



Overcoming Discouragement

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Facing Giants

In life, we face giants ... huge enemies committed to our destruction. Some of these giants are sin, fear, failure, despair, and doubt. We have to overcome these giants in order to live the victorious life God has promised us in Christ.

One of the giants we face – the giant we will look at today – is the giant of discouragement.

When have you experienced discouragement?

Describe what happens to you and what it feels like when you are discouraged.

We're going to look at four keys to overcoming the giant of discouragement in this lesson.

Rest in God's Presence with You

The first key is found in Joshua chapter 1. But before we look there, consider the following scenario taken from the end of Deuteronomy 34:

And Moses the servant of the LORD died there in Moab, as the LORD had said.
(v.5)

Moses is dead. Now, it does say that:

Now Joshua son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him. So the Israelites listened to him and did what the LORD had commanded Moses. (v. 9)

But you have to consider the person in whose footsteps Joshua was following:

Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face, who did all those miraculous signs and wonders the LORD sent him to do in Egypt—to Pharaoh and to all his officials and to his whole land. For no one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel. (vv. 10-12)

I don't know about you, but I might be feeling a bit of discouragement at that point if I were Joshua. His thoughts might have been: "I'm starting a brand new venture, and I'm all alone. Everyone is going to be comparing me to Moses. I rather wish he could at least have seen us through the first battle before he died ... we're on the brink of a rather large river, and I have to get across it with millions of people and all their supplies ... I'm leading a troop of nomads against an army that has been here for generations ... this is all rather discouraging."

That is the story at the beginning of Joshua chapter 1. And into this rather difficult and discouraging situation, God speaks directly to Joshua:

After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' aide: "Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them—to the Israelites. I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the great river, the Euphrates—all the Hittite country—to the Great Sea on the west. No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you.

"Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them. Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go." (vv.1-9)

Did you hear that? "As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you....Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go."

This is our first key to overcoming discouragement: Rest in God's presence with you.

Why is it so hard to get real "rest" (physical, mental, emotional, spiritual) when we are discouraged?

Why is "rest" so important when we're talking about discouragement?

Some people might say, "Why are you so discouraged? Don't worry about anything! It'll all be okay! Go get some rest!"

Such words are useless if you are suffering from discouragement so long as you are relying on yourself and your own resources to address the problem that is causing you the discouragement.

This is very important to understand: discouragement is inherently self-focused. I'm discouraged because I'm looking at myself, and I'm not equal to whatever task is at hand. I'm looking at myself, and I'm disappointed in what I see. I'm looking at myself, and I can't make it alone.

That's why this key to overcoming discouragement isn't simply to "rest." It's to rest in God's presence with you.

The key is to get our eyes off ourselves and off the situation that is discouraging us, and on to God.

Many times, it's important to fix our eyes on God and focus on such attributes as his holiness and sovereignty and majesty ... but when you're discouraged, one of the best thing to focus on first is God's presence with you.

Why? Because discouragement leaves us very vulnerable. We need a friend. We need help. We need support. We need to know that we're not going it alone. As we focus on God's presence with us, we get a sense of his love, his tenderness, and his gentleness – and that's the first thing we need.

Consider the following verses from Isaiah. What word-pictures do they provide that can help you focus on God's tender and gentle presence with you?

Isaiah 40:11 _____

Isaiah 41:10 _____

Isaiah 41:17-20 _____

Isaiah 42:3 _____

Isaiah 46:3-4 _____

Isaiah 49:15-16 _____

What other verses can you think of that would help you understand and rest in God's presence?

Now, suppose you are discouraged, and you try to rest in God's presence with you. You remind yourself of verses and passages and word-pictures like the ones we've looked at. Sometimes, you will "feel" God's presence with you as you focus on him and feel uplifted and restored. But sometimes, you still just can't sense God's presence, and you don't really feel his comfort.

What do you do when you do not "feel" God's presence or comfort?

Yes: as hard as it is, *you must believe through faith alone that God is indeed with you*. You rest in the faith of his promises. You make the commitment that, to the best of your ability, you will put your worries and anxieties on his shoulders, knowing that he cares for you, even though you can't sense it. And you move on. Eventually, the sense of his presence will return to you. But faith acknowledges the reality of his presence, even in the absence of feeling. And faith makes the decision to rest in the reality of God's presence. Yes, faith sometimes doesn't bring a comforting feeling, but it can still bring you rest. And the decision to rest by faith in God is a decision that builds your character – and strengthens your faith in God's character.

How can we rest by faith in God even when we don't "feel" his presence? One of the ways is to remember the second key to overcoming the giant of discouragement...

Recognize God's Power for You

Turn back to Joshua 1. God didn't just say he would be with Joshua, but:

“I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses.... No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life.” (vv. 3,5)

This was a very practical declaration of God's power for Joshua. God swore that he would give the land to Joshua and would support him against any giants that came his way.

We don't serve a weak God. We serve an incredibly powerful God. A God who is with us – and a God who exerts his power for us.

Why is it important to recognize God's power when we are discouraged?

Discouragement is often caused by or linked to a feeling of personal helplessness. Phrases like, “I can't ... it won't work ... I'll never make it...” come to mind. And again, all those phrases focus on ourselves and our limited resources.

We need to turn our eyes *away* from ourselves and our inadequacies, failings, and weaknesses. We need to focus on God, who is sovereign and powerful to do all things – in us, through us, and for us.

- *In us* ... because we in our nature are fallen. But he, through his grace, fills us with his Spirit, changing us from the inside out.
- *Through us* ... because once he has made a change in us, he is able to work through us in ways that are far beyond what we would normally be able to do ourselves.
- *For us* ... because no matter what our circumstances are, he is king over all of them and can work all things for our good.

Consider the following verses. What do they say about God's power in you, through you, and for you?

Philippians 4:13

II Corinthians 12:9-10

Matthew 28:18

II Corinthians 3:5

II Corinthians 4:7

Colossians 1:15-18

Again, many times as we recognize God's power for us we will feel encouraged and uplifted. But sometimes, the discouragement still hangs around. And just as we sometimes have to make a decision by faith to rest in the truth and reality of God's presence with us, sometimes we also have to make a decision by faith to believe in God's power for us. We may not "feel" much. But we exercise faith as an act of will.

This leads us to an important reminder. The order we need to take things in life is:

FACT → FAITH → FEELING

The facts come first. The truth of God's presence with us and his power for us is reality – regardless of our belief in it or our feelings about it.

What comes next is an act of the will: having faith in that fact. And that is a very freeing truth in and of itself: we make the choice to believe and have faith. Faith is always within our control. And considering that discouragement is usually tied to a *feeling* of being out of control, this is a wonderful realization. When I am discouraged, I can place my faith – as an act of my will – in God's presence with me and in his power for me. This is something I can *choose* to do. By faith, I can choose to live and act above my feelings.

Do we always feel good after we exercise faith in that manner? No. And that's because feelings are the caboose on the train. They come last, and they often trail behind. But I have consistently found that when I recognize the truth – the facts – and place my faith in them, eventually my feelings will come in line, too.

What tends to guide or influence your life the most? Facts, faith, or feelings?

What do you think of the statement "Faith is always within our control"?

Do you sometimes feel that faith is out of your reach and not under your control? When? Why?

What can you do to remind yourself when you are discouraged to place your faith in God – regardless of what you feel? What verses could you turn to?

Let's move on to the third key – which can help us remember to have faith, even when we feel discouraged.

Remember God's Proofs to You

Let's summarize the opening chapters of Joshua: Joshua is now the leader of Israel. God has taken some serious initiative to encourage and strengthen him. Now, they're on the banks of the Jordan River. And God parts the waters so that they walk through on dry land.

We then come to Joshua 4:1-7:

When the whole nation had finished crossing the Jordan, the LORD said to Joshua, "Choose twelve men from among the people, one from each tribe, and tell them to take up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan from right where the priests stood and to carry them over with you and put them down at the place where you stay tonight."

So Joshua called together the twelve men he had appointed from the Israelites, one from each tribe, and said to them, "Go over before the ark of the LORD your God into the middle of the Jordan. Each of you is to take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, to serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?' tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever."

Why did Joshua have the people put up a memorial?

When you're discouraged and you take the time to remember what God has done for you, what does it do for you?

Now, the Israelites actually set up stones. God didn't want them to trust only to their memories from generation to generation ... he knew that they would forget too easily. And we forget, too. That's why it is important to occasionally set up a memorial to help you remember times when God has demonstrated his power and love and presence in particularly key ways.

Memorials can be anything – a photograph that reminds you of a certain answered prayer, a shell picked up on the beach during a crisis that God resolved, a coffee cup with a special Scripture verse on it, etc.

Think of three situations when God demonstrated his power and love and presence to you.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

What are some things you could do to set up physical, tangible memorials to remind yourself of the above three situations?

We've said that you need to rest in God's presence with you, recognize God's power for you, and remember God's proofs to you. There's one more lesson from Joshua about overcoming discouragement ...

Rely on God's Plans for You

God spoke again to Joshua, and told him exactly how to conquer Jericho. The instructions were kind of odd ... really good psychological warfare, but then there was that declaration that God would pull a miracle and bring the walls down. But Joshua obeyed, and the walls crumbled, and Jericho was beaten.

It's important to realize that discouragement is very paralyzing. We tend to sit, feeling miserable, maybe sorry for ourselves, and let apathy grow. That's why this last key is so vital: the first three keys help get our attention off ourselves and our perceived helplessness, and onto God and his sovereign power. Those first three keys were working changes *inside* us.

Now, we need to get the inside changes to the *outside*: we need to put our faith in God's presence and power and proofs into action ... and that means looking for God's will in the situation we're facing that has been discouraging us, trusting in his will, and then doing our part.

Let's say that again another way. Relying on God's plans for you has three parts:

1. **Recognizing** his plan,
2. **Believing** that his plan is a good plan, and
3. **Doing** your part in his plan.

Scripture is very clear that we can know God's will in every situation. He will reveal it to us through his Word, through his Spirit, through our reason, through the counsel of others, and through our circumstances themselves. So you can be sure that when you seek his will, you will find it.

Where does God promise that he will reveal his will to us and give us wisdom for our lives?

Once God has revealed his will to you, believe in it. Sometimes, he reveals his will to us, and we say, "That's crazy!" or "That's ugly!" or "I don't want to!" and turn away from it. But an integral part of relying on God's plans for us is recognizing that he only ever has good plans for us ... he promised that.

Where does God promise that his plans for us are good plans?

Finally, relying on God's plans for us means getting up, shaking off our apathy, and doing our part.

Why do we find it so hard to "get moving," even when we say we believe that God has a plan for us and that it is a good plan?

How will the first three keys – resting in God's presence, recognizing his power, and remembering his proofs – help you rely in his plans and do your part?

Discouragement is a subtle and difficult enemy to overcome. But we have here four powerful keys that will guarantee our victory:

- Rest in God's presence with you
- Recognize God's power for you
- Remember God's proofs to you
- Rely on God's plans for you

In closing, consider Psalm 42:5:

Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.

When you are discouraged, put your hope in God – rest, recognize, remember, rely – he will save you, for he is your God.

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_____ in God's _____ with you.

_____ God's _____ for you.

_____ God's _____ to you.

_____ on God's _____ for you.