

How to Rise Above Discouragement

by J. Oswald Sanders

We can rise above discouragement in our ministry by realizing the importance of our ministry, appropriating new strength, and walking by faith.

Duration: 38:07

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 4:16

Topics: "Discouragement"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of focusing on the eternal rather than the temporary things of this world. He encourages the audience to lift their gaze and not be discouraged by the war, crime, and violence they see in the world. The speaker highlights four reasons why we should not lose heart, including walking by faith and not by sight, being content to leave the body behind and go home to the Lord, and being engrossed with the eternal rather than the circumstances around us. The speaker also mentions that Paul, in his ministry, realized the mercy of God and how being in the ministry was a marvelous thing despite his past persecution of the church.

Transcript

As you continue in your study and application of the biblical principles of spiritual leadership, may the truth be illuminated by the Holy Spirit. C. H. Spurgeon said on one occasion in addressing ministers that he believed discouragement was one of the sharpest weapons in the arsenal of the adversary. That was his assessment of the situation.

Maybe it's not the sharpest one, but it certainly can be one that has a very real and hindering effect on our ministry. And tonight I want to speak about how we can meet discouragement in our ministry. Would you turn, please, to 2 Corinthians 4. Verse 1. Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.

Verse 16. So we do not lose heart, though our outer nature is wasting away. Our inner nature is being renewed every day.

We do not lose heart. You know the context in chapter 3, how Paul had been writing to the Corinthians about the glory of the new covenant. That was his theme.

In chapter 3 and verse 18, that very wonderful verse, Paul shares with us the secret of sharing in and reflecting the radiance of Christ. We all, with unveiled faiths, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into the same image from glory to glory. And this comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Now there, Paul gives the secret of radiance. Where does it come from? The word behold, as you know, can also mean reflect. We all, beholding and reflecting the glory of the Lord, are being changed.

While we behold, the process is going on. We don't initiate it. It's not something that depends upon our volition.

While I am spending time beholding the glory of the God as it's revealed in the face of Jesus Christ in the scriptures, while I am doing that, I am being changed into the same likeness. And this comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. While I spend time beholding the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, meditating upon him, admiring him, longing to be like him, longing to emulate those things that are in him, while I am doing that, I am being changed.

And something of his radiance rubs off on me. That's what he's been saying in this very connection. And then he proceeds to show that these and other related truths are a preventative of discouragement.

I wonder who of us is never tempted to get discouraged. They're always discouraging factors, and sometimes they seem to be in the ascendancy. Who of us has never been to the point where we're just about to drop our bundle and turn it in? Quite possible that there could be somebody here tonight who is just on that place, and the thing you'd like to do would be to drop your bundle and do something else.

Well, none of us is exempt from the subtle and debilitating attacks of discouragement. The Apostle Paul knew something about it, too, you know. I was very glad to know that Paul used to get depressed.

That's cheering. He said, God, who comforteth those who are depressed, comforted me through the coming of Titus. There he was.

He wasn't invulnerable. He wasn't an impossible saint. He shared the same infirmities as we do, but he knew how to get on top of it.

That's the difference. Yes, we have the tyranny of our temperaments, and sometimes that causes us to become discouraged. We don't seem to be making the progress in our own inner lives that we long to.

We seem to be such slow learners, and we tend to be discouraged. But here, Paul shares with us the secret, or some of the secrets, of getting on top of discouragement. You may find the task desperately difficult, but we don't give up.

We keep on going. We don't get discouraged, another one. Nothing can daunt us, says another one.

We never collapse, says another one. Well, here is at least some of the background of these words. And if that's going to be so, there must be very strong motivation.

What is there that's going to keep me going in the face of all these discouraging things? You say, well, Paul, that's all right. You're quoting Paul, but I'm not Paul. If I had Paul's background, if I had Paul's spectacular gifts, if I had Paul's unequal training, if I shared Paul's success and service, well, perhaps I wouldn't lose heart either, but I'm no Paul.

Well, did everything drop into Paul's lap? Did he have no problems? Was it very easy for him? I'll just have a quick look through this book and see what Paul says about his experiences. If you look first at chapter 1 of 2 Corinthians, verse 8, and here Paul says, We don't want you to be ignorant, brethren, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself.

Why? We felt we had received the sentence of death. Utterly, unbearably crushed. Chapter 2, verse 4, I wrote you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears.

Chapter 4, verse 8, We are afflicted in every way, perplexed, persecuted, struck down, always carrying in the body the death of Jesus. Chapter 6, verse 4, Through great endurance in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors, watching, hunger, we are treated as imposters, as unknown, as dying, as punished, as sorrowful, as poor, as having nothing. Chapter 7, verse 5, For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn, fighting without and fear within.

The Apostle Paul wasn't immune to fear. He said, I was with you in fear and in much trembling. Here is the intrepid apostle.

He knows what it is to go through. We were afflicted at every turn, fighting without and fears within. And then chapter 11, verse 23, Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one.

I'm talking like a madman, with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, often near death. Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods.

Once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked. A night and a day I've been adrift at sea on frequent journeys in danger from rivers, from robbers, from my own people, from Gentiles, in the city, in the wilderness, at sea, from false brethren, in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure of my anxiety for all the churches. Hmm. It didn't all come easy to Paul, and yet, see he's written all this in this book, in this one letter, he knew what he'd been through, and yet he says, we never lose heart.

In spite of all that comes, it doesn't make any difference. I've learned some of the secrets that enable me to rise above discouragement. Well, I think a few of those things would have been quite enough to discourage me.

What about you? And yet, look at the way this remarkable man rose above his circumstances. A mounting crescendo of trials. And when we think of that, how our petty problems seem very trivial, don't they? But never mind.

Paul didn't learn that all at once. That didn't come the first day he was converted. He said, I have learned the secret.

He had to learn by experience, and I'm quite sure that he had his favors as well as the repeated. But he said, God who comforts those who are depressed, he's there to comfort us. And the comfort of God is not cuddling.

Comfort is to make us strong together with. That's the idea of our word comfort, to make us strong. When God comforts us, it puts starch into us.

It stiffens our backbone. Paul wasn't spared the normal educational and disciplinary processes and experiences of life. And because of that, he said, I have learned.

Longfellow said, Discouraged in the work of life, disheartened by its load, shamed by its failures or its fears, I sink beside the road. But let me only think of thee, and then new hearts springs up in me. Now, how did Paul rise about this discouragement? Why did he? What were the factors that enabled him to do it? Well, the first one you find in chapter 4 and verse 1. He was entrusted with a ministry.

Having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. Paul realized that his being in the ministry was one of the most marvelous things that had ever happened. He said, How can God make use of me? I persecuted the church of God.

But he said, God was merciful to me. He had mercy on me. And I'm in the ministry because of his mercy.

That's why. And isn't it true? If it hadn't been for the mercy of God, would you be where you are, or I? No, not one of us. We obtain mercy.

And we have been entrusted with a ministry. The New English Bible says, We have been entrusted with this commission. What is the commission? The New Covenant.

We're not self-appointed people. We're not self-made people. You remember Paul had said in the earlier verses that it was God who has made us competent as ministers of the New Covenant.

Didn't we make ourselves? There are no such things as self-made men in God's economy. It's God who makes us. He made us.

If we're able ministers of the New Covenant, He's done it. We've allowed Him to do it. We've cooperated.

But He's the one who has made us effective ministers of the New Covenant. We don't deserve it. It's all His mercy and all His grace.

And Paul says, Here am I, the persecutor who persecuted the church of God. And by His mercy, He's entrusted me with a ministry like this. And I can go around the world and tell people who failed and failed dismally that there is a New Covenant they can live under.

A covenant that was sealed with the blood of Christ. And they can live a totally new life. My brothers, my sisters, this is the ministry that's entrusted to us.

We ought to get excited about it, shouldn't we? Paul says, No wonder we don't lose heart with a message like this. And this is our message. Holding the promise with the Holy Spirit would impart to us not only the desire, but also the power to fulfill God's purpose.

So that's the first reason why we don't lose heart. Because we've been entrusted with the ministry of the New Covenant. Then the second one.

Chapter 4, verse 16. So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day.

Entrusted with a ministry. Endowed with new strength. Our inner man is renewed every day.

Though we're outwardly wasting away, the old body is gradually disintegrating with some of us faster than others. But that's all right, Paul says. The important thing is not the body, it's what's in the body.

And though our outer man is wasting, yet our inner man is being renewed every day. Paul was reviewing his soul-winning ministry with all the perils, with all the burdens. I wonder how that little body of his stood all that terrible battering.

If anybody could say our outer man is wasting, surely he had grounds for it. And yet, there he is. It was a victory of the spirit.

It was the spirit of the man. Even though that's happening, and my poor old body's wracked with pain, yet that's secondary. Why, my inner man, every day I am receiving new accessions of strength through the indwelling spirit of God.

And I believe he only got as much new strength as he appropriated from God. I don't think it was just an automatic thing. The spiritual principle is according to your faith, be it unto you.

And I think it was only as he personally appropriated every day strength for the task of the day that he got through. And many of us have never yet learned that lesson. That's why we make such heavy weather on it.

Instead of laying hold on the strength that the Lord will give, we go in our own strength and he lets us go. Paul shared something else. He said, I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

He laid hold on the strength that was available. My inner man experiencing inward renewal. There was the process of decay and deterioration going on in his body.

But he says at the same time there's a counter process going on. And I'm being renewed every day. No wonder we don't give up, he said, since I've got this resource.

No need for me to give up. There is always fresh strength available for me. And another very interesting thing is that God used the very processes that produce decay in the outer nature to bring forth strength in the new nature.

God's a marvelous alchemist. He changes things like that. And the very thing that the devil would like to use to get us down is the thing the Lord uses to build us up again.

No wonder we don't give up. I don't think Paul received special favors from God. I don't think he had anything that's not available to every one of us.

I think that's clear from Scripture. There is no favorite with God. Everybody is on exactly the same basis as regards spiritual blessings.

God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ. Not a promise. He doesn't promise that he will bless us.

He says, I have done that. When I gave you Christ, I gave you every spiritual blessing and you get as many of those blessings which are yours potentially. You get as many of them as you take and

appropriate for yourself.

And this was one of Paul's great secrets. God has blessed us. And because Paul daily appropriated new strength to meet the new demands, that was why he didn't lose heart.

Our Heavenly Father knows all the stresses and strains of the ministry. And he's not indifferent to it. He knows the stresses and strains of a pastor's wife and how real they are.

And I know that very often there is even a heavier burden on a pastor's wife than there is on the pastor himself. And the congregation very often don't realize it and don't make too much allowances for it. But it's true.

But our Father knows all about that. And there is daily renewal possible. Our inward man is being renewed every day.

It's the inner man that's being renewed. The outer man may get tired. You know, I think that being tired for God is rather a wonderful thing.

Why shouldn't we be tired for God? Do athletes ever get tired in sport? Ever get tired after a football match? When they're running a race, do they get tired? Do worldly people ever get tired dancing or spending a night that way? Get tired? Why shouldn't we get tired for God? Is there anyone better to get tired for? Don't be too afraid and don't spray yourself. I think it does us good sometimes to get really tired in the Lord's service. It's rather interesting when you read that passage in chapter 4 and verse 17, you notice the paradoxes.

It says, Our inner nature is being renewed every day, for this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. Because we look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen. The things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

You notice the paradoxes. The heavy burden, he says, is light. The ethereal glory is a weight.

The seemingly endless period of trial is momentary. And then, in addition to that, the momentary affliction brings an eternal weight of glory. Paul had a marvelous way of condensing a tremendous amount of truth in the minimum of words.

That was the old Greek ideal, a notion of truth in a drop of words. And so he's done this here. The heavy burden, when you approach it from the right angle, the heavy burden is light.

The ethereal glory, why, it's mounting up, it's heavy. The seemingly endless trial is only momentary. And then the momentary affliction, why, it brings an eternal weight of glory.

And so here Paul builds up the picture. You wonder that we don't lose heart when all these things are true. I am every day renewed in my inner man.

Now, it's not that I have occasional crises and high experiences in life when I receive a new infusion of strength that will last for a few days. He says my inner man is being renewed every day. And it doesn't matter what tomorrow brings or the next day or the day after.

There is awaiting your appropriation the adequate strength and power of God. So we do not lose heart. We have been endowed with new strength.

In the third one, chapter five, verses five and six, it is God himself who has made us ready for this change and has given us the Spirit a part payment and promise of more. So we are of good heart always. These statements of Paul are very strong statements.

He doesn't say we are generally in good heart. He said no, we are in good heart always. Here is a general principle that enables me to maintain a steadily encouraged experience.

Why was he able to be of good heart always? Because, this is the third one, he was endowed with the Spirit. That is the reason why God has given us the Spirit, a part payment and promise of more to follow. That is what the word earnest means, isn't it? An engagement ring is a part payment and promise of more.

At least I hope that you have prayed paid for it. But you know what I mean. The engagement ring is a promise of a much richer and fuller experience to come.

And that is what it says here. Paul is saying God has given us the Holy Spirit. But what we have had up to now is only part payment.

It is only just an installment on account. And this promise of more. I stood not very long ago at the banks of Niagara, just you know where that water goes over just under your feet there.

And I watched it rushing down. I thought of this verse of scripture, part payment and promise of more. There is it going on.

But look up the river, there it is flooding down. What tremendous possibilities. This is the kind of picture Paul is giving.

Why? God has given us the Holy Spirit with all his might, with all his power. And what we have received up to now, our highest experience of the Holy Spirit is just the beginning. Why? There are endless possibilities ahead.

He is always lifting our sights. In chapter 3 and verse 18 where he says we are being changed into the same image. He doesn't stop there.

He says from glory to glory to glory to glory. You can see the mountain ranges come to you. They are one after the other.

When you get to the top of one, there is another one coming. And he depicts the Christian life in those kind of terms. And the gift of the Holy Spirit is not something that you see once for all and that's the end of it.

No. Promise of more. There is infinitely more he can do in your life.

And infinitely more he can work through your ministry. Part payment and promise of more to follow. You see, it wasn't Paul's circumstances that enabled him to rise above his discouragements.

What was it? The coming of the Comforter. The one who made him strong. This became Paul's joy and confidence because he knew that within him was the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit of God. And the presence of his, and his presence in ministry kept Paul strong and confident. And he knew that because the Holy Spirit was always active, and that's one of the thoughts that grips me constantly, the Holy Spirit is always working.

We go to sleep, he doesn't. We pray for someone. We go to sleep and forget the person, but the Spirit of God doesn't.

He's ceaselessly working. And Paul counted on the ceaseless working of the Holy Spirit within him. And he said, this keeps me from despair and discouragement because I have dwelling within me the Holy Spirit who is the reticulating wires for the power of God.

And then the fourth reason why we need not lose heart, you find it in chapter 5, verse 7 and 8. We have to walk by faith, not by sight, but we are in good heart and are quite content to leave the body behind and go home to the Lord. Now, Paul had just written chapter 4 and verse 18. Look at that too.

He says, because we look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen, for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. I think this was the fourth thing. Paul was engrossed with the eternal.

He wasn't seeing merely the circumstances around him. If Paul had his eyes on the circumstances and had his eyes on his own experiences and his own prospective sufferings because he knew there was more ahead, he wouldn't have been a very good heart. But he said, no, I don't keep my eyes on those things.

He said, I look to the things that are not seen, the things that are eternal. They are the important things. And I'm to walk by faith and not by sight.

And because when I'm doing that, I can be of good heart. You know what happened when Peter walked by sight instead of by faith. You know what happened.

It wasn't very long before he was plunging into the deep. And when we gaze around us, you look around in the world today, anything very much to keep you from getting discouraged? No. Think of the political situation.

Think of the industrial chaos. Think of the economic instability. Think of the war and the crime and the violence.

We look at the things that are seen. You ever read the paper and said, why ever do I read the newspaper? Ever said that? Ever felt it? You never get very uplifted by it, do you? You're looking at the things that are seen, but you need to just lift your gaze a bit and see the things that are seen are transient. But the things that are unseen, they are eternal.

And if we keep our eyes fixed on the things that are around us, it means that we are going to get encouraged. So there were four things. What was the first one? Paul didn't lose heart because he was entrusted with a ministry.

He didn't lose heart because he was endowed with new strength every day. He didn't lose heart because he was imbued with the Spirit, with part payment and promise of more. He didn't lose heart because he wasn't looking at circumstances around him.

He was engrossed with the eternal, walking by faith and not by sight. But there's one more. It's not in this passage, but you'll find it in Galatians 6 and verse 9. It says, Let us not grow tired in doing right.

For when the time comes, if we do not lose heart, we shall reap. The fifth one is, encouraged by the assurance of harvest. We do not lose heart.

I suppose there are a few things that are a more fruitful cause of discouragement for the pastor, the Christian worker, than lack of visible results. How discouraging it is. You work and work and work.

I remember when we entered to the countries of Asia after we left China, and in the early days we went into places, tried to go to places where there was no work being done, nor little work being done. Mr. Street here tonight went to Japan, to the Hokkaido, to places where many places there was no work whatsoever. We tried to go to those places.

In those early days there was plenty of sowing and very little reaping. It was tough and difficult. I remember at that time I read three or four missionary biographies of the early days of missions.

I was absolutely astounded to find out that in each of those four biographies, it was seven years before there was a single response in those fields. Not a soul saved. You take Robert Moffat in Betjuanaland, David Livingstone's father-in-law.

He went there and he worked for seven years and nothing happened. His church in Scotland wrote to him one day, or in the middle of the year, it used to take about six months for it to mail to your bank. They said, we want to send you a present of Christmas.

What would you like us to send you? Robert Moffat wrote back. He said, I would like you to send me a communion service. Communion service, what for? There were no believers.

That was Robert Moffat's shout of faith. What was he saying? I am believing God that by the time that communion service arrives there will be believers who will meet with me around the Lord's table. That's what he was saying.

He really took a step of faith. And what happened? At Christmas time when the communion service arrived there were believers who met with him around the Lord's table. But in each of those cases, seven years, and not a single soul.

I read of something that was even more astounding than that. If you had Andrew Murray for your brother, you would think you would have a pretty fruitful ministry, wouldn't you? You'd say, Boy, he can pray. But do you know that Andrew Murray's brother worked a lifetime and saw no fruit in his field.

But not long after he died revival swept the whole area. And God entrusted that man without seeing a single, that was walking by faith and not by sight, wasn't it? I hope God doesn't do that with you. He doesn't do it.

Most of us are not fit to be trusted with something like that. But there it is. It's... The Lord expects us to walk by faith and not by sight.

And when we don't see visible evidences of success we tend to drop our bundle or become discouraged. But when you come to think of it is it not true that there is always a period of time between the sowing and the reaping? We expect that. And this verse says let us not grow tired in doing right for when the time

comes if we do not lose heart we'll reap.

Here is the assurance it's sure it's going to come. There is a time between sowing and reaping. Sometimes the Lord expects us to sow in faith without seeing.

But generally speaking he's so gracious that he allows us to reap some as well as sow. But sometimes he entrusts us with a period in which there is no visible sign. But that doesn't mean that there's nothing going on underneath.

Why? It is going on. But you notice what this verse says. It says when the time comes we shall reap if we do not lose heart.

There is a time. And we lose heart sometimes because we don't respect the sovereignty of God. I don't understand for a moment why God works in blessing in one place and not another when it would seem that there are equally faithful prayerful sacrificial workers.

And yet that's what happens. But God's got his own timetable. And when the time comes when the proper time comes one rendering has.

When the proper time comes when God comes it's all right. The germinating process has been going on underneath. Doesn't mean the work's been going on.

And the harvest is certain. If you don't lose heart you shall reap. You know that psalm he that goes to and fro weeping carrying his bag of seed shall indeed come again with a shout of joy bringing his sheaves with him.

He that goes to and fro even weeping. I don't know that we get far enough on to do much weeping. But even if we do the promise is sure.

He shall come. And when he comes it's going to be shouts of joy and it's going to be our sheaves with us. So we do not lose heart.

We don't collect. We don't give up. We count upon the gracious ministry of the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

We daily appropriate the new strength which is available to us. We are filled with wonder that we've been entrusted with such a ministry of the new covenant. We don't get our sight on the things around us and the discouraging things in the people we're working with or in the world.

We're engrossed with the eternal. And because of that we have the assurance that in due season at the proper time we shall reap if we do not lose heart. So my brothers, my sisters don't lose heart.

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