

"Discouraging Pathways"

Donnie Moore is one of the more tragic figures in baseball history. Most of his 13-season career, Donnie was an average pitcher at best. But, for two wonderful years, 1985 and 1986, Donnie became one of the premier relief pitchers in the game. However, Donnie is best known for a single pitch during his career. During the 1986 American League Championship Series, the California Angels went into the ninth inning of game five needing just three outs to clinch the team's first-ever pennant. When the Boston Red Sox began making a comeback, Donnie was brought in to stop the rally. Donnie quickly got two strikes on the hitter, and was now just one strike away from leading the Angels to the World Series. Dave Henderson then hit a pitch from Donnie for a home run, and Boston would eventually win both the game and the series denying the Angels their first ever World Series appearance. Donnie's life would begin to unravel because he never got over it. Donnie continued to brood over it, and listened to public criticism of him until he tragically ended his life in 1989. In his discouragement, Donnie could not keep things in perspective and unfortunately, forgot that baseball was still just a game.

One of the most memorable, and popularly misquoted, lines written by a poet was penned by Robert Burns: "The best laid plans of mice and men often go astray." Sometimes in life, even with the best laid plans and the best of intentions, the details of life do not always work out the way we thought they would. As Israel was nearing the last days of their wilderness journey, a notable statement is made in Numbers 21:4, "...and the soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way." The word "way" in the Hebrew implies "because of the distance, direction, and difficulty of the course." In other words, the journey was harder and the burden was heavier than they had originally expected. I read the story of two young boys who would approach those already shoveling snow and offer to finish the job for twenty dollars. When asked why they would go to those already shoveling snow they replied, "We make our most money off of those who are half finished and want to quit." Discouragement is both cancerous and contagious! The negative report of the twelve spies discouraged and defeated an entire generation. In his discouragement, Peter went back to the old life of fishing and all the other disciples followed right along. Until we can conquer our discouragement, it is highly unlikely that we will ever conquer anything else. Consider with me why that is so.

Discouragement **distracts our purpose**. In Psalm 32:8, the Lord promises to "...instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go..." It would do us well to remember that when the path we walk becomes difficult, if the Lord is truly the one that has led us, there will always be something to learn, something to do, or something to gain. Nineteenth century British hymn writer and theologian Frederick W. Faber said it this way, "There are no disappointments to those whose wills are buried in the will of God." In his dying days, John the Baptist became so discouraged that he questioned if Jesus was really the awaited Savior. The response Jesus sent to John was a gentle reminder that the purposes of God were being fulfilled. With the haze of discouragement now lifted, John was able to peacefully and courageously

glorify the Lord through his death. Discouragement is a hazard to our service because it lowers our discernment and paralyzes our determination. That is why Peter needed the reminder to "feed My sheep," and Timothy needed the reminder to "Preach the Word." As we follow the Lord, there are times when the path makes no sense, and places where the path does not seem sure. However, the key to survival amidst discouragement is maintaining the resolve of Job 28:23, "God understandeth the way..."

Discouragement **distorts our perception**. In Job 23:10, after assessing the path he was forced to walk, Job came to this conclusion, "But He knoweth the way that I take..." Few things can dishearten a servant of God like the feelings that your work is going unnoticed or that your work seems futile. When Elijah sat beneath the juniper tree in 1 Kings 19, it was these critical and condemning voices that drowned out God's voice and filled him with suicidal fear. Recently, I was teaching my son how to mow. The first day, I stood rather close observing him and he struggled immensely. The second day, I went inside leaving him alone at the task. However, he was unaware I was still watching his every move from the window. What a reminder that the Lord's unseen presence is not His lack of interest in us, but rather it speaks of His heart trusting that we will do what is right when we cannot perceive His presence! Nineteenth century minister DeWitt Talmage once said, "When omniscience has lost its eyesight, and omnipotence falls back impotent...then the Church of Jesus Christ can afford to be despondent, but never until then." The very moment we lose heart may be the moment we are nearer to finding God's heart than ever before!

Discouragement **disrupts our perfecting**. In Psalm 107:7, the psalmist noted of the Lord, "And He led them forth by the right way..." Wherever the Lord leads our life, the path may not always be smooth, straight, or shielded, but it is always right! The Lord is ever mindful of what it takes to mold us into the finished work of the image of Christ, and He never wastes any experience in our lives to do so. Noted eighteenth century French writer Francois Fenelon wrote, "In the light of eternity we shall see that what we desired would have been fatal to us, and that what we would have avoided was essential to our well-being." Joseph never knew in advance that problems, poverty, and prison would be the instruments used to promote him to the pinnacle. David never knew in advance that thorns, troubles, and temptations would be the pathway that would lead him to the throne. Truly, with the Lord, the end always justifies the means. Perhaps Abraham's servant said it best in Genesis 24:27, "...I being in the way, the Lord led me..."

As their journey through the wilderness came to a conclusion, Moses reminded Israel in Deuteronomy 8:2, "And thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God led thee these forty years..." Hindsight can provide 20/20 vision, and Moses knew as they reflected back on all the hard places they had been they would be reminded of the faithfulness of God through it all. The moment we lose that perspective is the moment we forget what a wonderful game this thing called life really is!

Your Most Proud Pastor,
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