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Andrew M. Davis Sermon

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Battling Discouragement in Pastoral Ministry

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Speaker: Andrew M. Davis

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I. Satan's Top Priority: The Discouragement of God's Fruitful Servants

A. Christ's Overpowering Promise:

Matthew 16:18 I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

B. Satan fights every step of the way... but look what he is facing

1. Irresistible offensive power of the word of God

2 Corinthians 10:3-5 For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. ⁴ The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. ⁵ We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

2 Corinthians 6:7 with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left

Ephesians 6:17 take ... the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

2. Impenetrable defensive shielding of the armor of God

Ephesians 6:16 take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.

If God's Servants put on that armor and advance with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and the left, HE WILL LOSE!!!

C. What's the Devil to Do?? Deceive Us into NOT EVEN TRYING by laying us down in a bed of spiritual depression!!

He wants to overwhelm us with discouragement through his lies and get us to give up and not even try anymore!

II. A Long History of God's Servants Assaulted with Discouragement

A. Many of God's Choicest Servant Faced the Trial of Discouragement

1. Moses faced discouragement when he first went to the Israelites in Egypt and things only got worse, not better... Pharaoh commanded the Israelites to make bricks without straw... Moses complained bitterly to God:

Exodus 5:23 Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has brought trouble upon this people, and you have not rescued your people at all."

2. Elijah was so discouraged and downcast after his battle with the prophets of Baal and Jezebel's threat to murder him that he was ready to lie down and die... God sent an angel to give him some food and water; when he fled to the cave, he cried out "I am the only one left!"
3. David was repeatedly faced with discouragement when Saul was chasing him to try to kill him
4. Jonah wanted to die after Nineveh repented
5. Job, of course, was wracked with discouragement at his trials

B. Paul's Battle with Discouragement

2 Corinthians 1:5-9 For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. ⁶ If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. ⁷ And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also

you share in our comfort. ⁸ We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. ⁹ Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.

C. Choice Servants Throughout Church History Battled Discouragement in Ministry

1. Martin Luther

a. “The Year Luther Quit Preaching”

Luther was not the pastor of the Wittenberg congregation. Johannes Bugenhagen held that position from 1521 until 1558, twelve years after Luther had died. Yet Luther, also, preached to that congregation regularly, usually several times a Sunday as well as during the week.

In the midst of all his astonishing activity in leading the Reformation, in 1528 he preached almost 200 times! From 1529 we have 121 sermons, even though severe headaches and spells of dizziness were becoming frequent. On 40 days that year he preached twice. His was a remarkable and tireless preaching ministry. His productivity was prodigious, almost miraculous.

Suddenly, however, at the beginning of 1530, he quit. For over a year and a half, he stayed out of the Wittenberg pulpit.

His friends were pleading with him to go back to preaching, but he stubbornly refused.

What happened??

He became very discouraged at the lack of progress of the gospel in Wittenberg... at the drunkenness and sinfulness of the Germans who heard him week after week

In 1529 he had warned the congregation several times that he would stop preaching unless there were more fruit of the gospel

among them. He told them they were selfish and miserly. " I am sorry I ever freed you from the tyrants and papists. You ungrateful beasts, you are not worthy of the Gospel. If you don't improve, I will stop preaching rather than cast pearls before swine."

He eventually did return to the pulpit... but that story is one of the clearest examples of discouragement in ministry!

2. Jonathan Edwards

During the controversy about the Lord's Supper that led to his dismissal from being Pastor of Northampton, Edward came to have serious doubts about his pastoral gifts. He was well aware that he had a brittle, unsociable personality that tended to alienate people. Foreseeing ever-increasing strife in his ministry, he said with great emotion to a friend, "It seems I am born to be a man of strife." To his wife Sarah, he lamented that the prospect ahead of his failed pastoral ministry seemed "like a bottomless ocean." [Marsden, p. 349]

3. William Carey

William Carey, the "father of modern missions," wanted to translate the Bible into as many Indian languages as possible. He established a large printshop in Serampore where translation work was continually being done. Carey spent hours each day translating Scripture, often while his insane wife ranted and raved in the next room.

Carey was away from Serampore on March 11, 1832. His associate, William Ward, was working late. Suddenly Ward smelled smoke. He leaped up to discover clouds belching from the printing room. He screamed for help, and workers passed water from the nearby river until 2 a.m., but everything was destroyed.

The missionary Joshua Marshman entered a Calcutta classroom where William Carey was teaching. "I can think of no easy way to break the news," he said. "The printshop burned to the ground last night." Carey was stunned. Gone were his massive polyglot dictionary, two grammar books, and whole versions of the Bible.

Gone were sets of type for 14 eastern languages, 1200 reams of paper, 55,000 printed sheets, and 30 pages of his Bengal dictionary. Gone was his complete library. "The work of years - gone in a moment," he whispered.

He took little time to mourn. "The loss is heavy," he wrote, "but as traveling a road the second time is usually done with greater ease and certainty than the first time, so I trust the work will lose nothing of real value. We are not discouraged, indeed the work is already begun again in every language. We are cast down but not in despair."

When news of the fire reached England, it catapulted Carey to instant fame. Thousands of pounds were raised for the work, and volunteers offered to come help. The enterprise was rebuilt and enlarged. By 1832, complete Bibles, New Testaments, or separate books of Scripture had issued from the printing press in 44 languages and dialects.

4. Adoniram Judson

Having surmounted enormous obstacles and years of preparation, Adoniram Judson arrived on the mission field. Seven hard years followed. All he had to show for it was one convert.

Eventually, Judson led a work that resulted in an amazing harvest of souls for Christ: Within a century, over a quarter of a million Christians directly or indirectly owed their spiritual lives to Adoniram Judson.

But that's eternity's view. During the British-Burmese war, Judson was thrown into a death prison and chained to a granite block. Every night guards hoisted his ankle fetters high above his head so that only his head and shoulders touched the ground. As he dangled in appalling filth, almost every thought produced a new reason for despair. At that point, there were only eighteen converts. Surely most, perhaps all, would fall away or be killed under the new outbreak of persecution. Years of struggle had produced a lone manuscript of a Burmese New Testament and his wife had smuggled it into prison. Any moment it could be discovered and destroyed. His

relations with fellow missionaries had been marred by hurtful clashes. He had buried his only child. His own life hung by a thread. He feared for his beloved, pregnant wife.

He said with despair: 'I came to bring life and have brought nothing but death.'

After a year and a half of cruelty Judson was finally released. A brief reunion with his precious wife ended with him having to wrench himself from her to assist in political negotiations. Weeks turned to months. Before he could return to his wife, she was dead. Months later, death tore from him his only remaining child, a sickly baby he had battled so hard to save. After two more years of mental deterioration, still numb with guilt over being absent when his wife most needed him, he dug a grave and lingered by it for days on end, his mind churning with morbid thoughts.

He said, **'God is to me the Great Unknown; I believe in him, but I find him not.'**

BUT the Lord lifted him up. He became one of the most admired missionaries of all time.

At the end of his life, as he lay dying from the illness that would take him from this world, Judson said

"I am not weary of the work and I am not weary of this world; but when the Lord calls me, I shall be like a schoolboy on the final day of school!"

5. Charles Spurgeon

Despite being the most famous and successful preacher of his day, he was often so afflicted with depression that he could hardly function. He once delivered a lecture entitled "The Minister's Fainting Fits" which he started with these words:

As it is recorded that David, in the heat of battle, waxed faint, so may it be written of all the servants of the Lord. Fits of depression come over the most of us... The strong are not always vigorous, the

wise not always ready, the brave not always courageous, and the joyous not always happy.

III. Most Powerful... and Mysterious... Example: Christ (Isaiah 49)

A. This Prophecy Clearly About the Messiah, Jesus Christ

Isaiah 49:6 "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."

B. As often with these Suffering Servant prophecies, we listen to the voices speaking within the Trinity ... in that verse, God the Father is speaking to God the Son

C. But in the earlier verses, we hear God the Son speaking

Isaiah 49:1-3 Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations: Before I was born the LORD called me; from my birth he has made mention of my name. ² He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver. ³ He said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor."

D. Now, the shocker:

Isaiah 49:4 But I said, "I have labored to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing."

E. The best explanation: the “apparent failure” of his work by the almost universal rejection by the Jewish nation... even his own disciples deserted him and fled

F. At the end of the only perfect ministry there has ever been, the only ones with him in his death were his mother, some women who were friends of his mother, and one of the Apostles: John... THAT’S IT!!!!

“I have APPARENTLY labored to no purpose. I have APPARENTLY spent my strength in vain and for nothing.”

This is the same one about whom it was said:

Isaiah 49:7 This is what the LORD says-- the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel-- to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation, to the servant of rulers: "Kings will see you and rise up, princes will see and bow down, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

Isaiah 53:3 He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

G. So... Jesus cries out in the anguish of having poured out his perfect words and perfect miracles of compassion and his perfect example on a nation that HATED HIM and DESPISED HIM and REJECTED HIM:

"I have labored to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing.

H. BUT... Look at the very next statement in Isaiah 49:

Isaiah 49:4 Yet what is due me is in the LORD's hand, and my reward is with my God.

1 Peter 2:23 When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

As if Jesus said

"Father, into your hands I commit MY MINISTRY! I was faithful to your command even to the point of death... Now, Father, DO SOMETHING WITH THIS!!"

It is impossible to measure how motivated God the Father is to VINDICATE his Son's perfect obedience by bringing in the elect from every nation to worship the Son to the glory of God the Father:

Psalms 110:1-2 The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet." ² The LORD will extend your mighty scepter from Zion; you will rule in the midst of your enemies.

I. Jesus LOOKED BEYOND the apparent failure of his ministry to his JUST REWARD, and to his FINAL VICTORY: the salvation of the elect not just from Israel but from every tribe, language, people and nation:

Isaiah 49:6 "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."

J. So... Even Christ had to conquer feelings of discouragement at the apparent failure of his mission to Israel!!

Summary: There is a long track record of the greatest servants of the Word fighting off massive discouragement in ministry.

Now, let us face the facts of why this is...

First, general discouragements that ALL servants of the Word face

Second, specific discouragements that those in CHURCH REVITALIZATION face

IV. General Discouragements in the Ministry of the Word

A. Apparent failure... the Kingdom of God generally "looks" unimpressive

1. The yeast is HIDDEN in the dough
2. The advance of the Kingdom is generally invisible
3. The overwhelming majority of the world will remain unconverted...

Matthew 7:13-14 "Enter through the narrow gate; for WIDE is the gate and BROAD is the road that leads to destruction, and MANY enter through it... but small the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and ONLY A FEW find it."

90% to 10%??

4. Also: The sanctification of the truly converted is in fits and starts; they all battle with Romans 7 indwelling sin; 3 steps forward, 2 steps back

Romans 7: "I do not understand why I do what I do. The very thing I hate, I do... but the thing I want to do, I do not do!"

- B. God is Committed to Work through Broken-hearted humbled sinners... and we are so proud, he must BREAK US in order to USE us

2 Corinthians 12:7-9 To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

- C. Unrealized ambitions

1. Paul had an ambition to preach the gospel in the unreached areas of the world
2. Other people have godly ambitions to do great things for God and for Christ
3. Often these grand ambitions, which are right and good to have, do not come to fruition
4. That is very discouraging

- D. Our work causes us to muck around constantly in the sins and sorrows of others

1. Jesus was

Isaiah 53: A man of sorrows and familiar with suffering

2. Every day, he healed bodies broken by the effects of sin
3. Every day, he preached the gospel to souls soiled by the effects of sin

4. That is SORROWFUL BUSINESS... and it is also OUR business
- E. Our role of leadership makes us a special target both of Satan and of people
- F. Personal weakness
1. God knows our frame, that we are but DUST
 2. We are bruised reeds and smoldering wicks
 3. This is just from our weakness as human beings
- G. Personal sin
1. Far more discouraging is our own sin
 2. And we feel our sin most acutely because we have received such surpassingly great revelations of truth
 3. We feel acutely our sins because we preach a pure life that we cannot live
 4. Paul wrote:
- 1 Timothy 1:15-16 Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-- of whom I am the worst. ¹⁶ But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.***
- H. Bad habits physically: poor sleep patterns, bad diet, stress leading to weight gain
- V. Specific Discouragements for Pastors in the Ministry of Revitalization
- A. Pause: What is the Difference Between a Church that Needs Revitalization and Just a Normal Church with Normal Need for Ministry?

1. All churches are imperfect, filled with sinners, coming short of the glory of God
2. All churches need to continually confess our sins both of commission and omission
3. God sets before every church open doors of ministry and we so often fail to walk through them
4. BUT churches needing revitalization have TOXIC FORCES at work in them, forces that will KILL THE CHURCH soon if they are not purged and the church healed
5. There are no PERFECT CHURCHES, but by God's grace there are HEALTHY CHURCHES
6. Churches Needing Revitalization have TOXIC FORCES at work

B. What Are They?

1. Factions, divisions, bitterness at one another...
2. Large number of UNREGENERATE CHURCH MEMBERS...
"wolves in sheep's clothing"... Satanic plants who do his work to destroy the ministry of the Word
3. Large number of IMMATURE CHURCH MEMBERS... genuinely regenerate members who have failed to make progress over the years
4. Faulty sense of ownership by individuals or groups within the church... "This is MY Church"
5. Selfish focus of seeking to please itself and not the Lord... resulting in rigid commitment to traditions and music patterns that only minister to the church members, not to future generations
6. Inward focus... through cowardice and worldliness and selfishness, failing to suffer and lay down their lives for EVANGELISM
7. Turning from the inerrant word of God to hear messages that tickle their ears

8. Worldliness... living for pleasure in this world; not putting sin to death by the Spirit

9. Traditionalism: enslaved to obsolete patterns of church life

C. Each of these Is Poisonous the the Pastor! Very discouraging!

D. Beyond that list are these problems for the Pastor

1. Isolation: Few (if any) kindred spirits, no fellow laborers or fellow warriors

2. Prayerlessness on the part of the church

3. Often DEBT... the church in financial crisis (though not always... some dying churches are “set for life” financially!!)

All of these ingredients... both the GENERAL trials in ministry and the SPECIFIC trials for church revitalizers... can lead by a short route to a deep, debilitating discouragement

VI. Time to Fight! Put on Your Spiritual Armor! (Eph. 6)

A. Discouragement is a Satanic Attack! We Must Fight... or We'll Be Wounded

B. We Have a Responsibility to Defend Ourselves... if we are passive, we will be hurt deeply

Ephesians 6:10-13 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.

¹¹ Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. ¹³ Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.

1. Our only way to defeat Satan's attack of discouragement is by spiritual warfare

2. To “be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power” = to draw very close to Christ and rest in his omnipotence... MENTALLY,

through PRAYER to acknowledge the reality of the spiritual warfare you are under

3. To STAND FIRM = to not retreat or abandon your post; to be committed to fight for your heart, your joy, your people, your church
4. To stand firm against the DEVIL'S SCHEMES = to be mindful of the fact that there is a dark intelligence, a wicked brilliance to the devil's attacks on your soul and on your ministry
5. To realize that OUR STRUGGLE IS NOT AGAINST FLESH AND BLOOD = so vital to realize that even your bitterest opponent in the church is not your true adversary... but Satan takes people captive to do his will... and we need to see his dark schemes behind their hostility and politics and opposition at member's meetings
6. PUT ON THE FULL ARMOR OF GOD = we have a specific, detailed responsibility to prepare for spiritual battle every day...
 - a. The details are important, but beyond my scope here
 - b. It's not merely a general awareness, but specific mental, spiritual preparations
 - c. "Each piece put on with prayer"
 - d. fight discouragement with each of these elements:

Ephesians 6:14-18 Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, ¹⁵ and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. ¹⁸ And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.

7. "Belt of truth" = the overall truth of the Word of God... especially as it testifies to Christ who is the truth; this fights discouragement

by reminding us that truth is eternal, that light always wins—it always drives out darkness

8. “Breastplate of righteousness” = Christ’s imputed righteousness, credited to us by faith... we are perfectly righteous in God’s sight; yes, we sin... yes, we fail; yes, we come short of the glory of God; yes, we are specifically hypocrites, preaching a perfect standard we can never live up to... but we are **RIGHTEOUS IN CHRIST!!**
That fights discouragement based on our sinfulness
9. “Feet fitted with the readiness of the gospel of peace” = stability and mobility; we are to **STAND FIRM** with the gospel under our feet; and **MOVE OUT** into the energetic tasks the commander in chief has given us to do to build his church
10. “Shield of faith” with which we are able to **EXTINGUISH ALL** the flaming arrows of the Evil One... faith = eyesight of the soul; we see invisible spiritual realities; the arrows of temptation and accusation and false ideas and discouragement... the arrow that flies at night... we can **SEE IT FOR WHAT IT IS**: lies from the devil! And the arrow is caught by the shield and cannot penetrate it
11. the “Sword of the Spirit” which is the Word of God: wield it skillfully!! It is a powerful weapon against personal discouragement... and it slaughters Satan and his minions and allows the Kingdom to advance irresistibly; God’s sword is **UNBREAKABLE** and **SHARP**... and it wields death to God’s enemies, and life to his friends

Hebrews 4:12 For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

12. “Pray in the Spirit” = very powerful weapon against Satan’s attacks of discouragement... “take it to the Lord in prayer”

VII. Precious Remedies Against Satan’s Device of Discouragement

- A. Humble yourself under God; confess any known sin
- B. Fight the Battle for the Mind... What You Meditate On

Philippians 4:8 Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable-- if anything is excellent or praiseworthy-- think about such things.

1. Meditate on rich themes helpful for pastors

- a. Meditate on the guarantee of final success in the sovereign, eternal plan of God
- b. Meditate on the temporary nature of all local churches...and the final glory of the universal church
- c. Meditate on the power of the gospel and of the Word of God

C. Fight the “Success Syndrome”

1. Kent Hughes: *Liberating Ministry from the Success Syndrome*

American ministry has become very pragmatic

2. We are liable to measure our effectiveness by tangible means: church attendance, baptisms, budget increase, building programs, worldly notoriety

3. Hughes’s book lists better criteria of success:

Success is faithfulness... Success is serving... Success is loving...
 Success is believing... Success is prayer... Success is holiness...
 Success is attitude

Our work is FAITHFULNESS, God’s work is FRUITFULNESS!

D. Seek Contentment “In Any and Every Circumstance”

Philippians 4:11-13 I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹² I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. ¹³ I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

E. Get Active—Powerfully Active—as the Spirit Leads!

1. The whole point of Satan's weapon of discouragement is to get you lying down in weak self-pity on the sidelines;
2. RISE UP and DO THE WORK OF THE KINGDOM!!

Ephesians 2:10 For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

1 Corinthians 15:58 Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.