Discouragement

By Hannah Whitall Smith

“The soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way.”

The Church of Christ abounds in people who are “discouraged because of the way.” Either inwardly or outwardly, and often both, things look all wrong, and there seems no hope of escape. Their souls faint in them, and their religious lives are full of discomfort and misery. There is nothing that so paralyzes effort as discouragement, and nothing that more continually and successfully invites defeat. The secret of failure or success in any matter lies far more in the soul’s interior attitude than in any other cause or causes. It is a law of our being, which is only now beginning to be discovered, that the inward man counts for far more in every conflict, than anything the outward man may do or may possess.

And nowhere is this more true than in the spiritual life. Again I must repeat, what I find it necessary to say so continually, that the Bible declares from beginning to end, that faith is the law of the spiritual life, and that according to our faith it always shall be and always will be unto us. Then, since faith and discouragement cannot, in the very nature of things, exist together, it is perfectly manifest that discouragement must be an absolute barrier to faith; and that, where discouragement rules, the converse to the law of faith must rule also, and it shall be to us, not according to our faith, but according to our discouragement.

Discouragement is Faith in Evil

In fact, just as courage is a faith in good, so discouragement is a faith in evil; and, while courage opens the door to good, discouragement opens it to evil.

An allegory that I heard very early in my Christian life has always remained in my memory, as one of those warnings to cyclists that we often see at the top of hills in country roads, “This hill is dangerous”; and it has many a time warned me away from the dangerous descent of discouragement.

The allegory declared that once upon a time Satan, who desired to entrap a devoted Christian worker, called a council of his helpers to decide on the best way of doing it, and to ask for volunteers. After the case had been explained, an imp offered himself to do the work.

“How will you do it?” asked Satan.

“Oh,” replied the imp, “I will paint to him the delights and pleasures of a life of sin in such glowing colors, that he will be eager to enter upon it.”

“That will not do,” said Satan, shaking his head. “The man has tried sin, and he knows better. He knows it leads to misery and ruin, and he will not listen to you.”

Then another imp offered himself, and again Satan asked, “What will you do to win the man over?”

“I will picture to him the trials and the self-denials of a righteous life, and will make him eager to escape from them.”

“Ah, that will not do either,” said Satan,” for he has tried righteousness, and he knows that its paths are paths of peace and happiness.”

Then a third imp started up and declared that he was sure he could bring the man over.

“Why, what will you do,” asked Satan, “that you are so sure?”

“I will discourage his soul,” replied the imp triumphantly.

“That will do, that will do,” exclaimed Satan, “you will be successful. Go and bring back your victim.”

An old Quaker has this saying, “All discouragement is from the devil”; and I believe he stated a far deeper and more universal truth than we have yet fully understood. Discouragement cannot have its source in God. The religion of the Lord Jesus Christ is a religion of faith, of good cheer, of courage, of hope that maketh not ashamed. “Be discouraged,” says our lower nature, “for the world is a place of temptation and sin.” “Be of good cheer,” says Christ, “for I have overcome the world.” There cannot possibly be any room for discouragement in a world which Christ has overcome.

We must settle it then, once for all, that discouragement comes from an evil source, only and always. I know this is not the general idea, at least in the spiritual region of things. In temporal things, perhaps, we have more or less learned that discouragement is foolish, and even wrong; but, when it comes to spiritual things, we are apt to reverse the order, and make that commendable in one case, which is reprehensible in the other; and we even succeed in persuading ourselves that to be discouraged is a very pious state of mind, and an evidence of true humility.

Reasons for Discouragement

The causes for our discouragements seem so legitimate, that to be discouraged seems to our short-sightedness, the only right and proper state of mind to cultivate. The first and perhaps the most common of these causes is the fact of our own incapacity. It is right for us to be cast down, we think, because we know ourselves to be such poor, miserable, good-for-nothing creatures. It would be presumption, in the face of such incapacity, to be anything but discouraged.

Our Inadequacies and Infirmities

Moses is an illustration of this. The Lord had called him to lead the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt; and Moses, looking at his own natural infirmities and weaknesses, was discouraged, and tried to excuse himself, “I am not eloquent, but I am slow of speech and of a slow tongue. They will not believe me nor hearken unto my voice.” Naturally one would think that Moses had plenty of cause for discouragement, and for discouragement very similar to that which is likely to assail us, when, because of our distrust in our own eloquence, or our own power to convince those to whom we are to be sent, we shrink from the work to which the Lord may be calling us. But notice how the Lord answered Moses, for in the same way I am convinced does He answer us. He did not do, what no doubt Moses would have liked best, try to convince him that he really was eloquent, or that his tongue was not slow of speech. He passed all this by, as being of no account whatever, and simply called attention to the fact that, since He had made man’s mouth, and would Himself be with the mouth He had made, there could not possibly be any cause for discouragement, even if Moses did have all the infirmities of speech of which he had complained. “And the Lord said unto him, Who hath made man’s mouth? or who maketh the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind? Have not I, the Lord? Now therefore go, and I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt say.”

When the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah telling him that He had ordained him to be a prophet to the nations, Jeremiah felt himself to be entirely unequal to such a work, and said, “Ah, Lord God, behold I cannot speak, for I am a child.” But the Lord answered, “Say not I am a child; for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatever I command thee, thou shalt speak. Be not afraid of their faces, for I am with thee to deliver thee, saith the Lord.”

Gideon is another illustration. The Lord had called him to undertake the deliverance of His people from the oppression of the Midianites, and had said to him, “Go in this thy might, and thou shalt save Israel from the hands of the Midianites: have I not sent thee?” This ought to have been enough for Gideon, but he was a poor unknown man, of no family or position, and no apparent fitness for such a great mission; and, looking at himself and his own deficiencies, he naturally became discouraged, and said, “Wherewith shall I save Israel? Behold my family is poor in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father’s house.” Other men, he felt, who had power and influence, might perhaps accomplish this great work, but not one so poor and insignificant as himself. How familiar this sort of talk must sound to the victims of discouragement among my readers, and how sensible and reasonable it seems. But what did the Lord think of it? “And the Lord said unto him, Surely, I will be with thee, and thou shalt smite the Midianites as one man.” Simply and only the promise, “Surely I will be with thee.” Not one word of encouragement did He give Gideon, nor does He give us, as to our own capacities or fitness for the work required, but merely the bare statement of the fact, as being sufficient for all possible needs, “I will be with thee.” To all words of discouragement in the Bible this is the invariable answer, “I will be with thee”; and it is an answer that precludes all possibility of argument or of any further discouragement. I, thy Creator and thy Redeemer, I thy strength and thy wisdom, I thy omnipresent and omniscient God, I will be with thee, and will protect thee through everything; no enemy shall hurt thee, no strife of tongues shall disturb thee; My presence shall be thy safety and thy sure defense.

One would think that in the face of such assertions as these, not even the most faint-hearted among us could find any loophole for discouragement. But discouragement comes in many subtle forms, and our spiritual enemies attack us in many disguises. Our own especial make-up or temperament is one of the most common and insidious of our enemies. Other people, who are made differently, can be cheerful and courageous, we think, but it is right that we should be discouraged, when we see the sort of people we are, how foolish, how helpless, how unfit to grapple with any enemies. And there would indeed be ample cause for discouragement if we were to be called upon to fight our battles ourselves. We would be right in thinking we could not do it. But if the Lord is to fight them for us, it puts an entirely different complexion on the matter, and our want of ability to fight becomes an advantage instead of a disadvantage. We can only be strong in Him when we are weak in ourselves, and our weakness therefore is in reality our greatest strength.

Insurmountable Difficulties

The children of Israel can give us a warning lesson here. After the Lord had delivered them out of Egypt, and had brought them to the borders of the promised land, Moses urged them to go up and possess it. “Behold,” he said, “The Lord thy God hath set the land before thee; go up and possess it, as the Lord God of thy fathers hath said unto thee; fear not, neither be discouraged.” But the circumstances were so discouraging, and they felt themselves to be so helpless, that they could not believe God would really do all He had said; and they murmured in their tents, and declared that it must be because the Lord hated them that He had brought them out of Egypt, in order to deliver them into the hands of their enemies. “And they said, Whither shall we go up? Our brethren have discouraged our hearts, saying, the people is greater and taller than we; the cities are great and walled up to heaven; and, moreover, we have seen the sons of the Anakims there.” When we read the report of the spies we cannot be surprised at their discouragement; and we can even believe they would have felt that courage under such circumstances would be only foolhardiness. “The land through which we have gone to search it,” the spies declared, “is a land that eateth up the inhabitants thereof: and all the men that we saw in it are men of a great stature. And there we saw the giants, the sons of Anak, which come of the giants: and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight.” Nothing could have seemed more humble than for them to look upon themselves as poor, good-for-nothing grasshoppers; and true humility would have seemed to teach that it would be the height of presumption for grasshoppers to try to conquer giants. We also often feel ourselves to be but grasshoppers in face of the giants of temptation and trouble that assail us, and we think ourselves justified in being discouraged. But the question is not, whether we are grasshoppers, but whether God is; for it is not we who have to fight these giants, but God.

In vain Moses reminded the Israelites of this. In vain he assured them that they had no need to be afraid of even the sons of the Anakims, for the Lord their God would fight for them. He even reminded them of past deliverances, and asked them if they did not remember how that “in the wilderness the Lord thy God bare thee as a man doth bear his son in all the way that ye went”; but they were still too discouraged to believe. And the result was that not one of that “evil generation” were allowed to see the promised laud, except Caleb and Joshua, who had steadfastly believed that God could and would lead them in.

Such are the fruits of giving way to discouragement, and such is the reward of a steadfast faith.

The Apostle in commenting on this story in Hebrews says, “And to whom sware He that they should not enter into His rest, but to them that believed not? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.”

Is there no parallel in all this to our case? Do we not look at our weakness instead of looking at the Lord’s strength; and have we not sometimes become so discouraged as to sink into such “anguish of spirit,” that we cannot even hearken to the Lord’s own declarations that He will fight for us, and will give us the victory? Our souls long to enter into the rest the Lord has promised; but giants and cities great and walled up to heaven seem to stand in our pathway, and we are afraid to believe. So we too, like the Israelites, cannot enter in because of unbelief.

How different it would be if we only had faith enough to say with the Psalmist, “Though an host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war should rise against me, in this will I be confident. . . . For in the time of trouble He shall hide me in His pavilion: in the secret of His tabernacle He shall hide me. He shall set me up upon a rock.” How joyfully and triumphantly would we be able to enter into rest, if this were our language.

Fear of People

Another very subtle cause for discouragement is to be found in what is called the fear of man. There seems to exist in this world a company of beings called “they,” who lord it over life with an iron hand of control. What will “they” say? What will “they” think? are among the most frequent questions that assail the timid soul, when it seeks to work for the Lord. At every turn this omnipotent and ubiquitous “they” stands in our way to discourage us and make us afraid. This form of discouragement is apt to come under the subtle disguise of a due consideration for the opinion of others; but it is especially dangerous, because it exalts this “they” into the place of God, and esteems “their” opinions above His promises. The only remedy here, as in all other forms of discouragement, is simply the reiteration of the fact that God is with us. “Be not afraid of their faces; for I am with thee to deliver thee, saith the Lord.” “For He hath said, I will never leave thee nor forsake thee.” So that we may boldly say, “The Lord is my helper and I will not fear what man shall do unto me.” How can any heart, however timid, dare to indulge in discouragement, in the face of such assertions as these?

Our Failures

There is, however, one sort of discouragement that is very common, and that seems as if it must be right, even although in all other cases it may be wrong, and that is the discouragement that arises from our own failures. It was from this sort of discouragement that the children of Israel suffered after their defeat at Ai. They had “committed a trespass in the accursed thing,” and “therefore they could not stand before their enemies”; and so great was their discouragement that it is said, “wherefore the hearts of the people melted and became as water,” and “Joshua rent his clothes, and fell to the earth upon his face before the ark of the Lord, until the eventide, he and all the elders of Israel, and put dust upon their heads.” When God’s own people “turn their backs before their enemies” one might well think they ought indeed to “lie on their faces,” and “put dust on their heads,” because of the dishonor they have brought upon His great name. Discouragement and despair would seem the only proper and safe condition after such failures. But evidently the Lord thought otherwise, for He said to Joshua, “Get thee up; wherefore liest thou upon thy face?” The proper thing to do after a failure is not to abandon ourselves to utter discouragement, humble as this may appear; but at once to face the evil, and get rid of it, and afresh and immediately to consecrate ourselves again to the Lord. “Up, sanctify yourselves,” is always God’s command. “Lie down and be discouraged,” is always our temptation.

But you may ask whether a sense of sin produced by the convictions of the Holy Spirit ought not to cause discouragement. If I see myself to be a sinner, how can I help being discouraged? To this I answer that the Holy Spirit does not convict us of sin in order to discourage us, but to encourage us. His work is to show us our sin, not that we may lie down in despair under its power, but that we may get rid of it. A good mother points out the faults of her children for the purpose of helping them correct those faults; and the convictions of the Holy Spirit are in truth one of our greatest privileges, if we only had the sense to see it; for they mean, not that we are to give up in discouragement, but that we are to be encouraged to believe that deliverance is coming.

The good housewife discovers the stains on her table linen, not in order that she may have it thrown aside as no longer fit for use, but in order that she may have it cleansed for future using; and, if she has a good laundress, she will not be discouraged by the worst of stains. Surely then when God says to us, “though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow,” it is pure unbelief on our part to allow ourselves to be discouraged at even the worst of our failures, for God’s “washing of regeneration” must be at least as effectual as the washing of any human laundress could possibly be.

Fenelon says concerning this: “It is of great importance to guard against discouragement on account of our faults. Discouragement is not a fruit of humility, but of pride, and nothing can be worse. It springs from a secret love of our own excellence. We are hurt at feeling what we are. If we become discouraged we are the more enfeebled, and from our reflections on our own imperfections, a chagrin arises that is often worse than the imperfection itself. Poor nature longs from self-love to behold itself perfect; it is vexed that it is not so, it is impatient, haughty, and out of temper with itself and with everybody else. Sad state; as though the work of God could be accomplished by our ill-humor. As though the peace of God could be attained by our interior restlessness.”

The Results of Discouragement

It Leads to Murmuring

Discouragement, from whatever source it may come, produces many sad results. One of its very worst is that it leads people to “murmur,” and to “speak against God.” When the children of Israel were “discouraged because of the way,” we are told that they “spake against God,” and asked all sorts of God-dishonoring questions. And I believe, if we could examine the causes of the rebelling and murmuring thoughts that sometimes beset us, we could find that they always begin in discouragement. The truth is, that discouragement is really, in its essence, a “speaking against God,” for it necessarily implies some sort of a failure on His part to come up to that which His promises have led us to expect of Him. The Psalmist recognizes this, and says concerning the discouraging questions His people asked in the days of their wilderness wandering, “Yes, they ‘spake against God’; they said, Can God furnish a table in the wilderness?” It appears therefore that even our questions as to God’s power or willingness to help us, which perhaps seem to ourselves so reasonable and even so humble, are really a “speaking against God”; and are displeasing to Him, because they reveal the sad fact that we” believe not in Him, and trust not in His salvation.”

It is Contagious

Another grievous quality in discouragement is its contagiousness. Nothing is more catching than discouragement. When the spies sent out by Moses brought up, as we have seen, an “evil report of the promised land,” and told of the giants there, they so “discouraged the hearts of their brethren,” that the people “lifted up their voices and cried,” and utterly refused to go into the very land which the Lord had given them, and which they had started out to possess.

The “evil report,” that so many Christians bring of their failures and their disappointments in the Christian life, is one of the most discouraging things in our intercourse with one another. The hearts of many young Christians are, I believe, far too often thus discouraged by their older brethren, who have but little idea of the harm they are doing by their doleful accounts of the trials of the way.

I can never look back without shame to a time in my own life when I “discouraged the heart” of a young Christian friend, by the “evil report” I gave her of the “giants” of doubt and difficulty I had met with in my Christian pathway. And afterwards, when a stronger faith in God had delivered me from all fear of these giants, I found that my former evil report had so effectually “discouraged her heart,” that it was a long time before I could induce her to hearken to the good report I had then to bring.

So important did the Lord feel it to be that no one should discourage the heart of another, that when Moses was giving to the Israelites God’s laws concerning their methods of warfare, he said, “And the officers shall speak further unto the people, and they shall say, What man is there that is fearful and faint-hearted? let him go and return unto his house, lest his brethren’s heart faint as well as his heart.”

Discouraged people, if they must be discouraged, ought at least to keep their discouragements to themselves, hidden away in the privacy of their own bosoms, lest they should discourage the hearts of their brethren. We know from experience that courage is contagious, and that one really brave soul, in moments of danger, can save a crowd from a panic. But we too often fail to remember that the converse of this is true, and that one faint-hearted man or woman can infect a whole crowd with fear. We consequently think nothing of expressing with the utmost freedom the foolish and wicked discouragements that are paralyzing all our own courage. We even sometimes, strange to say, sing our discouragements in our hymns at Church or in prayer meetings.

“Where is the blessedness I knew

When first I saw the Lord?

Where is that soul refreshing view

Of Jesus and His word?

What peaceful hours I then enjoyed

How sweet their memory still;

But now I find an aching void,

The world can never fill.”

Or this —

“And shall we then forever live

At this poor dying rate,

Our love so faint, so cold to Thee

And Thine to us so great?

In vain we tune our formal songs

In vain we strive to rise;

Hosannas languish on our tongues,

And our devotion dies.”

To sing such hymns seems to me the greatest travesty on the worship of God that could well be conceived of. If there are “aching voids” in our experience, if our “love is cold and faint,” and if we are living at a “poor, dying rate,” at least let us keep it to ourselves. Because “hosannas languish on our tongues” is no reason why complainings and murmurings should be exalted into their place. Surely we cannot think it can be pleasing to God to hear them. What would we think of wives who should meet together to sing such things about their relations with their husbands? I do not believe they would be tolerated in society a single day.

If the Church of Christ would only expurgate all the hymns of discouragement from its hymn books, and would allow none but hymns of courage and good cheer to be sung by its members, I believe the faith of Christians would go up with a mighty bound. “Be of good cheer” is the command of the Lord for His disciples, always and under all circumstances; and He founded this command on the tremendous fact that He had overcome the world, and that therefore there was nothing left for us to be discouraged about. As I have said before, if we only understood what it means that Christ has overcome the world, I believe we would be aghast at the very idea of any one of His followers ever being discouraged again.

If you had been an Israelite in those days, which would you rather have been, dear reader, the spies who brought an evil report of the land, and so discouraged the hearts of their brethren as to bring upon them the dreary forty years of wilderness wandering, or Caleb and Joshua, who “stilled the people before Moses, and said, Let us go up at once and possess the land; for we are well able to overcome it”?

Which will you be now?

Overcoming Discouragement

Speaking Positively

In the divine review of this episode, Moses spoke of Caleb as one who had “wholly followed “the Lord; and this “wholly following” consisted simply and only in the fact that Caleb had given his brethren a good report of the land, and, when his colleagues had made the heart of the people to melt by their evil report, had encouraged them to go up and possess it.

I hardly think that this is the general interpretation of what “wholly following” means; and I fear that many, otherwise really devoted Christians, fail in this essential point, and seem to make it almost the principal mission of their lives to discourage the hearts of their brethren, by the doleful and despairing reports they bring of the difficulties and dangers of the way.

How different it would be if discouragement was looked upon in its true light, as a “speaking against God,” and only encouraging words were permitted among Christians, and encouraging reports heard. How many times would the children of Israel have failed in conquering their enemies, had there been no men of faith among them to encourage and cheer them. And, on the other hand, who can tell how many spiritual defeats and disasters thy discouragements, dear reader, may have brought about in thy own life, and in the lives of those around thee?

In one of Isaiah’s prophecies which begins with, “Comfort ye, comfort ye My people, saith your God,” he gives us a wonderful description of God as the ground of comfort, and then sets forth what His people ought to be; and says in the course of the latter, “They helped every one his neighbour, and every one his brother, Be of good courage. So the carpenter encouraged the goldsmith, and he that smootheth with the hammer him that smote the anvil.”

Shall we follow their example, and from henceforth encourage one another instead of discouraging?

Turn Away From It

If I am asked how we are to get rid of discouragements, I can only say, as I have had to say of so many other wrong spiritual habits, we must give them up. It is never worthwhile to argue against discouragement. There is only one argument that can meet it, and that is the argument of God. When David was in the midst of what were perhaps the most discouraging moments of his life, when he had found his city burned, and his wives stolen, and he and the men with him had wept until they had no more power to weep; and when his men, exasperated at their misfortunes, spake of stoning him, then we are told, “But David encouraged himself in the Lord his God”; and the result was a magnificent victory, in which all that they had lost was more than restored to them. This always will be, and always must be the result of a courageous faith, because faith lays hold of the omnipotence of God.

Over and over the Psalmist asks himself this question, “Why art thou cast down, O my soul, and why art thou disquieted within me?” And each time he answers himself with the argument of God. “Hope thou in God; for I shall yet praise Him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God.” He does not analyze his disquietude, nor try to argue it away, but he turns at once to the Lord, and by faith begins to praise Him.

It is the only way. Discouragement flies where faith appears; and, vice versa, faith flies when discouragement appears. We must choose between them, for they will not mix.

Taken from Living in the Sunshine by Hannah Whitall Smith.