

HAND ME ANOTHER BRICK

Timeless Lessons on Leadership

STUDY SIX

Discouragement: Its Causes and Cure

Nehemiah 4:9–23

Though they were at one time enthusiastic and energetic—very motivated—Nehemiah’s workers now grew weary and became discouraged. They lost their strength, their vision, their confidence, and even their security. But Nehemiah, overcoming his own discouragement, took up the task of curing their melancholy through a variety of God-directed means.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

A HEALTHY community won’t go down easily. Occasionally, however, an infection afflicts one person, and before you know it, the illness has cascaded its way through the whole population. But if you catch the disease early enough, you can stop the infection before it spreads too far.

While this principle is true for physical health, the basic principle applies to *spiritual* health as well. And there is one particularly insidious infection that threatens to tear down any community—a family, a team, a church, a business:

Discouragement

Discouragement is a silent killer—one whose symptoms are often invisible to the naked eye. By the time you notice the signs of infection, you’re often too late to stop the rapid spread. So leaders must keep a watchful eye to identify the *causes* of discouragement. Only then can they apply the *cure* before the disease grips others.



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In Scripture, we read of a community plagued with discouragement. The great leader Nehemiah first identified the causes of the infection and then applied the appropriate cure so the people of God could continue to participate joyfully in His work. As we heed Nehemiah's example, we will grow healthy communities equipped to endure the most hopeless of circumstances.



PREPARE YOUR HEART

How is your spiritual health today? It's all too easy to grow discouraged because life is *hard*. Relationships, finances, responsibilities, and physical health can all be sources of discouragement. You may feel a lack of strength, vision, confidence, or security today. Thankfully, God generously bestows such gifts upon His children. Offer this prayer as you prepare to turn to Nehemiah:

Father, I confess that I'm not immune to discouragement. I'm often unaware of what causes me to lose heart. As I open Your Word today, probe into my soul and show me what discourages me. I trust You, the Great Physician, to lift me up. In Jesus' name, amen.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

One of the root causes of discouragement is *external criticism*. As Nehemiah and the people of Israel attempted to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, they stood in constant contact with virulent critique. The gentiles who lived in the regions of Jerusalem mocked this ragged crew of volunteers who attempted to fortify their city.

These critics offered comments like, "Do they actually think they can make something of stones from a rubbish heap—and charred ones at that?" (*Nehemiah 4:2*) and, "That stone wall would collapse if even a fox walked along the top of it!" (*4:3*). How could you *not* feel discouraged!

Thankfully, Nehemiah noticed the symptoms of discouragement early, and in *Nehemiah 4:9–23*, we see him act like a seasoned doctor, eradicating the infection from the community.



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Observation: The Disease of Discouragement

Read *Nehemiah 4:9–23* two or three times using a different Bible translation each time. As you read and observe the text, get a sense of the emotion behind the words. Sympathize with the discouragement of the people. Feel Nehemiah’s words of encouragement resonate in your soul.

Identifying Discouragement’s Causes—Nehemiah 4:9–12

The workers’ discouragement grew evident when they lamented, “We will never be able to build the wall by ourselves” (*Nehemiah 4:10*). According to this verse, what two reasons did they give for thinking this?

1. _____
2. _____

According to *Nehemiah 4:11*, how did Nehemiah’s opponents plan to ramp up their opposition? How did the Israelites feel when they heard about this plan in *4:12*?

Applying Discouragement’s Cure—Nehemiah 4:13–23

Nehemiah knew that God was greater than the threats of the enemies. He also realized that he needed to be actively involved in carrying out God’s plan. So he “placed armed guards behind the lowest parts of the wall in the exposed areas” (*Nehemiah 4:13*).



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Nehemiah wanted his people to be prepared for an attack from their enemies, but he also needed them to remain confident in God. What encouragement did he offer the people in *Nehemiah 4:14*? Summarize Nehemiah's exhortation in your own words.

Nehemiah first handled discouragement by pointing people to God, yet as we see time and again in this book, Nehemiah was a man of prayer *and* preparation—of faith *and* action. According to *4:15–18*, what practical steps did Nehemiah take to address the concerns of the people?

Nehemiah recognized that the wall was vulnerable to attack. With the workers spread out across the whole perimeter of Jerusalem, even a small force of soldiers could fight its way into the city with little resistance. According to *4:19–20*, how did Nehemiah prepare the people to handle this potential threat? Take special note of his refrain of hope at the end of *4:20*.



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According to *Nehemiah 4:21–23*, what additional measures did Nehemiah take to ensure the wall was completed in a timely and safe manner?

The opposition was so great that, before long, discouragement set in. No matter how hard Nehemiah tried to correct the problems, they just got worse. They multiplied and magnified as time went on. Leaders must be prepared to deal with a problem like that.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Interpretation: Diagnosing Discouragement

Interpreting a passage of Scripture involves uncovering gems of spiritual truth after digging through the text through observation.¹ This account is instructive as it teaches followers of Jesus across time how to diagnose and treat the disease of discouragement.

What factors ultimately caused discouragement among the Israelites building the wall? What had the people lost in terms of personal motivation, team morale, or faith in God?



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What did the Israelites' behavior reveal about their faith?

In what ways did Nehemiah rally his disheartened workers? In what ways did these *cures* correspond with the *causes* of discouragement? In other words, how does strengthening faith weaken discouragement?

Using the following template, write two or three timeless truths based on this passage: *A godly leader can combat discouragement by . . . because*

Just before the door of a new opportunity opens all the way, I seem to slump into discouragement. I'm hesitant to move through the door. Yet God graciously boots me in the seat of my pants, and I find myself on the other side rejoicing. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



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Correlation: The Disciples' Discouragement

As Jesus' original disciples walked with their Teacher, their morale resembled a leaf in the wind. In one moment, their faith soared, and in the next, it seemed to blow away with the faintest breeze of opposition.

In one particular instance, Jesus drew a crowd of 5,000 men plus their families. When he saw the people and their spiritual and physical hunger, “he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd” (*Mark 6:34*). The disciples knew Jesus could meet the people's spiritual needs, but they grew discouraged when they considered their physical needs.

According to *Mark 6:35–37*, what reasons did the disciples give for their discouragement?

Despite the squabbling of His disciples, Jesus wouldn't allow Himself to be discouraged like His students. According to *6:38–44*, how did Jesus meet the physical needs of the crowd?



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What kind of attitude would have remedied the disciples' discouragement at the outset of this episode?

The disciples neglected an essential principle of the Christian life: God “is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think” (*Ephesians 3:20*). No source of discouragement is too big for God to handle. And this truth is essential to the application of *Nehemiah 4:9–23*.

Application: Defeating Discouragement

Pastor Chuck Swindoll identified five common cures that can heal a community of some of the worst cases of discouragement:

1. *Direct people's attention to the Lord.* He is the only source of true security.
2. *Unify people around the same goal.* Clear vision keeps you from losing your way.
3. *Encourage people to maintain balance.* Each task must receive the attention it deserves.
4. *Provide people with a rallying point.* A community that gathers often stays strong.
5. *Occupy people with service to others.* As you meet others' needs, you build confidence.



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As you consider your neighborhood, your workplace, your church, do you sense discouragement infecting your community? What do you think is causing these feelings?

Which of the five points above can act as the cure for the discouragement caused by your specific circumstances? What practical steps can you take to apply this cure to your own life and so set an example for others?

While discouragement is a pandemic in our world today, we can rise above it. Jesus Christ offers His followers abundant joy and everlasting hope. Though you may feel sick with discouragement, one day, those feelings will be cured for good.

Take heart in that truth today.



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A FINAL PRAYER

Father, I want to lead a passionate life of service to You. Yet I know when discouragement plagues me, I feel that passion faltering. Give me the wisdom to identify any causes of discouragement in my soul. Give me the faith to allow You to treat me before my poor attitude infects others. I ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

ENDNOTE

1. To learn about Pastor Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study, go to the web page, "[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](#)."

