

Brian Zahnd: Encourage Yourself in God

✖ *To help and encourage his congregation, Brian Zahnd, founder and senior pastor of Word of Life Church in St. Joseph, Missouri, developed a sermon series based on the story of David at Ziklag in 1 Samuel 30. When David and his men returned to Ziklag, they found that the Amalekites had invaded the city, burned their homes, ransacked their possessions, and kidnapped their wives, sons and daughters. This was surely the worst day of their lives. But David did 10 things when faced with this horrible reality. In his new book, What to Do on the Worst Day of Your Life, Zahnd discusses David's 10 responses and how we can follow his example. Here is an excerpt from the book, Step No. 3: "Encourage Yourself in God."*

David could sink into the black hole of depression and give up and quit. Or he could fight back. But before David could fight, he would have to get his strength and courage back. As David looked around him, he saw nothing but discouraged and downcast men. David had no one to encourage him, so he had only one recourse: He "encouraged himself in the Lord his God" (1 Sam. 30:6, KJV).

From what we know of David, it is very easy to surmise how David went about encouraging himself. David took his harp, retreated to a solitary place, and began to sing songs of praise to God. No doubt David didn't feel like singing, but he did it anyway. To sing was simply a choice that David made.

David didn't sing a sad lament bemoaning his situation. Instead, David sang of the majesty and power of God. He sang of the Creator who had spoken the worlds into existence. He sang of the deliverer who had already given him improbable victories—victory over the lion, victory over the bear, and victory over the Philistine giant Goliath. Through praise and

worship, David changed his focus. On the wings of a song his spirit was lifted above his present circumstances into the presence of the One who is high and lifted up. The melodies of David's harp filled the air as the sweet psalmist of Israel sang praises to the God of heaven who transcends human limitation and is forever seated upon the throne of the universe.

The Bible states it very matter-of-factly: "David encouraged himself in the Lord his God." There was nothing about the circumstance that was encouraging, and had David limited his focus to the present circumstance, he would have surely gone into a deep depression. But David encouraged himself *in God*. In times of uncertainty and upheaval, God was David's constant. God was David's constant because God doesn't change. No matter what the circumstances, God is above it all, seated upon the throne of sovereignty and holding the scepter of dominion. Through praise and worship, David changed his focus so that by the eye of faith he beheld *El Shaddai*—the almighty God.

How did David praise God? Maybe he sang Psalm 34. In fact, I would find it hard to believe that this particular song did not come to David's mind as he sought to encourage himself. David had written this psalm just two years earlier when God had delivered him from the Philistine king Abimelech. I can easily imagine David sitting in the ashes of what was once his home with harp in hand singing these words:

"I will bless the Lord at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul shall make its boast in the Lord; the humble shall hear of it and be glad. Oh, magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt His name together. I sought the Lord, and He heard me, and delivered me from all my fears" (vv. 34:1-4, NKJV).

David sang, "I will bless the Lord at all times." All times—good times, bad times, great times and terrible times. Even on the worst day of your life, God is worthy of praise.

David sang praises to God in the middle of burnt-out Ziklag.

David sang. He sang the amazing lyric, "His praise shall continually be in my mouth." This is part of the path to encouragement. When praise is in your mouth, there will be no grumbling, no complaining and no negative speaking. Praise is the language of faith. If you want to strengthen your faith, begin to praise God.

Then David sang another lyric: "Oh, magnify the Lord with me." What does that mean? What does it mean to magnify the Lord? "Magnify" means "to enlarge or make bigger in perspective." When we magnify something with a magnifying glass, a microscope, or a telescope, we don't change its reality. We don't make the object we are observing any bigger, but we change our perception of it. We cannot make God any bigger than He already is—you can't increase omnipotence, but you can magnify (or diminish) *your perspective* of God. Perspective has everything to do with whether you are encouraged or discouraged.

Make God Bigger Than Your Trouble

Refuse to magnify the devil. Refuse to magnify the trouble. Refuse to magnify the present negative circumstance. Don't analyze your trouble with a magnifying glass—this will only lead to deeper discouragement. Magnify the Lord! Speak of His greatness, His power, His might. Talk about how big and powerful God is! My Nigerian preacher friend Bishop Goddowell Avwomakpa is in the habit of saying, "When you make God bigger, you make your trouble smaller." It's simple but true.

A thousand years earlier, the young but wise Elihu reminded Job (who was facing his own worst day) that God gives songs in the night (see Job 35:10). That is an encouraging word. In the dark night of the soul, God will give you a song that, if sung, will bring a dawn of faith and encouragement. So in the dark night of his personal anguish, David sang a song of

praise to the God who can make a way where there is no way.

Paul and Silas did the same thing a thousand years later. They had been arrested for the good deed of casting a spirit of divination out of a young slave girl. After a sham of a trial, they were beaten with rods and imprisoned in the innermost dungeon with their feet in stocks. How did they respond? In a most remarkable way. At midnight, instead of despairing and crying themselves to sleep, they sang hymns of praise to God. Paul and Silas made the exceptional choice to encourage themselves by praising God. Luke tells us that while Paul and Silas sang, the other prisoners were listening to them. No doubt they were! I'm sure the prisoners were amazed at such surprising behavior. Truly these men were different—they had something the other prisoners didn't have. They possessed a remarkable faith in their God, and God responded to their remarkable faith by delivering them from the dungeon of despair through a miraculously timed earthquake. "The foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were loosed" (Acts 16:26).

Paul and Silas were simply following in the tradition pioneered by David when he encouraged himself with songs of praise. Indeed, as David sang his songs of praise, a change came over him. A spark of faith had brought a glimmer of hope, and David could feel himself becoming encouraged. His men noticed the change also. An encouraged man among a multitude of discouraged men will stand out. That's why David was the leader. The leader will always be the one who can encourage himself when everyone else is discouraged. Had someone else encouraged himself instead of David, that man would have become the new leader. The ability to encourage yourself when everyone else is discouraged is an essential attribute of leadership. In the most desperate times, the ability to summon strength through encouraging yourself is the greatest act of leadership. It's the leadership of Abraham Lincoln ... of

Winston Churchill ... of David.

Encouraging yourself in the Lord is part of how you go about recovering your joy—not the shallow, mercurial feeling of happiness, but deep, abiding joy, which can be present even in the midst of sorrow. I know the idea of having joy in the midst of sorrow may seem paradoxical, but truth is in the paradox. If you are going to recover from the worst day of your life, among the first things you have to recover is your joy. In order to defeat you, the devil knows he must steal your joy. Satan is quite aware of the spiritual truth concerning joy revealed in Nehemiah: “‘Do not sorrow, for the joy of the Lord is your strength'” (Neh. 8:10).

What the devil is after through excessive grief and lingering depression is your strength—the strength that is found in the joy of the Lord. Peter talks about the devil utilizing a stalking strategy analogous to a lion stalking its prey. The devil “walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Pet. 5:8). The devil may be like a lion—not as a metaphor for majesty but as an opportunist seeking to prey upon the weak and feeble. Satan does not want a confrontation with strength; he seeks to exploit weakness.

Understanding that the joy of the Lord is the strength of the believer, the devil seeks to steal your joy, thereby reducing you to weakness. This is a primary strategy utilized by the devil to defeat believers. The believer who can retain his joy is destined to triumph in the end. This is a powerful principle. If the devil cannot steal your joy, he cannot ultimately defeat you. The moment David began to encourage himself in the Lord and recover his joy, he placed himself on a trajectory to turn his whole situation around. Joy is not just a preferred emotional state; it is a necessary element in attaining full recovery.

Think Yourself Happy

The apostle James was the first pastor of the first church. He spent his life in pastoral ministry, and from his experience he was well equipped to give counsel on how people should respond when facing a trial. In the first chapter of his epistle, James gives some vital information about how we are to respond in the midst of a trial. He said we are to “count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.” If we allow patience to have its perfect work, we will “be perfect and complete, lacking nothing” (James 1:2-4).

James teaches us that the redeemed should respond to the trials of life completely differently than those who do not have a Christian perspective on life. James teaches us that when we encounter trials, we should “count it all joy.” This is a reaction that is definitely counterintuitive but part of the Christian distinctive. The word translated “count” is *hegeomai*. It is an accounting term that means we are to place trials in the joy column of our emotional ledger. We can only do this if we understand the divine purpose behind trials. *Hegeomai* also means “to rule or exercise authority.” In fact, *hegeomai* was used to refer to an imperial governor. In other words, when you are thrust into a trial, you must become the governor of your emotions and not allow them to run out of control. You must take authority, rule over your feelings, and choose joy as your dominant emotion. Govern your emotions; don’t let them govern you.

The apostle Paul uses the word *hegeomai* when he says, “‘I think myself happy’” (Acts 26:2). Paul was in a trial—literally. He was standing in chains before King Agrippa, charged with insurrection (a crime he did not commit). Insurrection was a capital crime, and Paul’s life was at stake in this trial. Paul opened his defense with the words “I think [*hegeomai*] myself happy.” In other words, Paul was saying, “I account myself happy. I rule myself happy. I govern myself happy.” In spite of his trial, Paul commanded his

emotional state to be one of joy and happiness.

On more than one occasion, I have stood in the ruins of Caesarea where Paul made his bold confession, "I think myself happy." I have stood where Paul stood as an accused criminal, bound with chains, and I have thought, *If Paul can make that confession in his great trial, so can I.* So, I emulate the faith of Paul. When I find myself in a trial, I think of that judgment hall in Caesarea, and I say, "I think myself happy." I am the governor of my soul realm. I rule my emotions; they don't rule me. I choose the joy of the Lord as my dominant emotion.

James said that in order to count it all joy when you fall into a trial, you must know the divine purpose of trials—producing patience (see James 1:3). Your trial is a test—a test of your faith. Untested faith is of little value, but faith that has been tested and refined in the furnace of affliction is the most precious possession a person can have. It's more "precious than gold that perishes," and even though it is tested by fire, it "may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 1:7).

We are not interested in a counterfeit faith that is nothing more than a naïve, humanistic optimism; we want refined faith that has been proven in the tests of life. Four times in the Bible we are told to live by our faith (see Hab. 2:4; Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38). The quality of your Christian life will be a reflection of the quality of your faith. Faith is the victory that overcomes the ubiquitous troubles we find in this world (1 John 5:4). So, how do you know the quality of your faith? It is revealed in the tests of life—in the days of adversity. If we faint in adversity, our faith in God—the source of our strength—is small (see Prov. 24:10).

On the night that Jesus was betrayed, He warned Peter that he was about to enter a great trial. Satan was out to get Peter! (See Luke 22:31.) Satan had been observing Simon Peter, and he

could not tell if Peter's faith was genuine or counterfeit. Satan, therefore, obtained permission from God to test Peter's faith. Notice that Satan had to ask God for permission before he could put Peter in a trial that would test his faith. The Bible promises that God will not allow you to be tested beyond what you can endure (see 1 Cor. 10:13). So, you can know for sure that you will never encounter a trial that is too great for your faith.

Jesus told Peter that he would be sifted as wheat. One of the ways wheat is sifted is to place it in a sieve and shake it violently; another way is to toss the grain in the air into a stiff breeze. I have seen this done in India many times. The purpose of this process is to separate the chaff from the wheat. Chaff is *fake* stuff, but wheat has substance. When the wheat is thrown into the air, the wind carries the *fake* chaff away, but the substantive grain falls back to the ground. This is what happens in a trial. You are tossed into the air in the midst of a strong wind, and the *fake* stuff in your life is blown away, but your genuine faith will bring you back to the ground. Some people are all *fake* stuff; they have no genuine faith in their lives. They may talk like they have faith and act like they have faith, but when the storm hits, all of their supposed faith turns out to be just *fake* chaff that is blown away. After a while you cannot find these people; they are not in church anymore, they don't follow Jesus anymore, and they don't believe anymore. They never had real faith in the first place; they just had a *fake* emotional experience that could not stand in the storm and failed the test of faith.

Jesus told Peter what would happen when he was tested, saying that Peter's faith would not fail (see Luke 22:32). Peter failed, but his *faith* did not completely fail. Peter failed in his courage, and he failed in his commitment, but his faith did not completely fail. There was a lot of *fake* stuff in Peter that needed to be exposed and blown away. His boasting, his bravado and his self-reliance were all *fake* things that

would be blown away in the trial. There was a genuine faith in Peter that enabled him to repent and return to Jesus. Like the wheat that is thrown into the air, the chaff is carried away, but the grain returns to the same place. This is the way it was with Peter. He was thrown into the air in the midst of a trial, and his pride was blown away, but his faith returned to Jesus.

The testing of our faith produces something—it produces patience (see James 1:3). The Greek word for “patience” used here is *hupomone*, which means, “cheerful consistency.” When you have *hupomone* in the midst of your trial, you maintain the same cheerful attitude of victory. When you have *hupomone*, people may not be able to tell you are going through a trial because you act the same way—you are cheerfully consistent. It is by exhibiting the patience of *hupomone* in the midst of a trial—admittedly a difficult spiritual skill to master—that you pass the test of your faith.

What happens if you don’t pass the test? You don’t fail, but you do get to take the test over. You will face this kind of test until you learn to pass the test by maintaining a cheerful and consistent attitude of victory no matter what your circumstances. This is *hupomone*. Sadly, it’s a test the first generation of Israelites who came out of Egypt never did pass, and as a result, they were never able to enter the Promised Land, a land flowing with the milk of abundance and the honey of sweet victory. David, on the other hand, knew how to pass the faith test. Let’s learn from David.

We all enjoy telling our own stories of God’s deliverances, but without a test, there is no deliverance, no story, no testimony. Every glorious testimony that inspires the faith of others begins with a test. In the midst of a trial, the object is to turn the test into a testimony.

So what happens when you add *hupomone* patience to refined faith? James says you will lack nothing but will be “perfect

and complete" (James 1:4).

It is God's will that you lack no good thing (see Ps. 84:11). Though the devil's intent in the attack is to steal from you and diminish you, God will work with you in the midst of the trial to bring you into greater abundance. An amazing thing!

If we lack wisdom or any other thing that God has promised, all we need to do is "ask of God." He will never rebuke us for asking or refuse to respond. He "gives to all liberally," and we will lack nothing (see James 1:5).

Lack nothing—what a wonderful promise. If you can govern your emotions and maintain your joy, if you recognize your trial is nothing but a test of your faith, if you can maintain the cheerful consistency of patience, then in the end you will lack nothing. This is the promise of God!

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