

"DON'T GIVE UP, BROTHER!"
"DON'T LOSE HOPE, SISTER!"

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 4:1-16

If we were to write a history of our local congregations, using the old bulletins and other records as our resource, one feature would probably be held in common by practically every church.

Our records would reveal a pattern of beginning new ministries with great enthusiasm, only to be followed by our "losing heart" after the excitement had worn off.

The visitation program, for example, may attract more volunteers than we can use when the programs are first announced.

But frequently, the volunteers dwindle until only a few are left to oversee the programs.

They, too, "lose heart" for the task.

When a pattern of giving up on vital ministries occurs, we easily become cynical about the prospects for any new ministry.

This pattern has left many capable people "burned out" after years of thinking that they would make the difference.

Discouragement is always the problem.

Those who were put in charge "lose heart" after countless of trying to enlist volunteers for their work.

Many of us enter programs thinking that we will "make a difference," but later we doubt if we do.

The danger to our ministries is not the lack of good ideas or capable people. Our problem is that we "easily lose the fire in our hearts."

How do you know when your effort was decisive in building up the church?
Because success are not easy to measure, we demand tangible evidence that our work has made a difference.

We point to the attendance record to show our success.
But we know that there must be more to a successful ministry than these visible sign.

Discouragement is used often enough in the New Testament to suggest that our congregations are not alone in “losing heart.”

Jesus’ parable of the persistent widow who refused to give up in her request to the unjust judge was told in order to encourage the disciples: *“He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart”* (Luke 18:1).

Paul counseled Christians not to “lose heart.”
He wrote to both the Galatians (6:9) and the Thessalonians (2 Thessalonians 3:13) telling them not to “grow weary [*egkakein*] of doing good.”

On two occasions in 2 Corinthians, Paul says, “We do not lose heart” (4:1, 16).
The fact that Paul repeats this statement suggests that it is particularly important to him in his discussion with the Corinthians.

How does one keep from giving in to discouragement?

In 4:1-16, Paul gives the reason why he continued his ministry and did not lose the fire in his heart.

WE LOOK NOT TO THE THINGS THAT ARE SEEN (4:16-17)

On the surface, Paul had reasons for “losing heart.”

One possible reason for giving up was the constant “affliction.”

Throughout 2 Corinthians, Paul’s physical weakness and affliction have been the issue.

How can one fail to “lose heart” when his efforts are going nowhere?

Most of us can tolerate inconvenience and pain if we believe that our work will bring results.

It is when we no longer see a future that we want to give up.

Perhaps the lingering death of many of our efforts in the church occurs when we see our sacrifices leading nowhere.

And that's where we start losing the fire in us.

Through the eyes of faith, Paul was able to view the relationship between sacrifice and results in a way that encouraged him.

That is, the sufferings are out of proportion to the results because the sufferings are insignificant in comparison with the eternal results of his work.

This kind of perspective prevents Paul from being discouraged. The afflictions of the moment are trivial in comparison with the “eternal weight of glory.”

There is a reason why our ministries do not always have measurable signs of success; our apparent failures prepare us for real results which we cannot see at the present.

This belief in the future kept Paul's ministry alive.

He wrote to the Romans, *“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us”* (Romans 8:18).

His certainty in a future gave him the confidence to go on without growing discouraged.

If our congregations have a history of programs that failed and leaders who “lose heart,” it is likely that we have been victimized by the impatience of our age.

Our demand for instant results to prove that our program is “paying off” indicates that our ministries are lacking in faith.

There is a danger in an approach which demands visible signs of success.

Paul's confident spirit grew out of his assurance of the unseen:

“While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal” (4:18).

When we believe that the work of ministry depends on our own resources, we fail. We do not “lose heart” when we acknowledge that God has not abandoned us.

If we learn this valuable lesson, we will see our ministries in a radically new way. We will be able to find strength at the very place where we appear to be failures. Ministries that seem to fail will be the occasion for finding new strength. Frustrations in church programs will be the opportunity for us to grow spiritually.

Authentic Christianity looks not for the success of the “outer man,” but to the strength of the “inward man” which cannot be measured.

CONCLUSION

Paul showed us that he was never discouraged.

Paul’s attitude was this:

“being always of good courage” (5:6; cf. 5:8).

Scribbled on a wall of a cellar in Germany, during the violence and despair of World War II:

I believe in the sun, even when it is not shining;

I believe in love, even when I feel it not;

I believe in God, even when he is silent.

The perspective which can say,

“We walk by faith, not by sight” is the sign of the authentic Christian.

Be of good courage...do not lose heart...keep that fire burning within our hearts.

Giving up is not the sign of a true and authentic Christian.