

**YOU BELONG TO A LOVING FATHER**

Are you struggling with discouragement these days? Even just a little bit?

- The feeling of being discouraged is everywhere.
- It's just been too hard for too long.
- So we need extra patience for each other these days.
- *"Be kind. Everybody you meet is fighting a hard battle."*
- Be kind also to yourself if you are one who tends to forgive others but not yourself.

A dis-couraged heart is a heart that has lost its courage, the courage to keep on keeping on.

- Discouragement is a heart attack of the spirit.
- Heart attacks can be deadly.

Your discouragement could be as simple as the fact that you keep taking on too much.

- Author Seth Godin warns against what he calls, *"crowding the pan."*
- He writes, *"No matter what it is you're cooking, if you put too much in the pot, it's not going to come out as well."*

Your situation might be even more complicated if some of that "too much" in your pan is some pretty stinky stuff.

- As C.S. Lewis pointed out, *"No clever arrangement of rotten eggs ever made a good omelet."*
- As boxer Mike Tyson said, *"Everybody has a plan until they get punched in the face."*

Maybe you've even felt spiritually discouraged with what seems like a lack of God's response to your need?

- That happens. It's okay to admit it, even to tell God directly you're upset with Him right now.
- The biblical Psalms are full of what are called "Laments" – cries to God not only about the unbearable hardship a person is facing but the prayerful complaint that God doesn't seem to be doing much of anything about it.

Even so, Jesus says, *"Do not lose heart."*

- The full quote goes like this, *"Pray always and do not lose heart."*
- It's not only an encouragement, it's a command.
- The first part is important to the second part. *"Pray always and do not lose heart."*
- Another way to translate Jesus' words for *"Do not lose heart"* is *"Don't give up."*
- It might not be a happy prayer but keep praying.
- Pray it out. Pray it all out.

In Luke 18, Jesus tells a story, a parable, to encourage us to be persistent in our prayers.

- There's this judge, a shockingly corrupt judge.
- Judges are supposed to be honorable people. This one isn't.
- Judges are supposed to ensure justice happens. This one doesn't.
- Judges in Jesus' world also played a religious role making sure that society followed God's laws of the biblical Torah.
- But this judge ignored not only the scriptures but God himself - no faith, no faithfulness, not even any fear of God.
- Beware of those who are powerful and also godless.

It also says this judge had *"no respect for people."*

- The word here for "respect" actually means "shame."
- Being godless, this corrupt man *"has lost his ability to sense the evil of his actions."*
- As the biblical scholar Kenneth Baily puts it, *"His inner sense of what constitutes a good act and what is a shameful act is missing. He cannot be shamed."*
- This is a soul sickness with moral, spiritual, and social ramifications.
- Truly beware of those who are powerful, godless, and feel no shame even in public.

Jesus' story goes on. There's this widow. She's oppressed by some terrible injustice. She's in the right, as the judge himself later admits, but she's a poor and powerless woman on her own.

- If she wasn't poor, she could bribe the judge... bribes were common.
- If she was a person of influence, she could use her connections to win favor.
- If she was a man, she could go to court herself. The common courtroom for most places was the city gate, a men-only place. Ordinarily women were not allowed.

(The fact that Jesus is lifting up a widow to be the star of his story is just another example of Jesus' counterculture empowerment of women and others as well.)

But she's not totally powerless; she still has her voice.

- In fact, she becomes just-powerful-enough by using her voice.
- (You, too, might feel powerless, but do you still have your voice?)
- She also has perseverance. She refuses to lose heart and give up.
- There's not even a spark of honor in this judge to which she could appeal.
- And yet she keeps going directly to the corrupt judge and eventually just wears him out.
- Finally the guy says, *"Because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice."*

Jesus then makes his point:

- Look, even this dishonorable judge was finally persuaded to give justice!
- But you are not dealing with some corrupt and heartless judge! No!
- You are in the care of God, your gracious Heavenly Father who loves you!

You too have a voice, a voice you can use in prayer.

- No, we don't always get the answer we want.
- I know I have persistently prayed to the Lord about things, even pleaded and begged, and it still has not gone the way I wanted.
- You, too, might not be getting the answer you want, but the God who loves you does still hear your prayers. As long as there is a good God, there is still good hope.
- Not losing your prayers is the key to not losing heart.

There's a bit of a stinger in the tail end of what Jesus has to say.

- He wonders and warns that when he comes again to judge us all, "*will he find faith on the earth?*"
- Will Jesus find the faith that can endure hardship and even seasons of unanswered prayer.
- Losing your prayers leads to losing heart and that can lead to losing faith, which is something worse than injustice itself.

Cling to this, you belong to a loving Heavenly Father.

Amen.