

“Discouraging the Encouraged”

Isaiah 49:8-16a

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Did you ever try to encourage someone and give them hope, only to have it backfire? This person did not want to hear anything positive and discounted everything you said. How did you handle it? Did it take the wind out of your sails?

This happened to the prophet writing in Isaiah as our text reveals. His people had been in exile for fifty years and had grown weary. They had been separated from their homeland and all that was familiar to them and it appeared that their lot in life was never going to change. They were going to die strangers in a strange land and nothing about that appealed to them.

So, when the prophet told them that world events were changing which could lead to their return to Jerusalem, they did not believe him. His reassuring and comforting words sounded so hollow to them. Their reply was filled with despair and cynicism. “The Lord has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me” Isaiah 49:14.

Those are harsh words. Have you ever said this about God? Have you ever felt that level of abandonment, loneliness and despair? Would it help to know that Jesus did? Do you recall his words on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” This puts a little different twist on this passage, doesn’t it?

What did Isaiah do after getting this negative response to his good news? **The first thing he did was let the people own their feelings.** He did not rebuke them for venting their anger and frustrations. He did not chastise them for speaking harshly about God. Perhaps the writer knew that voicing pain and despair was a part of the healing process.

Often people apologize for saying anything uncomplimentary about God. When their anger boils over and they voice their disappointment in Him, they usually follow it with an apology. I tell them that it is not necessary to do that. God understands that people get angry with Him just as they do others and need to verbalize it.

Secondly, the prophet in Isaiah did not let their doubts destroy his faith. He did not feel the same way they did. His heart was filled with confidence and hope. He believed that God would honor the covenant He made with His people and lead them back to their homeland. His words were not hollow. They were genuine, real and filled with promise and certainty.

The prophet believed that God could no more forget them than a mother could forget a baby or be indifferent to her child’s needs. God’s love for His children was greater than the strongest form of human love and under no circumstances could He forget them. Even their names were engraved upon His hands.

I love that image of God inscribing the names of His people on the palm of His hands. It brings a vivid image to mind.

How many of us have written a phone number or name on the palm of our hand so we would not forget it? I suppose all of us have at one time or another. That name, however, washed off after a period of time, as it should have. It was not designed to last forever.

Isaiah assured his readers that their names were not merely written on the palm of God’s hands, they were engraved. He would never forsake or forget them.

Our McAfee students are very familiar with the name of Charlie Johnson. He has been the preaching professor at McAfee since the untimely death of Dr. John Claypool. He has also been my friend for twenty years. We pastored neighboring churches in the 1980’s.

Charlie’s father passed away a few months ago, having suffered from Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s. In the latter stages of his illness, he could not remember the names of his four sons. You know how painful this was for Charlie and his siblings. Many of you have experienced this.

Mr. Johnson was buried on the family farm in Monroe County, Alabama beside his father, grandfather, great grandfather and great-great grandfather. Charlie can trace his roots on that farm back to 1810.

After the funeral, Charlie and his brothers visited the hunting cabin on the Alabama River where he and his fathers before him roamed the woods and river bottoms. They had a wonderful time rummaging through his dad's personal effects and memorabilia.

Charlie's oldest brother, Langdon, was in the kitchen when he called out, "Fellows, come here." Lang had peeled back the tablecloth covering the kitchen table only to discover the names of all four sons carefully etched in the wooden plank of the table. Langdon, Francis, Charles and Dennis were all there.

You can imagine how this made them feel. As Charlie writes, "My father wanted all his children to know that long after he could tell us himself or even call our names, that we always had a place at our daddy's table."

Isaiah was confident that God had not forgotten His people and that their names were forever before Him. His listeners were not as convinced, however. Their cynicism attacked their faith and left them bitter. "The Lord has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me."

Isaiah understood the reason for their skepticism and did something remarkable. He offered them his faith when theirs was weak. For the time being, they could rely upon what he believed and I am sure many did.

Where are you in this story? Are you at a low point in your life, feeling abandoned and forsaken? Are you struggling to believe anything that would give you hope? I have a pen pal that is.

Yes, I have a pen pal. Remember when that phrase was common? The poorest person I know writes me about once every other month. She has done so faithfully for over nine years. She lives in Appalachia where life is a daily struggle for survival. At times her letters are laced with humor and at other times utter hopelessness. She uses me as a sounding board and often borrows my faith when hers grows weak.

In her latest letter she wrote about her old car dying, her house falling in around her, her accumulating bills and her daughter's pregnancy, which meant another mouth to feed. "It's 2:30 in the morning and I'm crying and trying to figure things out. I'd sooner put a dollar on the counter for a lotto ticket than to pray another worthless prayer. That's what they are-worthless.

I don't know what's going to happen and I really don't care anymore. There's no help anywhere. No place to go. No transportation. No money. Nothing, nothing, nothing! Please think of us once in a while."

She knows I will and that I will write and encourage her. I'll do what Isaiah did for his people. I'll let her borrow my faith until hers gets stronger, and it will. And when it does, she will share it with another struggling pilgrim.

Can you identify with my friend? Is this a "nothing, nothing, nothing" time in your life? Do you have someone who cares and will listen? I hope so. Don't carry this burden alone. It will consume you.

Perhaps you identify with Isaiah today. You are trying to encourage someone but it doesn't seem to be working. Be patient and be careful. Don't let their doubts destroy your faith, but neither let their harsh words drive you away.

To be the presence of God in a hurting world means that we don't forget people or abandon them. We travel with them even when the journey takes us down some dark and foreboding paths.

I know this isn't easy, but as Christians we don't give up on people. "Can a mother forget her nursing child or show no mercy on the child she has borne?" No, and neither can we.