

You may have noticed that people—even Christians in your church—are not lining up to give you encouragement. (Some, as you well know, are lining up to take a pot shot at you though!) Therefore, if you are going to last in leadership in the church, you must learn to encourage yourself in the Lord! I'd like to invite you to sit at the feet of David with me—and learn from one who knew how to deal with discouragement! I challenge you to take the next eight minutes to nurture your wounded and weary soul and learn how to encourage yourself in the Lord by reading, "Defeating Discouragement."

Cadre Connection

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The Electronic Newsletter from Bill Allison and Cadre Ministries Designed to Encourage, Equip, and Energize Volunteer Leaders and Teachers in the Church

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Defeating Discouragement

by Bill Allison

While everyone has highs and lows, it has been my experience and observation that church leaders seem to have a proclivity for higher highs and much lower lows. Indeed, my ministry experience has always been a mountain top experience. Either I've been on the top of the mountain or the mountain has been on top of me—but either way ministry has always been a mountain top experience! Think about your own ministry highs and lows. When our lives and ministries are moving forward, we feel elated and unstoppable. (Sometimes when the ministry news is good, I literally SCREAM and dance around my office! I do the James Brown song, "I Feel Good.") However, when our hearts are heavy and discouraged, our emotions plummet us to the deepest and darkest levels of despair. Frankly (and I hope my candor doesn't make you question my mental or emotional stability here), I can cycle through the highest and lowest of leadership and ministry emotions in a single day!

Ministry Can Be Worse

You don't have to be involved in ministry at any level very long before something or someone will sting the deepest part of your heart. **YOU WILL GET WHACKED!** I've always found ministry situations particularly discouraging and emotionally disheartening because I expect a higher level of behavior from us as Christians! (See the Bible.) But the gossip, emotional terrorism, and viciousness are often worse than many non-Christian environments I have worked in! That, my friends, is discouraging—and though it ought not be—it often is reality!

Discouragement from the Inside

This week alone I've met with three ministry leaders from completely different ministries who don't think they can hold on any longer. They are beat up, tired, and wondering if it is all worth it. I sat with a husband and wife who have served God faithfully for years. I listened to them pour out their horrendous story. We cried and prayed! No easy answers. No Christian cliches. Just tons of tough questions, soul searching, disappointment, and discouragement.

Discouragement from the Outside

In addition to the inner turmoil and discouragement that is often a part of our experience in serving God in the church, there are outside extenuating factors that can exacerbate the sting of discouragement in our lives—and makes the discouragement level even more troublesome to deal with! Some ministry friends I know are struggling with extraordinary tragedies like children with cancer, brain tumors, and one friend's four-year-old daughter was run over by a truck! Still other ministry partners are trying to negotiate the discouraging waters of rebelling teenagers and struggling marriages. When your inner strength is depleted and your outer world is crashing down on you, the discouragement is EXTREMELY overwhelming!

Discouragement: The Killer of Christian Leaders

Recently I attended a STELLAR leadership conference by Dan Webster (<http://www.authenticleadershipinc.com>) called, "Leadership of the Heart." Webster cogently pointed out three common pitfalls that sidetrack leaders: laziness, temptation, and discouragement. While what Webster had to say about all three of these leadership landmines was absolutely engaging, it was his comments concerning discouragement that resonated deeply with my heart. Webster pointed out that of the three leadership pitfalls, discouragement was the biggest sinker of leaders in the church. He said, "Discouragement among Christian leaders is almost epidemic." When he said this, God brought specific faces of leaders—vocational and volunteer—I know who are currently journeying through difficult personal, relational, internal, emotional, spiritual, financial, or ministerial terrain these days. From there my mind drifted to specific leaders I know who are not only out of leadership and ministry—but their very faith has been shipwrecked on the rocks of discouragement. Stop for moment right now and count the number of people you know who have been defeated by discouragement.

Dealing the Deathblow to Discouragement

If discouragement is the primary leadership landmine that is blowing up in the face of Christian leaders today, then it is absolutely critical that we, as leaders in the church, learn how to encourage ourselves in the Lord. Why encourage yourself? You may have noticed that no one else is coming to your rescue! And, frankly, there is little someone else can do for you if you do not do for yourself! Therefore, developing the skill of self-encouragement is seminal to our survival! And God—in His book, the Bible, shows us how to encourage ourselves during those times our spirit wants to scream mercy and give up! One episode in David's life in particular gives us some insight on how we can defeat discouragement by developing the ability to encourage ourselves in the Lord.

David's Discouraging Dilemma

In I Samuel 30 we read of the horribly discouraging day David and his men experienced. While David and his men were away from home (Ziklag) fighting their enemies, the Amalikites (not to be confused with the Hittites, Canaanites, or the Mosquito-bites), burned Ziklag and took

all the women and children captive. When David and his men arrived home in Ziklag, they were shook to the very core of their hearts as they realized the MASSIVE losses they would have to deal with. The Bible says that at this point, “David and his men wept aloud until they had no strength left to weep” (I Samuel 30:4). Can you relate? That, my friend, is discouragement in all its ugly glory! And just when you think things can’t get any more discouraging, in comes another heart-rending wave of fresh discouragement that takes a big bite out of your soul! Things go from bad to worse for David when his men started “talking of stoning him: each one was bitter in spirit because of his sons and daughters” (I Samuel 30:6). All of this caused David to be “greatly distressed” (v.6). Have you been there recently? Have you recently experienced a mother of all bad days?

David’s Divine Deliverance

What David did next is what separates those who end up ministerial road kill from those who rise and continue walking (limping?) down the narrow road. With his heart securely held by the sharp talons of discouragement, we read these amazingly insightful words pregnant with leadership lessons for the observant reader: “But David encouraged himself in the Lord his God” (v.6, KJ21). It is critical to note that dealing with discouragement is a self-leadership issue and skill—for David encouraged himself in the Lord! Did you get that? Everyone else was talking of killing David (talk about a bad day), but “David encouraged himself in the Lord his God.” I Samuel 30:7-8 shows us the secrets to David’s success in defeating discouragement--lessons that we as leaders today must take careful steps to APPLY to our own lives lest we be another statistic at the devilish hands of discouragement. I want to highlight four lessons that we need to APPLY to our lives when we are battling discouragement. These four lessons—when we APPLY them to our lives—can help us learn the skill of encouraging ourselves in the Lord!

The Self Encouragement Cycle

Lesson #1 Do What You Know To Be Right—Whether or Not You Feel Like It.

The first step David took out of discouragement and into self-encouragement is that he asked the priest to bring him his ephod. An ephod is an article of clothing worn by priests and in this case is indicative of David’s intent to seek God. Simply put, I believe the first step out of discouragement is when you and I do what we KNOW is right (i.e., seek God)—whether we feel like it or not. The context of this story gives every indication that David probably did not FEEL like doing what was right. Remember: David wept until he had no strength left (I Samuel 30:4)! He probably felt more like giving up and having a pity party! But David makes the choice to do what is right, not what he felt! If you allow your wounded emotions to control your behavior, you will never be able to rise above that which is discouraging you! David made a choice—made a PROACTIVE decision—to not let his feelings control his behavior and ultimately bring about his ruin. David’s heart began to come up from the bottom the moment he made the choice to seek God—though he still had a LONG way to go out of the labyrinth of despair.

As trite and worn out as it may seem, it is absolutely essential that I point out that when we are in the depths of despair and discouragement, we should seek God. Obvious? I know we know this, but I am not so sure that we DO this! (See John 13:17 and Matthew 7:24-27.) Don’t we have a tendency to go to other people first? Or just shut down, beat ourselves up, and play martyr? If discouragement can keep us in the bondage of our negative emotions and from seeking God, it will ultimately bring us down! So, like David, I challenge you to rebel against

your feelings of discouragement, take a step of faith—and seek God whether or not you actually feel like seeking Him! CALL FOR YOUR EPHOD!

Lesson #2 Ask God To Help You in Very Specific Terms—Whether You Feel Like It or Not.

The next step David took on the way out of discouragement and into the light of self encouragement is that he “inquired of the Lord” (v.8). Allison translation: David said, “Help God!” I love non-pretentious and gut-level prayers! And this is precisely how we see the discouraged David pray! No flowery eloquence required when you are discouraged—David directly addresses his SPECIFIC heart’s concerns: “Shall I pursue this raiding party [the Amalekites who ravaged his home and carried off his loved ones]? Will I overtake them?” This is bottom line praying from a desperate man! So whatever it is that is currently breaking your heart and weighing you down like an anchor around your soul, address those specific issues in a straight shooting prayer to God. CRY OUT TO GOD about it—and be TOTALLY honest with Him!

“This Day Stinks God!”

Once when I was a youth worker, I got a call from the parents of one of my students who was really struggling with life—and consequently—was VERY discouraged. I sat in my car with this student for about an hour. I just listened to this guy pour his heart out. He was hurting, depressed, and discouraged in a BIG way. At the end of our time together, I asked him if he would pray to God about the sources of his troubles. He agreed to pray. We bowed our heads right there in the car, and Tom prayed, “Heavenly Father, thank you for this beautiful day....” I broke in immediately! I calmly objected, “Tom, if what you have shared with me for the last hour is really troubling you as much as you said it is, this day is anything but beautiful to you right now.” He smiled and laughed at himself. Then he paused, bowed his head, and said, “God, I’m hating my life right now...” and went on to ask God for specific help to his specific problems and the sources of his discouragement! The point is that when you are discouraged, you, like David, must honestly ask God to help you in very specific terms—whether you feel like it or not.

Oxygen for Your Gasping Soul

The last thing I want to do in this article is to insult your spiritual intelligence—especially if you are one who is discouraged right now! I can hear the almost angry thoughts racing through some of your discouraged minds. “Come on Allison—is that the best you can do? I’m TOTALLY discouraged and you just tell us to pray about it? Is that all you have—worn out Christian cliches and pious platitudes? How simplistic can you be?” I admit that sometimes when I pray about things—they get much worse—and that is even more discouraging. Sometimes—many times—nothing on the outside changes. However, there is something profoundly significant that happens on the inside of US when we “inquire of the Lord” in the midst of our darkest times of discouragement—though we may not even be able to see or feel it at the time. What happens? Little by little, the power of God is unleashed into our lives. Through prayer, a little oxygen is poured on our gasping souls! It may not seem like much at the time, but it is that little bit of prayer-generated oxygen for the soul that keeps your spirit breathing, alive, and hopeful. What is the alternative? A slow painful death by discouragement.

Lesson #3 Listen to What God Says To You—Whether You Feel Like It or Not.

God did not seem to be put off by David's direct, specific plea for help! Amazingly God answered David's specific straightforward requests with very specific straightforward answers! God told David, "Pursue them. You will certainly overtake them and succeed in the rescue" (v.8). Perhaps even more amazing is not that God responded to David's specific requests, but that David HEARD what God said! My own experience and journey has taught me that the process of hearing what God is saying takes much time in quiet, reflection, prayer, the Word, and in godly counsel of a few trusted mentors. It is in this stage of recovery that God cooks our character—and that makes this part of the process very painful! But it is absolutely critical that we try to hear from God when we are discouraged—rather than just giving up in the process. Furthermore, we need to listen to what God says to us no matter how painful it may sound at the time. God wants to give us specific instructions about the specific sources of our discouragement. We must work at listening to him. So when you are in the depths of discouragement, pray your heart out... but don't be so distressed that you can't hear what God may be saying to you. Be sure to listen for a response from God! Search his Word. Quiet your heart and be still. Listen to the counsel of people who are Spirit-controlled. Check everything you think you are hearing against the Word of God. If what you think you hear God saying to you does not jive with the Word of God—then go back to listening! However, if there is congruence between what you think God is saying to you and the Word of God—whether you like hearing it or not, then move on to lesson #4.

Lesson #4 Obey What God Tells You To Do Immediately—Whether You Feel Like It or Not.

When God responded to David, David quickly responded to God by obeying! David took action. There is a time for prayer... but once God has given the clear marching orders... it is time for action! When you take action on God's directions, you allow God to step into your life and the sources of your discouragement. William H. Murray puts it this way: "The moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. A whole stream of events issue from the decision, raising in one's favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance which no man could have dreamed would come his way." When you obey God—whether you feel like it or not—you allow God to unleash his power into your life and encourage your heart and soul. However, if God shows you what you need to do—and you refuse to take action (i.e., you allow your feelings of discouragement to control your behavior)—you will not experience a lift in your spirit. You may experience the pains of divine discipline. When David put immediate action to God's marching orders, God's power was unleashed into his depressing situation and, before the day was over, David came home with all that was previously lost... and more (I Samuel 30:18-20).

Are You Controlling Your Emotions or Are Your Emotions Controlling You?

It is SUPER important to note that before David got victory over his outward circumstances, he FIRST got victory over his own emotions. Controlling our emotions—whether we feel like it or not—is a VERY biblical idea: "He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down and without walls" (Proverbs 25:28, KJ21). A city without walls is a sitting duck for invaders! Talk about trouble! This is why God tells us: "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life" (Proverbs 4:23). When we encourage ourselves in the Lord—like David did—we are guarding our hearts!

David's Self-Encouragement Cycle—A Model for YOU!

Instead of letting depression, despair, and discouragement rule his behavior, David ignored his discouraged emotions and did what he knew to be right, prayed to God, listened to what God said, and then immediately did what God told him to do. Would you like to start a journey out of the pit of despair and discouragement? Would you like to experience God's power in the midst of a heavy heart? Would you like to learn the skill of encouraging yourself in the Lord so that you can defeat the discouraging darts the enemy is throwing at you—to keep you from effective ministry to others? Then I would ask you to follow David's example:

1. Do what you know is right—whether you feel like it or not.
2. Ask God to help you in very specific terms—whether you feel like it or not.
3. Listen to what God says to you—whether you feel like it or not.
4. Obey what God says to you immediately—whether you feel like it or not.

The Ray of Hope that Can Keep You Swimming in Discouraging Waters

In *Becoming a Person of Influence*, John Maxwell and Jim Dornan tell of a fascinating experiment performed on laboratory rats to measure their motivation to live under different circumstances. Scientists placed a rat into a jar of water that was in total darkness. The scientists found that the rat could swim a little more than three minutes in complete darkness before it gave up and drowned. Then the scientists tried the exact same experiment with one minor variation: they allowed one tiny ray of light to shine into the jar of water where the rat was swimming. With one tiny ray of light, the rat kept swimming for 36 hours—over 700 times longer than the rat in complete darkness!

I totally understand that we, as humans, are not laboratory animals. However, I still think there is a lesson in here for us as church leaders. When you follow David's example and allow the sources of your discouragement to drive you to seeking God, praying to God, listening to God, and obeying God—you unleash God's power to shine one little tiny ray of HOPE into your discouraging situation. And that one tiny ray of HOPE can keep you swimming 700 times longer than if you opted to let the darkness of discouragement consume you!

A Final Challenge to Encourage Yourself in the Lord

The research conducted by Dr. Robert Clinton, Professor of Leadership at Fuller Theological Seminary, has absolutely frightening implications for us as Christian leaders. Clinton says, "Seventy percent of leaders don't finish well." It seems that most of us will not finish the race well. If Dan Webster is correct, the majority of us who do not finish well will eventually be sucked under by currents of discouragement... until we are finally so exhausted that we just can't come up for one more breath of hope.

However, my message to YOU is that we can experience HOPE in the midst of our deepest discouragement if we dare to be like David—a man after God's own heart—and do something radical, simple, and childlike. Pray. If we learn to encourage ourselves in the Lord—in the spirit of David—we can eventually deal the deathblow to discouragement—and rise to new heights of personal and ministerial effectiveness!

I challenge you to identify the greatest source of your personal discouragement and hit your knees now! When you come up from your prayer time, memorize I Samuel 30:6: "And David was greatly distressed, for the people spoke of stoning him because the soul of all the

people was grieved, every man for his sons and daughters; but David encouraged himself in the Lord his God” (KJ21).

Bible Promises You Can Claim When You Are Discouraged:

http://www.worship.net/bible_praise/biblepromises.asp

The Aspiring Communicator’s Academy Phase 2— Saturday, June 1, 2002

ACA PHASE 2 TRAINING SESSIONS INCLUDE:

- Unleashing God’s Power in Your Life and Communication Ministry—Bill Allison
- Finding, Filing, and Using Great Illustrations and Stories—Tim Reist, Teaching Pastor
- How YOU Can Develop and Use a Web Site for Ministry—Josh Jeffrey,
- People Skills for Successful Communicators—Steve Thompson, President and CEO of Easter Seals in Peoria, IL
- How to Get that First Speaking Engagement: Ten Steps to Launching Your Communication Ministry—Bill Allison
- The Communication Genius of Jesus—Bill Allison
- Communicator’s Roundtable Question and Answer Time with West and Kramer (<http://www.handsoflove.org>) and others: Dare to Ask ANY Question You Want!

To register or for more information about the ACA 2, visit:

<http://www.cadreministries.com/aca.html>

Links to Training and Resources for Leaders and Teachers in the Church

Links for Volunteer and Vocational Youth Workers:

- **Training for Students**—Sonlife Ministry’s SEMP and EQUIP: <http://www.sonlife.com/studentoptions.html>
- **Training for Volunteer and Vocational Youth Workers**—The Sonlife Strategy Seminar near YOU: <http://www.sonlife.com/youth/strategydates.html>
- **FREE E-mail Bible Study Newsletters for Students:**
 - E-mail from Hell: <http://www.cadreministries.com/sc/>
 - For Christian Athletes: carter4fca@msn.com

For Children’s Workers:

- <http://www.prayerkids.org>
- <http://www.kidology.org>

Resources Designed Especially for Volunteer Leaders and Teachers in the Church—and Vocational Pastors Who Want To Train Volunteers To Do the Work of the Ministry:

- <http://www.cadreministries.com/store/>

For Those Older Readers Who Sense God is Speaking To Them About Moving from Success To Significance for the Kingdom of God:

- <http://www.finishers.org>

A Strange But True Allison Family Story

Get the picture. We're all sitting around in our family room enjoying another exciting episode of SpongeBob SquarePants... or maybe it was yet another episode of Full House. We don't watch very much television at our house at all, and when we do, Stacy and/or I try to oversee what happens. We see part of our job as commercial control. (It's the commercials these days—even during “safe” programs—that we are concerned about. Like the recent commercial about the show Fear Factor where people fear being naked in public. That's God given common sense... not a fear to be overcome! So we try to be on guard the short time we actually sit in front of the television. Besides, our three year old has obviously conquered the fear of public nudity... but that is a whole other story.)

It was during a program that was relatively safe when the feminine product commercial came on. I looked for the television control changer (a man's best friend and sense of power and self-esteem all in one), but, alas, it was no where to be found. (Another never ending quest for a family our size: “Where in the world is the TV remote?”) For a minute, I held my breath and wiped the beads of panicked sweat as my five oldest kids, ages 2-10 (one boy age 9—the rest girls) watched with wide eyes. Stacy shot me the look that I know all too well—that “do-something-you-doo-fus—our-kids-might-start-asking-questions” look.

Finally the commercial was over. We did not know one minute could feel so painfully long. I looked at the kids. They had that Krispy Kreme look: completely glazed over! I thought to myself, “We made it! No unnecessary and embarrassing questions! That was close!” I gave my wife that look that said, “Relax-you-are wound-up-too tight-I've-got-everything-under-control.” She rolled her eyes. Unfortunately, for us—but especially me, it seems the network was short on commercials that day so they decided to run THAT EXACT SAME commercial again... two times back to back! Bummer. Now I was off the chair actively looking for the remote (that great symbol of power and authority) so I could seize my destiny. I'm frantically lifted up couch cushions and got down on the ground to search intently. NOTHING! As the commercial finished its second run, I gave up the search. (It never dawned on me at the time that I could change the channel by walking up to the TV and pushing a button. I'm a man. A man needs a remote. Need I say more?) I took a deep breath. Did we make it through without any comments or questions? Just when I thought we were out of the woods, Billy, my one son (then age 9), asked in a completely bewildered tone of inquiry, “What ARE those things?”

I didn't even look at my wife. I turned the television off and started to walk up stairs. When I was safely out of range from the look and physical reach of my wife, I said, “Billy, go ask your mother.”