March 26, 2023

Rick Myatt

LISTENING TO AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL

John 7:1-35

Recently Laurie and I have had a bit of a rough stretch. As you know, almost 6 months ago I diagnosed with metastatic melanoma. Dealing with that has been the major theme of our lives. There has been a steady stream of visits to my oncologist, my dermatologist and the cancer center. There have been lots of tests. Multiple CT scans, an MRI, several ultrasound scans, a PET scan, which is weird because we don’t own a pet, and enough blood tests that it’s a bit surprising that I have any blood left. I have experienced a laundry list of side effects from the immuno therapy drugs worthy of a pharmaceutical commercial on TV. One of them is fatigue. I am super tired all the time. This has been hugely wearing on Laurie. Meanwhile Laurie has had her own issues. She had to have a skin cancer removed from an ear, and that proved surprisingly painful for almost a week. That was followed by a urinary tract infection, a bad cold and then a bout with food poisoning. I smashed my thumb in a car door, which hurt like crazy for several weeks. While backing our car out of a parking space in the hotel garage I managed to scrape a cement pillar. Our son-in-law law, Michael has had 2 surgeries. And now our granddaughters, Bria, is very sick with an undiagnosed illness that could prove to be a very serious disease. It has all been very discouraging. Discouragement comes in a lot of different packages, but none of them are fun.

Today we are going to think about discouragement. That is a subject that has relevance to every human being, for we all experience it at times. It is a dangerous and unpleasant thing that can lead to us giving up on important things and making poor choices. Hebrews tells us that Jesus was tested in every way that humans are tested. One of those ways is discouragement. As we look at John 7:1-35 we will see some of the discouraging things he dealt with and learn how he handled them.

JESUS FACED DISCOURAGING CIRCUMSTANCES

While chronology wasn’t John’s primary concern as he told the story of Jesus’ life, noting some of the historical context of these verses is helpful. John 6:4 tells us that the Passover was near, which meant it was late March or early April. It was around that time that Jesus pulled off the miracle of feeding a massive crowd of 10,000 or more people with a couple of fish tacos. We can see in 7:2 that the events of this chapter happen near the time of the Feast of Tabernacles. That is also known as the Feast of Booths or Succoth, one of the 3 major Jewish feasts. It took place in September, so these events occur about 6 months after the incidents recorded in John 6.

I mention this because verse 1 says, “After this, Jesus went around in Galilee. He did not want to go about in Judea because the Jewish leaders there were looking for a way to kill him.” The leaders of his nation were trying to figure out a way to kill him, so he had to stay away from Jerusalem. He knew that it was destined for them to finally get their way, but he had things to do before that happened. So he steered clear of the capital city of his nation in order to avoid provoking the leaders. Jesus spent 6 months out in what was considered by his people the hinterlands ministering to people there to avoid more confrontations with the leaders of the Jews.

Why did they want to kill him? This started back in 5:17-18. Jesus had healed a man in Jerusalem who was crippled. While that seems like a good thing, to the religious leaders it was a big problem because Jesus did it on a Sabbath day. They asserted that healing was work, so that action constituted working on the Sabbath, thus it was a violation of the fourth commandment, which said one must keep the Sabbath holy, which they interpreted to mean do no work.. They claimed this even though the “work” consisted of saying to the man, “Stand up, pick up your bed, and walk.” That doesn’t seem like work to me. It is speaking one sentence! Hey, who wouldn’t want a job where their work is speaking one sentence? That doesn’t require much effort. Is speaking one sentence really a burdensome task that disrupts one’s rest on the Sabbath? Particularly when that one sentence is freeing a man from a terrible disability he had for decades.

One of the things that I have found increasingly annoying lately is encountering people adhering to policies in stores and bureaucracies, even when it is patently obvious that applying the policy in a particular instance is absurd, and everyone can see that. “I’m sorry, that’s the policy, so I can’t do anything to help you.” This, to me, is an extreme example of that. The religious leaders have determined that doing a beautiful thing, a life giving thing, is a heinous sin because in their minds it violated one of their rules.

Jesus then made it worse. He defended his action by saying in verse 17, “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.” Healing the man on the Sabbath was strike one against Jesus. This statement was offensive in two ways. First, it proved the religious leaders wrong and made them look bad. Jesus was right, the Father works even on the Sabbath, for he continues to sustain all of creation by his power and he continues to pour out good on people. What he stopped on the seventh day was his work of creating, not all work. The leaders had no answer for Jesus’ statement. He had out argued them on their own turf, the Old Testament, and that made strike two against Jesus. But then Jesus claimed God was his Father and said he was doing the same thing as his Father. They correctly understood him to be equating himself to God. That was blasphemy of the worst kind in their minds. It was strike three, and Jesus was out. Verse 18 says, “For this reason they tried all the more to kill him.” To them Jesus was a threat to their whole system and he was a heretic. They had already been irked by him and saw him as a threat. But from that point on they were determined to finish him.

How do you think it would feel to have the most powerful people in your nation declare you to be public enemy number one and determine they had to kill you? I can’t even imagine it, but I can see that is an extreme cause for discouragement. It's like one of those movies where the good guy has uncovered a government plot, and now the massive forces of government are out to eliminate him.

It’s a little like when David had done nothing wrong, but Saul went insane and made it his highest priority to kill David. In Psalm 13:1 David wrote, “How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever?” In verses 3-4 he wrote, “Look on me and answer, Lord my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death, and my enemy will say, ‘I have overcome him,’ and my foes will rejoice when I fall.”

Elijah had a similar reaction in 1 Kings 19. In chapter 18 he had a spectacular and miraculous victory over the supposed prophets of Baal. He thought this would result in Israel turning back to the true God. Instead, the queen of the nation, Jezebel, threatened to kill him. Things got worse, not better. Afraid for his life, Elijah ran away into the wilderness. He was discouraged because one of the most powerful people in his nation was out to get him. He was so discouraged that according to 1 Kings 19:4 he prayed that he would die, saying, “I have had enough, Lord. Take my life.” Jesus was in a similar situation, and he was surely as discouraging for him as it was for David and Elijah

Just that one thing would be all the discouragement I think I could handle, if I could even handle that. But there was more. Consider what was going on in Jesus’ larger ministry. He had been teaching people about the kingdom of God, telling them what it was really like. Because of his insightful teaching and his amazing miracles huge crowds were following him. But much of what he was saying wasn’t getting through to them. All they cared about was their lives getting better right now. They wanted food and they wanted a king who would overcome Rome. They couldn’t seem to grasp that Jesus was about much deeper spiritual issues. When he finally put that in the most vivid terms possible, they quit following him. It had to be discouraging to not be able to get them to see the truth.

Something happens in this chapter that had to have stabbed him in the heart. In verses 3-4 Jesus’ own brothers said to him, “Leave Galilee and go to Judea, so that your disciples there may see the works you do. No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret. Since you are doing these things, show yourself to the world.” That sounds like they were trying to advise him on how to run his campaign to be Messiah. If you’re running for President of the United States, are you going to spend all your time in Buttonwillow, Weedpatch, Delano, and other such hot spots in the Central Valley? Will you base your campaign in Buckatunna, Mississippi? You’re going to have to center your efforts in the big cities, especially New York, LA, Washington DC, Chicago and others. The center of life in ancient Israel was Jerusalem. They were saying if Jesus wanted to have any real impact, he had to go there.

However, they weren’t advising him on how he should run his campaign. Verse 5 says, “Even his own brothers did not believe in him.” They actually were his half-brothers, but they were related to him by blood. They had grown up with him. Wouldn’t you think, of all people, they would believe in him? Yet they did not. They were essentially implying that Jesus was hanging around in the boondocks because he knew he couldn’t cut it in the big time. They were criticizing him. Their words came with a healthy dose of sarcasm. “Hey, Messiah, if you want to be a big deal, go to the big city and quit monkeying around here in Smalltown, Israel.” I am glad I have always had the support of my family. But I have had several experiences of people that I considered good friends basically telling me they did not believe in me, and even stabbing me in the back. It was certainly discouraging for me when that happened. I have no doubt Jesus felt the hurt and discouragement of that deeply.

There is an unusual event that happens in this chapter. Jesus told his brothers in verse 8 that he was not going to the festival in Jerusalem, that they should go ahead without him, because it was not yet his time. But verse 10 says, “After his brothers had left for the festival, he went also, not publicly, but in secret.” Doesn’t that sound like he lied? He told them he wasn’t going to go, but then he did. He wanted to keep it a secret, so he didn’t tell them the truth. Let’s use a little logic here. John’s goal in writing this story of Jesus’ life is that his readers would know that Jesus is the Messiah. Do you think he would present his nominee for Messiah as lying? That makes no sense at all, which means that John did not intend to say that Jesus deliberately misled his brothers. The implication is that what he said was true. That is confirmed by the fact that, as verse 9 says, he stayed in Galilee. Later, part of the way through the feast, he did go, probably because he changed his mind. If Laurie asks me if I would like an English muffin at breakfast and I say, “No thank you, I don’t want one,” but then at the end of breakfast decide to get an English muffin, did I lie? No, I changed my mind. No dishonesty involved. I think that’s what happened with Jesus in this incident.

There are a number of other discouraging elements that show up in this chapter. In verse 7 Jesus told his brothers, “The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify that its works are evil.” That’s probably part of why Jesus’ brothers were maybe annoyed by him. The world did hate him. He knew it, and they knew it too. They didn’t say to him, “Oh come on Jesus. Nobody hates you. You just have a martyr complex.” They could see the hostility Jesus faced as well as he could. Hostility is definitely discouraging. In verse 12 some people were saying, “He deceives the people.” He was accused of being a sham artist, a phony. That’s discouraging. When Jesus talked about people plotting to kill him the crowd answered in verse 20, “You are demon possessed. Who is trying to kill you?” He told the truth, and they did not believe him. They said he was crazy, or worse, demonic. The whole scene is discouraging.

JESUS WAS NOT DEFEATED BY DISCOURAGEMENT

Jesus never wavered from his mission. Discouragement did not defeat him. What helped him overcome it?

**He was totally committed to the Father’s agenda**.

The curious incident where his brothers needled him and said he should put up or shut up by going to the big Feast in Jerusalem and announcing himself publicly, actually gives us a clue to this. He was not going to be driven by what other people, even his own family, said or thought. This little incident gives us a picture of the sometimes strange ways of Jesus. You could never tell what he was going to do. He wasn’t going to go to the Feast, then a few days later he went. He went through Samaria on his way back to Galilee because he had to talk to one Samaritan woman with a sketchy reputation. He picked one crippled man out of a crowd of very sick people and healed him, but not the others. A Canaanite woman begged Jesus to help her daughter, but Jesus said he was there to help the Jewish people. He said, “It’s not right to take the children’s bred and feed it to the dogs.” The woman said, “But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” That’s true, you know. When our granddaughters are at our house and eat a meal, we have to clean the floor afterward, because there a lots of crumbs there. Toby and Anna don’t have to do that because their dogs clean up every single crumb. Jesus healed the woman’s daughter. He was given a message that his very good friend, Lazarus, was gravely ill, could he come quickly and help. Then he proceeded to stay right where he was for 2 more days. Why didn’t he act quickly? You just could never tell what Jesus was going to do next. He would say things that were completely mystifying. He would call the most respected people in his nation hypocrites, snakes, and white washed tombs.

There was never a dull and predictable moment with Jesus. The reason was that he lived moment by moment according to the agenda of God the Father. In John 6:38 he said, “I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me.” That was how he operated every minute of every day.

Carissa has an app on her phone that tracks the flight paths of airline flights. She can follow where a flight that Michael is piloting is going. Not long ago she showed me the flight path of his plane that was going from Atlanta to LA. It made no sense at all. The shortest distance between 2 points is a straight line, right? This was far from a straight line. They flew northwest from Atlanta all the way up near Minnesota, then followed an arc from there southwest down to LA. Last year she showed me a flight path when he was in the south east that looked like it was created by a crazy person because it squiggled all over the place. That first flight went so far north because the jet stream was powerful and had dropped way down south. Controllers sent them north to avoid it. The crazy quilt pattern happened because controllers were vectoring them around violent thunderstorms.

The point is, to someone without knowledge of the situation both of those flight patterns made no sense. But the pilots were following the directions of controllers, and they made perfect sense to someone who understood the situation. Jesus’ life was like that. From our perspective at times it seemed almost random. We can make little to no sense of it. But Jesus was following what the Father told him to do and say every moment of his life. The Father was his flight controller, and he did whatever the Father said.

If you are a pilot, what is your priority? Is it to do what you think your friends or family would say you should do? Is it to do whatever you want to do? Is it to take an opinion poll of the passengers and do what they think? No, you do whatever the controller tells you to do, no matter how odd it might seem. You do that because they can see on their radar screens what you cannot. You do it because that is how you stay safe. What if it is hard, or what if other people think you are doing the wrong thing? Those things could be discouraging, but it doesn’t matter. You do what the controller says.

For Jesus, the Father was the controller. That enabled him to ignore the discouraging noise that was loud in his ears and to keep going. That’s what enabled him to change the world.

Jesus put the idea in different terms later in the passage. In verse 18 he said, “Whoever speaks on their own does so to gain personal glory, but he who seeks the glory of the one who sent him is a man of truth.” Jesus did not speak or act on his own. He did and said what the Father told him to do because his entire goal was the glory of the Father. His brothers didn’t understand this. In verse 4 they said, “No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret.” Jesus’ goal was not to become a public figure. He didn’t care about that at all. He only cared about doing the Father’s will so he could bring him glory.

I reflected recently on the arc of Laurie’s and my ministry. When we met I was on the staff of a megachurch working in its college ministry. When I graduated and we got married we began a new church in this area. It was a small beginning. We had 40 people at our first worship service, but the group was less than that on a consistent basis. We met in the auditorium of an elementary school. I wondered at times if what we were doing made any sense. I had been in a church that had a college group that had a couple of hundred students in it. Can a church of less than 40 people even be viable? Yet that ministry continued. Over the years that little ministry grew and eventually became a large church with over a thousand people in it. Now we are back meeting in a rented facility and we have a smaller group than Laurie and I started with 44 years ago. There have been some Sundays when two thirds of the people who make up this church have somewhere else to be. Honestly, it’s discouraging when there’s so few people here and our family makes up a third of it. What enables us to keep going and to give our best? It is doing what Jesus did. Our job is to do the will of the Father. The job is no different whether there are a thousand people or 15. As long as we keep our focus on doing the will of the Father, discouragement will not defeat us. Keep doing the will of the Father.

**He lived by the Father’s timetable**

In verse 6 Jesus told his brothers, “My time is not yet here.” I suspect they had no clue what he meant by that. But we know. Jesus was on a mission. There was a timetable for that mission. He operated by that timetable. Later in 12:23 Jesus said, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” He knew the time had come for him to reach the climax of his life. In chapter 2 when he was at a wedding and his mother told him about the hosts running out of wine, he said, “My hour has not yet come.” Jesus knew when the time was not right, and he knew when it was. He was following the Father’s plan, including the timing.

That can be a source of struggle for us. We know what we want to have happen, and we know when we want it to happen. When it doesn’t happen on our schedule we tend to go to “Well, it’s never going to happen, then.” We get discouraged when we have to wait. How good are you at waiting and being patient? All you have to do is envision those little dots going around in a circle on a screen over and over. It could be on your phone, or your computer, or even your television. How long are you willing to wait for that? Even a few seconds seems like eternity. I don’t wait long before I get frustrated. Waiting is apparently not my strong suit. But listen to what the Scriptures say.

Psalm 27:14 says, “Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.” Psalm 33:20 says “We wait in hope for the Lord; he is our help and our shield.” Psalm 37:7 says, “Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him.” Psalm 130: 5-6 says, “I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope. I wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning.”

How much do watchmen wait for the morning? Eons ago when I was young and single I had a flight out of LAX very early one morning. I was in Bakersfield. Back then you didn’t have to get to the airport 5 hours before your flight. It was just one hour. However, this flight was very early, and I didn’t want to make someone get up in the middle of the night to drive 2 hours to LAX, drop me off and drive back to Bakersfield. I found some friends who were flying out of LAX on a redeye the night before, and I hitched a ride with them. That meant I was going to spend the night at the airport. Have you noticed they make the seats at airports so that there is no way you can lie flat and stretch out on them? I think they do that on purpose to keep homeless people from camping out there. Have you ever tried to sleep in an airport? There’s no comfortable place to lie down, the lights are bright, there’s noise, even in the middle of the night. I dozed a little. I read some. I spent a long time waiting for the morning like a watchman. I have to tell you, I was super eager for the time for the flight to finally come. Psalm 130 said, “My whole being waits.” That’s exactly what I did that night.

What would it be like if we believed that God really did have a plan for us? What would it be like if we believed that there is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven as Ecclesiastes 3:1 put it? We are hoping to go to a Padre game or two this year because we have higher hopes for this Padre team than we have ever had before. If we go to a game and miscalculate how long it will take us to get to Petco Park so that we get there long before game time, what will we do? We will probably take our time finding something to eat. We’ll eat dinner. Maybe we will look in one of the souvenir shops. We might watch some of the pre-game stuff that goes on before every game. I might not like waiting much, but what I won’t do is get discouraged, think the game is never going to happen and just give up and go home. I know the game has been scheduled for a specific time, and when that time finally arrives the game will start. God has a plan for us. It will include some waiting. But we need to remember that God has everything scheduled for us, so we just need to be patient and wait. That will help us not be discouraged.

**He knew the Father**

In verses 28-29 Jesus said, “I am not here on my own authority, but he who sent me is true. You do not know him, but I know him because I am from him and he sent me.” Jesus knew his Father. He knew the Father loved him. He knew nothing would ever stop loving him. He knew the Father was good and was always working for his good. He knew the Father is wise. He knew in his wisdom the Father had a plan for him. He knew the Father was always present with him. He knew the Father has unlimited power, that nothing is too great for the Father. Knowing the Father is what gave him confidence no matter how discouraging his circumstances might be.

I have gotten to know Dr. Daniels, my oncologist. I know he is an extremely knowledgeable man who knows what he is doing and I know he cares about his patients. I know he tells me the truth. My first treatment was a train wreck. Dr, Daniel’s even told me it was a failure. I got so sick they had to stop everything because I was getting into a dangerous condition. Then he told me we were going to try again with the same drugs that caused the problem. He said they would change the mixture of the two drugs and that should solve the problem. But I have read the material on these drugs. Both of them can cause the problems I had. In fact, it is one of the common effects from both. How was this going to help? All I could go on was Dr. Daniels’ knowledge and expertise. I knew him, so I trusted him. And he proved to be right.

Harriet Tubman was born into slavery in 1822. She suffered all the horrors of being a slave. At the age of 26 when she was about to be sold and separated from her family she escaped and made her way north to Pennsylvania. She could have just stayed there and enjoyed her freedom, but she chose to help others. For 8 years she guided other slaves, helping them escape to freedom. In all that time she never lost even a single person. She said it wasn’t her, it was the Lord. She said she told the Lord that she trusted him. She said she told the Lord, “I trust you. I don’t know where to go or what to do, but I expect you to lead me. And he always did.” Abolitionist Thomas Garrett said of her, “I never met with any person of any color who had more confidence in the voice of God.”

The greatest force for overcoming the inevitable discouragements that come our way is knowing God. The more we know his love, his goodness, his wisdom, his power, the more secure we will be in him. The more secure we are the more we can overcome opposition and persecution.

APPLICATION

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. said that disappointment is the universal modern malady. Philosopher Bertrand Russell said that life is so empty that we should build our lives on a foundation of unshakable despair. You hear things like that and it is easy to become discouraged. But there are some important things we need to remember about discouragement that can help us overcome it.

PERSPECTIVE MATTERS

As Schlesinger said disappointment is a fact of life for all of us. But obstacles, disappointments, losses and hardships do not have to discourage us. Writer and Nobel Prize winner Maurice Maeterlinck said, “An obstacle is not a discouragement. It may become one, but only with our consent. So long as we refuse to be discouraged, we cannot be discouraged.”

I submit for your consideration the game of baseball. The central conflict of baseball happens at home plate where a batter tries to hit a ball thrown toward him by a pitcher. I can remember many times being at bat, seeing a pitch coming, swinging at it and completely missing. At that point you have a choice. Hitting a baseball is the single most difficult task in sports. Trying to hit a round ball with a round bat when it has been thrown at high speed is absurdly hard to do. If you swing and miss it would be very easy to become discouraged, to say, “This is impossible. I’ll never be able to do this.” It would be easy to cave into to discouragement and just quit. However, another approach is to say, “This is hard, but I have two more strikes. I’m going to focus, settle down and try again,” which is exactly what you’re supposed to do. Suppose on a subsequent swing you manage to hit a weak ground ball to the shortstop, who fields it and throws you out at first base. Again, you could say, “This is hopeless. I can’t do it.” Or you could say, “It’s only the second inning. I’m going to have 2 or 3 more at bats at least to try again.” And that’s exactly what you’re supposed to do.

James 4:7 says, “Resist the devil and he will flee from you.” One of the devils most common strategies is to discourage us. If we will resist him, he will run away. It is important to remember that when we face setbacks, opposition, hardships, it is a temptation to become discouraged and even to give up. That is time to remember that the obstacles and the opposition do not require discouragement. We can face the one without the other.

KNOWLEDGE IS NOT COMPLETE

Another important truth to remember about the hard times and the hard things that we sometimes face, is that our knowledge of all that is going on is far from perfect. After my first failure in my treatment I got discouraged. It seemed that my body could not tolerate the treatment I had been given. I thought they’d had to bring the whole thing to a dead stop. I was discouraged because this was my best chance at defeating the cancer, and it seemed it was not going to work for me. The problem was, my knowledge was not complete. Had I known then what I know now I would not have been discouraged at all. I now know that the steroids did not nullify the effects the medicine would continue to have. It would still work. Plus they could adjust the medicine in a way that I could tolerate, and they had a way of managing what symptoms I did experience. Even more interesting, my body adapted so that eventually the meds side effects were minimal. I didn’t know any of that. Had I known it I would not have been discouraged.

My point is that we have a tendency to get discouraged when, if we had complete knowledge, we wouldn’t be. So we have to remind ourselves that the dark places we go to are all in our head and are not necessarily in line with what is really happening. Our knowledge of the character of God is more important than any other knowledge we think we have when it comes to defeating discouragement.

OUR DESIRE FOR AN OUTCOME IS THE PROBLEM

One last thing to remember is that what leads to discouragement is we have a desired circumstance or outcome in mind. When we don’t get what we want we start to get discouraged. Jesus could have gotten discouraged because he wanted people, the leaders of his nation, and especially his own family, to believe in him. The discouragement would have come from not getting what he wanted.

Francois Fenelon said, “Discouragement is simply the despair of wounded self love.” It’s all about what I want, not what God wants. Every time we feel discouraged we need to think about why. There is something I want that I am not getting. But it is what I want, not what God is doing. That’s when we need to let go of what we want and refocus on what God is doing and on what he wants. As we submit to him we can let go of discouragement.

Do we want what we want, or do we want the Fathers agenda? If what we really want is to do the Father’s will, then we can keep doing that even when we are not getting the outcomes we think we want. We have to decide what we want most, the outcome we desire, or following the Fathers plan and thus honoring him. Can we accept that just as Jesus most honored the Father through unimaginable suffering, so we might glorify him by staying faithful through disappointment and even pain?

Remember God’s goodness. Recall how you’ve experienced it in the past.

Remember God’s presence. He is still with us today, and if he is there we have no reason to be discourage.

Remember God’s promise. This is our hope for the future. He has a plan. It is for our good. He will bring good out of everything that happens to us. So we need not be discouraged.