

Truth for Today

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Distinguishing things that differ: Dealing with discouragement

This week's talk titled "Dealing with discouragement" tries to address a very practical problem. When things are going well in our lives we might not think about this issue, but things don't always go well! Also, sadly in this country we live in a society that sees little need of God and a lot of us attend churches where we experience little growth and development. I am certain that most of us have had times of set-back and discouragement. We also meet a lot of people in the Bible who were discouraged. Some were discouraged because of personal failure, others faced years of disappointment that led to them slowly becoming discouraged, and still others were simply overwhelmed by outside circumstances that led them to question their purpose in life. It will be both interesting and helpful to see what these individuals have in common and how they found help in dealing with their discouragement.

Before we go any further, I would like to read some words written by Paul the Apostle to his Christian friends at Corinth. Paul is comparing the bright and glorious light of the Gospel that he had believed to the time at the beginning of creation when God spoke in the darkness and said "Let there be light". They were both equally dramatic events! Paul is, however, well aware that the glorious light and truth of the Gospel is displayed and maintained by frail human beings. *"But we have this treasure in earthen vessels that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed - always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body."* And then a little later in the same chapter, *"Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal"* 2 Corinthians 4:7-10, 16-18.

We will come back to Paul a little later, but first I want to think about people in the Bible who faced discouragement, but also the people who were marked by being encouraging!

There are plenty of people in the Bible who became discouraged. They were not failures or weak individuals at all. Often they were strong men of faith, but sadly at that time in their lives they became discouraged. At the beginning of this talk I listed three reasons why we become discouraged, I am sure there are others, but in broad terms we all can fall under one of these three headings.

John the Baptist was an incredibly faithful follower of the Lord Jesus but reached a point in his life when he appeared to question his previous vision and conviction that had once marked him. His relatively short-lived public testimony had landed him in prison. From the loneliness of his cell John sent his disciples to Jesus with the question, "Are you the Coming One or do we look for another?" Think of the conviction with which John had spoken when he introduced the Lord! *"I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Make straight the way of the LORD'"* John 1:23. Or, as John said the following day, *"Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is He of whom I said, 'After me comes a Man who is preferred before me, for He was before me.'"* John 1:29-30.

David was another faithful servant of God who experienced many ups and downs in his life. He was the man selected by God to govern His nation Israel but David met so many obstacles and dangers in his journey to the throne, and even when he was crowned king, David still had many problems. In Psalm 42:5, which I believe is a psalm of David, we read, *"Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me?"*

Elijah was another great man in the Old Testament, faithfully following God and fearlessly challenging tyrannical sovereigns, but still, after a memorable demonstration of the power of the only true God (1 Kings 18:20-40), Elijah flees from the threats of a wicked woman 1 Kings 19:1-3. He journeys all day into the wilderness, shelters under a juniper tree, and prays that he might die. Elijah was extremely discouraged! Many of us have had bad days, but Elijah was feeling very low indeed. He said *"It is enough! Now, LORD, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers."* A little while later he complains, *"I have been very zealous for the LORD God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life"* 1 Kings 19:4,10.

Another well known example of discouraged servants is found in Luke's Gospel. Following the crucifixion, two of the Lord's disciples, presumably a married couple, had left Jerusalem to return to their home village of Emmaus. The Lord joins them *"as they walk and are sad"* and asks them what they were talking about. They are surprised that anyone should need to ask! *"Are You the only stranger in Jerusalem, and have You not known the things which happened there in these days?" And He said to them, 'What things?' So they said to Him, 'The things concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a Prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how the chief priests and our rulers delivered Him to be condemned to death, and crucified Him. But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel'"*, Luke 24:18-21. Their dreams of deliverance from the Roman powers had been dashed!

I am certain that there are many others in the Bible who were at various times in their lives deeply discouraged. It is certainly true, however, that in the stories we have been considering they didn't remain that way. It is amazing to realise that God does not leave us feeling discouraged; He will minister to us if we let Him! Think of the trouble He went to with Elijah! First He fed him; in his self-pity Elijah had walked into the wilderness and was tired and hungry. He slept and then an angel woke him up and said, *"Arise and eat"* (1 Kings 19:5) and there by his head was a hot meal prepared just for him! The Scripture says that Elijah rose and ate and drank and went in the strength of that meal 40 days (1 Kings 19:6). Maybe this is the first lesson to learn. We are human! We are not always wise in how much we do and what we do even in our service for our Lord. We can get tired and exhausted and in such a condition we are much more prone to discouragement. The Lord Jesus as always was very wise in His care for His disciples: *"Come you yourselves apart and rest awhile"*, Mark 6:31

The Lord Himself was tireless in His service to His Father, He was the true servant of Jehovah who would *"not fail nor be discouraged"*, Isaiah 42:4. But He was also conscious of the frailties of His own followers and makes time for them to rest. It is easy for us to adopt an attitude of idleness and fail to do the work we should be doing, but equally it is all too easy for us to undertake more than the Lord has asked of us and wear ourselves out. Elijah complained that *"I am no better than my fathers!"* (1 Kings 19:4). I don't read anywhere that God had asked him to be! Elijah was placing expectations on himself that were both unrealistic and uncalled for. We can do the same and lay ourselves open to discouragement. We are entitled to expect that the Lord will support and strengthen us to carry out the tasks He has called us to; He will not necessarily give us the strength to perform tasks, however laudable, that He has not asked us to carry out!

What is also very instructive is what happens next in this passage in the life of Elijah. Having asked Elijah, *"What are you doing here Elijah?"* God then tells him to go and *"stand on the mountain before the LORD. And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore into the mountains and broke the rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. So it was, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave. Suddenly a voice came to him, and said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'"*, 1 Kings 19:11-13. It wasn't a loud dramatic sign that moved Elijah, it was rather "a still, small voice" and Elijah was asked exactly the same question that he had been asked a short time before, "what are you doing here, Elijah?"

I am reminded of the verse from Psalm 23, *"He leads me besides still waters, He restores my soul"* Psalm 23:2-3. When I am quiet and rested, it is then I can hear my Shepherd's voice, and it is then that He will restore my soul. What does it mean, "Restore my soul"? To restore is to refresh or revive, or as one translation of this passage renders it, "He gives new life to my soul."

Elijah was then given a new commission; he is not placed on the scrapheap and he is also told that he is not alone, rather God had reserved for Himself at least another 7,000 faithful servants (1 King 19:18). This is just the encouragement Elijah needed, he is not on his own, and he is not a failure. God still has work for him to do!

So what about David? He must have been a remarkable person! Even as a youth he displayed incredible courage, fighting off a lion and also a bear which had attacked his father's sheep (1 Samuel 17:34-37). He fought and defeated the giant Goliath (1 Samuel 17:40-51); he was called to serve as a musician in the court of King Saul (1 Samuel 16:23, 19:9); he was probably the most successful and popular leader of the army of Israel, and also he was a very sensitive writer. But he still got discouraged! There was more than one occasion when he despaired. What was his remedy? He remembered God's faithfulness to him in the past and reminded himself that God could still be trusted. In Psalm 42:5 we read, *"Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me?"* The writer had been remembering better times, and was conscious of spiritual thirst in his own soul. *"My tears have been my food day and night"* (Psalm 42:3) He was also aware of the taunts of his enemies, *"They continually say to me, 'Where is your God?'"* (Psalm 42:10). But the psalmist also tells God how he is feeling. We know ourselves how we are feeling, we may tell others as well, but we must tell God! There is a lot of wisdom in many of the old hymns and one encourages us to "take it to the Lord in prayer!" (What a friend we have in Jesus [Joseph Scriven 1819-1886])

Now might be a good time to remind ourselves of the words of another hymn.

*“When upon life’s billows you are tempest tossed,
When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost,
Count your many blessings, name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.”*

Johnson Oatman Jr. (1856-1926)

And this is just what David did. *“O my God, my soul is cast down within me; therefore I will remember You from the land of the Jordan, and from the heights of Hermon, from the Hill Mizar”* (Psalm 42:6). These were obviously places where in a remarkable way the psalmist had experienced God’s presence, power and faithfulness. And remembering God’s help in the past, we too can fortify ourselves for the present. David concludes the psalm with the words *“Hope in God; for I shall yet praise Him, the help of my countenance and my God”* (Psalm 42:11). So David looks forward to the certainty of a brighter future when again he will be able to praise God for His faithfulness.

The couple returning from Jerusalem to their home village of Emmaus (Luke 24:13-49) were discouraged for a very different reason. They had believed that Jesus was the long promised Messiah, and they had expected Him to exert His power and authority and overthrow the Romans and establish again David’s great kingdom. They were right of course to believe that Jesus was the Messiah and they were also right to expect that He would also establish a glorious kingdom. They had just got the timing wrong! They hadn’t read their Bibles properly! The Stranger who joined them on their journey said, *“Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?” And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself*, Luke 24:26-27. I can easily fall into the same mistake! The Lord Jesus was here to fulfil all Scripture. That first and foremost required that the offence of sin in the sight of a holy God be dealt with, the kingdom would follow in due course. I need to make sure that my sincerely held beliefs and expectations are regulated by Scripture, otherwise I lay myself open to disappointment and discouragement. For instance, it is true that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ at Calvary lays a basis on which God can offer forgiveness to the entire world. Nowhere in Scripture are we told that all will believe and be forgiven. If I think otherwise, I am certain to be discouraged when it doesn’t happen.

I think that the stories we have considered together may show us some of the ways we can deal with discouragement, but is there a way to avoid being discouraged in the first place? I think Scripture teaches us that there is. The words of Paul that we read at the very beginning, and I don’t think Paul was boasting, tell us about a man who had faced incredible difficulties and setbacks in his service for the Lord, but he would still press on, he was not discouraged. What did he say? *“We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed”* (2 Corinthians 4:8-9) Why could Paul speak like this? It was because of where he was looking! *“Not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen”* (2 Corinthians 4:18)

As always, our attitude to the Lord Jesus is the answer! Paul maintained the Lord Jesus as the preeminent object before him. He looked, not on the changing and passing things and circumstances around him, but on his unchanging Saviour. John the Baptist, jailed by Herod for his condemnation of Herod’s evil behaviour, briefly questioned whether in fact Jesus was the promised Messiah or not. His thoroughly unpleasant circumstances and the daily prospect of execution were similar to the situation the Apostle Paul would find himself in.

The writer to the Hebrews has wise advice for us: *“Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls. You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin”*, Hebrews 12:1-4

It would be the height of hypocrisy for me to criticise John the Baptist for briefly wavering in his conviction and becoming discouraged. I have become discouraged in much, much less stressful circumstances, but I am just drawing attention to what the Bible records. We are exhorted in Hebrews 12:1-4 to look to Jesus, just as Paul did, and find in His example and endurance the strength we need ourselves. You know as well as I do that if we look in on ourselves we will find much to discourage. Sadly, it can also be true that if we look at other Christians we can also find cause for discouragement. However, if we look as we are exhorted to, at the Lord Jesus, we will find only that which encourages. He is the Author and Finisher of faith (Hebrews 12:2); He never wavered, never faltered and was never discouraged. As it says in Psalm 16:8, *“I have set the LORD always before me; because He is at my right hand, I shall not be moved [or shaken].”*

It is always worth remembering that we have a God who is called the *“God of all comfort”* 2 Corinthians 1:3 or as another translation renders it, *“the God of all encouragement.”* Let’s read those verses: *“Blessed be the God and*

Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassions, and God of all encouragement; who encourages us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to encourage those who are in any tribulation whatever, through the encouragement with which we ourselves are encouraged of God.” 2 Corinthians 1:3-4.

Look at that! Five times in the space of these two verses we have the word ‘encourage’ or ‘encouragement’! We have the God of all encouragement on our side, to encourage us in all our tribulations. And He wants us in turn to share this encouragement with those who then also find themselves in difficulties. How often we prove this to be true! Who better to draw alongside and support and encourage, than someone who previously has passed through similar troubles and has experienced the support and encouragement of God. Notice as well that the Holy Spirit has written that God is the *“God of all encouragement who encourages us in all our tribulations”* (2 Corinthians 1:3). That’s a comprehensive promise! Elsewhere the Holy Spirit has written of *“everlasting encouragement”* in 2 Thessalonians 2:16 and *“strong encouragement”* in Hebrews 6:18.

I believe when we notice how often God the Holy Spirit has written about encouragement in the New Testament, that we may begin to realise how seriously He takes the matter of discouragement or encouragement! We belong to One who is very aware of the circumstances in which we find ourselves. One who is very aware of the opposition of the world and the failure within the Christian company, and He makes every provision for us. He wants to encourage us! To that end He has given us His Word, the Bible. Do I read it? Addressing his Christian friends in Rome, Paul writes *“For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort [or encouragement] of the Scriptures might have hope”*, Romans 15:4. I am certain that all of us have found tremendous encouragement from the Word of God. It is an inexhaustible source of comfort and encouragement if I will just avail myself of it, read it and believe it!

There is just one other matter I wanted to consider. Barnabas, a disciple mentioned in the Acts of the Apostle and a good friend of the Apostle Paul, is called *“the son of encouragement!”* in Acts 4:36. What a most remarkable man he must have been to have deserved a name like that! It brings a challenge to me as to what I would be called! Am I seen as one who is an encouragement or as a discouragement. There are some people who always manage to lift our spirits, sadly there are also those who discourage.

Think of the twelve men who were sent by Moses to spy out the land of Canaan (Numbers 13:1-33). All twelve had the same experiences, saw the same cities, viewed the fertile countryside and brought back one bunch of grapes so large that it had to be carried by two men! But how different was the final report of these men! Ten drew attention to the great cities with high walls and mighty soldiers who guarded them (Numbers 13:27-29), two drew attention to their great God who had promised them the land and was well able to give it to them! (see Numbers 13:30) These two men, Joshua and Caleb said, *“If the LORD delights in us, then He will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land which flows with milk and honey. Only do not rebel against the LORD, nor fear the people of the land, for they are our bread; their protection has departed from them, and the LORD is with us. Do not fear them”*, Numbers 14:8-9. Joshua and Caleb didn’t minimise the task that faced them but they trusted a God who was bigger than their enemies. Sadly the evil report of the ten spies was believed and led to the nation of Israel wasting forty years wandering in the desert before they finally entered the land God had promised them. How careful I must be!

Can we too make a commitment to bring our discouragements to the Lord, receive encouragement from Him through His Holy Spirit and His Holy Scriptures and then in turn be determined to be a source of encouragement to others! *“That we may be able to encourage those who are in any tribulation whatever, through the encouragement with which we ourselves are encouraged of God”* (2 Corinthians 1:4).

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