

Overcoming Discouragement

By Al Felder

“¹And Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and withal how he had slain all the prophets with the sword. ²Then Jezebel sent a messenger unto Elijah, saying, So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I make not thy life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time. ³And when he saw that, he arose, and went for his life, and came to Beersheba, which belongeth to Judah, and left his servant there. ⁴But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree: and he requested for himself that he might die; and said, It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers.” (1 Kings 19:1-4)

Discouragement is a very real thing. It’s something that all people deal with at various points in their life. Within the Bible, we can read of discouragement in the lives of Job, David, Jeremiah, and Elijah – just to name a few. No one is exempt from discouragement. Discouragement can take many forms and be caused by many things. Basically, a person is discouraged when they lose hope and feel like giving up. If left untreated it can be devastating to a person. It’s for that reason that we would like to discuss how to overcome discouragement.

Believe it or not, Elijah had just taken part in the greatest victory over idolatry during his lifetime. The year was 863 BC. Elijah issued a challenge to prove who the One True God is. He told Ahab, King of Israel, to assemble the prophets of Baal along with all the people at Mount Carmel. There Elijah reprimanded the people for their idolatry. He told them to stop going back and forth between God and Baal. He told them to follow the True God, but the people did not answer him.

Elijah proposed that the prophets of Baal make an offering to their god while he made an offering to the True God. Both Elijah and the prophets of Baal each took a bullock, killed it, and placed it on an altar. Then, Elijah told the prophets of Baal to pray to their god that he would send down fire to consume the offering. They prayed, chanted, and even cut themselves all to no avail.

Elijah instructed the people to gather around. He ordered that twelve buckets of water be poured over the sacrifice and altar. After all the buckets had been poured, water was standing in the trench surrounding the altar. Elijah prayed to God that He would send down fire to consume the sacrifice. Then, fire came down from heaven and consumed the sacrifice, the wood, and licked up all the water in the trench.

After this event the people fell down in fear of God. Elijah ordered them to seize the prophets of Baal, and he ordered that they all be executed. It was after this event that we read of Elijah’s discouragement.

The Bible tells us that Ahab's wife Jezebel had sent a death threat to Elijah. Jezebel was a wicked woman. She had the blood of many of God's prophets, as well as innocent people, on her hands. Jezebel was a woman you did not cross without consequences. If she wanted you dead, you would be killed. Elijah knew all of this, and it caused him to be afraid.

This great man of God fled for his life. He went a day's journey into the wilderness, and asked for God to kill him. He had no further desire to live. His get up and go had gotten up and gone. He had absolutely no will left to fight.

We too can find ourselves overwhelmed by discouragement. *"Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us."* (Hebrews 12:1) There are things in life that can weigh us down. These things hinder us in living the Christian life. They cause us to be ineffective in working for Christ, and if left unattended they can lead to our spiritual ruin.

What are some things that can lead to discouragement in our life? One cause is spiritual immaturity. *"¹²For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principals of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. ¹³For every one that useth milk is unskillful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe."* (Hebrews 5:12, 13) God expects us to grow in knowledge of His word. If we don't put forth time and effort to grow in understanding God's word, we will not grow as a Christian. A good test would be examining yourself to see if you can explain the Gospel to a sinner. Any person who has been a Christian, even for a year, ought to be able to explain what one must do in order to be saved. If you cannot, you need to become skilled at using the word of God.

Being double minded can also lead to discouragement. This too can result from a lack of understanding God's word. Our ignorance of God's word can lead us to be unstable spiritually speaking. There may be no rhyme or reason to the things we think and do. Our decisions and actions are based more on how we feel in the moment than anything else. There is no anchor providing stability in our life because we have not learned God's word.

Sin is another cause of discouragement. It should go without saying that sin in our life will cause us to be discouraged, but if we have not developed our understanding of God's word we will fail to recognize sin for what it truly is. We will be easily deceived and led astray.

Not only will our sin cause us to be discouraged, the sin of others can cause discouragement as well. In fact, God has given us commands in His word on how to handle such situations. *"Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou has gained thy brother."* (Matthew 18:15) Offenses can hurt. They can grow into bitterness and hatred, the end result of which will be the destruction of our soul. In order to prevent that from happening God has laid forth His plan on dealing with these situations.

A lack of success can cause discouragement. I'm not talking about worldly success. I'm talking about success in spreading the Gospel of Christ. There are times in which you may wonder if you are doing any good at all. You may ask and wonder whether or not you are making any difference. Is all your effort in vain! No, it's not. Sometimes you just need to be alone with God in order to get things back in perspective.

We can even face discouragement after a great success! You wouldn't think that this would be the case, but we have the example of Elijah before us. He was willing to do what God said, and because of his faithfulness the nation of Israel knew that there was One True God. Spiritual victories are great, but even in the midst of our greatest triumphs we must always keep our guard up.

We can become discouraged when we use others to measure ourselves. I may not have the talents and abilities that others have, but I am expected to use what I do have in service to God. I may think that it is unfair that certain tasks fall to me and not others. *"²⁰Then Peter, turning about, seeth the disciple whom Jesus loved following; which also leaned on his breast at supper and said, Lord, which is he that betrayeth thee? ²¹Peter seeing him saith to Jesus, Lord, and what shall this man do? ²²Jesus saith unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? Follow thou me."* (John 21:20-22) Peter was just informed that he would die for the cause of Christ. Immediately he turned to John and asked Jesus, "What about him?" To which Jesus replied, "Follow me."

The fact of the matter is that we are all different one from another. We have different talents and abilities. We are at different stages in our life, but we all serve Christ. If we were all the same than the analogy of a body would not be a fitting description of the Church. A body has different parts performing different tasks for the welfare of the overall body. That's the way the Church is designed. We are all supposed to do our part, but my part may not be the same as your part nor will your part be the same as someone else's. *"If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling?"* (1 Corinthians 12:17) We are blessed with different talents and abilities for a reason.

Finally, we may be discouraged by friendly fire. *"Therewith, bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God."* (James 3:9) A sad reality is the fact that we as the members of the body of Christ can often be the greatest hindrance to others and the greatest source of discouragement. The statements we make about others usually end up making their way back to the individual.

I came across a quote that I believe will help all of us to think about this issue. "Patience is something you admire in the driver behind you, but not in the one ahead." (Bill McGlashen) In other words, we don't often extend the treatment to others that we prefer for ourselves. Many times we will say and do things to others that would greatly offend or hurt us. When we do this, we become a source of discouragement.

How, then, can we overcome discouragement and be successful? We can overcome discouragement by faith. *“¹Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, ²Looking 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 is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.”* (Hebrews 12:1, 2) We have example after example of heroes in the faith from God’s word, men and women of old who faced great odds and remained faithful to God. Our greatest example is Jesus Himself. We must keep our focus upon Him at all times.

We must purify ourselves. The Bible tells us to lay aside all weights and sin that would hinder us. This is accomplished by self-examination. In life many people seek an immediate answer for their discouragement. Their job is the source of discouragement, so they change jobs. People will change cities, spouses, or even churches in an attempt to get rid of discouragement. The one thing that people often fail to change is themselves. *“And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.”* (Romans 12:2) A Christian is a person who constantly seeks to change himself or herself through studying and applying the word of God to their lives. It can be no other way.

As a part of this effort we may need to change our perspective. Elijah’s perspective was his reality, but his reality was wrong! *“¹⁴And he said, I have been very jealous for the Lord God of hosts: because the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.”* (1 Kings 19:14) Elijah believed that he was the only faithful servant of God left. In his mind there was no one else, and all hope was lost. Was he right?

Listen to God’s response. *“Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him.”* (1 Kings 19:18) Elijah was not alone. In fact, he had hid one hundred prophets from Jezebel himself. He was not alone, but he felt that way. Elijah needed to change his perspective through the renewing of his mind.

Another way for us to overcome discouragement is to pray.

“¹¹And he said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord. And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks 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: ¹²And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. ¹³And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave. And, behold there came a voice unto him, and said, What doest thou here, Elijah?” (1 Kings 19:11-13)

Elijah needed to talk to God. Today we talk to God through prayer. There are times when our prayer needs to be as urgent and as intense as the situation we are facing. This isn't our usual everyday prayer. This is a prayer that leaves us emotionally drained when we are done. This is a prayer in which we bear our soul to God. It's a prayer like the one Jesus prayed in the garden. *"And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground."* (Lude 22:44) Have you ever prayed so fervently that you felt it physically? If you want to overcome discouragement you may need to.

Finally, commit yourself to the work of the Church. God told Elijah to work. *"And the Lord said unto him, Go, return on thy way to the wilderness of Damascus: and when thou comest, anoint Hazael to be king over Syria."* (1 Kings 19:15) God wasn't done with Elijah yet. He still had work for him to do.

We have work to do. Each one of us needs to be personally involved in the work of the Church. As I said before, we are a body. A body has many members who perform different tasks. We won't do the same thing. *"¹²Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees; ¹³And make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but let it rather be healed."* (Hebrews 12:12, 13) These verses talk about making the way easier for others. That is a great need in the church. You may have a gift of being there for others. You may be a good friend or listener. You may be good at visiting the sick, or fixing things for people who are in need. You may be good at encouraging others. My point is this. There are many task to be done just as a body has many things going on at once, but they all contribute to the ultimate task of giving life to the body.

Discouragement is a tool of the Devil that he uses to weaken our faith, hinder our service to God, diminish our effectiveness, and ultimately separate us from God. Don't allow Satan to succeed. Many quit too soon and fail to receive the reward. *"And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken."* (Ecclesiastes 4:12) God wants us to join together, and trust and obey Him.