

DISCOURAGEMENT: THE ENEMY'S BIGGEST WEAPON AGAINST GOD'S WORKERS

Introduction

Jesus declared to the Father that he was going to send his followers into the world to fulfill his will (John 17:18). However, the followers of Jesus have an enemy who is going to do his part to keep us from being sent. And if we do allow ourselves to be sent, that enemy is going to try his best to keep us from fulfilling the purpose for which we are sent. Unfortunately, this enemy, Satan, the devil, has many different kinds of weapons that he uses to derail us from our ministries. These include:

- moral temptations
- financial temptations
- temptations to the gossip of others
- temptations to anger and unforgiveness
- temptations related to interpersonal conflicts
- temptations to spiritual coldness and deadness
- temptations to laziness and carelessness and shallowness

However, I am convinced that one of the biggest temptations, especially to Christian workers, including missionaries, is the topic for our discussion today.

I will begin this sermon with a statement from Eliphaz one of Job's friends.

*Then Eliphaz the Temanite replied: "If someone ventures a word with you, will you be impatient? But who can keep from speaking? Think how you have instructed many, how you have strengthened feeble hands. Your words have supported those who stumbled; you have strengthened faltering knees. **But now trouble comes to you, and you are discouraged; it strikes you, and you are dismayed.** Should not your piety be your confidence and your blameless ways your hope? "Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed? As I have observed, those who plow evil and those who sow trouble reap it. At the breath of God they are destroyed; at the blast of his anger they perish. The lions may roar and growl, yet the teeth of the great lions are broken. The lion perishes for lack of prey, and the cubs of the lioness are scattered (Job 4:1-11).*

Eliphaz was the first of Job's friends to speak. As soon as Job finished his first speech, he began explaining his philosophy which basically assumes this:

- God is just which means that he rewards the righteous, punishes the wicked and forgives the penitent.
- Since there was little understanding of the after life, God had to reward the righteous and punish the wicked in this life.
- When you see a person being financially or physically blessed, that was an indication of God's blessing and therefore a testimony to his righteousness.
- If you see a person who was suffering physically or financially, that was an indication that he was under God's judgment and that was a proof of his lack of righteousness.

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Job was suffering under several tragedies. Therefore, that meant that he was under the judgment of God. Note these statements from Eliphaz which reflect that theology:

- 4:7: “*Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed?*” The point is that God does not destroy the good. A good God would not allow the innocent to suffer. That must mean that Job has done something that is bringing on the judgment of God.
- 4:8: “*As I have observed, those who plow evil and those who sow trouble reap it.*” Job is now reaping a lot of trouble. That must mean that he has sown that trouble because God would certainly not allow bad things to happen to an innocent man.
- 4:10-11: “*The lions may roar and growl, yet the teeth of the great lions are broken. The lion perishes for lack of prey, and the cubs of the lioness are scattered.*” This is an interesting figure of speech. Trouble is compared to a great lion. The lions of affliction and trouble roar around us. However, because we are righteous, God is going to protect us from the lions. In fact, the lions will have so little to eat from us, that they will perish and their cubs will be scattered.

In other words, God is going to protect us from the lions of affliction.

This kind of teaching sounds very familiar to us. It takes a little different approach here in Nigeria but we still hear it. Because God loves us and is all powerful . . .

- God wants to bless his people with prosperity.
- Sickness and accidents and privation are never the will of God.
- God wants us to be the head and not the tale.

Here is the record of what God said to Eliphaz and his friends at the end of the Book of Job:

*After the LORD had said these things to Job, he said to Eliphaz the Temanite, “I am angry with you and your two friends, because **you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.** . . . My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly. **You have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.**” (Job 42:7-9)*

Here is a key statement from the passage we read earlier:

*Think how you have instructed many, how you have strengthened feeble hands. Your words have supported those who stumbled; you have strengthened faltering knees. **But now trouble comes to you, and you are discouraged; it strikes you, and you are dismayed.***

The key word here is “*discouraged.*” Perhaps Job’s biggest problem was not the physical pain that he suffered or even the loss of his family but when all of these joined together, they weighed him down with discouragement.

And here is a parallel point: If you have the wrong philosophy or the wrong theology, you will easily become discouraged. Eliphaz says that Job had been doing a lot of good things and apparently things were going quite well but all of a sudden, a big problem comes into his life and he has become discouraged. Then trouble strikes and he becomes dismayed.

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The point of this sermon is that one of the greatest tools that Satan uses against us is the tool of discouragement. And nearly always our discouragement arises either because of poor theology or because of a failure to remember or live by our theology. Job's theology and philosophy of life were severely tested during this time. And his questions that arose from his philosophy created discouragement.

I want to look at some things in the Book of Acts that led to discouragement and show you how Satan uses the weapon of discouragement against us. The example of Eliphaz simply demonstrates that poor theology leads to discouragement. The book of Acts demonstrates that Satan likes to use discouragement in our lives. I want to show you how often the enemy tries to attack us with discouragement when we first enter the ministry or after we first start a new project. The devil will hammer us with discouragement.

Discouragement Through Violence

Sometimes the attacks of Satan are quite subtle. He tries to discourage us through confusion. This seems like just a "normal thing." However, at other times the attacks are more direct. Sometimes the devil comes in like a "roaring lion." Why does he do that? He does that to discourage people.

Illustration

When I teach the book of Acts, I always force me students to notice something in Acts 16:8-10:

*So **they** passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." After Paul had seen the vision, **we** got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called **us** to preach the gospel to them.*

This is the beginning of the "we" passages in Acts. What this suggests is that it was in Troas where Luke joined the missionary team. After joining the team, they sailed across the corner of the Aegean Sea and arrived at Philippi. In Philippi, Paul delivered a slave girl from demons. This caused her owners to stir up trouble. Paul and Silas were arrested and beaten and thrown into prison. This event is described in Acts 16:22-24:

The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

The missionaries were dragged into court. They were beaten. They were thrown into prison. Their feet were fastened in stocks.

What do you think that this would do to the new missionary Luke? It would tend to discourage him. On Luke's first missionary experience, his leader is arrested and beaten and jailed. It is likely that he narrowly escaped this treatment. What were the questions that you think were going through Luke's mind at that time?

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- What have I got myself into?
- If this is the way it is, do I really want to continue this kind of work?
- Why did God not stop this violence? After all, we prayed this morning for God's protection but God did not protect them.
- Perhaps I better just get the next boat back to Troas and return to my normal medical practice in Troas. When I agreed to go with Paul, I did not agree to this.

Unfortunately, Luke was neither the first nor the last to see and experience violence. Peter was arrested and imprisoned just a short time after Pentecost. He was arrested another four or five times. Paul was arrested at least three times that we know of in the Book of Acts and at least one of those experiences resulted in a serious beating. One another occasion, Paul was beaten by a mob so severely he was left for dead. What was the enemy trying to do with these experiences? They were designed to discourage people. When people get discouraged they either do not do their jobs very well or they stop doing them all together.

Application

The Bible gives us many wonderful comforting scriptures that promise that the devil cannot defeat us.

- *the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world* (1 John 4:4).
- *When the enemy comes in like a flood, the Lord will lift up a standard against him* (Isaiah 59:19 KJV).
- *No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it* (1 Corinthians 10:13).

God may not allow the devil to defeat us. However, in the midst of the battle, sometimes we are tempted to be discouraged and quit.

Many of you have been exposed to violence in the last few weeks. You have experienced the violence of the Jos Crisis. You have seen the smoke and heard the sirens and the gunfire. You have seen the burned buildings and vehicles and some of you have seen the wounded bodies of the victims. In addition, some of you have experienced the violence of armed robbery some time in your missionary career. In fact, I have said for years that it is not a married of if you are hit by armed robbers but when. If you live long enough in Nigeria, the odds are that you are going to experience some kind of armed robbery.

We learn from the book of Job that there are two things going on with regards to the violence you have seen and experienced.

- ***The enemy is trying to discourage and defeat you.*** He wants you to quit and go home and stop the ministry he has given you to do.
- ***The Lord is putting you on exhibit as a demonstration of how a child of God can live through times of violence.***

The same problems that the devil uses to discourage you are the problems that God is going to use you to be a model and demonstration of the way God's people respond to violence.

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I met with the members of Emmanuel Baptist Church two Sundays ago. This is a church that has been burned three times in the last seven years. I told them that I don't know of any other church in the world that has been burned three times. Therefore, God has chosen to put them on display. How will the people of a church that has been burned three times respond to that? God's people and the enemy's people are both watching to see how they will respond.

We must remember that it is not just the direct attacks of the devil that defeat us. It is the pressure and the depression and discouragement that come from these things. Have you been discouraged from the various kinds of trauma that you have experienced or witnessed? Remember, the devil is trying to defeat you. But God has chosen you to be a model of how Christian suffer. Therefore, we must not allow ourselves to become discouraged.

Discouragement Through Confusion

Most people like for things to be very straightforward and clear.

- Students like for policies of their schools to be clear.
- Missionaries want the working policies of the mission to be clearly understood.
- Few people enjoy living in an atmosphere of confusion.

Wherever there is any kind of confusion, that tends to produce discouragement. In 1 Corinthians 14:33, Paul discusses worship services. In the KJV, Paul said, "*God is not the author of confusion.*"

- God is not the author of confusion in a church service.
- God is not the author of confusion in our personal lives.
- God is not the author of confusion in a ministry or project.

Whenever confusion comes into a situation, the devil is trying to discourage people and discouragement is one of his best tools. Note these examples of confusion in Acts which leads to discouragement.

Leadership Confusion

The following two sections of scripture introduce an important issue:

- Acts 13:13: "*From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, where John left them to return to Jerusalem.*"
- Acts 15:36-38: "*Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, 'Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.' Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work.*"

Why did John Mark leave the missionary team in Perga? We are not told. However, it is likely that he left the team because of discouragement. There may be a hint of why he got discouraged in the story of the team's activities on Cyprus. Note these verses:

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- 13:2: “While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me **Barnabas and Saul** for the work to which I have called them.’”
- 13:6-7: “They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for **Barnabas and Saul** because he wanted to hear the word of God.”
- 13:13: “From Paphos, **Paul and his companions** sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, where John left them to return to Jerusalem.”
- 13:42: “As **Paul and Barnabas** were leaving the synagogue, the people invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath.”

What is the point? When they entered the island, they were “*Barnabas and Saul*.” When they left the island, they were “*Paul and Barnabas*.” Apparently, the leadership of the team changed while the team was on the island of Cyprus.

John Mark was the nephew of Barnabas who had been the leader of the group. When he saw what was happening—that his uncle was losing his position as the leader of the group, he apparently was confused a bit. Why was this happening? Was this young man, Paul, trying to take over the leadership of the team? The confusion over leadership brought on discouragement. And it is possibly that discouragement that eventually led him to quit the missionary team.

One of Satan’s biggest schemes is to try to create confusion over leadership. He does this so that we will be discouraged and quit. The enemy was able to get Mark so discouraged that he actually quit his ministry and returned home. Nature does not like a vacuum and when there is either a vacuum in leadership or even a transition in leadership, that is the opportunity for confusion and frustration and that is always fertile ground for discouragement. Whenever there is any kind of confusion over leadership, be very careful. The devil is on the prowl. He is trying to bring discouragement. He is likely trying to attack some vulnerable person.

Doctrinal Confusion

Paul and Barnabas had successfully completed the first missionary journey. They were filled with joy over the success of their journey. Acts 15:1 says: “Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: ‘Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.’ This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them.” This problem eventually caused Paul to write the book of Galatians.

This was primarily a doctrinal issue. Some Christians were insisting that all Christians had to be circumcised whereas Paul and Barnabas were insisting that Gentiles did not need to be circumcised. This led to doctrinal confusion. And Galatians 4:8-11, Paul reflects on discouragement.

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.”

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When you have one leader teaching one thing and another leader teaching something else, that leads to confusion. And confusion leads to discouragement.

At a seminary level, it is good to have healthy debates. And it is good to teach our people to think and to respect the opinions of others. However, we must be careful about allowing too many doctrinal variations to develop in our churches. They will lead to confusion and confusion will lead to discouragement.

I was reared in a church that was very strict. We were always quarreling over small doctrinal or lifestyle issues. The end result was that many of our young people became discouraged and left our faith community, many of them departing from the faith altogether.

Directional Confusion

Timothy apparently was converted in Lystra or Derbe on the first missionary journey. However, he joined the missionary team early in the second missionary journey. Here is a record of the events immediately after Timothy joined the team:

Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas (Acts 16:6-8).

Paul was a major city evangelist. After revisiting the cities where he had planted churches on the first missionary journey, Paul headed directly towards Ephesus, the major city in Asia Minor. The Lord stopped him from going to Ephesus. He turned to go to Bithynia but the Lord stopped him. So he turned and went another direction. He travels actually looked like a big Z.

How do you think that this directional confusion affected young Timothy, on his first trip with these evangelists? I am sure that it tended to confuse and discourage him.

All of us like for things to go straight. However, very often they do not go straight. We walk through open doors and run up against closed doors. We have to zig and zag until we get to Troas where we can get real direction from God. We should be aware that young people and new people and people who have recently joined the ministry are vulnerable to discouragement when there is confusion over direction.

I am currently working on a project in Southern Sudan. I have made three trips there working on the details of sending three people there. They should have gone there last August. However, there have been delays and “unknowns.” We actually are not quite sure what is happening there right now.

Some of you know Dr. Layne Turner. Although he has worked for a government institution and was entitled to a GO (Government Officer) visa. He had problems with his visa here. He was advised to go back to the US, take his normal break and then re-apply through the normal means. He got all the supporting documents from the college of education. He went back and applied properly. He heard nothing for about two months. He finally had his passport withdrawn. I got another fresh letter from the college and we

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attempted again. After two months of calling the embassy and trying everything possible, there has still not been any response. We are now asking the question: What is going on? Is the Lord closing the door for Layne Turner to come back to Nigeria so he can go somewhere else. Or is this the enemy that is causing all of this confusion? The answer is that we do not yet know. What we do know is that there is confusion and where there is confusion there is the great likelihood that there is going to be discouragement.

Application

Is there confusion in your life and in your ministry? If there is, there is also likely a lot of discouragement in your life. Remember confusion is not of the Lord. Resist and reject it and do not allow yourself to get discouraged.

For the last several years, my country, the USA, has been bogged down in a war in Iraq. This is primarily a war against insurgents and radical foreign extremists. These insurgents know that they cannot defeat the US army militarily. The US has better equipment, better trained soldiers, far more money than the insurgents. The insurgents are defeated every time there is a head-to-head engagement. They cannot stand up to the fire power of the US military. However, the hope of the insurgents is not to directly defeat the US and its coalition partners. The hope is to gradually wear them down—to keep killing a few soldiers along and continue blowing up equipment so that the American public eventually becomes discouraged with the war and puts pressure on the politicians to bring the troops home. This is actually a low level engagement, compared to former wars. We lost more soldiers in one hour in certain battles in the past than we have lost in four years of fighting in Iraq so far. However, the strategy of the insurgents is working. The American public are becoming discouraged.

This is exactly the strategy that Satan uses against us sometimes. He knows that he cannot get us to yield to certain temptations. He continues to loose the direct confrontations. However, he is wanting to gradually put enough pressure on you until you eventually get tired and give up and cease doing the work God has called you to do.

We must be concerned about the direct assaults of the enemy but we must not rejoice too much when we succeed because the repeated assaults will tend to discourage us. And discouragement is one of Satan's biggest weapons.

Discouragement Through Isolation or Inactivity

Exposition

When Paul was giving his testimony to Felix, he told about what he had received from the Lord on the day he was converted.

“Then I asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ “ ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ the Lord replied. ‘Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me’ (Acts 26:15-18).

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What do these verses teach us about Paul? They tell us that Paul knew from the first day of his conversion that God had called him to a significant ministry to the Gentiles. However, what happened to him after that? Paul gives us some information in Galatians 1:15-18:

*But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased¹⁶ to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus. Then after **three years**, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter and stayed with him **fifteen days**.*

In Galatians 2:1, Paul adds, “**Fourteen** years later I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas.” After an amazing conversion and receiving clear direction that he would have a ministry to the Gentiles, Paul went to Arabia where there was nothing to do and stayed for three years. He then went to Jerusalem but stayed only 15 days where he received a cool reception. He then went to Tarsus where he stayed about ten years, essentially doing nothing.

What was happening in Paul’s life at this time? Not too much. Paul was isolated from the main body of Christians at the time and also from those with whom he could minister and from whom he could learn and with whom he could have fellowship. Isolation is dangerous because it leads to discouragement. Remember the earlier point: Sometimes God and the devil use the same events for different purposes.

- What was the devil doing during this time? He was trying to discourage Paul.
- What was God doing during this time? He was teaching him patience.

Application

Has God put you in a lonely place? If he has, there are lessons that you can learn. Has God reduced or stopped the ministries that you were involved in before? However, you must be careful and not allow yourself to become discouraged. Even if the devil is interfering with your activities, remember that the Lord can use these things in your life.

One of my good friends made a small mistake in his ministry. He was then put on suspension by his overseer. He stayed in that condition for three years. However, rather than allowing himself to get discouraged, every time I saw him, he would say, “The Lord is being exceptionally good to me. He is preparing me for something special.” It was this kind of attitude that kept him from getting discouraged.

Beware of isolation if you can help it. However, if God does isolate you for a while, keep your focus on God and your ministry and do not allow yourself to become discouraged.

Other Forms of Discouragement

Interpersonal Conflict

Paul had observed a flaw in Peter’s life which he was forced to confront. Later Paul had a serious disagreement with Barnabas. Of all the problems that we face, interpersonal conflicts can wear you down the quickest.

Disappointing Disciples

Paul was disappointed that some of his new converts from the first missionary journey were departing from the faith. This was so serious that Paul thought that perhaps all the work he had done on the first missionary journey was a waste of time. Paul was disappointed that some of his converts were doing stupid things. 1 Corinthians is full of these examples. Paul was disappointed that some of his disciples were arguing and squabbling with each other. In Philippians 4:2 he writes: *“I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord.”* All of these kinds of things have a way of weighing down on you and creating discouragement.

Financial Stress

I could not find any examples of financial problems in Acts. However, Paul makes this interesting statement in Philippians 4:11-12: *“I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be **in need**, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or **hungry**, whether living in plenty or **in want**.”* Do you notice the words *“in need,” “hungry,”* and *“in want.”* There were obviously times where Paul did not have all that he felt that he needed to carry on his ministry. When you don’t have all you need, it has a way of discouraging you.

Legal Problems

Paul was arrested in Philippi. He was arrested in Corinth. He was arrested in Jerusalem. Each of these involved legal problems. Missionaries often face various kinds of legal problems, including immigration, visa. quota and other problems.

Responding to Discouragement

How do we respond to discouragement? I do not have a formula. As I have said before, I worry about formula Christianity. However, I will make some simple observations.

Be sure of your calling.

Make sure we know what God has called us to do. Sometimes we get involved in doing things that are not really our responsibilities. When that happens, the Lord may put pressure on us to get us to return to doing what we should be doing. Knowing the gifts and callings in our lives is a subjective thing. There is no formula for discovering it. However, God has many ways that he can reveal to us that we are indeed doing or we are not doing what he has called us to do.

I heard of one man who moved his family to the mission field. However, after one year, he recognized that God had never called him to the mission field. This was his own idea. Therefore, he had the courage to admit that he was wrong and take his family back to where they belonged.

Vance Havner said, “Many people sing the song, “I will go where you want me to go, dear Lord, but they are unwilling to stay where God wants them to stay.”

Look for the hand of God in the discouraging times.

Even when there is opposition, there are often little markers of God's presence. Make sure you look for them.

Noah experienced the trauma of the flood for weeks and months. There was uncertainty and confusion and worry about what would happen. However, a dove showed up with an olive leaf and that was the reassurance he needed to know that God was with him. Here is the record: "When the dove returned to him in the evening, there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf! Then Noah knew that the water had receded from the earth" (Genesis 8:11).

Paul experienced a lot of trouble on his last trip to Jerusalem. He was warned repeatedly before going that there would be trouble. When he got there, he received a lukewarm reception from the church at Jerusalem. At one point he was falsely accused of taking a Gentile into a restricted part of the Temple. He was attacked and almost torn apart. He was arrested by the Roman army and detained. There were assassination attempts and inconclusive trials. Paul's imprisonment eventually lasted for four years. However, the Lord did something nice for him. In the midst of all of these troubles and these discouraging circumstances, the Lord arranged some special transportation for Paul from Jerusalem to Caesarea. In the midst of a death threat, the Lord arranged for 470 soldiers to accompany Paul to Caesarea. Paul had 200 spearman going before him and 200 swordsmen coming behind him. He was given a horse to ride and was surrounded by 70 members of the Roman cavalry. I am sure that Paul smiled when he saw all of this happening. He smiled because he could see the hand of God on him in the midst of this discouraging and trouble situation and that caused him to take hope and not be discouraged. This was his dove with the olive leaf. This is the indication that surely the waters are going to recede from the earth. We need to look for those appearances of God during times of discouragement.

My wife experienced an armed robbery about a year ago. It was a traumatic experience. However, there was one thing that happened in the middle of the armed robbery that made her see the hand of God. When the robbers first came in the house, they were struggling with the night guard. Mary screamed as loud as she could. She is not a screamer and has never screamed like that. However, later just when the robbers had closed the lid to her laptop and was about to take it, the whistles from the security guards started blowing. Someone on the road had heard Mary scream and rushed down and reported to the security. They came running back up just in time to save Mary's computer from the robbers. And the strange thing about the scream is that the robbers acted as if they had not even heard Mary. This was an indication that God was with her. It was her dove with the olive leaf. Jesus said, "Lo, I am with you always."

Focus on the Positive.

Discouragement comes from focusing on the problems of life. However, hope and joy come from focusing on the positive things. Paul encouraged the Philippians to think about things that are good and wholesome and pure and worthy of praise (Philippians 4:8). The more we focus our attention on God rather than the problems, the less discouraged we are going to be. When you are in the ark and there is water all around you, focus on the olive leaf. It is a sign that God is with you and that eventually the floods will go away.

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I am sure that it was discouraging for Paul to be detained for those four years. However, good things came out of it. Paul spent some time meeting and encouraging Christian believers. He also spent some time, especially in Rome, meeting with Jewish leaders, evangelizing them. He spent some of his time writing the four prison epistles. And it is almost certain that he worked closely with Luke during his detention to help compile and write the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. Therefore, without those four years of detention, we would not have had the prison epistles or Luke and Acts.

When we force ourselves to focus on the positive things that God is doing in our times of trouble, that helps to drive away discouragement.

Remember the sovereignty of God. (Make sure you theology is correct.)

We believe in an all-knowing and all-powerful personal God. Romans 8:28 says, *“And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.”* We Christians are not fatalist. We do not believe that everything is foreordained and predestined. We do not even believe that God is the author of all the trouble that we experience. However, we do believe that God is so big that he can take even the actions of the devil and turn them around for our good.

Note Paul’s testimony about the thorn in the flesh. *“And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me . . .”* (2 Corinthians 12:7). This problem was a messenger from Satan. Note the rest of the statement. *“ . . . lest I should be exalted above measure. ⁸ For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness”* (12:8). However, this messenger of Satan accomplished good things in the life of God.

- It kept him from getting pride.
- It gave him a chance to demonstrate the grace of God.
- It gave him a chance to demonstrate God’s strength in a time of weakness.

The point is that even if the problems that we face are messengers from Satan, our God is so powerful that he can turn them around and use them for our good and his glory.

Ask God to teach you something during your times of discouragement.

There are often lessons to be learned when we go through difficult circumstances. The Psalmist said, *“Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word”* (119:165). I am currently writing a book entitled *But God Provided a Worm* in which I try to show how God used the various difficulties in the lives of Biblical characters to teach important lessons.

- Abraham experienced the worm of examination
- Joseph experienced the worm of direction.
- Job experienced the worm of demonstration.
- The Philippian jailor experienced the worm of salvation.
- Trophimus experienced the worm of unknown origin.

If you can learn a lesson or gain some new insight as a result of your problems, that will help you view them more positively and there will be less room for discouragement.

Persevere.

Don't give up. Hang in there. Keep on doing what God has called you to do. An old American proverb says, "Never get off the train when it is in a tunnel." To continue with the flood analogy: "Don't get out of the ark until the waters have receded." God has not promised us that life would be easy. However, he has promised to be with us in our times of difficulty and stress. Therefore, we must discipline ourselves and continue on doing the right thing even when we do not feel like it.

A number of years ago, my senior son got sick with spinal meningitis. While he was sick, the Lord spoke to my wife and me through a song:

HOW FIRM A FOUNDATION

*How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,
Is laid for your faith in His excellent Word!
What more can He say; than to you He hath said,
To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled*

*Fear not, I am with thee, O be not dismayed,
For I am thy God, I will still give thee aid;
I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,
Upheld by My gracious, omnipotent hand.*

*When through the deep waters I call thee to go,
The rivers of sorrow shall not overflow,
For I will be with thee, thy trials to bless,
And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.*

*When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,
My grace all sufficient shall be thy supply;
The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design
Thy dross to consume and the gold to refine.*

*The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose,
I will not, I will not desert to his foes;
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I'll never, no never, no never forsake!*

Although we were tempted to be discouraged, the Lord was with us and helped us to see that the Lord's hand was upon us and would use this painful problem for our own good.

Conclusion

There is a little Nigeria chorus that says, "I serve a very big God-o. And he's always by my side." God is so big he knows all things and can do all things. He has chosen not to remove all our problems from us. However, even when the problems come, God is there also.

Are you discouraged? Maybe you had better take another look at your theology. Most important, keep your eyes fixed on Jesus.

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