

Defeating DISCOURAGEMENT

How to keep going when life overwhelms you.

by Florence MacKenzie

Have you ever had it with life? Ever wanted to run away and hide from difficult and painful circumstances that just seem to go on and on with no end in sight? What do you do at times like this? Despite the fact that we can't always choose our circumstances, we can choose the way we respond to them. Next time you're discouraged, try these six ways to defeat it.

- 1. Choose to believe the character of God.** At one level, it's very comforting to know that God is all-powerful and in control of our lives but, at another level, this knowledge can leave us perplexed when things aren't going well. I'm sure I'm not the only one who has responded to difficult circumstances by asking, *If God has all power and authority, why does He not do something to stop my pain? Does He not care about me?* Perhaps there have been times when you, too, have questioned God's character. In order to know the character of God, we need to go to the Word of God. In 1 Peter 5:7, we're told clearly that God cares for us. Numerous other verses let us know that He loves us with an everlasting love. The bottom line is that our all-powerful God is in charge of our world and He also cares deeply for us. If we allow this knowledge to sink into our hearts and minds, it can help us to keep going when discouragement threatens to overwhelm us.
- 2. Choose to respond to God in praise.** This is probably the last thing we want to do when things are going badly for us! But we need to hold on to the truth that, despite our changing circumstances, He never changes. A few years ago, our family was involved in ministry in a local church and things weren't turning out the way we had expected and hoped. One disappointment followed another until, after several months, we found ourselves extremely discouraged. What were we to do? While talking over the options available to us, we reminded ourselves that if God is good, kind, holy, just, loving, merciful, faithful (and a whole host of other things) when life is going well, then as our unchanging God (Malachi 3:6), He remains like this when circumstances turn sour. We knew then what we needed to do. We would make it a priority to regularly praise God for who He is! Out of this experience "31 Days of Praise" was born (downloadable from the Equipped for Living website). Several years on, we still use this resource to praise God every day. Giving thanks to God is another aspect of praise. Even in bad times, we've a lot to be thankful for. 1 Thessalonians 5:18 tells us to give thanks *in* all circumstances, not *for* all circumstances... We don't have to give thanks *for* broken dreams or dashed hopes; the key is giving thanks to God *in* the broken dreams and dashed hopes.
- 3. Choose to wait for the Lord to act.** I hate waiting and I guess you probably do too! I'd much rather take action! But waiting is not necessarily something passive. Think of a sheepdog waiting for the shepherd's command to round up the sheep. The dog has his attention closely focused on the shepherd, ready to spring into action as soon as the command is given. The animal doesn't tell the shepherd how or when to respond, but he waits with an attitude of expectation that there will be a response of some kind, at some time. God doesn't always act in the way we would like Him to, and rarely does He act according to our timetable! So we have to wait. But how can we make good use of this waiting time? Here are four practical suggestions:

- Take time out each day to focus on God rather than on your problems.
- Try asking *what* instead of *why*. Be teachable and ask God what you need to learn at this point in your life. Don't waste the pain!
- Keep handing over your problems to God and trust Him for the outcome.
- Determine that, whatever happens, you will continue to praise and serve God wholeheartedly.

4. Choose to share your problems with a trusted friend. Don't underestimate the comfort a good friend can bring to you. None of us has to walk through troubled times on our own. Your friend might be close at hand or on the opposite side of the world. With telephone and email access, we can connect with friends who live hundreds, or even thousands, of miles away. A great advantage of email over face-to-face conversations is that it forces you to write down your problem. Sometimes this can help clarify the issues in your own mind. Using email to "talk" through my feelings with a couple of trusted friends was a great help to me during a period of personal turmoil. I could read and re-read my friends' wise responses whenever I needed to be reminded that I wasn't on my own. With friends who are nearby, it's a good idea to do fun things together and not spend all your time talking about your difficulties. This will remind you there is life outside your current situation that you can be part of. Through time, you might want to form or develop a particular interest or hobby, with or without a friend, which will help you to focus on something other than your problems. You'll be amazed at how this can bring a sense of normalcy to your life.

5. Choose to build structure into your day. When you go through a period of discouragement, it's a very natural response to let things slide. Some people neglect their appearance, or turn to the wrong kind of food for comfort. Others feel they don't have the energy to get out of bed in the morning and have no desire to face a new day dominated by the same old problems. While it's not a good idea to be too tough on ourselves at times like this, we need to recognize that maintaining some sort of routine each day helps to bring perspective to what's going on around us. Even if it's just keeping to regular meal times or walking the dog at set times throughout the day, I've found there's something about "going through the motions" of a familiar task that helps to keep us on track, even if we might not feel particularly enthusiastic about what we're doing.

6. Choose to rejoice in the Lord. The Old Testament prophet, Habakkuk, talks about the worst case scenario befalling an agricultural economy (Habakkuk 3:17) and then goes on to say in the next verse, "yet I will rejoice in the LORD! I will be joyful in God my Saviour." Notice he says that he *will* rejoice and he *will* be joyful. He doesn't say that he *feels* like rejoicing or being joyful! By a set of his will, he determines how he is going to respond. He recognizes he has a choice. He could focus on a disastrous outcome and be thoroughly miserable, or he could choose to rejoice and be joyful. What an encouragement to know that we can choose our response to bad circumstances in our lives! But Habakkuk doesn't leave it there. He makes it clear that his rejoicing will be "in the LORD" and he will be joyful "in God (his) Saviour". Making the decision to be joyful in the face of adversity is not enough. But when we get into the habit of focusing on God by celebrating His character and believing the many promises found in His Word, then we are able to rejoice in Him.

Why not give these six suggestions a try and defeat discouragement?