

Equipped to defeat discouragement

When was the last time you felt discouraged? Perhaps you're discouraged or disheartened right now because you've experienced one disappointment after another and your confidence and enthusiasm are at an all-time low. Maybe events haven't quite turned out the way you expected and they seem to have taken the heart out of you. At times like this, what can you do? I'd like to share with you three things I'm learning about discouragement.

1. I need to check my thinking. Many of the problems we experience in life can be traced back to the way we think. When life takes a down-turn, our thought life is often the first thing to get out of kilter and, before we know it, we've fallen into patterns of faulty thinking. An example is when we assume things are true when they're not. Perhaps you've found yourself saying, *"God doesn't care; I think He might have abandoned me."* We know this is faulty thinking because it cuts across what we read in God's word, the bible. For example, He tells those who belong to Him that He loves us with an everlasting love;¹ He promises He will never leave us or forsake us;² and nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ.³ We need to reject the lies that come from faulty thinking, replacing them with the truth of what God has said.

2. I need to restrict my hearing. In other words, I need to be selective regarding the voices I listen to. Psychological studies have demonstrated that humans are very susceptible to what other people say. We tend to be influenced to a greater extent by negative words than positive words. It's reckoned that one negative comment can wipe out the positive effects of three or four encouraging ones. In Mark 5, Jairus begged Jesus to come to his house because his young daughter was terminally ill. On the way there, someone gave the unwelcome news that the girl was dead so there was no point in involving Jesus any more. Jairus chose to filter out this information and believe Jesus. When they arrived at the house, Jesus put the mocking mourners out of earshot. Lesson? Let's choose to listen to God rather than the negative reactions of people around us.

We all know people who would cheer us on, but there are way too many others whose negative remarks need to be tuned out. I'm not talking about people who, for our own good, are prepared to tell us things we'd rather not hear. Rather, I'm referring to those whose mission in life seems to be to put a damper on other people's enthusiasm. Who are you listening to?

3. I need to expand my vision. Another way of saying this is that I need to focus, or perhaps refocus, on the big eternal picture. It's so easy to zero in on things we're currently involved in, whether it's bringing up our kids, working at a difficult relationship, or trying to make a success of a new job or ministry opportunity. These can become all-consuming of our time and attention with the result that other issues get sidelined. As such, it's the easiest thing in the world to get discouraged when what we've been focusing on doesn't deliver in the way we would like.

If I work too long at my computer my eyes begin to get tired. I find it helps to take my gaze off the screen for a few moments and look at something outside my study window. This literal shift in focus from what's right in front of my nose to what's going on further away brings a much-needed change in perspective. The same principle operates as far as discouragement is concerned. When we focus on what lies ahead in eternity, the temporal things that have been dominating our vision and sapping our energy tend to lose their tyrannical grip. The New Testament book of Hebrews exhorts us to keep our eyes on Jesus and we will then be able to *"run with endurance the race that God has set before us"*.⁴ Are you keeping your eyes on Him? Am I?

There is an apocryphal story about the devil owning the tool of discouragement which ends with him saying this:

"I can pry open and get inside a person's heart with (discouragement) when I cannot get near him with any other tool. Once I get inside, I can use him in whatever way suits me best. It is well worn because I use it on everybody I can, and few people even know it belongs to me" (source unknown).

Food for thought, huh?

¹ Jeremiah 31:3

² Hebrews 13:5

³ Romans 8:39

⁴ Hebrews 12:1, 2