

Study 3 : Discouragement & Doubt

Opening discussion

Are you a natural optimist (glass half full) or pessimist (glass half empty) kind of person, and what would you say are the main reasons for taking this position?

Key Passage

Read Romans 8:38-39 (Paul stresses that nothing in life's path, from beginning to end, can separate us from Christ's love).

"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Question

How easy is it to become discouraged in your daily life, and do you have examples you could share?

Experiencing discouragement

Each of us is unique. Although there are common situations that happen to us and others that can discourage faith, there are specific triggers that can be a cause for particular individuals (as answers to the above question might well have brought out). In this study we look at a few that are perhaps more universal and affect a range of characters in the Bible.



The incredulity of Thomas - unknown artist, c1504

Read Numbers 21:4-9 - Here one could say that impatience and dismay are the cause of the people's discouragement, and they compound the problem by complaining bitterly, both about Moses and God - which, at least initially, only adds to their troubles.

Read Jeremiah 30:8-10 - It is easy to imagine the discouragement of a people exiled to a foreign land, and that was the experience of the Israelites on several occasions. Easy to forget your God, become hard-hearted or simply filled with despair. But God does not abandon his people, saying "I am with you and will save you!"

Read 2 Corinthians 1:8-9 - Paul explains that the believers in Asia were despairing of life itself because of all that they had endured. It is a deep weariness over their lot in life that caused such discouragement. Fortunately they were able to call upon their strong reserves of faith.

Question

Weariness, fear, dismay, impatience and anger with God – Can you add to the list of possible causes of discouragement in our journeys of faith?

Dealing with discouragement

Most people seem to have coping mechanisms which kick in when they are out of their comfort zone. It might be the forced smile which suggests that all is well, a retreat to a quiet corner away from the cause of a problem, asking for help, standing firm but resolute, or confronting whatever is happening with growing anger and strong language. We are all different!

Read 1 Samuel 17:32-37 – Sometimes our help comes from unlikely places and trust in the most unlikely of people.

Read 2 Timothy 4:5 – Sometimes it just means getting on with the task before us, head down and walking into whatever storms are brewing.

Read 1 Chronicles 22:12,13 – At other times we might trust our own common sense and wisdom to help us make the correct choices, based upon our understanding of God's Word.

Question

Have you seen, or do you use 'coping mechanisms' and do they help?

With God's help

It might seem obvious that a believer when faced with a situation that causes distress or great discouragement might naturally turn to God for help. However, that isn't always the case, as many Christians would no doubt admit. There is often a natural inclination to try and sort things out ourselves before turning to God.

Read Romans 8:35-39 – Paul reminds us in this most powerful passage that nothing is beyond the power of God, "No, in all these things we are conquerors through him who loved us."

Read Isaiah 40:29-30 – As if Paul's words were not enough, the prophet Isaiah tells us that the weary and tired find strength and renewed power through faith in God.

Read John 16:33 – And Jesus himself gives us encouragement that although trouble might come, there is nothing that this world can throw at us that he has not already overcome.

Read 2 Chronicles 20:15-17 – Through the mouth of a young and little known Jahaziel comes the answer to Jehoshaphat's complaint to God that He is allowing the nations to gather against His people. "Do not be afraid...for the battle is not yours, but God's... Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Go out and face them tomorrow, and the Lord will be with you."

Question

Can there be positives gained from facing up to and dealing with discouragement, when it interrupts our daily walk of faith?

Are there some battles that are indeed best left for God to deal with?

Food for thought:

*"Depression begins with disappointment. When disappointment festers in our soul, it leads to discouragement."
(Joyce Meyer)*

"The Christian life is not a constant high. I have my moments of deep discouragement. I have to go to God in prayer with tears in my eyes, and say, 'O God, forgive me,' or 'Help me.'" (Billy Graham)

The experience of doubt

From a Biblical perspective we might say that doubt first raised its head in the Garden of Eden with that infamous phrase, “Did God really say?”

‘Now the snake was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, ‘Did God really say, “You must not eat from any tree in the garden”?’ (Genesis 3:1)

It is a subtle question, inferring that God might be keeping something potentially beautiful from them. As this is not a very loving thing to do, there must be some mistake. Just one tree in such a beautiful garden with a prohibition notice on it seemed unreasonable when the fruit tasted so good and was a source of wisdom.

Question

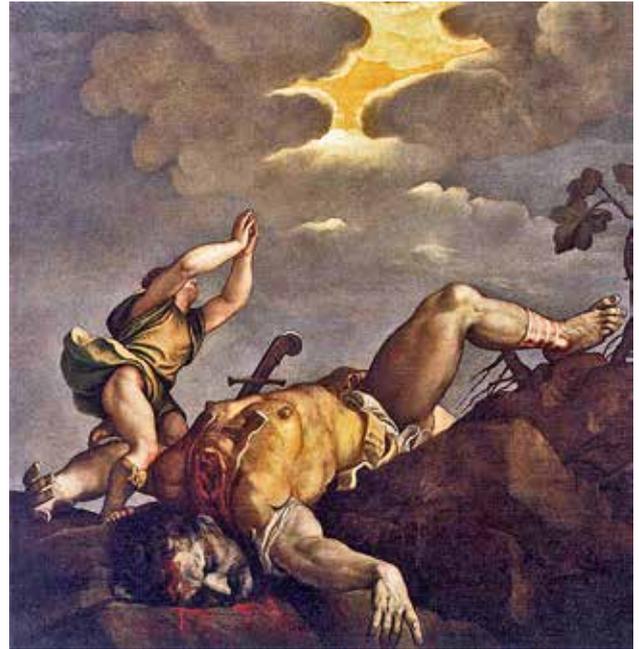
Questioning the actual meaning of what God, Jesus, the Prophets or Apostles said has been a part of Church history since its beginnings. Are we any better than Adam and Eve?

Read 1 Samuel 17:10-11 – When Saul and the Israelites prepared for battle against Philistines, they imagined a fair fight with themselves as victors. But then Goliath appeared and tipped the balance against them. Defeat this one man, local hero against muscle-bound giant, and the battle is won. Lose and the people are enslaved. Fear and dismay are all they feel!

Then David steps forward, and despite fears he wouldn’t stand a chance, the outcome surprises everyone (other than David) who doesn’t have their doubts about God’s power with him.

“The Lord who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine.’

Saul said to David, ‘Go, and the Lord be with you.’” (1 Samuel 17:37)



David & Goliath by Titian b. 1542-44

The apostle Peter had a serious moment of doubt when sailing with his friends after the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus was on land, the wind increased and the boat was struggling to make progress. They see what seems to be Jesus walking toward them on the water. “If it’s you,” says Peter, “Tell me to come to you on the water!”

And that’s where Peter’s faith wavers, as Jesus calls his bluff. Feeling the wind and seeing the waves, Peter is suddenly frightened and starts sinking.

“Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. ‘You of little faith,’ he said, ‘why did you doubt?’” (Matthew 14:31)

Question

How have periods of doubt you have experienced related to the size of the challenge faced?

Dealing with doubt

Read Genesis 18:10-14

Sometimes we can be guilty of underestimating the power of God in our lives. Sarah was accused of laughing at the sheer improbability of conceiving a child when both she and her husband Abraham were so old. God took that laugh to mean that in her mind there were limits to the power of God, and responds with the question, "Is anything too hard for the LORD?"

Question

How easy is it to limit the power of God, in our minds at least?

Read 2 Timothy 3:14-17

Paul has many words of encouragement to the churches which he has founded and nurtured, but for any who are experiencing doubts these verses seem very good advice. He encourages Timothy and all who read these words to remember the Holy Scriptures they were brought up on, the people from whom their teaching came, and how those words have been proven to be true in their own experience.

Hold onto that knowledge, he implores. Remember that God's words have many uses – for teaching, correcting our mistakes and training us to live God's way. They are the building blocks of faith, the essential equipment and supplies for all God's servants.

Question

How important in your own journey of faith have been those who by their example and words demonstrated the truth of Paul's advice?



Saint Peter Attempting to Walk on Water, by François Boucher, 1766

Food for thought:

“In faith there is enough light for those who want to believe and enough shadows to blind those who don't” (Blaise Pascal)

“It is not as a child that I believe and confess Jesus Christ. My hosanna is born of a furnace of doubt.” (Fyodor Dostoyevski)

“Doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith.” (Paul Tillich)

“Faith is the refusal to panic.” (David Martyn Lloyd-Jones)