Don’t Be discouraged!

Discouragement is one of the most troubling problems Christians encounter. It strikes without warning, like a bone-chilling cold, paralyzing us.

On Sabbath you come to church in dress clothes and wear your smile. The sun is shining. You look around and think. No one is discouraged here! Actually, church may be the last place you'd know if someone is discouraged. We try to avoid showing anything is wrong; it doesn't look "Christian."

Discouragement is one of Satan's favorite tools to keep us to ourselves, thus separating us from the body of believers. Once separated, we are vulnerable and weak; we are easy prey for more of the Enemy's tactics.

Elijah, a great prophet of God, became discouraged. In his story, we see three elements of discouragement and three steps to defeat it. First, let's look at the background in 1 Kings 17, 18, and 19.

**Riding High**

Elijah was riding high in his ministry. Because of King Ahab's sin in worshipping Baal, Elijah proclaimed there would be no rain in Israel until he asked for it. Sure enough, a drought began.

God provided for His servant during this time of drought. He sent Elijah across the Jordan River to the desert, where he was fed by ravens morning and evening and drank from the brook.

When the brook dried up. God told Elijah of a widow who would take care of him. While others ran out of food. God miraculously replenished her oil and flour.
But God didn't just provide for Elijah's needs; He used Elijah to perform His miracles. When the widow's son died, Elijah stretched himself out on the boy three times and prayed to God. God restored the boy to life.

Then came Elijah's incredible challenge to the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. Elijah challenged them to a duel: his God (Yahweh) against their god (Baal). Elijah's challenge was bold and fall of sarcastic humor.

Baal's prophets were to ask Baal to send fire to consume a sacrifice. When nothing happened, Elijah asked the prophets of Baal if their god was sleeping. Maybe he had America Online and the lines were tied up, or he forgot to check his voice mail. Or maybe the prophets of Baal couldn't find his Web page. (This cyberspace translation hasn't been published yet!)

Then Elijah's turn came. He prayed a simple prayer to God, asking Him to reveal Himself to the people. In response, God completely consumed Elijah's offering. Elijah ordered the slaughter of the prophets of Baal to complete the victory.

After this, the Spirit of God came on Elijah. He took off down the north side of Mt. Carmel, outran a horse and chariot all the way over to Jezreel. Then it started to rain.

What an incredibly exciting time for Elijah! God was using him in tremendous ways. He was at the top of his game. It was a "What are you going to do now? Go to Disneyland?" moment.

But then Elijah came crashing down. He got word that Ahab had told his wife, Jezebel, that Elijah had killed the prophets of Baal. Jezebel, a conniving control freak, informed Elijah he had less than a day to live.
It was from the top of the mountain back to the desert for Elijah, from the top of his game to the pits of despair, from the fear of God to the fear of Jezebel.

What happened?

**Loss of Vision and Purpose**

Elijah would never have become afraid had he not lost his vision and purpose. Forgetting God had burned the sacrifice when he prayed, forgetting the drought had begun and ended, he felt alone and afraid. When you lose your vision and purpose, fumbling and stumbling begin.

Usually, such disorientation is temporary; we get up and dust ourselves off. But continued stumbling and fumbling inevitably bring discouragement.

I see this principle at work in the church when people's visions and dreams fail to materialize. People become discouraged, and are sometimes angry and frustrated, when their goals are blocked by others with different dreams and agendas.

If our success depends on everyone, our visions are in everyone's control. We are bound to become frustrated and discouraged. Have you seen people discouraged with their church when their visions and dreams fail to materialize? It usually starts with a statement like "I want our church to be more spiritual, more loving, more dedicated, more committed, more evangelistic" (whatever is seen as deficient). These are good, legitimate desires, but they make poor goals.

Visions and goals for churches are necessary, but they must be applied personally. If my desire is for the church to be more loving, the change begins with me! There is no reason to wait for others to
be more loving. If I am more loving, the church is more loving! If my goals bring change in me, I am a success! Visions that wait for the cooperation and participation of everyone are doomed to failure.

Pastors constantly flirt with discouragement, trying to capture a vision for the whole church, trying to get everybody on board before they go for it. Some visions almost demand that. But if they or we wait for all to get aboard for every project, the train will never leave the station. The train will leave for one person with a ticket if the destination agrees with Scripture and God's will.

Discouraged people who have lost their vision have no clear direction, no clear mandate for progress. This condition leads to the second element.

**Focus on Self**

When discouraged people have no vision, it's time for a pity party! Look at Elijah's statements: "I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. ... I am the only [prophet] left, and now they are trying to kill me too" (19:14).

Elijah's entire focus is on self. Discouraged people can't see past themselves. They make a lot of "I,"me," and "my" statements: "It doesn't meet my needs! It isn't the direction I want to go. I would have done it differently!"

We are seeing the "Oprah-tization" of America: "I am not responsible; I am a victim of something or someone." Elijah traveled the same road. He was saying, "It must be genetic! I am a victim." A person in this state is without hope. He has no idea where he's going. This state leads to the final element of discouragement.
Loss of Power

Elijah ran off alone into the desert after Jezebel threatened his life. This great man, an instrument in all those miraculous events, was exhausted. Spiritually or physically? Was it because he ran all that way to Jezreel?

Elijah had incredible power available to him. Not long after he ran to the desert, Elijah destroyed one hundred men and two captains just by saying the words (2 Kings 1:10,12). God was with him. The power didn't go anywhere. God didn't move; Elijah was the one who ran away. He denied the power when he focused on himself and gave in to fear.

Discouraged people often abandon the power all believers have through the Holy Spirit: an awesome relationship with a holy God. They lose power by forgetting who they are in Christ and what is available to them. They fail to recognize the strength and power of associating with even a few of God's people.

Good news! There is no need to remain discouraged, paralyzed, and isolated. Three steps will defeat these elements of discouragement.

Refocus Our Vision

The Lord asked, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (v.13). I would have loved to hear the voice inflection in that question! It would have revealed much. After Elijah explained his discouragement and fear. God said, "Go back the way you came..." (v. 15). Hiding in a cave was not what God had in mind for His prophet. God immediately refocused Elijah's vision. He told Elijah to go here and do this; get to it!
People without a vision are prime targets for discouragement, because they do nothing and go nowhere. We must recapture God's vision: where God wants us, what God wants us to do. Then we should ask Him, "Lord, give me a passion for the task!!"

**Reestablish Our Perspective**

While Elijah was in the cave, God let him know He was about to pass by. He sent an earthquake, a great wind, a fire; but God wasn't in these. Then Elijah heard a still, small voice. Time to listen, Elijah!

This prophet was still in his pity party, wanting to talk about being the only one left. But God set the record straight: "You're not the only one who loves Me. Seven thousand others haven't bowed their knees to Baal nor kissed him" (see v. 18). Elijah's work didn't depend on those seven thousand others; it depended on the power of God.

When we feel discouraged, it's time to change perspective, to get rid of the "Woe is me. . boy, things are bad...I am a victim...this really hurts" way of looking at things. Instead, we need to concentrate on our awesome God, on how powerful He is. We need to realize this truth: "I am not as important as my response to this situation."

When we do this, the situation doesn't look so bad! God's perspective is that our trials test our faith in Him and develop perseverance (James 1:2-4). We need to reestablish our perspective and temper it with God's perspective on our situation.

**Reconnect with the Holy Spirit**

Elijah was reinvigorated, reconnected with the power of God. He knew three important things to do: anoint two kings and prophet
(see 1 Kings 19:15,16). Elijah understood his place in the scheme of things.

That power is available to us today. Children of God don't have to hide in a cave! Paul says, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:13).

Paul says elsewhere:
In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 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 (Romans 8:37-39).

This isn't a picture of a Christian hiding in a cave! It is someone justified by the grace of God, filled with the love of God, and enabled with the power of the Spirit to conquer all things.

Where Are You?

Are you discouraged, hiding in a cave? If you have allowed frustration to separate you from God's people, if you feel weak and helpless, come out and listen! It may be noisy for awhile, but things will quiet down. You'll find that God still has work for you to do.

Refocus your vision, replace your perspective with God's perspective, reconnect with the power of the Holy Spirit, and do whatever God has planned for you!