

“Dealing with discouragement”

how to keep going when doubt, or depression, or temptation strikes

The four central 10-min sections of the study:

Battling with doubt (seeing doubt as an opportunity to grow, not a reason to panic)

Battling with depression (trusting God even when you can't see him)

Battling with temptation (ways of defeating the devil's lies and finding the “way of escape” God promises)

Battling with disillusionment (you can be honestly angry with God, but you shouldn't stay that way)



Intro (10 min) : As last time, the leader

- introduces the title of the workshop,
- tells the keynote story (it's in “Resources” at the end of these notes),
- then reads the first key verse (Haggai 2:4) and plays Audio Clip 1. If you choose not to use the audio, and would rather do your own introduction, you should make these points:

- What God is doing may not look all that great. Haggai's people were becoming discouraged because they had dreamed of greater, more powerful progress, and a much bigger building! But often God's most significant operations begin in very small ways. We have to be patient and realize that the Lord Jesus can do a lot with very little... like feeding 5000 people with a few loaves and fish...

- God gives Haggai two bits of advice to deliver: *be strong* and *work*. Both of these things are important. Your attitude needs to be right (“be strong”), and you need to put your confidence into practical action too (“work”).

- And finally God gives them an important fact to bear in mind, a promise that won't let them down: remember that *I am with you*. This is important for us to remember too. If you don't keep that in the forefront of your thinking, discouragement will overwhelm you sooner or later.

This session will look briefly at four ways in which discouragement can strike...



The first danger: discouragement through doubt (10 min)

In pairs, or small groups, discuss:

- (a) What are the most difficult questions you have to face, in believing the Christian story is true? (*Perhaps make a list, and compare everyone's lists to see how many questions you've come up with? You'll probably find there's lots of repetition – the great student evangelist Paul Little observed that there were only seven or eight basic objections that people make to Christianity – it's the devil who tries to convince us that there are thousands!*)

- (b) When are you most likely to doubt your faith? *(It's important to see that we're not totally rational beings, calculating machines on legs; we're influenced by our emotions, by physical tiredness, by upsetting events, and lots of other experiences that cloud our judgment. We need to recognize that doubt is not just a logical experience: sometimes when it hits us most powerfully, it's at its most illogical!)*

Check what people have come up with. Then as a whole group, discuss these two questions:

- (a) Is doubt wrong? *(The answer should be No – it's normal for human beings to look at both sides of a question, and people who never doubt that they are right can be very scary people! Doubt can be an opportunity to explore new questions you haven't thought through yet, and so strengthen your faith. The opposite of **faith** is not **doubt**, but **unbelief** – sheer refusal to credit that what God says is true. Doubt, as Os Guinness put it, is just "faith in two minds". God doesn't condemn those who have doubts; in fact he commands us to "show mercy to those who doubt" – Jude 22.)*
- (b) What do you do with doubts? *(The wrong thing to do is the instinctive thing: just to repress your worrying thoughts and hope they will go away! That's dishonest, and the doubts will only grow bigger and bigger. The best thing to do is to treat doubts as an opportunity, not a problem – to take them out into the open and look at them closely – to see what answers you can find from other people, or from books. And of course it's important not to panic, but to keep going calmly while you investigate. Don't stop talking to God but keep on living as if it's all true – and then you will find it is.)*



The second danger: discouragement through depression (10 min)

In our "Living with thorns" series recently, we've done some thinking about depression. See what people can remember... Then read together 1 Kings 19:3-5.

1. Elijah has suddenly become depressed after one of the greatest triumphs of his life. Does that surprise you? Why?
2. "Elijah was afraid" – and so he did several stupid things (vv 3-4). Which exactly? *(What we're thinking of: he ran away from the problem, instead of facing it; he shut himself off from other people; he decided his life was over.)*
3. Elijah says, "I am no better than my ancestors." Does that tell you anything about the wrong thinking that had led to his depression? Can we sometimes fall into similar traps? *(What we're thinking of: much of Elijah's motivation in serving God had been personal ambition – becoming the greatest figure in his own family's history! When our motives are self-interested, we're vulnerable when things take an unexpected direction; rather than letting God do things his way, we become upset that things aren't going as we dreamed they should.)*

Leader: after this discussion, please summarise the rest of the story! God actually has more resources than Elijah imagines (19:18) – Elijah has been making himself depressed by assuming he is indispensable (19:10 and 19:14). But God won't speak to Elijah again until he has had enough rest,

food and exercise (19:7-9) – and when he does, it’s not as Elijah expects: no dramatic wind, earthquake or fire experiences – just a “gentle whisper” that Elijah would previously have missed.

Ask the group: how does this echo our own experiences of depression?



The third danger: discouragement through temptation (10 min)

Now turn to 1 Corinthians 10:12-13.

1. Is it wrong to think you’re standing firm (v 12)? How could that result in a fall? *(Answer: No, it’s not wrong to be confident in your relationship with God – but we always have to be watchful and aware of our weakness (1 Peter 5:8). Confidence isn’t wrong; complacency is.)*
2. Why is it important to realize that none of our temptations are unique (v 13)? *(Answer: because the devil does his best to make us feel isolated, defenceless, special weak cases who will always be defeated while other Christians don’t suffer the same strong evil impulses. But others have been in the same situation we’re facing, millions of times.)*
3. God makes two promises in the rest of verse 13. What are they? *(First, that he won’t allow us to be tempted beyond the level of our powers of resistance; second, that there will always be a way of escape provided for us – we don’t have to give in.)*



The fourth danger: discouragement through disillusionment (10 min)

Ask people to share: what have been your greatest experiences of *disillusionment* in your life?

Have any of those been connected to your faith – disillusionment with other Christians, or with how God seems to be acting, or with something for which you had great hopes only to be disappointed? How did you react to the feelings you had? Was it a wise reaction or an unhelpful one? (There’s a sheet you can use in the “Resources” section, if you wish.)

Then make a list together of *why* Christians can become disillusioned...

(For example, you might put down: we always expect God to do things for us right away; we think other people are wonderful, and then they let us down; we have set ideas about how God is going to bless us; we have a chapter of accidents, one after another, and find it hard not to feel God is punishing us unfairly; we hold certain ideas strongly, then suddenly find they’re wrong, and start doubting everything... etc.)

Finally, look at Daniel 10:12-14. Daniel, whose people are still captives in a foreign land, has been praying desperately for three weeks, with no apparent answer from God (see vv. 2-3). Suddenly God’s angel appears to him... and says these words. Do they tell us anything that might help us, when we’re tempted to feel God isn’t really interested in us?



Wrap-up (10 min): The leader reads the second keynote verse (James 1:12) and plays the second audio clip. If not showing the video, please make these three points in closing:

- James 1:12 makes it clear that *if we're Christians, we'll be tested and tempted*. God doesn't tempt anyone (v 14), but he does allow us to be tested – not because he's hoping we will fail, but because he can use that experience to strengthen our faith and deepen our wisdom. It happens to everybody. No exceptions. So we need to be prepared, and expect it to happen!

- But the verse also says that *if we love Jesus, we'll persevere*. It's possible not to cave in! In fact, if we don't, we're "blessed" – i.e. in a *very fortunate position*. It doesn't always feel like that when we're under pressure to throw in the towel, but to keep on going means that we win through in the end to God's blessing. And what sort of people *can* persevere? "Those who love him". When God wins the battle for our heart and our affections, *we* start to win the battle with discouragement.
- Finally, this verse promises that *if we keep going to the end, we'll be rewarded*. For those who love him, God has a "crown of life" waiting. The word "crown" is *stephanos*, which properly means "a badge of royalty, a prize in the public games, or a symbol of honour generally" (Strong). In other words it's all about *recognition* – God will not allow our trials to go unnoticed, our struggles with temptation to be unrewarded. We aren't on our own in those difficult times; he's there; he knows what we're enduring, and we'll be honoured for it in his presence.

Resources

The keynote story.

Hjalmer Berg and his wife Virginia were freelance travelling evangelists in Florida. When Virginia became pregnant, they became convinced that God had told them their baby son would become one of the most important and powerful Christian leaders of his lifetime.

Unwisely, as the boy grew up, Virginia told him all about their expectations. And David Berg began to believe he was destined for greatness. After college, he signed up eagerly to work alongside an older evangelist, and waited for the recognition to start.

It didn't come. And Berg became convinced he was being held back by the jealousy of the older man, and the sterility of the churches he was working with. And so - secretly at first - he began his own movement of young people, eventually taking them away from the group he was supposed to be working for, and becoming independent.

Now, at last, he hit the headlines. For these were the days of the "Jesus Revolution", when hippies all over America were turning to Christ in large numbers, and Berg found himself at the forefront of a new, extreme group of untaught disciples, who looked to him for their leadership and unquestioningly did whatever he said.

At first his group, the "Children of God", worked closely with all the other churches. But soon Berg was frustrated by their unwillingness to recognize his greatness, and so secretly the group developed the idea that God had rejected all the other churches, leaving only the Children of God as the one true church in the world. When eventually Berg's supporting churches discovered what they really believed, they recoiled horrified from the Children of God. But it was too late: many of their best young people had been sucked into Berg's movement, which under his unquestioned leadership soon drifted further and further from biblical values.

Today the Children of God are known for their brainwashing techniques, their involvement in prostitution as a means of recruitment, their history of sexual abuse of children, and their fascination with occultism. They have been banned in many countries. But although Berg himself died in 1994, the group continues down its unhealthy path. As recently as 2005, Berg's stepson - brought up and sexually abused in the cult for years - murdered his mother as an act of revenge, then killed himself.

And all of this misery came about because one ambitious boy became discouraged that God wasn't doing what the boy thought he should.

When I've been disillusioned...

where has it come from?

Things that have happened that have
disappointed me?

Other people
who let me down

Expectations that just
didn't materialize

Bible promises that
didn't happen for me

Anything else?:

