

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## Lessons from History: Dealing with discouragement

Human lives are like snowflakes. They are very delicate and transient, and each one is unique. Lying behind the individuality of each snowflake are common patterns and symmetries which many, or even all, share. Likewise, there are elements in our unique lives which are common to all of us. One of these is discouragement. Every human being has felt that disappointed, pressed down, "Why bother any more?" sensation of being discouraged. The Bible has many examples, and today we will look at the incident of Joshua's twelve spies, and see what lessons we can learn for dealing with our own discouragements.

You probably know the story well. Israel have left slavery in Egypt and crossed the Red Sea (Exodus 14) and the desert. They have had recent, startling experiences of God's power and goodness, but they are also in completely unknown territory, and finding themselves facing new challenges and dangers every day. Now they are on the brink of the land God has promised them and 12 spies, one from each tribe, have been sent into the land to scout it out. (Numbers 13:1-24) There are no mobile phones or e-mail systems, so the people have to wait for the return of the spies to get their report.

After 40 days of tense waiting (Numbers 13:25), the spies finally return and everyone is on tenterhooks to hear what they have to say. Let me read you the transcript of their report from Numbers 13 and 14. "We went to the land where you sent us. It truly flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. Nevertheless the people who dwell in the land are strong; the cities are fortified and very large; moreover we saw the descendants of Anak there. The Amalekites dwell in the land of the South; the Hittites, the Jebusites and the Amorites dwell in the mountains; and the Canaanites dwell by the sea and along the banks of the Jordan.' Then Caleb quieted the people before Moses, and said, 'Let us go up at once and take possession, for we are well able to overcome it.' But the men who had gone up with him said, 'We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we.' And they gave the children of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out, saying, 'The land through which we have gone as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great stature. There we saw the giants (the descendants of Anak came from the giants); and we were like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight.' So all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night. And all the people of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron, and the whole congregation said to them, 'If only we had died in the Land of Egypt! Or if only we had died in this wilderness! Why has the LORD brought us to this land to fall by the sword, that our wives and children should become victims? Would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?' So they said to one another, 'Let us select a leader and return to Egypt'" (Numbers 13:27-14:4).

### Discouragement Dissected

Let's work through this classic tale of discouragement and see what we can learn.

#### A brief look at the bright side ... then turn away

Things start so well. The spies report that God's glowing description of the land as, "flowing with milk and honey" (see Exodus 3:8), is entirely accurate (Numbers 13:27). Moreover they hold up an astonishingly large cluster of grapes as evidence (Numbers 13:26). In a time before photographs, this was perfect confirmation of what they were saying. Nobody can argue with a bunch of grapes that is so large it takes two men to carry it! It is one of the ironies of discouragement that it often follows hard on the heels of something positive. When we are feeling discouraged we quickly dismiss the positive, and concentrate on the downside.

This is just what the Israelites do. Having started with the good news, it is downhill all the way from here, and the wonderful fruitfulness of the land is never mentioned again.

#### Focus on the difficulties

Once we have dismissed the positive, we are free to focus on the negative. This is how discouragement takes hold and starts to drag us down. Having quickly dismissed the good nature of the land, they move on to the problems they have seen. Not only are there people in the land that they will have to displace, these people are **strong**. There are not just cities to fight against; they are "fortified and very large" (Numbers 13:28). In fact, some of those strong people are descended from giants. In case their hearers thought that only some regions of the land were well defended, they

carefully detail the different nations that inhabit each sector. In short, they focus on the difficulties. We all know what this is like. When we are feeling low, everything positive feels somehow remote and inaccessible, and all the problems we face are only too real, imminent and seemingly insurmountable. Once we have focussed on the difficulties we are quickly weighed down and disheartened. This is just what happened to the Israelites.

This doesn't mean we must refuse to face reality. Reality includes positives **and** negatives. Focussing purely on the negatives is as much a failure to face reality as focussing only on the positives would be.

### **Immune to encouragement**

Of course, not all of the twelve spies share the same gloomy outlook. Joshua and Caleb were two of the twelve, and they had their own 'minority report' (Numbers 14:6-9). The murmuring had already begun, and Caleb had to quieten the people down before he could begin to explain his simple campaign strategy, "Let us go up at once and take possession, for we are well able to overcome it" (Numbers 13:30) Short and to the point!

I am always fascinated in how several people can see the same event or location and bring back totally different accounts. So it is here. All twelve spies see exactly the same country, people and cities; but ten men return discouraged, and discouraging, and two are enthused, and ready to start the military campaign today! There was no difference in the facts between the two reports, but the conclusions are totally opposed. Ten said, "No chance, let's not even think about it!" Two concluded, "No problem, let's get on with it!" However, discouragement is not always easily shifted by simple exhortation, and so it proves here. The ten are not about to change their story.

### **Magnify the difficulties**

One of the problems with focussing on difficulties is that it usually has the effect of magnifying them. The sun is significantly larger than a ten pence piece! If you could put a ten pence piece on the sun it would not even begin to cover it. However, if I close one eye, and put a ten pence piece right up to the other eye, I can completely obscure the sun from view. From my viewpoint, the sun is very effectively covered. In the same way, focussing completely on problems is a very good way to get them out of proportion.

At first the ten spies simply contradict Caleb's assertion that they can defeat the inhabitants of the land. Then they go further and start to defame the land that God has promised to give them. They declare it to be "a land that devours its inhabitants" (Numbers 13:32). Now they think about it again, the people are not just strong with a few giants but they are **all** men of great stature and the giants are so big that the spies were just insects in comparison! So the problems are magnified and the positives run down.

### **Ignore the resources of God**

We might think that the difference between the two groups of spies is just their natural temperament. Joshua and Caleb were simply born optimists and the others were naturally pessimistic. Simple as that. But the real difference is something that the ten do not see or mention, and that is the enormous resource they have in God. God has just shown spectacular signs in Egypt, opened the waters of the Red Sea and provided food and water in the wilderness. Besides this, it is God who has directed them to this land, and promised to give it to them. Joshua and Caleb saw the same giants and fortified cities as the others, and no doubt did not underestimate the challenge they presented. On the other hand, they also remembered the promises of God and the recent evidence of His willingness and ability to help, and were prepared to trust that He was stronger than giant men and giant walls!

### **Discouragement spreads like wildfire**

When we are discouraged we don't like to be the only ones. Discouragement is contagious. The discouraged like to tell other people how they are feeling, and their listeners quickly end up feeling as discouraged themselves. Things certainly spread like wildfire amongst the Israelites. What started with ten discouraged men, soon ended with, "all the congregation" weeping (Numbers 14:1). The discouraged tend to be very 'evangelical' about their sentiments. Although evangelical (a term based on the word for good news) is, perhaps, exactly the wrong description! They are so convinced that things are hopeless, that they won't rest until everybody agrees with them.

### **Wish you had never started (wallow in self pity)**

Now things are spiralling down, out of control. What began with worry about the next steps, and grew into a firm conviction that there was no possible way forward, now turns into a sinking feeling that they should never have started on this course in the first place. How often have we followed the same line of thinking?

We begin some work for Christ in high spirits and with good faith. Later on, we are faced with some setback and start to feel discouraged. As we brood over things, we start to think that the temporary setback is actually an insurmountable

obstacle. More than that, it is actually good evidence that we should never have begun this thing in the first place! How could we ever have been so foolish as to start out? This is the stage the people of Israel have now reached. "If only we had died in the Land of Egypt! Or if only we had died in this wilderness!" (Numbers 14:2) Self pity has taken over, to the point that they would rather be dead than where they are today. We might not indulge in such dramatic language (although some of us do), but we share the sentiments.

Of course, sometimes we **were** wrong to start something! We might have to reach that conclusion after a rational review of the facts, but we must not **start** with that conclusion, in a tide of self pity.

### **Blame God**

Their next step is to look around for somebody to blame, and to choose God as the culprit. "Why has the LORD brought us to this land to fall by the sword, that our wives and children should become victims?" (Numbers 14:3) In a terrible piece of irony, they refuse to follow God's instructions to take the land, and so doing, despise what He has promised them, yet they conclude that it is all God's fault! Presumably they have forgotten that a few months ago they were crying out to this same God to deliver them from the Egyptians. God assured them that He had seen, heard and known their situation, and that He had come down to deliver them. Now they ask, in effect, why He ever bothered; they were happier before He started! I will refrain from judging these people too harshly, because I am all too conscious of how often I blame God when things don't work out quite the way I planned. Didn't I start this work to serve Him? Doesn't God realise I am doing my best? What does He think He is playing at, letting things fall apart like this? I don't know why I ever bothered!

### **Idealise the non-existent 'good old days'**

The Israelites shared a common human tendency, in times of difficulty, to look back to the 'good old days'. Things are bad now, but back then, life was simple and life was good. In their case this is obviously a huge distortion of the facts. Life in Egypt had been miserable and brutal. They had longed to escape and be free, and pleaded with God to intervene for them. It was quite a feat of mental gymnastics to regard that time as the good old days! But then, things always look better viewed with hindsight. Today's pain and worry are vastly more real and urgent than yesterday's, and yesterday's pleasures are much less obscured than tomorrow's.

### **Make active plans to give it all up**

There is one final step for the people of Israel. They decide to give it all up and go back. "Let us select a leader and return to Egypt", they say (Numbers 14:4). God selected a leader for them to take them to Canaan (Exodus 3). Now they will choose their own leader to take them back to Egypt. How sad! Slavery looks preferable to the freedom that God has promised. But which of us, in our discouraged moments, hasn't looked around at non-Christians who seem to have happier, more successful lives than we do, and wondered why we don't just join them? "Give it all up!", "Forget the whole thing!" These are the cries of the discouraged.

### **Live with the consequences for a long time!**

Did I say that was the final step? Actually, I was slightly premature. There is one final, very depressing stage. They chose to give everything up and then had to live with the consequences for the rest of their lives (Numbers 14:26-40). Terrifyingly, when they told God that they didn't want to bother with His promised land, and would rather die in the wilderness (Numbers 14:4), He took them seriously, and that is exactly what happened! That whole generation, apart from Joshua and Caleb, trailed around in the wilderness for 40 years until they had all died. What a dreadful request to have answered!

Perhaps this is the ultimate example of what bad decisions we make when we are discouraged. It is also a solemn reminder that our decisions in life have long term consequences. God's grace may lift us out of our messes, but we pay a high price for foolish choices, and we make more foolish choices when we are discouraged.

### **Which kind of spy are you?**

Are you like Joshua and Caleb, or one of the ten? Here's my 'tongue in cheek' guide to being part of the 'discouraging majority'!

### **How to discourage others**

- **Always dwell on problems and failings.** Whether talking about your personal situation or that of your local church; always stress the negative - and call it realism. You will soon develop an Eeyore-like gloom that will spread to all those you meet!
- **Never bother to praise people.** After all, you might make them proud! God will reward them in the end - no need for you to say thank you now.

- **Never fail to point out people's mistakes.** It is always much easier to spot other people's mistake than your own. You can convince yourself that you are, "speaking the truth in love". The truth might be a bit skewed, and the love might be a bit lacking but **you** will feel better - temporarily!
- **Never offer to help.** Other people need to learn to stand on their own feet. They can't keep relying on you all the time. The fact that they never have been able to count on you, because you have never offered to help anybody, is beside the point!
- **Always play down any good news.** People are far too easily carried away by enthusiasm when good news comes along. Somebody needs to bring things back down to earth and avoid worldly levity, by pouring on a little cold water.

### Are the saints refreshed by you?

Paul says a very lovely thing about Philemon in Philemon 7. "The hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother." What a beautiful commendation! The character and behaviour of Philemon were such that, being with him was a refreshing, encouraging experience. I hope we all know Christians like that. People who seem to lift us up every time we meet them. More to the point, we ought to be those kinds of Christians ourselves.

Here's a healthier guide to joining Caleb and Joshua in the encouraging camp.

- **Be thankful to God, and sound like it.** Encouraging Christians are encouraged themselves because they are deeply thankful to God. They don't look back on a mythical, 'good old days' past, but remember the pit God took them out of, and regularly thank Him for doing so. They express this thankfulness aloud to others too.
- **Be thankful to others, and express it out loud.** They are not just thankful to God, but also to the people whom God uses to help them. They are happy to express that thankfulness out loud. Perhaps, like Paul, they might phrase it in ways that make clear that God lies behind the action. See Philippians 1:3-6 for an example.
- **Listen.** Encouraging people listen. Even Job's 'miserable comforters' were wise as long as they kept their mouths closed! Sometimes people just need their troubles listened to.
- **Find practical ways to help.** Sometimes positive words are **not** enough and we need to do something practical. 'Be clothed and fed', is not a sufficient response to the poor and hungry, and 'cheer up', is not a sufficient response to the discouraged.
- **Pray for people, and tell them you are doing it.** Paul was a master of this. He not only prayed for other Christians, he told them about it in his letters. They were therefore doubly blessed by his prayers. We certainly ought to pray for each other, and we would do well to follow Paul's example and tell others that we are praying for them.

### Final Thoughts

#### Accept that occasional discouragement is inevitable

Everybody is discouraged at times, and it is particularly hard when discouragement comes from within the family or within the church. When we are trying hard to serve Christ, and stepping out of our comfort zone to do so, a 'knock back' can really hurt. Don't be ashamed to be discouraged by such things.

#### Remember past blessings and evidences of God's faithfulness

Don't just remember for 10 seconds. Methodically replay particular events in your mind, so that you think through in detail how you felt before, and after, God's actions.

#### Refuse self pity

Let's be honest; we all like a bit of a 'pity party', but it is far easier to start one than to stop it. Be tough with yourself, and refuse the indulgence of starting.

#### Finally ... Focus on future hope

Christianity is **absolutely** for the here and now, but it is most fundamentally rooted in the future. Seeing Christ face to face, a new body, total absence of sin, heaven, joy with no pain mixed in; these are all still in the future. The present **may** just be unremittingly discouraging at the moment, but the future for a Christian is glorious and guaranteed by Christ Himself. Israel **did** enter their promised land, and so, we too will enter ours, one day!

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