

Friday, February 5, 2010 - Dealing with Obstacles in Life

In James 5:17 we are told that Elijah was just a man, "...subject to like passions as we are." He possessed the same human frailties and inclinations. He was a human being just like us. He was a man who faced great obstacles in life, and while he did not always deal with them correctly, we can learn a great deal from the guidance God provided him; and it is still applicable to us today.

1 Kings 18 shows us that Elijah stood up valiantly and courageously in a marvelous demonstration of what it means to defend God and His truth against overwhelming numbers. Ahab went home and told his wife, Jezebel, what Elijah had done to dispose of her false prophets, and she was so enraged that she put out a contract on his life and vowed he'd be dead within 24 hours. The news shook Elijah up so much that he headed straight out into the desert a day's journey, sat down under a desert shrub, and began to pray that God might take his life! What a change came over him! Rather than being the courageous, confident man he was on Mt. Carmel, now he is despondent, depressed and in the firm grip of his human vulnerabilities.

Notice in 1 Kings 19 the symptoms and sources of Elijah's despondency which were counterproductive to dealing effectively with the obstacles of life:

1. He was the recipient of criticism, even threats (vs. 2).

1.1. It is extremely discouraging to be attacked verbally by others. It can come from friends, acquaintances, strangers, or even our own physical or spiritual family members--close loved ones. The tongue is a "fire," "a restless evil, full of deadly poison" (James 3:6,8).

1.2. Elijah's reaction to the criticism that he received was typical.

1.2.1. He withdrew and backed away from his previously forthright behavior (vs. 3).

1.2.1.1. He retreated into inactivity. Earlier, he had confidently asserted that he would boldly meet Ahab face to face--and did so (1 Kings 18:15,17). But now he has given up. His strong and active stance for the Lord was effectively neutralized.

1.2.1.2. My friends, this is what Satan hopes to accomplish when the world attacks our defense of the gospel. He wants us to shut down and quit doing God's will.

1.2.2. He then withdrew from people. He left his servant behind (vs. 3) and went to a deserted, uninhabited location, ultimately spending the night in a cave (vs. 9).

1.2.2.1. How often, when things seemingly go against us do we immediately dismiss the strength and encouragement we could get from our brothers and sisters in Christ by avoiding them and allowing our attendance and participation in the Lord's worship to decline?

1.2.3. Avoidance of the obstacle is no solution. It only prolongs the agony and makes doing the right thing harder.

2. Elijah entertained the idea of an end to it all. Perhaps he was not suicidal, but he certainly wanted to be put out of his misery (vs. 4).

2.1. If he really wanted to end it all, Jezebel would have been happy to oblige him if he had just presented himself to her.

3. Another symptom of Elijah's predicament is seen in his self-pity. He felt sorry for himself and likened himself to his hapless predecessors (vs. 4).

3.1. Self-pity creates the illusion of humility and submissive resignation. In reality, self-pity is a selfish, self-centered, even self-righteous attitude. Twice Elijah boastfully reiterated how very zealous he had been for the Lord and that he was now all alone in the effort to please God (vs. 10,14).

3.2. We have too many brethren who swell up and pout because they perceive themselves as being ignored, dealt in a wrong fashion by others, etc.

3.3. We need to get over ourselves!

4. Notice that Elijah dealt with his depression by going to bed and sleeping (vs. 5).

4.1. Some people cope with life's difficulties by resorting to drugs or alcohol as an escape. They think by dulling their mental capacities or rendering themselves unconscious, they won't have to face the problem and deal with it.

5. A final aspect of Elijah's circumstances was his loss of appetite. An angel nearly had to force feed Elijah to keep his strength up (vs. 5-8).

So here was Elijah, facing his share of obstacles and hurdles in life. Can you identify with him? Have you ever felt overwhelmed and beat down by the hardships and traumas of this life? How can we deal responsibly with them? How should Christians behave when adversity strikes? How can we keep from going into psychological seclusion, alienation and spiritual neutrality? We've seen the sources and symptoms of Elijah's problems. What's the solution?

At least five answers lie in this very text of Scripture that we need to apply in our lives when faced with what we feel are overwhelming difficulties in our lives.

1. When Elijah retreated into a cave, we're told the Lord confronted him with the words, "What are you doing here?" (vs. 9).

1.1. There's the first solution to coping with life's obstacles: straight talk and direct confrontation. We need friends and loved ones to get right to the point, press us with reality, and shock us out of our inward preoccupation.

2. In order to successfully negotiate the obstacles of life we will have to face God.

2.1. Elijah was forced to experience God's presence in the form of a series of near encounters involving a strong wind, an earthquake, a fire, and suddenly the voice of God Himself (vs. 11-13).

2.2. The application for us is that we absolutely must hear the voice of God in Scripture. We must go to our Bibles often and quit relying upon our own thoughts and our own wisdom. The only way to lean on the Lord is to encounter Him in His word and saturate ourselves with His thoughts. His word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Ps. 119:105). Turn to the scriptures!

2.3. Consider the direction and hope we get from the following passages"

2.3.1. Ephesians 4:31 - Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be [put away] from you, with all malice:

2.3.2. Psalms 118:24 - This is the day which the LORD hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.

2.3.3 I Thessalonians 5:14-18 - Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all. See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

2.3.4. Colossians 4:6 - Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each person

2.3.5. Ephesians 4:29 - Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers.

2.3.6. Rom. 15:4 - For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope

3. An important key is for us to focus on others instead of ourselves (vs. 15-16).

3.1. Get back into the Lord's work and get busy.

3.2. Occupy your mind with thoughts of other people who need to be loved and served. (John 15:12-13,17).

4. Another great help in handling life's roadblocks is to make friends--comrades in the faith who will help us and support us even as we encourage them.

4.1. God wanted Elijah to enlist the aid of three individuals. These men would help Elijah in the task of eliminating idolatry and false religion. The Bible even says that one of these men, Elisha, "arose and followed Elijah, and served him" (vs. 21). Elijah

needed some friends, some fellow workers who were in there pulling in the same direction.

5. Finally, a great aid in overcoming life's obstacles is to realize that we are not alone.

5.1. Elijah was lonely; he felt all alone in his efforts to oppose false religion. He honestly thought he was about the only one left who was genuinely trying to live faithfully before God. But God set him straight on that point: Seven thousand remained who had not capitulated to the subversive trends (vs. 18).

5.2. So it is for us. There are other Christians who are facing similar obstacles in life. There are other Christians who are just as dedicated and determined to stay faithful and work for the Lord. We're not alone.

We have the decision to make in our lives as to whether we allow obstacles to manage us and how we live or are we going to manage them through lessons we learn from Elijah and others in the scriptures. As with all other aspects of our spiritual lives, the solutions are easy because God tells us how to handle all situations of life. The hard part is deciding we want to follow His direction.

1 Cor. 10:13 - No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it