

HOLD ON TO YOUR FAITH

All of us go through times when we begin to question the circumstances surrounding us. Sometimes we think, "What am I doing here?" Usually these thoughts come about in times of adversity when nothing seems to go right. It may be at work, at school, in our social environment or in the home. Sometimes the situation may be many small annoyances that get in the way of getting the job done. Other times we face things of really tragic proportions. We know that the "right thing" is to "keep on keeping on." However, a series of many small hindrances or just a few very large set backs can bring a person to the point of discouragement or even despair. Everyone goes through periods of discouragement and a few slip into despair. It is important to learn to deal with discouragement so that we do not let it cause us to lose ground in our journey to "higher ground." I've heard it said, "If the road always seems uphill, then it may be simply because we are going in the right direction."

How can we deal with the discouragements of life? Do we run away and hide? Sometimes that may be tempting, but it doesn't solve anything. There are people who have literally "run away" and they are among the "homeless" in our country. Other hide in a bottle and become alcoholics while some get into the drug culture. Objectively, we can see that this does not solve anything, it only adds to the problem. Others seek professional help with psychologists and psychiatrists who lead people to identify the cause of the problem and to get in touch with themselves -- whatever that means. The surest way is to get a fresh look at our vision of life and to project beyond the present difficulties and objectively answer the question "What am I doing here?" Each of us has a purpose for being. That purpose goes beyond the natural and ordinary and reaches into the supernatural and the extraordinary. It goes beyond time into eternity. As Paul said it in I Cor 15:19, "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable." Again, Paul reminds us in Philippians 3:14 we are to "press toward the goal to win the prize to which God has called us."

People who are recognized as being great have had discouragements and even what the world would judge as failures. Jesus told us that John the Baptist was among the great persons ever born (none were greater), yet John experienced serious discouragement.

MATTHEW 11:1-3 Jesus continued to practice what He taught His disciples to do. He was not content to be just a teach of the Kingdom of Heaven but also a practitioner.

John had preached repentance to all who would listen. He sounded a call announcing the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven. John baptized Jews and Gentiles and he also baptized Jesus. He pointed to Jesus as the Lamb of God. John had carried out his mission well.

John continued to preach and to point out immorality even in the highest places of government. He publicly condemned the marriage of Herod Antipas to Herodias, the wife of Herod's half-brother Herod Philip of Rome. How times have changed! What was deemed as scandalous in John's day is rather common place today. John's boldness was met with retaliation by Herodias who had John arrested, put into prison and eventually had him executed. With things working out as they had with John in prison, he had to wonder whether he was right about his mission in life. He had proclaimed Jesus to be the coming Savior and Messiah and yet there he was, languishing in prison. The question was there, "Is Jesus the Messiah or should we look for someone else?"

John may have been expecting a great political or physical world victory with the coming of Jesus. Many thought that Israel would be restored to a place of prominence in the world when the Messiah came. They failed to recognize there would be two advents of the Messiah. The prophecies of the past had not distinguished the difference and expectations were focused on the events of the second advent (the defeat of sin and death) rather than the sacrifice that would take away the sin of the world of the first advent.

MATTHEW 11:4-6 Jesus pointed John's disciples to the Old Testament prophecies and invited them to witness how He had fulfilled

many of the predictions. Isaiah 61 was a direct reference to the coming of the Messiah. Jesus had used this passage in the synagogue in Nazareth as he began His earthly ministry. He carefully left out references to the prediction related to His Second Coming -- the "day of the Lord's vengeance" for example. He used this same passage as a reference for John's disciples. The very acts of mercy that Isaiah foretold were being done in their sight. Jesus was confirming His covenant with the nation of Israel by the clear miracles of healing the blind, lame, deaf and lepers. Even the dead were brought back to life.

Jesus told John's disciples that those who would not be offended in Him would be blessed. Some people find the teachings of Jesus to be a stumbling block or something that trips them up. Some will have trouble with "turn the other cheek and go the second mile." Others have problems with Jesus being "the only way to salvation." Still others cannot accept the fact that they need a savior at all -- they are offended if told that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." Many modern Christians find the call to "put self to death" something they cannot accept. We have a problem dealing with the fact that in this world we have "no rights" since our citizenship is in heaven. If we do not let such things trip us up on our journey, then we really will be blessed.

MATTHEW 11:7-15 Jesus spoke to the crowd to clarify the mystery of the man and the mission of John the Baptist. Jesus questioned the crowd. Would they have gone out to hear someone who swayed under the breeze of current popular trends? Absolutely not! This is one reason people are staying away from our churches in droves today. Many preachers are simply spouting the latest pop psychology fads from the pulpits and people are pooh-poohing it as they should. John was not a reed shaking in the wind. He was not a "weather vane." Jesus asked them if they went to hear John because he was a fashion trend setter. No, that was not the reason either. Despite the popular saying, clothes do NOT make the man. People really can and eventually will look beyond the facade of showy glitz to see if there is any substance to a person. Some people are all "show" and there

is nothing else. A friend describes such people as "What you see is all there is." John had substance, he was real.

Most importantly, John was the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy of "one sent to prepare the way of the Lord." The greatness of John among all men who had even been born was established from the mouth of the Lord Himself.

Jesus also spoke of the struggle that was going on at the time regarding the "kingdom of the heavens." Jesus was referring to the spiritual world. Things happening in the spiritual realm were influencing what was occurring in the physical realm. The fact that John the Baptist was in prison was evidence that the spiritual realm was undergoing violence. The struggle is still on going. The spiritual battle is with us and is intensifying.

Jesus made a reference to the prophecy regarding the coming of Elijah relative to the mission and ministry of John the Baptist. John certainly came in the spirit and power of Elijah, yet he denied that he was Elijah. Jesus said, "And if you are willing to accept it (if you want to believe it), he is the Elijah who is to come." Then he added, "He who has ears, let him hear." In other words, John's ministry was like that of Elijah, but he was not the fulfillment of that prophecy of the coming of Elijah before the "great and terrible day of the Lord." The reason it was not the fulfillment was that Jesus' first coming was not that "great and terrible day of the Lord." That day is yet to come.

John needed to be reminded of what the Scriptures said regarding Jesus so that he could keep focused on the vision and mission for his life. We need to do the same thing and interpret all that happens to us in light of the fact that God supremely loves us and is using everything that comes our way to bring about His mission for our lives -- to transform us into the image of His Son, Jesus.

MATTHEW 11:16-19 People concentrate more on form rather than function. The people of Jesus' day were more interested in finding fault with the style of John and Jesus than listening to the message they proclaimed. Today, it is not any different. Jesus reminds us that results are more important than cosmetics.