

Body of Christ: Encouraging

1st Kings 19:9-18; Lk 22:31-41/2nd Thes 2:14-3:5

Sometimes the stresses of life bear down upon us. We may find ourselves struggling to make it through the day or even the hour. We may even struggle with issues of faith and whether faith is real or whether we are the only ones who struggle to allow our relationship and confidence in God to make a difference in our lives. Despair may force itself upon us, tempting us to believe that we are utterly alone and there is no hope—no way out.



As the body of Christ, we are called to encourage the downhearted and downtrodden. We are called to lift the spirits of others, pointing them to God's love and care. It's hard to do that when despair invades our own lives.

That is precisely where Elijah found himself the week after the great confrontation on Mount Carmel. God had proven beyond doubt that Baal was impotent, but when Jezebel issued threats against his life, he plunged into great despair. God had proven to be powerful, great, and faithful, but the very leaders of Israel had simply ignored *Yahweh*, returning once more to worshipping Baal. Elijah fled into the desert, fearing for his very life. All that he had done and that *Yahweh* had done through him had been for naught! Even in the face of Mount Carmel, the people had proven to be utterly unfaithful. He had nothing more to live for, seeing as his ministry was having no effect at all. He was ready for God to take him out of the picture. He lay down and asked God to end his life, for he had no more hope. Despair had settled upon him, and it wasn't letting go.

Elijah lay down in the midst of the wilderness, begging to die. God sent one to feed him and strengthen him for the journey ahead. Rested and fed, Elijah journeyed through the wilderness to a cave at the mountain of God. The Word of *Yahweh* visited him there: "What are you doing HERE, Elijah?" From the question, it would seem that Elijah's long journey had been pointless, and yet *Yahweh* had fed him, rested him, and strengthened him to make the long trek. "What are you doing HERE, Elijah?"

"Oh, Lord, I have been very zealous for *Yahweh*, the God of Israel, but those people are so unfaithful! They have ignored that *Yahweh* is truly God—the only God—and they have gone right back to worshipping Baal! It is just so pointless! I am the only one who is faithful, the only one who is willing to serve you, but it is just no use! They don't listen! They have killed all the others who were serving you with integrity, and there is no one else left. Now, they are trying to kill me, too! I've had enough!"

God sent Elijah to stand outside the cave and await *Yahweh* to pass by. A great breath blew by, breaking the very rocks and forcing them apart before *Yahweh*, but *Yahweh* was not in that great demonstration of power. Then came an earthquake and shook all the land, but *Yahweh* was not in that great demonstration of power. Then came a great consuming fire, but *Yahweh* was not in that great demonstration of power. Then came a profound silence. At that silence, Elijah covered his face and stood before *Yahweh*. "What are you doing HERE, Elijah?"

“Oh, Lord, I have been so zealous for *Yahweh*, the God of Israel, but the people have ignored and despised their God! I am the only faithful one left, and they are trying to kill me, too!”

“Elijah, go on back where you belong and wait for me. All is not over. You cannot see the end right now, but judgement will come in due course. Oh, by the way, there are still another seven thousand men who have not bowed down to Baal, but remain faithful to me. Don’t worry so much about those visible signs of power, for I come in the quiet stillness and find those who seek my presence. I have more for you to do, so get up and let’s get back on track. I have servants for you to anoint, a remnant you do not imagine.”

Jesus knew that his disciples would fail. He knew that despair would overtake them and accepted it as a reality of human life. He did not accept, however, that his disciples remain despondent. He prayed for them to regain strength, courage, and purpose to encourage others as well. On the night of Jesus’ betrayal, he called on Peter to return and strengthen the rest of the disciples after he had recovered from betraying Jesus.

It seems a very strange way to address someone: “After you are through betraying me and come to your senses, encourage the rest to be faithful once more!” Jesus accepted our failure of strength and character. He prayed for our encouragement and calls on us to encourage one another as well. Despair and dejection seems lonely, but it is all too common.

Paul wrote to encourage Christians who were struggling with a lack of strength. He reminded them of God’s love and the strength they had in God’s care. Apparently, they needed reminding, much as we often need to be reminded. Even as he writes to comfort and strengthen them, he calls on these same Christians to pray for his own encouragement. We were given the task to encourage one another—specifically because we need reminding that we are not alone.

Without encouragement, we are tempted to fall into despair. Without encouragement, we are tempted to believe that no one else is faithful. Without encouragement, we are tempted to determine that we are no longer fit to serve God. Without encouragement, we are tempted to believe that we must accomplish the mission before us on our own strength.

Jesus did not see himself as able to face the tragedy and horror of crucifixion. Christ had to turn to God for comfort, strength, peace, and encouragement. On the way to the cross, He took the time to encourage those He knew would forsake Him. He told them to encourage others as well.

As the stresses of life bear down upon us, we must remember that they bear down on others as well. We need the encouragement of the body of Christ, just as we need to encourage those around us who struggle with their own burdens. If Jesus could take the time to encourage Peter on His own way to the cross, should we do less? If the burdens of others are lighter than our own, maybe we should be carrying their burdens, instead of our own.

Are we up to the challenge?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*