

"WHAT DOEST THOU HERE?"

"And he came thither unto a cave, and lodged there; and, behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and he said unto him, What doest thou here, Elijah?" I Kings 19:9.

For every person life is a series of ups and downs. One day we are on the mountain top, and the next we are in the valley. Now we are encouraged, and again we are discouraged. The encouragements we welcome gladly, but the discouragements are grievous to bear. They retard effort, and prevent the highest success. The discouraged man is far from his best. His outlook is darkened and his energies are crippled. The discouragement is contagious, and others speedily feel its effects. For our own comfort and success, as well as for the influence which it has upon others, we want it removed. As to how this may be accomplished, we shall look at God's method of dealing with one of the great characters in history who was discouraged to such an extent that he actually prayed to die.

Elijah's glorious ministry reached its climax in his marvelous victory over the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. When the worship of Baal had been overthrown publicly, Elijah expected Ahab and Jezebel to turn from their idolatry, but he was sadly disappointed. The news of what had taken place at Mount Carmel incensed Jezebel against Elijah. Her threat to kill him within twenty-four hours totally upset Elijah's sense of victory, and he concluded that he had not won at all.

Seized with a fear to which he had hitherto been a stranger, due to the hatred and persecuting zeal of this deceitful, unprincipled and wicked woman, Elijah decided to take his case in his own hands and preserve his life. This he did by fleeing to escape death. Upon his arrival at Beersheba, Elijah left his servant and went a day's journey into the wilderness. In that solitary place he prayed, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life." That prayer indicated that he was in the depths of disappointment, discouragement and despondency. The world was so given over to wrong that to him it was no longer a desirable place in which to live. It is a dreadful thing for a person to sink to such a depth of wretchedness and despair, but such an experience comes to many of the Lord's people at some time or other. Elijah's discouragement was caused by physical exhaustion, apparent failure, grievous disappointment, enforced inactivity, spiritual loneliness and diminished faith. With his vision of God obscured, his faith in others and in himself greatly diminished, it is not surprising that Elijah prayed to die. Although he requested death, he did not express the real sentiment of his heart. It was not the real Elijah speaking. He was down in the dumps so far that he was not at himself.

Knowing exactly what Elijah needed to cure his discouragement, God put him to sleep, guarded him while he slept, provided food for him when he awoke, permitted him to express his grief, convinced him that he had sinned, told him some good news, sent him back to work, and supplied him with sufficient strength for his journey and his task. In the strength which God had provided for him, Elijah made his journey of forty days and forty nights unto Horeb, the mount of God. Perhaps no spot is more closely associated with the manifested presence of God than Mount Horeb. There the bush burned with fire but was not consumed; there the law was given to Israel; there Moses spent forty days and nights alone in communion with God.

It is a very striking scene that is depicted here. Elijah had found shelter and taken refuge in a mountain cave. In imagination I can see him sitting there alone and musing upon his troubles. He had failed ignobly in what seemed the most dazzling success of his prophetic career, and his heart was filled with disappointment, discouragement and despair. He was bewildered and dismayed. His godlike courage and his wondrous zeal had forsaken him. The bold prophet, the heroic champion of heaven and the intrepid reformer has become the man of desponding thoughts and enervating fears. In utter blackness of despair and distress of soul, Elijah felt that he was not able to do his work any more. He had committed the blunder of being out of touch with the Lord. At the threat of a woman he had fled from the place of public testimony and active service. He had left the path of service with its opposition, persecution and suffering, and had sought a place of safety in wilderness solitude and in a mountain cave.

Elijah had turned aside from the path of duty and the Lord knew it. God always knows where His servants are, what they are doing and what they are not doing. None can ever escape His omniscient gaze, for His eyes are in every place. Great stirrings were taking place in Israel, and Elijah might have been an exceptionally useful instructor and worker among the masses at that particular time. But, instead, he was far away from the habitations of men and sheltering himself in the quietness of a cave. He was an absentee from an important post of duty at one of the most critical moments in the history of his nation.

Elijah's presence at the cave reveals the fallibility of an eminent saint. His life, teachings, miracles, prayers and testimony prove beyond a peradventure of a doubt that he was a man of God. But he was not perfect, and the fact that he fled to the cave proves this. Why did Elijah retire to this place? It was due to his lack of success. From this incident in which Elijah was involved we learn that human beings are not good judges of success, and that, after all, success is neither the right nor the only standard for life. Elijah was there also because of the corruptness of his time, which was the very reason why he, of all men, should have been out in active service in public life. Moreover, he was there because of the fear of persecution or of being slain.

God knew where Elijah was. In fact, God knows everything about every person. God knew about all of Elijah's devoted and loyal service, knew the distress and trouble of his soul, and knew that he needed to meet Him. God knew why Elijah was there. And yet He asked him the question: "What doest thou here, Elijah?" God's question implied, "I am your Lord and Master and you do not have any right to be here without consulting me, Give me the reason for your conduct." God wanted the prophet to tell Him all that was in his heart in order that He might help him. God did not ask Elijah the question because He did not know the answer, but because He wanted to make Elijah put his mood into words. In like manner, God is looking down upon us, and by means of this question is challenging us to put into words why we are where we are and engaging in what we are doing.

God's question, "What doest thou here, Elijah?" was a rebuke to him. Since we do not know which particular word the Lord accentuated, let us emphasize each one separately. "What doest thou?" Is it good or evil? for man cannot be totally inactive. "What doest thou?" Art thou employing thy time for the glory of God and the good of His people, or is it being wasted in peevish repinings? "What doest thou?" Thou who art the servant of the Most High, who hast been so highly honored, who hast received such signal proofs of God's power, couldest not thou have committed thy cause unto Him and depended on the Almighty for protection? "What doest thou here?" -- away from the land of Israel, away from the work of reformation.

Elijah gave a threefold reason for fleeing to the cave. First, he said, "I have been very jealous for the Lord God of hosts." That statement implied that he considered his zeal for the Lord to have been in vain, and hence he had given up all public testimony. Second, he complained about the people of God. He said, "The children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword." Thus he implied that the hopeless condition of the people of God made it useless for him to continue laboring in their midst. Third, he said, "I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away." Elijah declared that he was left alone and that the very people before whom he had given such a mighty testimony had turned against him. Hence he had turned his back on them and sought rest and shelter in the lonely cave. Thus the disgruntled prophet spoke well of himself and ill of God's people and virtually called upon God to judge them. It is easy to discern the wounded pride and the embittered spirit that lurked behind his words and led the prophet to speak well of himself and nothing but evil of God's people.

God spoke to Elijah, saying, "Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord." Great manifestations of divine power followed. Elijah witnessed the very remarkable and awe-inspiring display of God's power. The mighty mass of the mountains was torn apart, and the rocks were upheaved and broken by the force of the tempestuous hurricane. Next came the earthquake, and then the mountain range was lighted up by fire from heaven, but still the Lord was not there. Finally, "a still small voice" spoke quietly and gently to his soul, calming and soothing his ruffled spirit. This voice evidenced afresh the kindness and tenderness of the Lord, who could assuage Elijah's disappointment and cheer his heart. When the soul is reassured of his Master's love, the servant is nerved to face fresh dangers and oppositions for His sake and to tackle any task He may assign him.

So far as we can gather from the inspired record, Elijah stood unmoved from the varied displays of God's power, fearless as they were to behold. But, when the still small voice sounded, he was affected immediately. The Lord addressed His servant with gentleness and tenderness to show him how compassionate and gracious God was, and his heart was touched deeply. This soft gentle voice drew Elijah to the entrance of the cave with his face wrapped in a mantle. Away from the Lord Elijah talked about himself, but in His presence he hid himself. The wrapping of his face in his mantle signified two things -- his reverence for the divine majesty and a sense of his own unworthiness.

Like Elijah of old, it is possible for us to get discouraged if the work of God in our hands does not move in striking ways. Persons of energetic disposition, such as the prophet certainly was, are more likely than others to feel thus. Where there are no visible manifestations, some are prone to conclude that nothing is doing at all. This scene on Horeb certainly contains a timely message for ministers of God's Word. Many a preacher has become thoroughly discouraged, though with far less provocation than Elijah. They have been untiring in their labors, zealous for the Lord, faithful in preaching His Word; yet, there is no public response, and they conclude that it is all in vain. They need to lay hold afresh on the grand truth that the purpose of the Lord shall not fail, and that purpose includes tomorrow as well as today. God is not confined to one agent. Elijah thought that the whole work was to be accomplished through his instrumentality, but he was taught that he was only one factor among several. It is our business to do our duties where God has placed us, and somebody will do the reaping in God's own good time.

Elijah's pathetic reply to the question, "What doest thou here?", really amounted to saying: "I'm running away; I've had it; don't ask me any more what I am doing; nothing is worth doing any more; let me die." The prophet had come to the cave to avoid the question, "What doest thou?" That question was the last one he wanted to hear. He thought he was escaping responsibility by retiring to the cave.

This pointed and personal question is being asked of you, "What doest thou here?" What is the point of your living? For what purpose are you in the world? It is to avoid answering such questions that men flee from their posts of duty. No one is exempt from the temptation to throw in the sponge, the desire to quit, the desire to avoid responsibilities, and the longing for some quiet place where there will not have to be any justification of one's existence.

God is asking us the same question, "What doest thou here?" He does so in order that we may learn where we are, what we are doing, what our bearings are, and what is the direction in which we are going. When God says to you, in a still small voice, "What doest thou here?", can your heart answer with a loyal sincerity, "Lord, thou knowest all things. I have come here because I want to get to know Thee better, I want to know the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, that is why I have come"? As long as you are able to live and labor for the Lord, you will never be justified in quitting the field of usefulness. What are you doing here on this beautiful earth, in this remarkable era of the world's history? What are you doing with your soul, your life, your time and your talents? With each of these you are doing something, but what? "What doest thou here?"