

## THE MASTERY OF DISCOURAGEMENT

"But he himself went a day's journey into wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree; and he requested for himself that he might die; and said, It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers. And as he lay and slept under a juniper tree, behold, then an angel touched him, and said, Arise and eat." I Kings 19:4-5.

Not many souls will reach heaven without a battle with the demon of discouragement, for very discouraging circumstances present themselves in every life. Sometimes, it seems that those who serve the Lord most faithfully are the most fiercely attacked. Discouragement handicapped Moses in Egypt. It struck Job a terrific blow. It fiercely attacked Elijah. It caused John the Baptist to wonder and be fearful. It made Simon Peter a denier. All of us, who have felt the stress and strain of life, know something about it. It has pressed upon our spirits and thrown its shadow across our lives. Very few ever claim to be entirely free from discouragement. Yet all of us, who have been afflicted with discouragement, know that it never helps matters but often makes them worse. We have learned that it is not easily banished -- even after we have concluded that it is detrimental to us.

Satan is the source of discouragement. It is his most effective tool with which to thwart the plans of Christ. An old fable states that Satan once thought of going out of business and advertised his tools for sale. People who wanted to buy them came and looked them over. Among his tools were deceit, hypocrisy, envy, lies, and greed. Apart from the other tools lay a long, slim wedge, the high price of which aroused the curiosity of the buyers. One asked, "What is this tool, and why is it so expensive?" Satan replied, "That is my best tool. It is called 'discouragement'. It works when all other tools fail me." Satan knows this all too well, so he tries to discourage Christians at every turn. But a discouraged Christian cannot attract others to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Few characters, if any, afford us a finer example for a profitable study of this subject than does Elijah, one of the grandest men mentioned in the Bible. Many things which were true of him apply to us. In the light of his experiences, let us consider: ----

### I. The Condition of Discouragement.

Elijah came upon the scene of action, in Israel's history, as suddenly as a meteor blazing forth from the heavens at midnight. He came from the rural section, the place from which God brings up many champions. He came from the wild and mountainous land of Gilead, where he had been accustomed to the solitary life of a herdsman. He was not afraid of any man. He was rugged and ready for sacrifice and service.

He did not have an effeminate or "kid glove" personality. His attire was the shaggy sheepskin mantle which had been his covering day and night. His flowing locks were such as had attracted the wondering gaze of shepherds and others as he had passed with rapid pace over the hills and along the solitary footpaths.

Without warning or introduction, he appeared abruptly in the ivory palace of Ahab, the apostate king, at Samaria. Standing in the presence of the startled and guilty king, with awful look and uplifted hand, he said, "As the Lord liveth, before Whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word." I Kings 17:1. Having delivered his message, he passed unchallenged and unmolested, leaving the king dumb and paralyzed with astonishment. Elijah must have been a man of great faith to be willing to stake his very life upon the truthfulness of what he had spoken. At any rate, this emergence marked the beginning of an heroic ministry.

His glorious ministry reached its climax in his marvelous victory over the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel. There he fought well and met with success and renown. Automatically, he became a regular hero. The prophets of Baal were dead, and the multitude shouted, "The Lord, He is the God; the Lord, He is the God." I Kings 18:39. Thus, Elijah's implicit faith enabled him to demonstrate that Jehovah alone had supernatural power.

In the exhilaration of victory, Elijah ran through the drenching storm in front of the chariot of Ahab from Mount Carmel to Jezreel, a distance of approximately eighteen miles. Upon their arrival at the palace, Elijah waited at the gate while Ahab went in and "told Jezebel all that Elijah had done; and withal how he had slain the prophets with the sword." I Kings 19:1. He expected Ahab and Jezebel to turn from their idolatry inasmuch as the worship of Baal had been publicly overthrown, but he was sadly disappointed.

Ahab's report incensed Jezebel against Elijah. Immediately she sent a messenger to Elijah with a threatening message. She said "So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I make not thy life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time." 19:2. Her oath showed the intensity of her rage. Her threat totally upset Elijah's sense of victory and he concluded that he had not won after all.

Why did Jezebel send Elijah word of her design, and thus give him an opportunity to escape? Did she think him so daring, that he would not flee? Or, was it that she did not want to deal with him for fear of the people, and therefore, sent this message to him merely to drive him from the country and get him out of the way so that he might not carry on what he had begun?

Seized with a fear to which he had hitherto been a stranger, on account of the hatred of this deceitful, unprincipled and wicked woman, Elijah determined to take his case into his own hands and preserve his life. Accompanied by his servant, and under cover of the night, he ran through the driving storm across the hills of Samaria into the drear expanse of the Arabian desert. "And when he saw that, he arose, and came to Beersheba, which belongeth to Judah, and left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree: and he requested for himself that he might die; and said, It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life: for I am not better than my fathers." When that haggard, weary, travelworn and unhappy fugitive gave utterance to those strange words, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life," he was certainly in the depths of 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. In every sense of the word, Elijah was "down in the dumps." It is a dreadful thing for any human heart to sink to such a depth of wretchedness and despair.

Up to the time of his strange and rapid flight into the desert, Elijah had seemed to be the very incarnation of courage and energy. No temptation had turned him aside from his duty. No hardship had exhausted his endurance. No threat or peril had ever caused him to fear. In his dejection we have an illustration of men breaking down in the strong points of their characters. He was bold, courageous, and fearless; yet these were the points on which he failed -- he was afraid of Jezebel.

## II. The Causes of Discouragement.

Discouragement is a common experience. Sooner or later it comes to all. We fall from sunlight heights to depths of gloom. Therefore, we should consider the causes of discouragement. What was wrong with Elijah? The causes of his discouragement were in part as follows: --

### 1. Physical exhaustion.

Elijah's physical condition had much to do with his despondent state of mind. The relationship between the state of the body and the attitude of the mind is very close. Depleted health has a marvelous power over mind and spirit.

Elijah had just been through a terrible ordeal. He had done too much. His strength was overtaxed by the tremendous strain which he had undergone and sheer physical exhaustion was the result. Now that the extreme tension was relaxed, it was only natural that he should suffer keenly from the reaction.

2. Apparent failure.

The great object for which Elijah had lived seemed on the verge of realization at Mount Carmel. Jehovah was acknowledged with one voice and false worship was put down. Then, in a single day all of this bright picture was annihilated. So far as Elijah could see, his testimony had failed to effect any real change in things. Although he had done his best, there came to him a heart-breaking sense of personal failure in his work after all. Failure is always bitter and hard to bear -- especially when it follows closely upon the great hope of success.

3. Grievous disappointment.

Seldom can one review the past and say that life's anticipations have been realized. When Elijah stood in triumph on Mount Carmel, he thought that the evidence in favor of Jehovah was irresistible. He was confident that the apostate nation would turn back to God, with Ahab and Jezebel being converted and leading the way. Instead, she was enraged and sought to take Elijah's life. At that unexpected result, the prophet's heart sank within him. In his disappointment, he concluded that his work had been in vain. However, he was mistaken, for he had accomplished more than he realized.

4. Enforced inactivity.

Elijah had run away from duty. He had nothing to do in the place of the work he had been doing. His enforced inactivity made him miserable. An unemployed life is a burden to itself. On the other hand, it is remarkable how work will improve one's outlook on life.

5. Spiritual loneliness.

Until his flight from Jezreel, Elijah's steps had been ordered of the Lord. But on this occasion there was no waiting for Divine guidance. Therefore, he had the consciousness that he had deserted the post of responsibility. He was shocked by the consciousness of his lonely position. He said, "I, even I only, am left." He seemed to think that the whole responsibility for Israel rested on him. No doubt he was honest, but he was mistaken. God does not want us to have an undue sense of our importance, but He does expect us to perform the duties which He assigns us. Elijah's feeling that none sympathized with him weighed like lead upon his spirit. Who has not felt his heart aching for want of sympathy during lonely days and still more lonely nights?

6. Diminished faith.

Until he fled from Jezebel, Elijah had been animated by a most splendid faith because he had never lost sight of God. Faith always thrives when God occupies the whole field of vision. But Jezebel obscured his vision of God. He lost faith in others also. He concluded that there was not a good man in all Israel. If you want to be wretched, get to the place in life where you do not believe in anybody. Elijah even lost faith in himself.

With his vision of the Lord 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 not at himself then. This goes to show that one should never make an important decision when he is "down in the dumps."

### III. The Cure for Discouragement.

Whatever the cause of our discouragement, we must admit that in the final analysis it is not likely to help us physically, mentally, morally, or spiritually, and this being the case, we should seek to banish it from our lives. The only cure for it is available through Christianity. Jesus Christ has the remedy for every ailment in life. He wants to bring salvation where there is sin, joy where there is sorrow, and encouragement where there is discouragement.

How did God cure Elijah's discouragement? He did not rebuke him for his fearfulness and discouragement. God knew best what he needed. God's provisions are always appropriate to the existing needs.

#### 1. He put him to sleep.

Doubtless, that was what he needed most of all. The disease of the mind was cured by removing the weakness of the body. Sleep is a priceless gift from God and not time lost. We are so constituted that a third of our time should be spent in sleep. Elijah had overworked and needed rest. For him sleep was better than medicine, rebuke, or instruction.

#### 2. He provided food for him.

Elijah was physically weak and needed food. God guarded him while he slept, then sent an angel to him with food prepared for the nourishment of his exhausted body. When Elijah awoke, he discovered the delicious food. This meal convinced him that God cared for him and that his life was needed still. After he had eaten the food, he slept a second time. Upon awaking, he received food again and was refreshed.

#### 3. He permitted him to express his grief.

Elijah said, "I have been very jealous for the Lord God of hosts: for the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away." I Kings 19:10. After he had stated his case, his mind was eased. Frequently, it is a great relief when one is permitted to express his grief to one in whom he has confidence.

#### 4. He convinced him that he had sinned.

Elijah must have blushed when God said, "What doest thou here, Elijah?" He must have realized that life is for doing, but alas! he was doing nothing except complaining. It is always a mistake to dictate to God. Elijah claimed that he wanted to die, and yet he fled from the woman who was most eager to grant his request. We do such foolish things when we are discouraged.

#### 5. He told him some good news.

God informed Elijah that He still had seven thousand in Israel who had not bowed their knees unto Baal. The knowledge of the existence of those 7,000 faithful men was a source of great encouragement to Elijah. His sense of

loneliness was thus removed.

6. He sent him back to work.

God told him that there was still plenty of work for him to do. Reading 19;15-16 we note that "the Lord said unto him, Do, return on thy way to the wilderness of Damascus: and when thou comest, anoint Hazael to be king of Syria: And Jehu the son of Nimshi shalt thou anoint to be king over Israel: and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abelmeholah shalt thou anoint to be prophet in thy room." He supplied him with sufficient strength for his journey and work. The remedy of renewed activity worked when it was applied.

When you are discouraged and despondent, go out and help somebody who is discouraged and you will find that you have helped your own soul. Any service cheerfully and faithfully rendered to others for the Lord will not be in vain.

The encouragement of friends is helpful and very comforting, but the discouraged person who has learned to "encourage himself in the Lord" has found a never-failing source of comfort and strength. The best of friends sometimes fail; the Lord never fails. Trust in the Lord Jesus Christ; live for Him, work for Him, and thus experience the joy that accompanies the mastery of discouragement.