

THE MASTERY OF DISCOURAGEMENT

I Kings 18:41--19:8

Elijah's glorious ministry reached its climax in his marvelous victory over the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. When the people announced their decision, and the idolatrous prophets had been slain, Elijah knew that the day was near when the Lord would send rain upon the earth. However, in the divine orderings, it was necessary for Elijah to pray for the rain. He was, so to speak, God's administrator towards Israel in that crisis. His lips had pronounced the judgment, and his lips must announce the blessing. Thus we have the prophet going up to the top of Mount Carmel to speak to God. Ahab, in his selfishness, prepared to go home, not to pray, but to feast. A banquet was far more to his liking than a prayer meeting.

Elijah withdrew from the crowds, went up to the top of Mount Carmel, bowed himself upon the earth and put his face between his knees. That was a becoming attitude in the man of God who had stood bold and erect before king, prophets and people. His success had not elated him. He was not seeking glory for himself. He was just a servant of the Lord and had acted according to instructions from Him.

Elijah's prayer was very definite and fervent. The most noticeable feature about it was his perseverance. We should also note his watchfulness in prayer. He commanded his servant to be on the lookout to see if there was any evidence of his prayer being answered. When his servant returned from his point of observation the seventh time, he said, "Behold, there ariseth a little cloud out of the sea, like a man's hand." That little but significant omen convinced the man of God that the windows of heaven were about to be opened and plentiful showers given. He promptly sent the young man with an urgent message to Ahab to get away at once before the storm burst and prevented him from making his journey homeward. What holy confidence in a prayer-hearing God!

Immediately the longed-for and tremendously heavy rain fell. In the exhilaration of his remarkable victory, Elijah did the unusual thing of running 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." 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." 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.

I. The Condition Of Discouragement.

When Jezebel came breezing on the stage, with her lips and face freshly painted and her heart blazing with anger, the whole scene seemed to change. Her will was set with iron determination. She had undergone a most humiliating defeat, but she had no intention of giving up the struggle. She rallied her defeated forces and was soon in a strong

enough position to deliver her ultimatum to Elijah. Instead of ordering her officers to slay the prophet forthwith, Jezebel sent a servant to announce her sentence upon him. How often mad passions defeat their own ends, fury blighting the judgment so that prudence and caution are not exercised. Possibly she felt so sure of her prey that she did not hesitate to announce her purpose. Probably she thought that Elijah was so courageous there was no likelihood of his attempting an escape, but if so, she was mistaken.

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. His courage failed before the furious threat of her vengeance, and he fled for his life. Hitherto, he had moved at the word of the Lord, but in this case he was moved by a threatening word from a woman. For the moment Elijah had allowed the wicked and powerful Jezebel to come between himself and God. Thus it came to pass that the man who stood for God before the king, the false prophets and all Israel fled before the threat of a woman. "He went for his life." Note that it was not for God, or for the people of God, or for the testimony of God, but for his life he went.

Accompanied by his servant, and under cover of the night, Elijah 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 went for his life, 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."

Upon his arrival at Beersheba, Elijah left his servant and went a day's journey into the wilderness. In that solitary place he prayed, but how different was this prayer from his former requests. Before, he had prayed for the glory of God and the blessing of the nation, but now this haggard, weary, travel-worn and unhappy fugitive gave utterance to some very strange words. He said, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life." That statement indicates 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.

Elijah had thought that he had been far more successful than his fathers and that under his ministry there would be a true and widespread turning to the Lord, but such was not the case. Since his supreme effort to recall the people to God had been in vain, he concluded that there was nothing further to be done. He simply was not prepared to face the failure of his mission. 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, but such an experience comes to many of the Lord's people at some time or other. He had forsaken the place into which the Lord had brought him and was tasting the bitter dregs of his course of self-will. Oh what a rod we make for our backs when we depart from the path of duty!

II. The Causes Of Discouragement.

What was wrong with Elijah? Was he merely a pessimist? By no means! 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.

Elijah had just been through a terrible ordeal, the most tremendous conflict of his life. He had done too much. The anxiety and excitement on Mount Carmel, the wearisome run of approximately eighteen miles to Jezreel, followed by the rapid flight and long journey into the desert were extremely exhausting. 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 very best, there came to him a heartbreaking 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. Naturally he anticipated a turn in the tide of the history of Israel. 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.

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 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.

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.

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. Here we have a truly wonderful manifestation of the kindness of God. An angel was sent to provide a meal for a faulty servant who had forsaken an important position of duty and who was completely outside the pale of God's leadership.
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." 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 seven thousand 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. 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 God; live for Him; work for Him, and thus experience the joy that accompanies the mastery of discouragement.