

LOSING HEART

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"Hence as I hold this ministry by God's mercy to me, I never lose heart in it" (II Corinthians 4:1 Moffatt).

"For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day" (II Corinthians 4:16).

There are various causes of failure in life. One of the most common is that people lose heart. They may have enough energy and willingness, but if they lose heart it is as if the fire should go out in the powerhouse of a factory. Slowly but inevitably all the machinery would come to a standstill. This is what often happens to people in the struggles of life. Misfortune comes to a family. The children become ill. The husband loses his job and is out of work. But for a while they struggle along as best they can, always hoping that the tide will turn. Then it all becomes too much for them and they give up and let everything go. They have just lost heart.

This also happens in business. Mark Rutherford tells of a man in a little business who lost heart. He did not have anything to say to his customers who became fewer and fewer. He ceased to care about his stock and about keeping the place clean. He did not have any interest or energy. But behind that listlessness was the fact that he had lost heart. It is not mere misfortune that causes one to lose heart, though misfortune may play its part. Many a man has gone on fighting against adversity and won through in the end. Losing heart means losing hope and the feeling that the struggle is not worthwhile. Few people can go on for long through a dark tunnel unless they are sure that in the end they will see a glimmer of light and come out into the sunshine on the other side of the mountain. We all know what it is to lose heart, both from our own experience and from that of others.

Perhaps the business in which we are tempted most to lose heart is that of Christian living and Christian service. The plague of our own hearts is not easily cured. The Christian enterprise often shows few encouraging results. The knowledge of history should help us here. Discussing the prospects of pioneer missionary work in a difficult region beyond, a missionary remarked that the work should not be left to the native Christians. They would be discouraged by the difficulties and lose heart; for they would not know enough about the history of Christianity to realize that the seeds of the gospel of Christ often take long years to ripen and bear fruit.

It is encouraging to read from the letters of Paul that he himself knew something of the temptation to lose heart. Second Corinthians four gives us a glimpse of a man winning victory out of defeat. There he tells us that he did not lose heart, which suggests that he might easily have done so. His reason for not losing heart is interesting and helpful. He had been called to the ministry by the mercy of God. It was a great and wonderful experience. God was behind it and God would see him through. "Seeing I hold this ministry by the mercy of God I do not lose heart." He had continued faithful to his task; he had been at it for years and he was at it still.

Perhaps this claim "we faint not," or "I do not lose heart," does not seem any great thing to make a fuss about. But on second thought, is not patient continuance in well-doing, faithfulness to one's task, the ability to hold on to the supreme achievement? It is easy enough to be enthusiastic at the beginning of an enterprise. The difficulty is in being steadfast when success lays and delays. When America was discovered, there were plenty of people in England who were eager to seek a fortune here. Various companies of them

landed on that bleak northeast coast. But in the face of the rigors of the climate, the dangers from the Indians, and the necessity for patience, they lost heart and returned home. Then came the Pilgrim Fathers, men of conviction and character, and they faced the climate and the Indians, sickness and hunger, without flinching, and then won because they did not lose heart.

To stick to a cause or a task, even when difficulties are great and disappointments many and prospects dark, because the cause and the task stand for what is right and good and true; that is the supreme achievement of courage. So, Paul said the biggest thing he could have said when he penned these words: "Therefore seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not." The test of devotion does not come in the time of triumph when the bands are playing and the drums are beating and the flags are flying, but rather in times of reaction and delay and seeming defeat. With a ring of profound thankfulness in his voice Paul said, "Hence as I hold this ministry by God's mercy to me, I never lose heart in it."

I. The Condition Of Losing Heart.

The temptation to "faint" or to lose heart is one from which nobody is entirely free. That temptation certainly came to the Christians of the first century, as the New Testament proves conclusively. All sorts of men lose heart. It is the experience of the dull and stupid, but also of the wise and understanding. The latter knows so much to lose heart about. The man who called himself the Preacher in the book of Ecclesiastes held a secure place among the intelligentsia. But that fact did not keep him from losing heart. According to his own confession, it made him the more hopeless. In spite of his great gifts, he looked with dull-eyed pessimism at his utterly crooked situation, and he declared that it could never be made straight.

It would be hard to find anyone who does not sometimes look toward the heights and long to climb. Many make a good start, but fail to arrive because they lose heart. That man who came to Christ with such charming enthusiasm as to make him vow to become a disciple regardless of the cost, when given to understand that this might make him more homeless than the foxes and more destitute than the birds, so completely lost heart that we have not heard of him any more.

The strong also lose heart. Elijah told God that he himself was the only good man in the world and that he hoped that he would not be here long. What was the matter with Elijah? Certainly he was not a weakling. He had even dared to defy Jezebel. He had also put his mighty hand on a tottering nation and so steadied it as to save it from disaster. What was wrong with Elijah? He had lost heart.

We lose heart over all sorts of things, both large and small. We are depressed as we look at our present world. We are tempted to lose heart when we think of our own nation, our homes, our churches and our schools. Many husbands and wives are so disappointed in each other that they are ready to quit. Parents are disappointed in their children. The rebellion of youth is worldwide. In many colleges and universities the faculty members are called upon to sit at the feet of the students. Surely ours is not a day of radiant hope. Too often we are keenly disappointed in ourselves. Life hasn't worked out for us as we dreamed that it would.

II. The Causes Of Losing Heart.

1. The thought of one's unworthiness.

It is easy to lose heart when one is faced by the thought of his own

unworthiness. It is a very common temptation of the sensitive conscience. It may be that life has found us out in some failure in love or patience, and we are discouraged. Despondency takes hold of us. We meet people whose quiet peace or shining godliness makes us ashamed and we begin to wonder if the full Christian experience is not beyond us. Perhaps we forget that the inner story of the saints has often been that of sore struggle and inward conflict. It will help us if we recall that fact.

2. The weight of one's burdens.

We may feel crushed and beaten by the weight of life's burdens, and sink in the feeling of utter insignificance. Sometimes life seems meaningless and futile, and nothing can take the heart out of us like the sense of futility.

3. The rejection of one's message.

As soon as Saul of Tarsus was saved, he wanted to tell others, and especially his own countrymen, about Jesus Christ. The Bible says, "Straightway in the synagogue he proclaimed Jesus that he is the Son of God." In those early days Saul was full of a soaring enthusiasm. Very likely he anticipated the speedy triumph for the Christian cause. Wherever he went, he began by offering the gospel of Christ to his fellow countrymen.

Pleasing platform performance was undoubtedly not among Paul's characteristics. The Corinthians spoke disparagingly both of his bodily appearance and of his oratorical ability, but they acknowledged a gravity in his message. His style was clear, concise, and convincing. He possessed the coveted faculty of being able to speak much in few words. His certainty of expression, undergirded by unquestioned sincerity gave him prestige with thinking people. Paul had a unique ministry in that it outshone the law, outweighed the wisdom of men, and outlined the deliverance of God. But everywhere he went there were those who rejected and scorned his message.

In Antioch the Jews contradicted the things which Paul preached and brought about his persecution. In Lystra the Jews worked upon the multitude until they stoned Paul and left him for dead. In Thessalonica the Jews, moved with jealousy, set the city in an uproar. That was Paul's practically unvarying experience among his fellow countrymen. They refused his gospel, and they repudiated and scorned his message. Paul knew the bitterness of rejection and apparent failure. It would have been small wonder if he had given up the effort in despair. But he went on patiently with his task, refusing to be discouraged. He never gave up, but remarked, "Having received this ministry.... we faint not."

Paul's experience among the Gentiles was very similar to what it was among the Jews. At Philippi they flung him into the inner dungeon; at Athens they turned his message into ridicule; at Ephesus they tried to murder him. His gospel was an offense to the Jews, and sheer silliness to the Greeks. Such a reception was enough to take all the heart out of Paul the preacher. But, in spite of rejection, scorn and ridicule, he stuck to his task. He went on with his preaching, and never lost heart.

4. The disappointments in one's acquaintances.

Paul was frequently disappointed in those to whom he preached and who

professed to be Christians. They united with a church during his ministry and then failed to live as they should. In the church at Corinth to which our text was written was strife, divisions and immorality. At times it looked as if Paul's eighteen months of labor in Corinth had been wasted, and as if his labors had been in vain. It would have been very human and quite understandable if Paul had washed his hands of these Corinthians, if he had refused to bother with them any more, and if he had cast them aside as hopeless cases. But that was not Paul's way. He declined to be baffled and beaten by disappointment. He refused to give up, and said, "I never lose heart."

5. The persecution which one encounters.

With utmost devotion and supreme courage Paul went on with his preaching for Christ in spite of the terrible physical suffering and torture to which he was subjected. Concerning these sufferings Paul said: "Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day have I been in the deep; In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches" (II Corinthians 11:24-28)

Branded on Paul's body were the "marks of Jesus" in the form of the scars which resulted from the treatment he received, but none of these persecutions ever made him falter or faint. This word "faint", as used here, really means to treat badly. When we faint we treat badly the work which has been committed to us, and the Christ Who has trusted us with it. Regardless of that treatment to which we may be subjected, let us never lose heart or treat Christ badly by ceasing to serve Him faithfully. There is no success for us outside the will of God and there is no real failure within that will.

III. The Cure For Losing Heart.

1. A deepening experience with God.

Paul said, "For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (II Corinthians 4:6). Paul was heartened by a vivid and deepening experience with God through Christ. Directly and constantly he was being reinforced by the power of God.

2. A genuine appreciation of the mercy of God.

Paul had an increasing appreciation of that experience which he had on the road to Damascus, when Christ came to him, saved his soul, and filled his heart with peace, joy, love and hope. That experience in which God broke into his soul with mercy and forgiveness was one which Paul remembered gratefully. The real root of the undiscourageable spirit is in the mercy of God.

3. A glorious assurance of victory.

Life may be a big struggle, with a series of baffling misfortunes

and burdens. There are many who find it so. But if, like Paul, we recall God's mercy, two things will enter the mind with tremendous power. One is that it is God Who has called us into this battle. We are not in it by any personal choice. This is true of life itself. The responsibility for that is God's, and behind it is the mercy that knows it is worthwhile. There is a meaning in the hardest experience if we take it from God. There is a goal to the loneliest journey if we go at His call. To see God's mercy in the call of life is sufficient to deliver us from the numbing sense that we are the mere playthings of callous fate. And this is especially true of Christian service. It is God Who has called us into it, however unfit we may think we are, and however unpromising the results. It is comforting to know that one has been called and sent by a God Who knew that in this call there was a gift.

The other comfort and blessed assurance is that the mercy which called us will see us through. There is the love and mercy of God that will not permit evil to triumph, or His world to perish, or anything to keep us from achieving His purpose. In Christ His mercy went through all that evil can do in order to give us the grace we need. To see and know that is to realize that we can be "more than conquerors" through Him that loved us. Let us never lose heart!