

A FIGHT AGAINST DESPONDENCY

"Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me? hope in God: for I shall yet praise Him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God." Psalm 43:5.

These words occur three times, at short intervals, in this and in the preceding psalm. They appear there twice, and here once. This psalm makes its appeal to us because it tells the story of a struggling soul.

One of the things about this text that arrests us in the likeness of David's battle to our own. In our misfortunes we sometimes feel that our trouble is worse than anybody ever endured, that nobody ever suffered as we have. We are prone to think there never was a life so weak, so ragged or so full of a dull gnawing as ours. We are so ready to believe that we have had a harder time than anyone else.

David is not talking to an audience in this text, but rather to himself. That is one of the habits of the saints. It is always a highly profitable habit. It means that we look squarely in the face the things that are lurking in the shadows. There are times in life when we ought to take ourselves to task. We fall into some moods in which we need honest and faithful handling. It is good to challenge ourselves. "Why art thou cast down?"

An old commentator has said that, "David chideth David out of the dumps." All of us must learn to do that. Our faith must chide our feelings, and our hope must overcome our fears. When there is no one else to encourage us we must encourage ourselves. When we can find no comfort in our circumstances we can find all the comfort we need in the "God, that comforteth those that are cast down."

1. He felt his lot was very hard.

Providence seemed to be unfavorable to him. His circumstances and environment were very uncongenial. His life was not always so. At one time the lines were fallen unto him in pleasant places, and he had a goodly heritage. But the remembrance of that time only served to intensify the hardness of his lot. "When I remember these things, I pour out my soul in me: for I had gone with the multitude, I went with them to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise, with a multitude that kept holyday." Psalm 42:4. He was thinking of the good old days and contrasting them with the present evil days. He missed the blessings of days gone by.

In the present days there are many like the Psalmist. Their lot has severely changed for worse. As they look forward into the future they cannot see much prospect of improvement. How can they but be depressed in such circumstances?

2. He received the cruel taunts of his enemies.

"As with a sword in my bones, mine enemies reproach me; while they say daily unto me, Where is thy God?" Psalm 42:10. The enemy of souls makes his fiercest onslaughts on the godly when they fall into adversity. Those who were supposed to be desirous of comforting him in his adversity only said things that were calculated to discourage him, and rob him of his faith in God. Instead of pouring wine and oil into the wounds of his soul they rubbed in salt and vinegar, so that the good man had to call them miserable comforters. The tribe of the miserable comforters has not yet died out by any means. Wherever we turn we come across some of them.

One can readily believe that all people at one time or another are visited with their hours of depression, discouragement, and despondency. Indeed, the contrast of feeling in men's lives today and then again tomorrow is sometimes quite amazing. Take, for example, Elijah, confronting the false prophets on Mount Carmel, hundreds of them, one lone man against hundreds of the prophets of Baal. Elijah withstands them and with sarcasm, marvelous for its pungency, puts them to rout. The very next day this same brave man flees far into the wilderness before the threat of a wicked woman. Take the case of John the Baptist, standing before Herod and the woman consorting by his side, and mark his marvelous moral courage. A little later, when this same brave man languished in prison and he was cast down in spirit, he sent men to ask Jesus: "Art thou he that should come or do we look for another?" All of us at one time or another sail this sea of discouragement. All sensitive people, all very earnest people are likely to have their reactions, their painful contrasts, their fearful reverses in feeling. We should not pass judgment when the hour of depression and discouragement is upon us. That old expression, "Let me sleep over it and I will answer you tomorrow," has great wisdom in it. For a man in the hour of discouragement is likely to be quite unfair, and he will miss the mark sadly, if he be not careful.

We should be on our guard against discouragement, for discouragement is neither good nor wise nor Christian. And certainly to parade our discouragement before people is harmful and sinful. We should present an air of positive kindness and good cheer wherever we go, because others have their difficulties and need from us reinforcement rather than discouragement.

I. The Causes of Despondency.

1. Frequently the cause is purely physical.

The physician knows that better than anybody else. The body is the citadel of life, and it reacts marvelously on the spirit. The body influences the mind and spirit very much. One day Jesus said to a group of tired apostles, "Come ye apart to the desert place and rest awhile." Often a man's battle with discouragement is due to the fact that his body is below par -- that he is down physically.

2. Life's monotony is another cause.

They tell us that "Variety is the spice of life." So it is. Men and women with little horizon in life, with all their conditions circumscribed and narrow, are apt to have hours of discouragement. Life's monotony may explain why discouragement comes.

3. Grievous disappointment.

We make our plans and suddenly they go completely awry. Something we never figured on comes in and turns them topsy-turvy. "After the French Revolution" is one of the most interesting things Wordsworth ever penned. In that story he tells us that he thought the outcome of the French Revolution would be brotherhood and that all the finest qualities of human life would be extolled and glorified, as the earth had never seen it before. But he said, "Lo, a little after the last gun had ceased its echo, men went back to the old scramble of selfishness and bitterness and warfare and unseemly strife." Wordsworth's heart experienced bitter disappointment. The same thing happened following World War I, and now again after World War II.

4. Personal egotism.

The person who is egotistic is to be pitied -- and always he is one with whom it is difficult to deal. While Elijah was lying under the juniper tree, in his hour of awful discouragement, he cried, "I am no better than my fathers." Why, certainly he was not any better than his fathers. Whoever said he was? Why did he think he was? Any one who is possessed of a great measure of personal vanity is riding for a hard fall. Of all the inexcusable things in men, the most inexcusable characteristic is that of vanity, self-conceit or too high an opinion of one's self. With these tendencies, the hour of discouragement is certain to come to any person. God does not want any of us to have an undue sense of our importance, but He does expect us to perform the duties which He assigns us.

5. 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. Apparently, his faith diminished to such an extent that he thought of God as being little or no stronger than the instrument which He used.

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.

6. A false view of the facts of life.

In the hour of his discouragement, Elijah said, "I am the only one left. Why should I stay? I am fighting a losing battle. I have held out the best I could for righteousness, for God and for true holiness, but I am the only one left. Why should I keep on with the battle?" God replied, "Why, Elijah, I have seven thousand men who have never bowed their knees to Baal. You are not the only one left."

The young servant of Elisha was discouraged and feared in his heart when Elisha was withstanding great hosts of enemies who came with mighty pomp and parade. Elisha prayed, "Lord, open the eyes of this young man that he may see; Lord, open his eyes." And when his eyes were opened, he saw the mountains round about filled with the horses and chariots of God. If you and I could have our eyes opened to the true facts of life, we would understand that there is a plan, a program divine, going forward from victory to victory and that Christ must reign until He puts all enemies under His feet.

II. The Cure for Despondency.

1. Right care of the body.

2. Right sort of companions.

Despondency may be eliminated by joining ourselves to other brave souls and magnifying them in their relationship to us. Human companionship with the right kind of people is one of the most vital and helpful things in all of life.

3. Comparison of your lot with that of others.

You will discover what little basis you have for despondency when you compare your lot with others. You will become ashamed of your self when you find out that your battle is not comparable to what many have to fight. Remember what their sufferings are in comparison with yours.

4. Work.

The most miserable people in the world are those who do not work. God's great panacea for thousands of life's woes is work. Work is honorable in all and idleness is dishonorable and sinful. Work often clarifies one's whole moral sky and he goes back to the warfare and wins the victory.

5. Faith in God.

This is an unailing cure for all despondency. Oh, soul, tried and beaten and fettered, put your trust in God! Get your feet fixed on the rock of the purpose of God, instead of seeking the primrose path of our own pleasure or self-will. "hope thou in God." From Him cometh your salvation. He is your satisfying portion. He will not fail you, nor forsake you. As long as we are in this scene of things we shall continue to meet with trials, temptations, disappointments and problems that will naturally discourage us and tend to make us despondent. But faith comes to the rescue and gives us the assurance that God is for us and will see us through.

"Trials many will beset my pathway
And temptations I shall surely meet;
But my Saviour promised grace to help me,
Till I lay my trophies at His feet."

But whatever our circumstances may be we must not cast away our confidence and allow ourselves to become despondent. As George Mueller says, "Is there ever any ground to be cast down? There are two reasons but only two: if we are as yet unconverted, we have ground to be cast down; or, if we are converted and live in sin, then we are rightly cast down. But except for these two things, there is no ground to be cast down, for all else may be brought before God in prayer with supplication and thanksgiving; and regarding all our necessities, all our difficulties, all our trials, we may exercise faith in the power of God, and in the love of God; and in His own time help will come in answer to prayer and faith. Oh, remember this -- there is never a time when we may not hope in God. In the Lord's own time help will come."