

DOWN WITH DISCOURAGEMENT

"Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted in me? hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him for the help of his countenance." Psalm 42:5.

Satan is the source of discouragement. It is his most effective tool with which to keep Christians from conforming to the will of God. An old fable states that Satan once thought of retiring and advertised his tools for sale. People who wanted to buy them came and looked them over. Among his tools were deceit, hypocrisy, envy, malice, lies and greed. Apart from the other tools was one, the high price of which aroused the curiosity of the buyers. Moved by curiosity, one approached Satan and asked, "What is this tool, and why is it so expensive?" With a smirk of cunning on his evil face, the devil replied, "That is my best tool. It is called 'discouragement.' It works when all other tools fail me."

Is there anyone among us on whom Satan has not worked, at one time or another, with this high-priced tool of his? It had certainly been used on the man who penned the forty-second and forty-third Psalms. Three times at least he looked within his own soul and, lo! there was the satanic wedge of discouragement. Three times in these two chapters he cried: "Why art thou cast down, O my soul?"

I. The Temptations To Discouragement.

These two Psalms tell the story of a struggling soul. They open a window on that battlefield with which no other battle can be compared-- the struggle of the individual with himself. David was not talking to an audience in our text, but 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 with the question, "Why art thou cast down, O my soul?"

All of us are prone to moods of discouragement and despondency. Some are more apt to be visited by these moods than others. They have the melancholic temperament. They always tend to see the dark side of things and to expect the worst. The Slough of Despond is never far away, and any hint of trouble or any disappointment is apt to tip them into it. Others have an optimistic outlook. When they do get a setback, they have a natural resilience of spirit that soon rises to shake the dog from their backs. The latter temperament is much easier to live with, both for ourselves and others. Its defect is that it may tend to keep us living on the surface of life without coming resolutely face to face with unpleasant facts. The defect of the despondent temperament is that it may keep us in the grip of its black moods so that we are never able to respond to the ringing notes of faith and hope.

Why was the Psalmist discouraged?

1. He felt his lot was very hard. Providence seemed to be unfavorable to him. His circumstances and environment were very uncongenial. However, his lot 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 seemed only 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.

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. His would-be comforters only said things that were calculated to discourage him and rob him of his faith in God.
3. He forgot God.
David's trouble was not in his circumstances, but it was in himself. He had been in tight places before, but God had always brought him safely through. For some reason his eyes had been removed from the Lord and fixed upon himself, upon his changing experiences and changeable circumstances. If he had only stopped to do a little thinking about God, he would have overcome the blues quickly. He failed to praise God. If you want the blues to get hold of you, just stop praising God. People who praise God faithfully do not get discouraged. Why? Because one cannot praise God and have the blues at the same time. When David quit praising God, his heart became heavy. It seemed to him that he was in the sea and the waves and the billows were going over him. He said, "All thy waves and thy billows are gone over me" (Psalm 42:7). If you are blue and discouraged now, it is because you have failed to praise God for what He has done for you.
4. He was betrayed by those whom he had trusted.
That is a severe trial to the courage and morale of anybody who experiences it. Our text may have referred to the time when King David was in temporary exile because of the rebellion against him that was led by his own son, Absalom the pretender and hypocrite.

Far from home and from the Temple, David does battle with his broken heart. "There are tears in my eyes," he confesses in verse three. "There is a sword in my bones," as it were, he cries in verse ten. Turning his dejected spirit to God, he groans, "All thy waves and thy billows are gone over me." In his isolation and the loneliness which grew out of it, he remembered the days when he was in Jerusalem and pleasantly surrounded with family and friends. With a pang of wistfulness in his heart he recalled having gone with the multitude to the house of God and there joined with them in joyous praise of God.

II. The Technique For Handling Discouragement.

The first thing to do with a dark mood is to try to find out the root of it. To struggle against it without understanding its cause is like fighting an enemy in the dark. Sometimes there are shadows where there are no clouds. We do not know why the dark mood has come. If we know the real cause of the despondency, we can deal with it. We can bring it out into the light of our faith. Some moods, like certain insects, can only live in the dark. Giant Despair, Bunyan tells us, had fits on sunshiny mornings.

Our depression and discouragement may, however, have a cause we can identify. The cause may, of course, be purely physical. The body is the citadel of life, and it reacts marvelously on the spirit. The body influences the mind and spirit very much. Often one's battle with discouragement is due to the fact that physically he is below par. Life's monotony may be another cause. When there is no variety at all, no new horizon in the morning, but the same work and the same haunting worry day in and day out, we are apt to grow disheartened. It is the sameness that discourages us.

Another cause of discouragement is the seeming lack of progress in life. There has not been the progress, the victory and the result which were anticipated so confidently; therefore, it is easy for one to be downcast. Sometimes one makes plans, and suddenly they are shattered. Having failed in this or that piece of work, the sense of futility has taken hold of one and persuaded him to believe that no struggle has been worth-while.

As to the technique for handling discouragement, three suggestions are in order.

1. Know yourself emotionally.

Don't make a bad matter worse by saying to yourself or to others, "Well, what can I expect--I inherited this tendency toward despondency. Blaming heredity becomes a form of fatalism, and it never helps anybody toward the mastery of self. Understand that in situations of strain or risk or challenge you are going to be tempted to discouragement. That is the time to pray, "Lord, toughen me to take it! Empower me to go through with it!"

2. Deal honestly with yourself.

In his low and disconsolate moments the Psalmist sought to pin the blame for his state of mind on the Lord and the unhappy circumstances in which he found himself. He remarked, "I will say unto God my rock, Why hast thou forgotten me?" (Psalm 42:9). But the fact is that God had not forgotten him. He complained, "Why dost thou cast me off?" (Psalm 43:2). But the fact is God had not cast him off.

When disappointments, disturbances and difficulties crash in on us and depress us, we are prone to blame it on our circumstances. What we had better do is to say to ourselves: "These circumstances are not pleasant, but there is something more important than the circumstances themselves, and that is the way I react to them." What I am on the inside, through Christ who dwells in me, determines whether I shall react passively and pessimistically or courageously and creatively. A sympathetic friend said to a polio victim, "Affliction does so color life." To this statement the young woman, hopelessly crippled by the paralysis, responded: "Yes, and I propose to choose the color!"

3. Forget yourself promptly.

Don't let the cloud of discouragement hover over you long until you deliberately, prayerfully and resolutely forget yourself. A woman, following the birth of her third child, fell into a very stubborn state of depression. After a year of it she sought counsel. It came to light that her father had been a doctor. She had dreamed in childhood of being a doctor. After her father's death and the years of family-making for herself and her husband, she

had begun to think that she had made a terrible mistake by giving up the career of medicine for marriage and a family. Her regret became an obsession. She had to be shown, first, that a faithful, intelligent performance of her duties as a wife and mother could easily be as great a service in the long run as if she had remained single and pursued a medical career. Secondly, she had to be shown that the love of God, if she surrendered herself to it, would lead her to go beyond her domestic duties and give some time to others. She began working with the local "blood bank." Soon, with her mind taken off herself, she was lifted clear of her depression.

III. The Triumph Over Discouragement.

The ultimate secret of triumph over discouragement is faith in God. The Psalmist said, "Hope thou in God." Confidence and faith in God constitute the final bastion of defense against the onrushing of discouragement. 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 your 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. 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."

Remember this--there is never a time when we may not hope in God. In the Lord's own good time help will come. Therefore, cast down the black flag of discouragement and raise the white banner of hope.