

THE PROBLEM OF DISCOURAGEMENT

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on January 25, 1970 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

Discouragement is one of the most devastating enemies of every good man and of every worthwhile cause. By causing people to believe that success is impossible, discouragement has brought about the failure of countless good endeavors. When a man thinks that he cannot succeed, inevitably he does not try hard enough to succeed. There is no greater blight than the expectation of failure. Some people are more prone to be discouraged than others, but all of us feel depressed from time to time.

In thinking through the scriptures for a man who demonstrated the paralyzing effect of discouragement, I ultimately settled upon the prophet Elijah. Elijah the Tishbite was one of the greatest prophets of the Old Testament. He stood high among the most esteemed of Hebrew characters in the minds of the Hebrew race. It was he who was chosen from among the prophets to be transfigured with Christ, along with the great leader and lawgiver Moses. This within itself shows an unsurpassed preeminence.

The life of Elijah can best be described as a continuing war with King Ahab and his wife Jezebel. There were many skirmishes and many battles. Jezebel came from Tyre and brought with her a deep determination to replace the worship of Jehovah among the people with the worship of her god Baal. She was clever, ruthless, and powerful. At one point in the story Elijah became so discouraged that he fled to Beer-sheba and then on to a cave on Mt. Horeb deep in the Sinai desert.

The story is told in I Kings 19. "Then Jezebel sent a messenger unto Elijah, saying, So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I make not thy life as the life of one of them (the prophets of Baal who had been slain) by tomorrow about this time. And when he saw that, he arose, and went for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, 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 Jehovah, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers."

After God had caused him to be fed by an angel he regained some strength and the story continued, "And he arose, and did eat and drink, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights unto Horeb the mount of God. And he came thither unto a cave, and lodged there: and, behold, the word of Jehovah came to him, and he said unto him? What doest thou here Elijah? and he said, I have been very jealous for Jehovah, the God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, torn 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 ... And Jehovah said unto him, Go, return on thy way to the wilderness of Damascus." God's directions continued in pointing out work that he had for Elijah to do and then concluded, "Yet will I leave me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him." (I Kings 19:24, 8-10, 15, 18).

Elijah is an example of deep discouragement. Furthermore, he is an unexpected example, for at this distance it appears that he should have realized that God was on his side and that ultimately he would be victorious over the enemies of righteousness. However, even this unusually good man fell prey to the temptation to become discouraged. He had strong and powerful enemies, He was lonely, with no wife or family or friends. He made a solitary and heroic stand against unrighteousness, but ultimately he gave up. An expression used by the prophet Isaiah in describing the coming Messiah fits Elijah quite well, "I have trod the winepress alone, and of the people there is none to help." (Is. 63:3). Eventually his courage melted and he became so discouraged that he wished that he might die.

When Things Go Wrong

I have tried to analyze the situations in which we are most likely to become discouraged. One of these situations obviously is the occasion when conditions all about us seem to be going wrong. Sometimes this is true on a national level or even a world level. I think today we live in such a time as this. Many trends are in the wrong direction. It is a time of unusual sensualism, overpowering materialism, and growing irreligion. Crime is multiplying. Drugs are in wider use. There is a spirit of rebellion. And the war goes on and on. The Communists tease at the peace table. The Mafia prospers. Pornography grows bigger and bigger. At times it seems almost hopeless to stand against these and other negative, discouraging trends of our day.

However, our day is not nearly so hopeless as the age described by the prophet Micah in the Old Testament. He wrote, "The godly man has perished out of the earth, and there is none upright among men: they all lie in wait for blood; they hunt every man his brother with a net. Their hands are upon that which is evil to do it diligently; the prince asketh, and the judge is ready for a reward; and the great man, he uttereth the evil desires of his soul: thus they weave it together. The best of them is as a brier; the most upright is worse than a thorn hedge: ... trust ye not in a neighbor; put ye not confidence in a friend ... For the son dishonoreth the father, the daughter riseth up against her mother, the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; a man's enemies are the men of his own house." (Micah 7: 2-3). We can at least be glad that our situation is not that bad.

Sometimes the problems are more personal than national in their scope. In every individual's life there will be discouragement. There is the inevitable matter of aging, there is illness and there is bereavement. In addition, there are many unfulfilled ambitions and goals which must be filed away as unattainable as we go on through the years. Sometimes we feel almost as David did, "There is but a step between me and death." (I Sam. 20:3). It is in discouraging times like these that we might well remember the poem of some unknown author:

When things go wrong, as they sometimes will,
When the road you're trudging seems all up hill,
When the funds are low and the debts are high,
And you want to smile, but have to cry,
When care is pressing you down a bit,
Rest, if you must--but don't you quit."

It is good in times like these to remember the Lord's warm, invitation, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." (Matt. 11:28). Or, those matchless words of the apostle Paul, "And we know that to them that love God all things work together for good, even to them that are called according to his purpose." (Rom. 8:28). Then, there are the words of the apostle John in Rev. 2:10, "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee the crown of life."

When We Have Failed

In the second place, discouragements are likely to come upon us when in our own lives there is some personal failure. Perhaps we have lost a job, or been forced to drop out of school, or had to give up some cherished goal or ambition. Failures are of many kinds and come at various points in our lives. With each there comes the great temptation to become discouraged and to give up the battle.

Perhaps you are familiar with the facts set forth in a little paragraph by J. R. Sizoo in his book, *Still We Can Hope*. "A young man ran for the legislature in Illinois and was badly defeated. He next entered business, failed, and spent the next seventeen years paying back the debt. He was in love with a beautiful girl to whom he became engaged, and then she died. He then tried to get an appointment to the United States Land Office but was refused. Entering politics again he ran for Congress and was badly swamped. He became a candidate for the U. S. Senate and was brushed aside. In 1856 he became a candidate for the Vice-Presidency and was hardly considered. In 1858 he was defeated by Douglas. One failure after another, and they were dark failures and great disappointments."

Here are enough failures to cause a man to give up and quit. However, the story has an unbelievable ending for we remember that two years later, in 1860, this man who had been so consistently dogged by failure was elected President of the United States. Not only was Abraham Lincoln elected President, he went on to become one of the most highly respected men in the history of the entire world. No American stands higher in the esteem of people around the globe than this man who had the deep determination to press on, even after repeated failure. One cannot but think about what might have happened if Abraham Lincoln had given up after one of his early fiascoes.

Perhaps an even more meaningful example for us is that of Saul of Tarsus. In his early years he had come to believe that Christians were enemies of God. Consequently he had persecuted Christians to the death. When later he came to realize how totally wrong he had been, how deep must have been his feelings of despair. When he thought of individuals and families whose lives he had ruined by his persecutions he must have been chagrined. However, having made one tragic mistake, he did not make a second. He closed the door on his regrettable past and faced the future with a new determination to spend his remaining years on the Lord's side. He says this in effect in Phil. 3:13-14, "Brethren, I count not myself yet to have laid hold: but one thing I do, forgetting the things which are behind, and stretching forward to the things that are before, I press on toward the goal unto the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." This is our model. This is how we ought to act when we have made some great mistake or failure.

When We Are Weak And Helpless

In the third place, there are many bad situations beyond our power to remedy. Sometimes these are in the affairs of our nation or our world. Sometimes they are closer home as when our children are grown and gone. Rather than brood about what we might have done, or what we wish we could do but cannot, there is a better way. As we read the story of Christ's life, we find an occasion when the apostle Thomas must have felt discouragement in a situation in which he felt helpless to do anything that would prevent Christ's suffering. It was when Jesus and his disciples were east of the Jordan in the wilderness, late in his public ministry. Danger and threat of death lay at Jerusalem, but when the message came that Lazarus had died Jesus declared his intention to go to Bethany on the outskirts of Jerusalem. It was almost like walking into a death trap. It was then that Thomas said, "Let us also go that we may die with him." There is love and loyalty in this sentence, but there is also defeat and despair.

In this connection I would like to repeat the words of Jimmy Allen, which appeared in *Power For Today*, in the November-December issue of 1969. He wrote, "I am completely inadequate and incapable to live each day without divine help. By 'living' I mean meeting the day to day problems which arise. The tensions of life can be overpowering for man's own unaided ability. It is easy to become depressed. Discouragement is familiar to most of us. Loneliness is not an uncommon experience. Loneliness is especially present if

there is a great deal of separation from family and loved ones. Recently, a friend asked me to list a few of my favorite Biblical statements. I mentioned Romans 8:28 and Ps. 23:1-6 ... The one, however, which has meant more to me than any other is Phil. 4:13--'I can do all things in him that strengtheneth me.' I have repeated these words in preparing to preach to large audiences in some of our major campaigns, in planning to teach college Bible classes, in striving to be a Christian husband and father, and in the constant battle to bring my flesh into subjection to the will of God. In the present operative power of Christ, I can do all things expected of me by the Father. What a tremendous reality!"

When We Are Alone

Finally, temptation to become discouraged also comes when we are alone. I think we feel it in the description of Paul's entrance into ancient Athens. As we read the account in Acts 17, Silas and Timothy had stayed behind. Paul goes alone into this great pagan city and even though he preached on Mars Hill there is no indication that he was successful enough in his preaching to establish a church. He soon moved on to Corinth, sending word to Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible. We feel something of his apprehensiveness later on when he approached the city of Rome. Being brought as a prisoner, accompanied by a few of his friends, he was walking up the Appian Way when suddenly there appeared several brethren from Rome who had heard of his coming. Luke wrote of this meeting "And from thence the brethren, when they heard of us, came to meet us as far as the Market of Appias and The Three Taverns; whom when Paul saw, he thanked God, and took courage." (Acts 28: 15). Even so great an apostle as Paul was apprehensive and lonely and needed to be encouraged.

His real spirit is shown in these words "We are pressed on every side, yet not straightened; perplexed, yet not unto despair; pursued, yet not forsaken; smitten down, yet not destroyed; always bearing about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life also of Jesus may be manifested in our body ... Wherefore we faint not; but though our outward man is decaying, yet our inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is for the moment, worketh for us more and more exceedingly an eternal weight of glory." (II Cor. 4:8-10,16-17).

In the final hours of his life, Jesus also felt this loneliness. John's account of the scene in Gethsemane contains these words, "Behold, the hour cometh, yea, is come, that ye shall be scattered, every man to his own, and shall leave me alone: and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me." (John 16:32). And it is this note that we would emphasize. Even when we are physically alone, as in old age, or as in some far away work, let us always remember that we are never alone in the total sense. God is always with us. In Matt. 28:20 Jesus says, "I will be with you always. This is our sustaining power when loneliness would cause us to be tempted to be discouraged.

Conclusion

Discouragement is one of our most deadly temptations. It can erode away our desire to continue the battle. It can cause us to be paralyzed by fears of defeat. It can ruin our lives. Let us be on our guard and let us realize that our only hope is to lean heavily upon the Lord and to draw strength and power from him. May we also learn to say over and over again, "I can do all things in him that strengtheneth me." And may we add the further sentence, "And my God shall supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus." (Phil. 4:13, 19).