

## "WHEN LIFE LETS US DOWN"

### INTRODUCTION

The devil, they said, was holding an auction in his workshop. He was selling some of his tools. There were several of them because the devil is a busy person and has lots of work to do, and needs the right tool for every situation. There was a tool called pride and another called lust. There was a tool called greed and still another called anger. Over in the corner was a tool with a tag on it which read NOT FOR SALE. Someone asked the Devil about it, and he replied: "Why that's one of my most valuable tools; I wouldn't be without it. It's a wedge called discouragement."

Whether you believe it's the wedge of the devil or not, it is true, however, that one of life's common experiences is discouragement. The youngest and the oldest among us have known it. The child has plans for his day only to have them thwarted by his parents who have plans of their own for him to follow. The young person fails an important test, or he's not accepted into a group that he desperately wants to be a part of. The man in business fails to get the promotion he felt he had earned. A person finds that a trusted friend has violated a confidence.

We all know what it is to have hopes and dreams shattered - hopes and dreams for our own lives, for our children, for causes we have given ourselves to. And at such times we feel that life has let us down. We begin to wish that we could somehow resign from the human race. Discouragement wedges its way into our lives.

### ELIJAH'S SITUATION

Now, this was exactly the way that the prophet Elijah felt - a portion of whose dramatic story was read to us earlier in the service.

If you remember anything about Elijah's situation, you may recall that only a little while before he had been riding the crest of great popularity - the hero of his people. For Elijah, on God's command, had challenged the prophets of Baal to a dramatic contest on Mount Carmel. The challenge was to build an altar and have their God send down fire from heaven to ignite the sacrifice. When the Baals failed to answer their prayers, Elijah called upon the power of his God and fire rained down from heaven, utterly consuming the sacrifice. Elijah then commanded the people to rise up against these false prophets and there on Mt. Carmel they slew four hundred and fifty of them.

This was an occasion of great personal triumph for Elijah, but in the process he made a powerful enemy. Her name was Jezebel; the wicked and notorious Queen, furious at the death of her prophets, proceeded to pronounce Elijah's doom. She swore that she would do to him exactly what he had done to her prophets. And in fear for his life, Elijah felt it best to clear out and he fled south into the land of Beersheba and made his way into the wilderness. There he found a cave and crawled into it to hide. Hever had there been a man so discouraged, so beaten, so much at the end of his rope.

### HID IN A CAVE

There are times when we feel at the end of our rope, times when defeat and discouragement invade our lives and when they do, it's a natural reaction to want to run off and hide somewhere. Like Elijah, we go searching for some convenient cave to retreat to. We wish we could stay there after finding one. Think of some of the caves available to us.

For some, alcohol may become a cave of retreat. It provides people, for a little while, with a kind of forgetfulness about their real situation, a numbness

that seems welcome at the moment. Unfortunately, those who retreat into this cave are apt to find that it tends to make them less able to cope effectively with their problem later on.

For some - illness...physical or mental...may be the means of escaping, the convenient cave where one can hide. We can laugh at the six year old who announces, "Tomorrow I'm going to be sick and will have to stay at home from school". But, it's less amusing - indeed, it is sad - when a fifty year old tries the same tactic in order to avoid a situation he or she doesn't wish to face.

Or, what about the person who wallows around in self-pity, rehearsing over and over again the injuries he has received, the slights he imagines he has suffered, the heart-aches he has borne. Self-pity is another kind of cave that some people like to crawl into.

Religion can become a kind of cave, too, where people retreat from the world and its demands. This is not good. It's a poor use of religion. As a boy I can remember enjoying a particular anthem that our church choir would occasionally sing. I can't recall the exact lines, but it went something like this: "If I had the wings of a dove, I would fly away and be at peace". I confess to you, rather irreverently, that part of my enjoyment for me was the vision or fantasy I could easily conjure up, as these elderly ladies were singing of the horror if their pleas should be granted and if the lead soloist in some miraculous way should suddenly spout wings and be lifted out of the window, off to some more peaceful realm.

I felt that what that choir and church needed was not to be more at peace, but rather to be stirred up a little. The Church sometimes allows itself to be so other worldly that it has become for some a cave of retreat rather than a school for learning in order to live more effectively with others in this world.

There are other caves that one could mention, and when we become discouraged, when we hurt with pain, a cave seems like a good solution. Only this: it never is a final solution for the problem. It wasn't for Elijah, nor is it for us. There is no way to hide from life's blessed moments and there is also no way to hide from its bitter moments. Neither Elijah in his cave on Mount Carmel, nor we in the caves into which we retreat when the going gets tough, will be allowed to get away with such evasion. This is not God's will for us!

#### WHAT HAPPENED

Let's go back to Elijah and pick up the story again and see what happened. He was cowering in his cave and the voice of the Lord came to him demanding: "Elijah, what are you doing here?" Chances are, if he had been completely honest with himself, would have said, "Lord, I'm scared....frightened....I've had it up to here....I'm hiding". But instead, like most of us, he tried to justify himself before God and he proceeded to recite all of his grievances....all of the terrible things he had suffered and piously suggested that he was alone in the world in his loyalty to God. Nobody had ever had it quite so bad; talk about self-pity.

The narrative suggests this thought to us: isn't it true that sometimes our deepest discouragement comes after our greatest success. Perhaps it is only natural, for sometimes in our moments of success we do allow ourselves to get an exaggerated sense of our own importance.

I have a friend who is a minister who, after many years of fine service in one town, moved to another. The people in his former parish missed him greatly and spoke so lavishly in their regard of him and what he had done in that town. I mentioned this to him several weeks ago when I saw him at annual conference, and he spoke of how sorry he was to leave that community, but perhaps the move was good for him if only to remind him, as he put it, "of the fragile nature of success". That's a good phrase - "the fragile nature of success". This may be the cause of our discouragement. We sometimes get to thinking we're better and more important than we are.

If we are to learn how to deal with our disappointments, then we must be prepared to answer the same question the Lord put to Elijah: "What are you doing in that cave?" And we must answer that question honestly. It may be that we're there from a feeling of self-pity because we have not emotionally accepted the fact that this sort of thing can happen to us. It can happen, as we know, to anyone. God plays no favorites.

COME OUT OF THE CAVE

We need to hear his second word, too. "Come out of the cave, Elijah, and stand upon the mountain".

Elijah did so and as you may recall, he experienced the most remarkable religious experience recorded in the Old Testament. The tremendous power of the Lord poured down on him. The earth trembled; a mighty whirlwind surged around him; a consuming fire raged. Elijah was terrified. Against this cosmic display of the Almighty in nature what could he do and what did his life add up to. But Elijah, you'll recall found that the Lord was not in the earthquake, nor was He in the wind, nor was He in the fire. Instead the spirit of the Lord came to Him as a still, small voice speaking quietly in his own heart and assuring him of a peace, of a power, of a presence that was even more real and vivid to him than any manifestation of God in nature could ever be.

In times of our discouragement, we need to be brought out of our caves to stand in that place where we, too, can find God, where we can experience something of His presence and power, and in so doing relate our lives to His life. To me, this is why our worship is so important. Here in this place and in places like it, people can expose their lives through prayer and worship to His life and to His spirit. Here, they seek to hear His word and to find His will. Insight, direction, new perspectives, strength, peace, power, purpose, patience - all of these come as a person stands before God.

Helen Hayes had a daughter, Mary, who when she was 20, was stricken with polio. Miss Hayes reflecting on that once said,

"I went to Church every morning to pray...but I had become careless with my religion and had all but cut God out of my life. I didn't have the nerve to ask Him to make my daughter well. I prayed only for understanding. When Mary died, I felt my prayers had not been answered. But I later learned that this experience gave my life meaning which until then had escaped me. I became a living part of God's world of people".

GO BACK

And the last word that God had for Elijah was this:

"Go back. Go back to the situation from which you have come. You are not alone; you have completely misperceived the situation. There are still 7,000 persons in Israel who are loyal to

to me. Find them and get on about my business".

And so Elijah, ordered back into life, left his mountain and went back to try to carry through on God's will. And in a way, isn't this what is demanded of us? For many of us, the temptation is to linger in the cave, or to linger on the mountain-top of inspiration. But we are sent back into the valley of every day life....sent back to that place where we perhaps encountered the experience that brought about our discouragement, there to face it, to struggle with it, to overcome it to the best of our ability.

AN ILLUSTRATION

Remember how in 1939 and 1940, thousands of English children were evacuated from their homes to avoid the physical destruction of the Nazi bombs. The authorities were convinced that this move was necessary to give these children the best chance for physical safety and security. But, it was discovered later on that many of them - even though they were physically safe suffered emotionally because of the separation from their homes and families and the emotional security they had known. Bishop Kennedy of California, commenting on this fact, makes this point:

"The thing which the children of God need the most is not to be withdrawn from the bombardments of life and be physically sound and safe. It is to come to know again the security which is ours in God, who surrounds us with his protection even when the dangers of life are the hardest to bear".

It is hard to make this claim without sounding somewhat overpious and over-sentimental, but I believe that God has the power to help redeem our disappointments.....and to turn them into something constructive, if we will let Him. I believe there is no disappointment beyond His power. This is what I believe He was doing on the Cross on Calvary. This is what I understand Helen Keller to mean when she says:

"When one door of happiness closes, another one opens. But so often we look so long at the closed door that we do not see the one which has been opening to us".

Friends, there are times in life when you and I need to hear this reassuring word. Times when we need to be reminded that we can never drift beyond the circle of that love and care. Perhaps there is someone person in the congregation this morning who needs to hear it: to know that there is for you the chance to begin again, putting all that is past behind you, and looking forward to the future:

"Come out of the cave; stand on the mountain, experience God's power and presence....go back to the situation from which you have come".

PRAYER

In those moments of life that can be filled with discouragement and disappointment, when the pressures of life seem to exceed our power to meet them, save us O God from thinking that the end has come. Open our eyes to see thy presence in the time of trouble, to speak quietly in our hearts, even as thou didst long ago with Elijah. Remind us that we live, not by ourselves, but by the strength which thou hast given to each of us. In and through Jesus Christ, our Lord, we pray. Amen

to hear the word God spoke long ago to Elijah -