

WHEN THINGS LOOK HOPELESS

INTRODUCTION There have been times when all of us have felt helpless in a situation that looked hopeless. For instance, you know a person who is drinking too much; you can see him going down hill; you watch him deteriorate day by day. His family suffers, his business declines, his friends slip away, and his life shrinks on every front. You would do almost anything in the world to help him, but you are absolutely helpless for he has not yet come to the point where he either wants help or thinks that he needs it, and you cannot help him until that time arrives.

Or, you know a person who is getting more and more confused mentally, living a life farther and farther removed from reality. You see him withdrawing little by little into a world of fantasy. You ask people who are supposed to know about such things what the prospects for the future are, and you learn that they're not very good. You'd give your life if it would help the person, but there seems to be nothing that you can do. The situation looks hopeless, and you feel helpless.

Or, on a much larger scale, you see the world, and as you reflect upon the tensions that are part of its day to day existence, you can't help but wonder what's ahead. How long will it be before things explode. As you read the newspapers, and as you watch television programs like the one that many of you saw last weekend entitled, "Castor, Cuba and Communism", you have a feeling of helpless and hopelessness.

You know what I'm talking about without my going into it in any greater detail. The chances are that there is no one in this congregation who has never felt completely helpless in a situation that looked hopeless. My question is, What do you do? What do you do when you feel that way?

YOU DO WHAT ELIJAH DID You probably do what Elijah did when he felt that way. You, like him, give in to it. This is what Elijah did. He said, if we dare to put it into the vernacular, "I've had it! I've had about all that I can take. I've had enough. I'm a man, and I'm going to die sometime. I'd just as soon die now and get it all over with."

The surprising thing is that just before he said that he had scored an enormous success. He alone, single handed, had challenged four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal to a trial by fire. He said, "We'll settle this question here and now, once and for all, and we will demonstrate who is really God. Bring all of your prophets to Mount Carmel. Get them all together and arrange for a sacrifice, and then ask your God to send the fire that will light the blaze." The worshippers of Baal did this. They prayed to their Gods. They danced around the altar of sacrifice. They sang, they gashed themselves with knives, they performed all of their rites and ceremonies. But there was not a single spark; the fire did not come; their gods did not answer. They gave up.

You know how the rest of the story goes. Elijah, alone, prepared his sacrifice. He drenched it in water. Then he prayed to God and

said, (if again we dare to put it into the vernacular), "God, this is your chance. If you are really God, show the people that you are by sending the fire." The fire began to burn, and it blazed, and the people knew that the God of Israel was really God. This was a moment of triumph.

You wonder then, why did Elijah feel so helpless, and regard the situation as hopeless. For a very good reason. You see when the Queen heard what he had done, she sent him a message in which she said that within twenty-four hours he would be dead. Elijah knew that she meant what she said, and he ran for his life. He went into the wilderness and in a state of exhaustion, threw himself under a tree and cried out, "It is enough. I have had enough of it. I'm helpless against the queen. She is too powerful for me."

The queen, you see, was a foreigner. The king had married the princess from Tyre as a political expedient. This had been done in order to cement relationships between Phoenicia and Israel. She was a powerful woman, and in addition to being powerful, she was unscrupulous, and when you find both elements in a person, there's danger ahead. She brought her own religion with her, and it was quite different from the religion of Israel. It was a natural religion. It's difficult for us to appreciate fully the degree of difference. She had been brought up to worship the gods of fertility, the gods of the land. Elijah, on the other hand, had been brought up to worship the God of all nature, who revealed himself most fully and finally not in fertility but in character, not in seed time and harvest, but in justice. So you can see that this was no insignificant contest. This was a real contest between a religion of nature and a religion of moral law.

Elijah was one of the few who dared to stand up and protest against the queen's policy. He could see what was happening. The queen, Jezebel, first converted her husband to the new religion. Then she brought priests from Tyre and set up a shrine to Baal, and then she began to lure the people of the country away from their own religion toward hers. And she was realizing some success in this.

Elijah, weired, almost wild, appeared out of the blue. Nobody had ever heard of him. Nobody knew who his parents were. He met the king and told him that he would stop the rain unless the king himself stopped all of this nonsense. A bold thing to do. It was a brave man who dared to oppose the royal family. The amazing thing is that Elijah did stop the rain. There was a drought for three years, and this, of course, didn't help to increase the king's popularity, nor did it help to endear Elijah to Jezebel. And then, as the drought came to an end, the great victory on Mount Carmel took place.

You can understand how Elijah must have felt. He had made his protest. He had caused a three year drought in order to arouse the conscience of the people. He had won the contest on Mount Carmel. He had defeated the prophets of Baal. But he hadn't been able to win the battle against the queen. She was too much for him. And this is why he said what he said, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life".

HE SAID WHAT HE FELT

I think it's a healthy thing to say what you really feel, and not go around pretending that all is well when you know that it really isn't. I think it was good, it was healthy for Elijah to say what he really felt. If he felt that he couldn't take it any longer, that he couldn't hold his own against the queen, it was better for him to say it.

And it is better for you to say it. If you feel helpless, if you feel your situation is hopeless, the best thing for you to do is to say it. In a real sense, your spirit never begins to rise until it touches bottom. I think you know what I mean. Your spirit never begins to rise to its maximum height until it hits rock bottom. So your first move is into the wilderness, figuratively speaking, and to sit down and say to yourself, "I feel helpless in a situation that looks absolutely hopeless."

Now after you have done that, I hope you will do what Elijah did next. He went to sleep. As you can imagine, he was exhausted physically and emotionally. He had been through a severe trial. He had traveled a long way under emotional strain, and now he was tired. So he went to sleep.

There are times when you have to let off steam. There are times when you must say exactly what you think; that you've been imposed upon, that nothing is right, that nothing can be done about it. There are times when you have to do this sort of thing. Of course there are some of us who tend to do this too often, sometimes at the expense of the feelings of other people, and when I see people doing this I often think they're just reflecting their own inner turmoil. But there are times when you have to do this sort of thing, for so long as the steam is boiling inside of you, there is no rest, not even for the weary, and rest is what you need. The lower the level of your physical energy, the darker things are bound to appear. You know this without my having to say it. Situations that seem hopeless at midnight never seem quite so hopeless in the morning, not because the situation has changed, but because you have changed. I was brought up on the advice that one never makes a major decision at night when one is tired from the toil and tension of the day. Decisions ought to be made in the morning when one is fresh, when one's physical energies have been repaired and revived.

Elijah's rest was disturbed in a rather unusual way, in a way in which your rest is not likely to be disturbed. He was awakened by an angel who touched him on the shoulder and said, "Get up and eat". Elijah looked around - he was in the wilderness, remember - and lo, and behold, there was a cake and a jar of water. So he got up and ate.

This reminds us how much of a piece we are: how the body, mind and spirit of a man are interlaced; how independent they are and how one influences the other no matter how you try to avoid it. When the body is over-fed, the mind is likely to be sluggish; when the body is starved, the spirit is likely to crumble. Under normal circumstances the spirit rises when the body is rest and fed. When, therefore, you feel helpless and things look hopeless, you may need a good night's rest and a good square meal.

"Jesus, lover of my soul,
Let me to thy bosom fly.
Other refuge have I none,
Hangs my helpless soul on Thee;
Thou of life the fountain art,
Freely let me take of thee;
Spring thou up within my heart,
Rise to all eternity."

PRAYER: O god, when we feel helpless in situations that look hopeless, give us the honesty to say what we feel and think and then lead us to the place where we will find strength. Guide us to thyself as thou hast made thyself known to us in Christ Jesus, our Lord. In his spirit we pray. Amen