

UP FROM SIN

The Fall and Rise of a Prodigal
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by

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CHAPTER NINE

THE MASTERY OF DISCOURAGEMENT

“And they journeyed from Mount Hor by the way of the Red sea, to compass the land of Edom: and the soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way” (Numbers 21:14).

I have often thought of the disciple Thomas. He was not present with the others when Jesus came to them. He was overcome with discouragement on account of the Saviour's death. So, to reach Thomas Jesus had to pay a second visit to the company. And even then Thomas was hard to convert and redeem from his discouragement. But when Jesus invited the poor, doubting, pessimistic disciple to thrust his hand into His gaping wound, he said, **“My Lord and my God.”**

So it has been in the history of many a man and woman. At some unexpected moment the forces of discouragement have taken hold of them, and they have fallen from a state of flattering prospects to one of miserable despair.

This was the trouble with Israel. They wanted to take a straight course through the land of Edom. But Edom was stubborn, and declared it should not be allowed. So they had to pass around the country. Consequently they grew much discouraged, and it took all the power of their God-inspired leader to keep them from dropping out by the way.

How like many a college student. He looks out at the years ahead – years to be made and studies to be mastered, before he is equipped for life, and he becomes discouraged, and oftentimes in spite of all that can be done drops out by the way, and makes a wreck of a bright prospect.

But his is not only true of student life – it is true of all life. The dreaded octopus of man is discouragement.

I. ITS NATURE

1. *It is sometimes purely physical.*

The late Charles F. Deems used to say, “Many a man needs physic more than prayer.”

By this he did not mean to underestimate the place or power of prayer, or to overestimate the importance of physic; but that many disturbances, mental and moral, are physical and would be overcome by such physical exercises as God ordained for the alleviation of such conditions. I have seen a bright eyed, hopeful woman, once earnest and active in all that was pure and good, wholly overcome by the gloom of severest despondency, because of a reversion of all the laws of physical economy. Such cases need our best advice, our pity, our patience and our prayers.

2. It is often imaginary.

You have doubtless read of the man who always contended that there was a lion in his path. He had an eye for lions. The wolf, the dog and the panther gave him no concern, but it was ever "a lion." If he went to the field to plough, nobody could convince him that there was not a lion within fifty feet of the fence. If he went to town, he was certainly in the streets. If he went to bed, he could hear him growl and scratch at his door. If he looked out the window, he could see his red, fiery eyes peering through the panes of glass.

Finally, to get rid of the lion he took his own life. It was a despicable fix to be in; but how many are almost as miserable. Some poodle pup has crossed our path and wagged its stumpy tail, and we have fancied him a lion. How many a wife or husband has gone down before the lion of jealousy, when the monster beast was never around. How many businessmen have closed their doors at the roaring of a lion in some distant forest. How many students have turned back from the lion of physics before they have gotten beyond the simple rule of three. Alas, alas, how many an earnest child of God has turned loose a glorious scheme for humanity and dwarfed their own spiritual life because of a trouble that never was.

3. It is often due to our environments.

I know of nothing so contagious as atmosphere. Scientists are now about to account for every ill of humanity by the atmosphere. It is a mighty day for atmospheric germs.

However much or little there may be in the atmospheric production of disease, there is a mighty significance in the atmosphere man carries.

Saul once sent messengers to take David. When these messengers approached they saw the company of prophets prophesying, and they began to prophesy. Another company of messengers was sent by Saul, and they began to prophesy. Finally Saul went himself, and when he saw the men prophesying he too began to prophesy. Oh, the power of our environments!

How unconsciously they stamp us. To-day we are full of hope. Life before us is a panorama with beautiful streams and streamlets, towering peaks whose sun-kissed heads are wreathed in perpetual beauty. But how is it to-morrow? We are so blue we are almost black. What's the matter? No change has taken place. Things are moving along with the usual ups and downs that are common to life. What is the matter? Why, the environments have changed. We have drifted in when the wrong servants were prophesying.

I know a young man who is my friend. He is a strong friend much of the time. He would fight for me. But he has a sweetheart who doesn't know me except by certain garbled newspaper reports. Such knowledge is always bad. When my friend gets with his girl she throws a chill over him, and he has a hard time for a while to know whether he is or is not my friend. Let us look well to the influence we allow to be exerted over us. We should know our position, and then maintain ourselves and carry our own atmosphere.

4. *It is sometimes necessary.*

This was true in the case of Mary and Martha, two trusted friends of Jesus. He said, when approached about Lazarus' sickness, "**This sickness is not unto death, but to the intent that ye might believe.**" So often God allows discouragements to come upon us for our own good.

First, that they may enable us to know how to deal with those who are likewise discouraged.

Some time ago a favorite cousin of mine was sick in a private sanitarium. About midnight I got a phone message from the sympathetic doctor:

"Come over here, I am afraid your cousin won't live long."

I hastened to the sanitarium, and found the doctors weighed down with grief, almost equal to my own. Finally they left me alone. I could hear them talking in a subdued tone, and walking up and down the hall. It was a sad time for us all. But do you know, my grief looked not only in the direction of the suffering girl, but to the good doctors, who, from all human consideration, held her life in their hands.

"Poor men," said I to myself, "I've been where you are to-night. I've walked the floor. I've felt it all. I'm so sorry for you."

Yes, it was a fellowship of suffering. I had been schooled in it. And so with many of our discouragements, God allows them that we may be prepared to help those who are discouraged. And once prepared we are expected to act.

There is no greater need to-day than sympathy. It is said that the indifference felt by many people in cities about the fate of their next door neighbor caused Henry Grady to leave New York City.

As a young man he was employed on the *New York Herald*. As he was leaving his boarding house one morning, shortly after his arrival in the city, he saw a hearse standing in front of the adjourning house.

"Who is dead?" Grady asked his landlady.

"Sure, I don't know," was her reply, with such a tone of indifference as to fall like a clod on the heart of the young Georgian who had sorrowed from his youth in every grief that came into the family of a neighbor. As he started down to his office, a little coffin was being borne down the steps, followed by a mother who was crying as if her heart would break.

He turned to ask his landlady if she was going to the funeral, when she said:

“Sure, it’s none of my affair.”

Such heartlessness, or seeming heartlessness, made so unpleasant an impression on Grady that he is said to have told his wife:

“Pack your trunks. I am going back to Georgia, where people have time to shed a tear with their neighbor when death removes their child, and where it is an ‘affair’ of the whole neighborhood when grief invades the home. It is no home for us where our next door neighbor is heart-broken, and nobody cares about her grief.”

Again, discouragement is necessary sometimes to develop the man that is in us.

Look at Job. The Lord said to the devil:

“Hast thou considered my servant Job that there is none like him on earth?”

The devil said, “Yes, I’ve considered him. But he’s hedged about. He has been paid for his goodness. He’s never had any discouragements. You let me have him a while. Let me know down his hopes, and I’ll show you what kind of man Job is.”

So the Lord gave His consent. Then the work began. Never has the world known a series of greater discouragements. First, the devil destroyed his property. Then his children. Then came the sores. Then those hypocritical comforters who sat there looking at him in perfect silence. Finally, came his wife – God pity a man when his wife turns against him. She said:

“You are nothing anyhow; *Curse God, and die.*”

But listen to the old hero: “I am something. I have maintained my integrity.”

Ah, there is the manhood of the man. It took the discouragements of life to bring it out. You can’t down a man like that.

I knew a North Carolina boy who left his humble home to attend college in a distant city. There were two things conspicuous about him, little money in his pocket and plenty of tar on his heel. The first thing he did when he arrived was to register. To do this he had to pay a fee of \$5. This gave him a certificate to a seat in the lecture room. The lecture ticket besides this cost \$100. This he could not pay. Things went on well until one day he was order to leave the school or pay. But he couldn’t pay and wouldn’t leave. But what was to be done? He simply drew out the seat certificate, and said:

“Gentlemen, I’ve done my best. I can’t pay the rest of the money now. This certificate says I am entitled to a seat in the lecture room during this year. I am going to stand a law-suit, or sit in it. If you can lecture to the others without my hearing, you are all right.”

There was the manhood. What do you think happened? That faculty arose and said:

“Come close to us, young man; you have got the stuff in you the world needs.”

Oh, friends, don't cower before discouragements. If view aright, they are stepping stones upon which we climb to victory.

II. ITS REMEDY

Now we want to spend a little time considering the remedies for the discouraged state. We will state them briefly, because much has been anticipated in presenting the causes.

1. *A Cool head.*

If ever a man needed a cool head it is when he is facing discouragements. Look at the Prodigal Son. He had gone into sin at a mile a minute gate. His life was a mistake, and his future as black as midnight. What a state he had reached. A proud rich Jew now a ragged pauper, eating with the hogs. How ugly it sounds – Jew and hog. But he came to himself – he thought.

Then came the resolution. “I'll make things better. **There is bread enough in my father's house, and to spare. I will arise and go to my father.**”

Oh, do I speak to a discouraged soul? Has hope gone? Think! Is this thing physical, imaginary, from your environments, or necessary? Think! And as you think, the light will stream through the cloud. I tell you, the greatest need of this day is thinkers and thinking; men and women who will stand erect and look despair in the face, and think, “What profit me to give under? What am I to gain by pining? I will arise! I will walk out of the pig-sty of discouragements to where there is bread enough and to spare.”

2. *A forced optimism.*

I say “forced”, because under such circumstances it is forced. But it will eventually adjust itself if we will give it a chance. Optimism!

I like the spirit of the young woman whose sweetheart left her to go to war with Spain. The young man made up his mind he was going to have her cry the last visit he made. So after they had talked about everything else, and the clock hands were pointing to twelve, he began to pave the way for the flow of tears down her pretty cheeks.

“Well, my precious,” said he, “just think, I'll soon be far away in Cuba.”

“Yes, Charlie,” said she, “but I was just thinking how nice that it's no farther.”

“Then, dear,” said he, “how I'll miss this sweet experience of sitting and talking with you every night or two.”

“Yes,” said she, “but we will have so much more to talk about when we get together again.”

“Oh, but the temptations,” said he; “you know how I’ll miss your staying hand.”

“Yes,” said she, “but you’ll be so busy fighting Spaniards you won’t have time for temptations.”

“Oh, Ellen, but suppose I should get killed and never see you again?”

Then he broke down and cried.

“Hush up, my boy,” said she; “just think, we’ll meet each other in heaven!”

You see? That girl just would not give under. There was at least some light, and she proposed to see it. Oh, that her mantle might fall on every one of us here to-day. Do you write down your trials? Get you a larger slate. The one you have is not big enough. Now you’ve got it, begin to write, not your trials, but your blessings – and what happiness! When you have finished, there is no room for the trials.

3. *A resigned spirit.*

There is nothing that man can invent, no remedy that he can suggest for a cloudy sky, like complete resignation to Him who tempers the wind and calms the sea. Peter, the dynamic disciple, braved a mighty discouragement when he leaped off the boat into the sea. He succeeded well at first. Then, poor human that he was, his confidence in Christ was destroyed by the rolling waves, and he began to sink. How like him we are to-day. We walk upon the ocean, and sink before the waves. God save us from Peterism. Put your condition in His hand. Let it stay there. He has your chart and compass. He will guide your life through the stormy night and o’er the angry sea.

It is related of Mendelssohn, the great musical power, that he once visited Freiburg cathedral, and asked permission to play on the organ, but the organist not knowing him refused. After much entreaty he consented to let the stranger play just a little. When Mendelssohn placed his fingers upon the keyboard of the great instrument, and it began to send forth its mellow music until it seemed that the very building itself was keeping time, the old organist began to shed tears. Finally, he asked the name of the magic performer, and when he found that it was Mendelssohn he exclaimed:

“Only to think, only to think, I had almost forbidden him to touch my organ!”

So, dear Christian friends, at best we are novices in comparison with the great artist of glory. Jesus Christ comes to-day, and stands by every heart in this presence, and says:

“Let me place my hands upon the keyboard of your life, and make its music for you.”

But either because we do not know Him, or are not willing to surrender to Him, we refuse.

Oh, yield to-day! Take away your fingers; let Jesus sit down in your heart, and place His blood-stained fingers upon the keyboard of your life, and make harmonies that will flow into every corner of life; and there will be one unending harmony forever.

4. *A determination to fight it out.*

What student of history does not remember the story of Garibaldi – the man with an iron will, who with a single sentence transformed the Italian mob into a conquering army. All Italy had succumbed to the dark cloud of popish bigotry. The people were ignorant, idle, and had no conception of right and wrong. There was nothing left but despair. But listen! There is heard the tramp of feet in Sicily. Garibaldi with a little band of two thousand men comes from Genoa, lands at Marsalla, and takes up the hopeless fight. He has but one battle cry:

“Italy and Victor Emmanuel!”

See light flash, hope regained and a nation redeemed.

Oh, dear soul, what a lesson! Here we are to-day confronted by a thousand and one discouragements, in personal experience, in national affairs, in church life, in religion. What are we to do? Are we to sit still with folded arms, and pine away our privileges? Shall we simply eat the crabapple and frown, when by the proper effort we might feast upon the luscious fruit? Shall we surrender because of dark days that have come? Shall we turn over the state and the nation to ruin? Shall we sink the church because of the waves? God forbid. Let the Garibaldi mantle fall upon us to-day. Seize the banner of our King Emmanuel, and in His spirit shout:

“I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.”

~ end of chapter 9 ~

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