

Hymn: *He who would valiant be* NEH 372

*1. He who would valiant be 'gainst all disaster,
Let him in constancy follow the Master.
There's no **discouragement** shall make him once relent
His first avowed intent to be a pilgrim.*

*2. Who so beset him round with dismal stories
Do but themselves confound—his strength the more is.
No foes shall stay his might; though he with giants fight,
He will make good his right to be a pilgrim.*

*3. Since, Lord, Thou dost defend us with Thy Spirit,
We know we at the end, shall life inherit.
Then fancies flee away! I'll fear not what men say,
I'll labour night and day to be a pilgrim.*

Garage sales have always intrigued me; I am always fascinated by the fact that “one person’s trash is another person’s treasure.” Someone can’t wait to get rid of things such as old books and records and imitation leopard skin lampshades, not wanting them to clutter up the house anymore. Along comes a complete stranger and they just can’t believe anyone would want to sell them. They buy them for a steal and drives home with a big smile thinking they have the bargain of the century. They bring the records home, clutter up their own house with them, placing the leopard skin lampshade in pride of place and they are as happy as can be. Human beings can be weird sometimes.

The devil once had a garage sale. He thought he’d get rid of some of his old tools that were littering up his abode. There was gossip, slander, lying, greed, power-hunger, and lust laid out on the tables. Interested buyers were perusing the tables looking for a good bargain.

One customer, however, strolled way back in the garage and found on a top shelf a very shiny tool. It looked well cared for. He brought it out to the devil and asked if it was for sale. “Oh, no!” Satan answered. “That’s my tool. Without it I couldn’t ruin the world! It’s my secret weapon!” “But what is it?” the customer inquired. “It’s the tool of discouragement,” the devil said. Nothing takes the life right out of you more than discouragement. A discouraged spirit is a powerless spirit.

I’m sure that is how the man possessed by an evil spirit felt when he met Jesus. He was so discouraged that he was too blind to see that Jesus wanted to heal him of his demons. The gospel of Mark states that Jesus told the man to be quiet and then ordered the evil spirit to come out of him. If we could just quiet the demons within us that bring discouragement that easily; sometimes it is hard to do.

Discouragement is an awful thing. Life pulls the rug right from under you, and you have nothing to hold onto. Your confidence is shattered. A sense of well-being is a distant memory. Your motivation and enthusiasm has evaporated. Have you ever felt that way? If you have, do you remember how you got over it? Some people never do get over it. A traumatising event occurs, discouragement sets in, and they are never the same.

Every day is a battle with discouragement. They just can't seem to get over what happened to them. In every circumstance, they are a victim. In every relationship, they are a victim. In every conflict, they are a victim. Do you know anybody like that? Discouragement is a strong force. Its particularly malevolent when used by individuals to stop others doing things or making decisions they feel threatened by. Jesus' response to this is emphatic: "If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea." (Mark 9:42).

We've all been discouraged. We know how debilitating it can be. I've always wondered why some people seem to bounce back from it while others wallow in it forever. I know people who have gone through unspeakable things throughout their lives and they just keep on going and never miss a beat. I know others who experience one set back in life and they live in the pit the rest of their lives. I have always been curious as to what makes that difference. That wouldn't be a bad research project — why some people get over discouragement and disappointment and others don't. What's the difference? Genetics? Upbringing? A change in lifestyle?

Maybe that's it — a change. When you're discouraged nothing seems better than change, any change, anywhere other than where you are and what you are feeling. I know a lot of people who think change is the answer. If you have a bad experience at work, quit and go look for another one. Are you disappointed in your friends? Drop them and go find new ones. Are you discouraged by the way you look? Get plastic surgery. Maybe making a drastic change isn't always the answer to discouragement! You know, sometimes making a lot of changes can be a form of running away. But we can't run away from our feelings or from who we are. Running away rarely solves anything.

What does Holy Scripture have to say about discouragement? Isaiah writes: "Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." (Isaiah 40:28-31)

That sounds more like it, doesn't it? That's what we need— to run and not be weary, to walk and not faint — to soar like an eagle. Have you ever seen an eagle fly? It is one of the most beautiful sights in the entire world! The eagle spreads its wings, exerting very little effort, allowing the wind to carry it along as it climbs higher in the sky. Wouldn't it be great to live life that way? I know many people who would love to live life that way, and what do you know the key is right under our very noses!!

Before we can truly hear and apply the key to power for living, we have to embrace an eternal truth that people trip up over all the time. It is our unwillingness to accept this truth that causes so much of our suffering and our inability to get over discouragement. Ready? Here it is: Anyone who seeks to live by his or her own power will eventually break down. Isaiah put it this way, "Even youths will faint and be weary and the young will fall exhausted." Count on it. No matter how young you are, how self-sufficient you may be, or how independent you may feel, if you try to live your life on your own power, you will eventually break down. You will fail. You will give out. You will be discouraged over and over and over again. This is a truth so many of us stubbornly and determinedly resist. We don't want to be told that we can't stand on our own two feet. We don't want to be told that we can't handle life on our own terms. We don't want to be told that we are vulnerable. We will fight it to the end- literally!

It is only when we stop fighting and resisting this truth that we open ourselves to the power over discouragement. What is that power? It is the power of God! If there is one thing this passage teaches us, it is that God has power and God gives power. Isaiah tells us that God gives power **not** to those who think they are strong, **not** to those who pull themselves up by their own boot straps, **not** to those who think they can handle life on their own terms, **not** to those who are proud of their fragile illusion of self-sufficiency, for now. Isaiah says God gives power to the weak, the vulnerable, the open, the powerless, the biddable, the willing, those who are yielding to him.

If you are discouraged today, the worst thing you can do is to try to overcome it by sheer will power. The best thing you can do is what Isaiah directs us to do: “Wait for the Lord.” Now, this is not a passive, lazy waiting. This is a hopeful waiting, a purposeful waiting. It is a waiting that knows in God’s good time God will provide God’s good answer. This is a waiting that holds on for God’s response. Some call it faith.

Unfortunately, faith is misunderstood. So many people see faith as simply a means to end — faith is crossing our fingers to God and hoping hard enough that things turn out the way we want. And when they do, well, we had faith. That’s not faith. Someone once said, “faith is not the means by which we achieve victory; faith is the victory itself.” Victory is achieved when we trust God’s timing and wait hopefully for him. Victory over discouragement is achieved when we stop rushing ahead of God, quiet our hearts before him, and wait for his strength.

Some of you may be thinking, “Okay, I am waiting on you, God. Is that it? Is that all I have to do?” Well, it is not a bad start, but there is a little more to it than that. The key that unlocks God’s soaring power in your life is found in one little word in verse 31 of Isaiah — “renewed.” In Hebrew the word literally means “exchange” — to exchange one thing for another — to hand God one thing and receive something else from him—to let go of one thing and gain something new. According to Isaiah, God’s strength comes only when this exchange is made. We have to give something up. We have to make room for God’s strength.

Now, what in the world do you think we would have to give up in order to gain God’s strength? Can’t we just get God’s strength? Would you believe there are obstacles in our lives that hinder our ability to receive God’s strength? Would you believe there are things that clutter up our souls so much that there is no room for God’s strength? For some it is pride and the illusion of self-sufficiency. For others it is control. And again for others it’s a deeply deeply negative attitude. Still, for some, it is a sinful habit, which diminishes them, but they can’t seem to let it go.

My mother used to tell the story of our local kindergarten at St Paul’s Grangetown Cardiff. At the kindergarten there was a box placed at the entrance to the school where new children would have to place their dummies in if they still had them. Mum said she used to watch as little kids with dummies in their mouths dropped them into this big bin. One by one they would come and drop their dummies, and then they would start crying and reach back for them. My Mum was baffled the first time she saw this and asked what it was all about? The teacher told her it was “Dummy Heaven.”

It is time to give up the dummy of control. It is time to stop trying to live life on our own power. It is time to stop pushing our agenda over God’s agenda. Do you want to soar like an eagle? Give up your control for God’s control. Give up the dummy — exchange your weakness for God’s strength. Amen.

Fr Robert Newton