

A weary young mother once came to her pastor. She was at her wits end. She was weary, tired, and weak. Everyday an unending pile of dirty diapers and dishes faced her. She had no one to help her. No one to give her any respite. It seemed like an eternity since she had been alone and by herself. This particular morning, however, she had managed to find someone to watch the kids for a few hours so she could get out. But as she talked she shifted nervously in her chair and her eyes darted here and there as though she expected her children to start popping out of the woodwork.

She began with a confession to her pastor. "I don't think I believe in God anymore. Where is he? Why doesn't he help me? How long can I go on like this? Sometimes I think I'm going crazy. My head and body aches. I'm tired. I'm weary. I'm worn out. I say and do things that shock and disturb me and those around me. I can't control my temper and all the venomous despair I feel inside is spilling out and fouling these I love. I once felt close to God. I thought I knew Christ as my Lord and Saviour. I prayed. I enjoyed going to church. Christ was real. But now I feel no relationship at all with him. My prayers seem futile. Worship is a burden to me."

Have you ever felt that way? You may not be a harried

housewife. You may be a young businessman who stumbles and falls into your armchair each night out of sheer exhaustion and the stress of your work. You may be unemployed and tired of fruitless job interviews. You may be worn out in the work of the Lord as a Sunday school teacher, discouraged with the results you are seeing. The uncertainties of the future or the threat of unemployment or financial ruin may be draining your strength. You may be old and weary in your bones. You feel your body and mind growing weak. Simple chores are becoming major tasks and like Rebekkah in the Old Testament you say, "I am weary of my life."

Weariness is the bane of our industrialised and technological society. The poet Wordsworth wrote,

"The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers."

Psychologists are greatly concerned about this. Growing numbers of men and women are experiencing emotional and professional burn-out. Burn-out is marked by a severe depletion of physical, spiritual, and emotional energy. It expresses itself by emotional exhaustion, negative attitudes, personal devaluation and a feeling that all of life is wearisome.

Ancient Israel manifested all the signs of spiritual burn-out when they were in exile after the Babylonian empire conquered them some 600 years before Christ. Following their

defeat Israel was weary and worn out physically and spiritually. Israel's faith waned. ^{years before} God had made promises to Abraham that Israel would be a blessing to the nations. Later the Lord made promises to king David about the future of his kingdom. But now Israel found herself humiliated by defeat, the kingdom in ruins, and her sons and daughters strangers in an alien and pagan land. Our Scripture lesson is addressed to the Jews sighing for deliverance in their long and painful captivity. Their city and temple had been laid waste for many years. Their captivity had been long and wearisome and without a doubt many were saying that it would never end.

Our Scripture lesson contains two points that I would like to turn our attention to now:

- I. The despair of the perplexed and weary believer.
- II. The ~~tear~~ tenderness with which God responds to the believers complaint.

First, the perplexity and weariness of the believer. I can easily imagine the devout Jew in Babylon bowing his head and covering his eyes in despair and saying, "My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God." He felt abandoned by his God. He felt his God didn't care. He was a believer but he was perplexed and weary with waiting.

Can you understand his perplexity? It is perplexing, for example, for a child to feel that his father disregards

his cause. The other day Philip was riding his little tricycle on the front walk. An older child came up to him and tried to drag him off his bike. Instinctively Philip looked to me. He said nothing but his eyes spoke volumes. "Dad, look here. Do you see what's happening to me? Don't disregard my cause." In the same way Babylon had dragged Israel away from the land of Palestine and destroyed the city of Jerusalem with its temple. The pious Jew looked to God but it appeared that he neither saw or cared. It is devastating for a weak young child to feel that his father doesn't care but it is far more crushing and perplexing to feel that your God doesn't see your plight and that he disregards your cause.

The ancient Jews' experience of desolation teaches us something important today. If our faith in our Lord Jesus Christ were perfect we would never feel perplexed or experience despair. We would have perfect confidence that God sees us and cares. We would be utterly confident in God no matter what our circumstances, in plenty and in want; in joy and in sorrow; in sickness and in health; as long as we live. But our faith is not perfect. Just as none of us perfectly obeys God's commands, none of us perfectly trusts God. There is no perfect faith in this life. We know that our salvation is through faith in Christ alone. But none of us have perfect faith in Christ alone. Our faith is always alloyed in this

life. If our salvation were dependent on a perfect faith none of us would ever go to heaven. Our salvation, though, is dependent on Christ and his perfect work. Even the weakest faith, even the faultiest, uninformed, and alloyed faith he accepts.

John Calvin was a man of great faith. He knew that perfect faith is a firm and certain knowledge of God's love for us in Jesus Christ. But he also realised that no one has perfect faith in this life. He wrote, "Unbelief is so deeply rooted in our hearts, and we are so inclined to it, that not without hard struggle is each one able to persuade himself of what all confess with the mouth: namely, that God is faithful."

Because our faith is imperfect and weak we sometimes become perplexed and filled with despair when we are exhausted physically, emotionally, or spiritually. When we are exhausted and burned-out we often feel with the ancient Jew, "My way is hidden from God and my cause is disregarded by my God." This is not the complaint of an infidel or an atheist. It is the complaint of a tired and exhausted believer. And who of us has not at times felt this way? Who of us has not experienced at times the despair of the perplexed and weary believer in our Scripture lesson?

But notice, secondly, how tenderly God responds to this weary believer's complaint.

Do you not know?
 Have you not heard?
 The LORD is the everlasting God,
 The Creator of the ends of the earth.
 He will not grow tired or weary,

With these words the Lord does not condemn the perplexed believer for his weak faith. He gently seeks to strengthen and comfort his child in his despair by reminding him of who God is.

There is a lesson here for us. The person of weak faith does not need a lecture on the sin of despair or the foolishness of weak faith. He needs assurance that God really is faithful. The little boy who is ~~dragged off~~ his bicycle by an aggressive playmate... who looks in vain for his father but cannot find him... whose heart sinks within him, not so much because of the injustice he suffers, but because of the absence and apparent disregard of his father— that child does not need to be berated for doubting his father's love. He needs assurance that his father still loves him despite his failure to intervene. And so the prophet does not condemn Israel for his weak faith. He responds tenderly to the perplexed believer. He lays aside anything which might alarm him in case he should terrify one of those who had lost heart.

There are three ways the Lord's prophet tries to comfort and stand by the weak believer.

First, the prophet confesses that God's ways are hard to understand. "His understanding no one can fathom." In other words the prophet takes his stand with the perplexed believer and admits that he cannot explain adequately why they are suffering as they are. Let this be a warning to those of us who are spiritual leaders and who know our Bibles well. Let us not give the impression that we have all the answers to the questions of the perplexed and weary man or woman. Let us not weigh down the weak believer with a load of guilt by blaming all his or her troubles on sin and unbelief. Let us not hesitate to confess that there is much about the ways of God we do not understand. There are so many experiences in life which are mysterious, unexplainable, perplexing, and troubling for one who believes in a loving heavenly Father. God moves in a mysterious way. "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God, how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord?"

I so often feel that this is forgotten by evangelicals. We so often give the impression that we, like Job's counselors, have all the answers. Too often there is a smugness about our

knowledge of the Bible and of God's ways. We are too quick to give answers and too slow to listen and stand beside the weak and perplexed brother or sister in Christ. There is a disturbing over-familiarity with the everlasting God whose understanding no one can fathom. The mystery is gone. The awe has vanished.

Secondly, the prophet assures the weak believer that God will give power to the faint. God is the everlasting God, the creator who never wearies or grows tired and so "he gives strength to the weary, and increases the power of the weak." Do you hear that exhausted house-wife? burned-out businessmen? tempted teen-ager? lonely widow? "He gives strength to the weary, and increases the power of the weak." He doesn't make it easy for you. We may be sorely tempted. All will not be a bed of roses. We should not expect to be carried to heaven on flowery beds of ease. But he gives strength to the weary. He enables us to go on.

The prophet also reminds us, parenthetically, that none of us are exempt from spiritual, mental, or emotional exhaustion. "Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall." Let this be a word of warning to those who are self-confident in your spiritual health and smug

in your strength. "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." None of us are secure in our own strength. None of us are so strong in our faith that we can look down condescendingly on perplexed believers whose faith is weak. It is possible that you might some time grow tired and weary, stumble and fall. You might, one day, in the midst of adversity, hear your own voice crying out in the night and darkness, "My way is hidden from the Lord."

Thirdly, the prophet promises that the Lord will renew the strength of those who hope in him; who wait for him; who trust in him.

"but those who hope in the LORD
will renew their strength.
they will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint."

~~Spiritual renewal causes our hearts to soar on wings~~
like eagles. I remember so well a communion service I attended years ago as a college student at a small episcopal church in Wilmington, Delaware. I had been going through a dry period of spiritual desertion that summer. But my heart soared on wings like eagles that bright summer morning as I joined in the prayers and canticles and listened to God say to me ~~those~~ those comforting and strengthening words, "This is my body broken for you... this is my blood poured out for you." I

~~fed upon~~ the Lord Jesus Christ and he strengthened me and caused me to soar on wings like eagles.

Spiritual renewal also enables us to ^{run and not be} ~~do the work of the~~ ^{wear,} Lord ~~in the church and be not weary in well-doing.~~ The work of the Lord can be exhausting as any Sunday School teacher or spiritual leader knows. We need the spiritual renewal that God alone is able to give if we are to run with patience the race that is set before us. Unless we wait upon the Lord and hope in him our running becomes a rat-race. We can run ourselves ragged developing programs, promoting them, and thinking up sensational gimmicks that will produce the appearance of success. But when we wait and hope and trust in the Lord he enables us to run and not grow weary.

Spiritual renewal also gives us strength in our daily walk. Stephen Olford once wrote, "our everyday duties and hobbies and pastimes, call for a steady plodding every moment of ~~every~~ hour. I believe this is why the Christian life, in its totality, is described as 'a walk'". We all want to soar, ~~many~~ of us are running, but when it comes to the normal activities of everyday life, we tend to rely on our own strength and when we do this we so often collapse exhausted. Whether we are flying high, running here and there, or walking we need the strength of the everlasting God.

As we have studied these verses we have seen how the devout believer is often perplexed and wonders if God notices him or her. We have also seen how God, in his great tenderness, stands beside us, assures us, and promises to spiritually renew those who wait in hope and trust in Him. But as I close I want to drive home the message of our text to all of you here this morning.

Perplexed believers! you who are exhausted and weak in faith! you who are at the end of your rope and leading a life of quiet desperation! Wait upon the Lord like those who wait for the morning and like the morning the Lord will come. He will renew your strength.

Then you who are strong believers! you who are spiritual leaders and bulwarks of strength to whom the weak look. It may be that you have never experienced the perplexity and despair of the weary and exhausted believer in our Scripture lesson. As a result you may be tempted to gloat in spiritual pride. You may be insensitive to the plight of many of your brothers and sisters in Christ. May God give you sensitivity and empathy for the weak and perplexed. May God spare you from giving easy answers to explain God's unsearchable ways.

And, finally, you who are young and strong! I envy your youth. your enthusiasm for life and your energy. But some-

times those who are aglow with youth, who are strong and healthy, do not sense their need of Christ. But "even youths grow tired and weary, and young men and women stumble and fall." What will you do then? Weakness, weariness, and death may seem far removed from you but too soon you will come to know them in your own experience. You need Jesus now to strengthen you for the future. Do you realise that all your strength and vitality and elan vital comes to you from the Everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. He gives you that young pulsing life to run and walk in his ways. May you look to the Lord Jesus Christ in gratitude for the strength he has given to you to serve him and may you hope in him forever.

Let us pray. Everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. You will not grow tired or weary and your understanding no one can fathom. Give strength to the weary. Increase the power of the weak. Renew our strength. Cause us to soar on wings like eagles. Enable us to run and not grow weary. Let us walk and not be faint. We pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.