

Dealing with Discouragement

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Preacher: Keith Knowlton

[0 : 0 0] Well, as I mentioned tonight, we continue in our preaching through the book of 1 Kings. And tonight we'll be in 1 Kings chapter 19.

! This challenge is to see who is the true God.

And so the prophets of Baal, they summon up their call to their God to see if He will rain down fire on their altar. And we see it's this vain pursuit.

They call, they scream, they cut themselves and nothing happens. In fact, Elijah kind of mocks them that their God does not answer. And so then it's Elijah's turn and he has the prophets pour water again and again and again on the altar before he calls to the one true God who does send down fire, who consumes this burnt offering and the wood and the stone and the dust and the water.

And so we see this mountaintop experience for Elijah. This highest hour perhaps of his where God's sovereignty and His power shines through. And then we very quickly transition to this new chapter, chapter 19.

[1 : 2 2] And we see what seems to be the spiritual giant having his greatest hour now experiencing perhaps his darkest hour. And so that's going to be a focus of what we think about tonight, this pain of discouragement, this pain of despair that happens.

That can happen often in ministry. It can happen in life in general. And how do we deal with this despair? What happens when we're depressed and we're disappointed by how life is going?

Where do we turn to for comfort? And I think it can be a temptation. It was for me, in fact, when I read this passage for the first time earlier this week, when we see this transition from what Elijah was to what he becomes in this chapter, and we can easily judge him to say, how did you lose your faith so quickly?

But I hope what we see actually is Elijah's status of despair can serve as a comfort for us. Because we see this man of God struggling under hardship and we recognize he's just like us.

And we are just like him. And in our frailty and in our fear, we have a God who still loves us. And a God who protects us.

[2 : 2 9] And a God who gives us hope even in our darkest hour. And so let's turn to the reading of God's word. 1 Kings chapter 19, starting in verse 1. Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword.

And so Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them.

Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. And when he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness. And he came to a broom bush and sat down under it and prayed that he might die.

I have had enough, Lord, he said. Take my life. I am no better than my ancestors. Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep. All at once an angel touched him and said, Get up and eat.

He looked around and there at his head was some bread, baked over hot coals and a jar of water. And he ate and he drank and then lay down again. The angel of the Lord came back a second time and touched him and said, Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you.

[3 : 42] And so he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by the food, he traveled 40 days and 40 nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. And there he went to a cave and spent the night.

And the word of the Lord came to him, What are you doing, Elijah? And he replied, I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, tore down your altars and put your prophets to death with the sword.

I am the only one left. And now they are trying to kill me too. The Lord said, Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by. Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord.

But the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind there was an earthquake. But the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire.

And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then the voice said to him, What are you doing here, Elijah?

[4 : 47] And he replied, I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, tore down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.

The Lord said to him, Go back the way you came, and go to the desert of Damascus. And when you get there, anoint Hazael, king over Aram.

Also anoint Jehu, the son of Nimshi, king over Israel. And anoint Elisha, the son of Shaphat, from Abel-Meholah, to succeed you as a prophet.

And Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael. And Elijah will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. Yet I reserve 7,000 in Israel, all who knees have not bowed to Baal, whose mouths have not kissed him.

This is the word of God. Pray with me again. Gracious God, we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from your mouth.

[5 : 54] And so we ask, Lord, that you send your Holy Spirit that in the preaching of your word our eyes may be opened, our hearts may be softened, and that our wills may be renewed.

Lord, we ask that we may receive your truth and be comforted by your provinces this evening. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Now, I'm sure many of you know the book Pilgrim's Progress.

Actually, James referenced it this morning in his sermon. And if you know, it's written by a man named John Bunyan. This was a preacher and a writer back from the 1600s.

And this book, Pilgrim's Progress, it's an allegory of the Christian life. And so there's this main character, Christian, who's moving from the city of destruction on his way to the celestial city.

And so it tracks his journey through different trials and temptations and struggles. He encounters different people along his path, some who carry on with him. And there's at one point in this story where he meets a friend, a man named Hopeful, and they begin to travel together.

- [6 : 59] And as they begin to walk, though, the path gets a little stony and difficult. And off in the distance, though, they see this other path. It's green pasture. This green meadow. And they decide, you know what? If we were to turn off there and take this slight detour, we can avoid this rocky patch.
- And so they decide together to do so. And as they walk through this meadow, night begins to fall. And a storm comes up. And we realize the rains come and the winds.
- And they realize they've made a horrible mistake. But as the floodwaters rise, they realize they can't turn around. And now that it's too dark to see where they're going, and so they decide to find shelter for the night, thinking that at daybreak, they'll return to the path.
- But when day comes, they see that we realize this land is the land of a giant, a giant named Despair. And he captures them. And he takes them to his castle, Doubting Castle.
- And he throws them in prison there and says, you've been trespassing. Now you will pay the penalty in this dungeon. And so they survive in this dungeon without food or water for days and days. And each day this giant Despair comes and he beats them and he beats them.
- [8 : 02] And he encourages them to take their own life because they'll never escape. And so after many days of this happening, Christian, he's ready to take this advice and end his own life.
- And at this point in the story, we see Christian in his journey. It mirrors very much the journey of Elijah here, this prophet in a very similar state of hopelessness.
- He's been portrayed as this faithful man and now he seems to be without hope at all. And so that's what I want us to focus on tonight. As we think about discouragement and we think about being depressed, when we feel like we're at the end of the rope, what are we to do?
- And so I think from our passage in 1 Kings here, there's really three things I want us to focus on in regards to discouragement. First, the cause of discouragement. Second, the characteristics of discouragement.
- And third, the cure for discouragement. The cause, the characteristics, and the cure for discouragement. And so let's first consider the cause of discouragement. Now I think we can think about cause in two ways here.
- [9 : 02] We can think about it circumstantially and we can also think about it spiritually. Again, if we think to the very end of chapter 18, what's just happened here? There's been this great victory.
- The prophets of Baal have been defeated. The rain comes. The drought has been lifted. And it says that Ahab, he's hurrying home to tell Jezebel what's happened. And it's interesting here because Elijah could have stayed on that mountain, but instead he chooses to go see Jezebel as well.
- Ahab, it actually says he's on a chariot. But somehow Elijah on foot beats the chariot to Jezebel. And we see, obviously, he's probably anticipating some sort of fantastic result here.
- That finally Jezebel's heart of stone will crumble. That she'll finally submit herself to the one true God. That she'll turn from her wickedness when she hears what the true God has done. But in fact, she does the exact opposite, right?
- She threatens to kill him. And so we see circumstances like this that can reasonably think will lead us to despair. But the thing is, it's not simply circumstances that guarantee us to go into despair because Elijah's faced hardship before, right?
- [10 : 15] We see this in the passages previous. He was no stranger to hardship. He had, in fact, told Ahab to his face, you're a troubler of Israel, risking death at the very least.

He's endured drought. He's raised the dead. He's defeated these prophets. And so it's not simply circumstances for Elijah that caused him to fall into despair. I think oftentimes we like to blame our circumstances for our condition of despair or for discouragement.

But the reality is that oftentimes our discouragement, it reveals more about our spiritual condition than our circumstances. You know, all that I mentioned before that happened to Elijah, he does so in reliance on God.

But here we see a change in his attitude, a change in his outlook because instead of focusing on God and what he has done, he begins to focus on self. And so we see this play out when he's at Mount Horeb.

He's asked twice, why are you here? And he gives the same answer twice. He says, I've been very zealous for the Lord. Everyone else has rejected you. I alone have left. Everyone's trying to kill me. And so he's not really trying to speak at all about what God has done.

[11 : 22] He's speaking about what he's done. He's a concern for his own life. It seems as though he's relying on his own work, his own merit, as being the foundation for why he should be saved. And we see some discouragement here too, right?

He's seen success in his ministry up to this point. And now that success doesn't come, he begins to question the Lord. As if success in and of itself has been his God, and that's almost been more important than serving the one true God.

And so instead of trusting in God and relying on his promises, he begins to listen to the threats of man and rely on his own strength. And so I wonder, do we do the same thing?

I mean, there's certainly many in this room who face hardships of various kinds, right? Many who have lost loved ones. Many who have maybe not been as successful in your career as you might have hoped.

You face financial uncertainty. You have troubles in your family. You're battling illness. Battling depression. You seem to, as though you can't find stability in your life.

[12 : 29] And I think we can experience this too, not only in the individual sense, but also in the corporate sense. As we think about this church. Maybe you've been at this church for a long time.

And you think maybe we're in a hard spot. Maybe the church isn't as well off as it used to be. Maybe membership is low. Maybe families are few. Maybe our impact has begun to be limited. And how do we respond spiritually when we face that kind of discouragement?

I think oftentimes we do what Elijah does and we turn our eyes off from God and we begin to think about ourselves and our own need for success to turn to our own path as we seek our own solution to our problems.

Because this is what Christian does here in our book, right? He turns off. The reason he gets captured by this giant despair is because he's turned off the king's path. He's turned off the king's road to his own way.

When difficulty comes, he chooses his own path to solve his own problems. I think that often happens when we probably think incorrectly about the Christian life at times.

[13 : 36] We expect it to be easy perhaps. We fail to recognize the hardship that we should expect. We fail to recognize that the cross of Christ is a sign to us that we share in the sufferings of Jesus, not that it's a guarantee to remove us from all hardship.

And so the disappointment, it may be sparked by our circumstances at times. Oftentimes it's perpetuated by the spiritual state that we're in when we choose to turn from God and rely on self.

And so that's the reason that we see for Elijah's discouragement here. I want to look, take a little bit deeper look at the characteristics of his discouragement now. Because I think what Elijah's experienced, I think we all can experience this at times.

So practically, what does it look like when we experience disappointment and despair? Well, I think first of all, we often experience fear. This is exactly what Elijah experiences from the very beginning.

He had been portrayed as this figure of bravery and now he's running for his life. And I think the same thing can happen to us. When hardship comes, we feel as though we need to question God or question our future.

[14 : 48] What's going to happen? What does my future hold? And I think we see this in the people of Israel too. When finally they make it through the promised land and through the wilderness, they're making their way into the promised land.

Joshua is now their leader. What is, what's the command and the instruction that God gives Joshua over and over again? This encouragement of don't be afraid. Be strong.

Be courageous. Do not fear. And he gives reason for why we're not to be afraid because the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go. And so I think we see here that fear comes when we choose to forget God's power and forget his presence.

I think we can often kind of slide into spiritual amnesia at times. When trials come, we forget how God has provided for us in the past. And just like the people of Israel, it's easy to trust God when things are going well.

But when hardship comes, we begin to question, is God really there? We begin to question his track record and we become crippled with fear. Will this hardship ever end?

[15 : 56] And so we need to be reminded as the people of Israel were over and over again, when God gives new command to them, he reminds them of how he's been faithful to them. I am the Lord your God who has brought you out of the land of Egypt.

He's telling us, I know you become fearful when you forget. So don't forget that I am your sovereign, all-powerful, loving Savior. Another characteristic that I think also follows very closely to fear is this feeling of loneliness and isolation.

Think about verse 10 again. How does Elijah answer God? He says, look, all of Israel's rejected you. I alone have left. Everyone's trying to kill me now. And when we face hardship, I think we can feel very, very alone.

We can often experience, well, I'm the only one who has ever experienced this. No one knows what I'm going through because it's a unique situation. This is what we sang about in Psalm 88.

This is what the psalmist is saying. He feels that he's set apart with the dead. That God remembers him no more. That he's been cut off. That he alone is left. And is it true that when we feel this loneliness and despair, oftentimes we make it all the worse because we choose to deprive ourselves from company?

[17 : 16] This is what Elijah does here. He flees to Beersheba, but he leaves his servant and then he keeps traveling on. No doubt, the servant was a companion of his, a friend, someone who knew him, and yet he decides to leave him behind in his despair.

And so why do we do this sometimes? When we experience hardship or difficulty, why do we isolate ourselves? It may be because we like to wallow in our sorrow.

It may be because we want to be justified in the way that we feel. We don't want to share our burdens with others. We don't trust that they maybe have our best intentions, that they can provide help for us.

We don't want to be encouraged sometimes. And I think we can see this play out in the church even. I had the opportunity to share a little bit this morning about community groups and the value of community groups and how we're looking to build community and unity as we come together midweek.

But no doubt there are some in the church who have always avoided community groups because you just, maybe you don't trust those in the church. Maybe you have issue with something about the church or in your life that you just don't want to share.

[18 : 31] And you certainly don't want to be bothered by other people's problems. And so you isolate yourself. And in your isolation we can begin to perpetuate these feelings of despair rather than seek others to bear our burdens.

Another characteristic I think we see in Elijah in regards to his despair is one of exhaustion. Right? He's had this mountaintop experience and now is fleeing for his life.

He runs into the wilderness. He asks God to die and he falls asleep. And even when he's awoken by an angel you think, okay, that's something that's going to wake him up, right?

He wakes up enough to eat a little food and then go back to bed again. Many of you know Charles Spurgeon who was a minister down in London in the 1800s known as the Prince of Preachers.

Someone who preached for almost 40 years. Prolific preacher. Often preached 10 sermons a week to thousands of people. His own sanctuary holding 5,000 to 6,000 people.

[19 : 31] But yet he had a very public battle with depression. At age 22 when he was preaching to thousands in this big music hall, someone yelled out fire.

And though there wasn't any fire in the building it caused a panic and people got up and started running out and in the chaos seven people were trampled to death. And this was an episode that never left him.

He was devastated by the screams of the crowd, by the weight of his own responsibility and that tragedy scarred him for life. But on top of that he battled multiple chronic illnesses.

He was often overworked by his preaching, by his counseling, by his caring for the poor, by his writing and he was often left utterly exhausted. And he would describe these bouts of darkness and depression as the dark night of the soul.

And I wonder if we ever feel that way. as if we're trying to keep all these plates spinning and we have family and we have friends and we have church and we have other responsibilities, we have activities, we have our own health and we feel like we're trying the best we can but maybe we're failing at everything.

[20 : 45] And so maybe like Elijah we just want to cry out and call enough, enough God, I'm ready to call it quits. I'm at the end of the rope, I'm sick of trying, take my life. And we can actually reach a point of being irrational.

I think that's the point that Elijah ends up here because he's praying out to God that God may take his life while he's actually running for his life. If he truly wanted to lose his life, stop running.

Jezebel will certainly kill you. But we see he's in this downward spiral of fear and loneliness and isolation and exhaustion.

And perhaps we felt that same way and so we ask what are we to do? Well that brings us to our third and final point because we see here a cure. A cure for our despair it's revealed in the tenderness of God.

And we see this both in word and in deed here. When Elijah runs into the wilderness what does God do? Does he yell at him? Does he chastise him? Does he reprimand him or punish him?

[21 : 52] No. He offers him nourishment and rest. If you're a parent in the room certainly you've experienced this before when you've had a young child an infant a toddler who is just they're starting to crumble and they're crying and they're screaming and they're inconsolable and they don't want to be held and they don't want to be put down and you realize what they need is what?

They need sleep. And it's amazing the transformation that occurs when they wake up. You put them down a little devil and they wake up a little angel. My own boy Crawford our youngest he was at nursery this week and took a fall and bumped his head and the nursery called Rachel to come pick him up and he had this cut on his head that wasn't stopping bleeding as Rachel was consoling him and asking him how he was doing he answered and said I could really use a cup of tea.

Now if anyone's doubting that I'm raising a Scottish child there's your answer right there and he got his cup of tea when he got home and he was feeling a lot better. And so I don't mean to trivialize this point but honestly sometimes when we are at our lowest even as adults what we really need is a snack and a nap.

That seems very simple but this is what we see in God's kindness to Elijah here because what we see is we are human our strength and our energy is finite and our God is not a slave master he is a good father who gives good gifts.

And I think often times in our despair we often neglect to see the love and the goodness of God and it can come in many forms and we can receive it in many different ways.

[23 : 37] It may be time with a good friend who makes you laugh. It may be the flowers in your garden. It may be a beautiful sunrise or sunset. It may be the cool breeze when you're walking to church this evening.

It may be a cup of tea by the fire. See God gives us our senses so that we can see and smell and hear and taste and touch that he is good and that he cares.

Secondly we see here that God not only provides nourishment but he listens to Elijah here. Elijah is asked twice by God what are you doing here? Now I think you could say well is God being harsh here?

I don't really think he is. I think he's not speaking in a condescending way but he's really permitting Elijah to vocalize his grief. Because we see here Elijah he really doesn't give a good answer.

He's perhaps expressing a bit of frustration or pride but we still see God listens to him. He allows him to pour out his heart and to be honest with his feelings. And I think this is something that we often fear to do ourselves when we pray because we want to keep up appearances.

[24 : 50] We want to appear as though we're spiritual and say the right thing. But in fact I think what we see here is that venting our frustration through prayer can be a wonderful starting point for the God to start working at our hearts and to align our wills with his.

And so we can say to God God I hate my job. We can say to God I'm sick of my family. We can say to God I'm sick of not having a family.

You can say to God I'm sick of the people in this church. You can say to God I'm sick of my illness. I'm sick of being sick and tired. And he welcomes that.

You know why? Because he's willing and ready to answer. And that's what he does here to Elijah. We read that Elijah comes to Mount Horeb here. This is Mount Sinai by a different name.

And so this is the same mountain that the people of Israel came and received the Ten Commandments from God. The same mountain where God revealed himself to Moses.

[25 : 56] And so we see here almost Elijah is mirroring a lot of his activities. He travels for 40 days and 40 nights to come to Mount Horeb. It kind of mirrors the people of Israel spending 40 years in the wilderness before coming to the promised land.

And here he too meets with God in the same way that Moses does. We see here that it says that when God appeared to Elijah it says there was a strong wind that came and an earthquake and fire but God wasn't in those elements.

We had seen his power and his might up on Mount Carmel to the prophets of Baal. But right here to Elijah he comes in a still small voice. He comes with a message of hope and a plan of victory.

Again God could have been angry Elijah for his actions for his attitudes but instead he calls him back to action like a general summoning a soldier.

Don't be a deserter. Come back to the front lines. You are needed here. You have duties to fulfill. And of course God doesn't need Elijah to complete his task here but we see that.

[27 : 01] And when he is welcoming Elijah back into his mission he's actually pulling him from that well of despair. And I think he does the same for us. And he does so by announcing good news.

You're not alone. I'm raising up another king. I'm raising up another prophet. There are 7,000 other faithful Israelites when you think you're all alone. He's saying my plan will not fail.

My timing may not be what you think it should be. It may not occur in a dramatic fashion that you were expecting. But I am in sovereign control of this situation and I have a wonderful rescue plan to save my people.

And he says I will send another who will suffer in your place. My son Jesus will conquer death and fully and finally defeat the enemy forever.

So God is reminding Elijah to take heart that this is his promise. God is so if we think back to Pilgrim's progress again as Christian is kept in this castle of doubt by this giant despair and he's being beaten daily.

[28 : 13] There comes one last night where the giant comes to him and beats him and advises him again once again to kill himself and if he doesn't he promises that he will come in the morning to kill him personally.

And I'll read to you what happens at that point. Because Christian and hopeful they begin to pray. It says well on Saturday about midnight they began to pray and continued in prayer till almost daybreak.

And now a little before it was day good Christian as one half amazed break out into a passionate speech what a fool am I thus to lie in a stinking dungeon when I have well to walk at liberty I have a key in my bosom called promise that will I am persuaded open any lock in doubting castle then said hopeful that's good news good brother pluck it from your bosom and try and then Christian pulled it out of his bosom and began to try the dungeon door whose bolt as he turned the key gave back and the door flew open with ease and Christian and hopeful both came out and then he went out to the outward door that led to the castle yard and with his key opened that door also and after that went to the iron gate for that must be open too but the lock went desperately hard yet the key did open it and then they thrust open the gate to make their escape with speed but that gate as it opened made much of a cracking that it waked the giant despair who hastily rising to pursue his prisoners felt his limbs too frail for his fits took him again and so he could by no means go after them and then they went on and came to the king's highway and so were safe because they were out of the giant's jurisdiction we see here that

Christian and hopeful are saved by the promise of the savior and this is the same promise that was given to Elijah it's funny when you think that Elijah here is pleading with God to take his life but in fact we read that Elijah never actually experiences physical death he is taken up in a chariot with God and we wonder we can wonder if this episode of fear and disappointment and despair if Elijah looked back and thought just how foolish he was to forsake the promises of God and the reality is that we experience those promises too and it's not promises that we will not face hardship but when we do we have an ever present loving sovereign God whose plan is perfect and whose victory is sure and so we can be assured of this that when we fall into despair we fall into the arms of loving and gracious God who is willing and able to raise us up again let's pray and