

Light on Dark Clouds: Discouragement

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[0 : 00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.! For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah and saying, So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.

Then he was afraid, and he rose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there.

But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he asked that he might die, saying, It is enough. Now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my father's.

And he laid down and slept under a broom tree. And behold, an angel touched him and said, Arise and eat.

[1 : 38] And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. And he ate and drank and lay down again.

The angel of the Lord came again a second time and touched him and said, Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you. And he arose and ate and drank and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God.

And he said, And the Lord said, Go out and stand on the mount before the Lord.

And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke it in pieces, the rocks before the Lord.

But the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind, an earthquake. But the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake, a fire.

[3 : 09] But the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire, the sound of a low whisper. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

And behold, there came a voice to him and said, What are you doing here, Elijah? He said, I've been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts, for the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars and killed your prophets with the sword.

And I, even I, only am left and they seek my life to take it away. And the Lord said to him, Go, return on your way in the wilderness of Damascus.

When you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Syria. And Jehu, the son of Nimshi, you shall anoint as king over Israel.

And Elisha, the son of Shephat, of Apal-Miloph, you shall anoint to be prophet in your place. And the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu put to death.

[4 : 25] The one who escapes the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death. Yet I will leave 7,000 in Israel. All the knees that have not bowed to Baal.

And every mouth that has not kissed him. May God bless preaching and the hearing of his word.

There's no music that breaks your heart like country.

Rock and roll sings about making love and partying down. Country sings about life and loss. Dreams dying, marriages crumbling, fathers leaving, and people staring down into a shot glass and a honky tonk.

No music breaks your heart like country and no country breaks your heart like George Jones. George Jones was famously the wife or the husband of Tammy Wynette.

[5 : 28] Let's just say their relationship was a little bit rocky. Married and divorced no less than five times. But Jones sang with all his heart.

You can hear it now still in the recording through the speaker. And he sang songs that will break your heart. None more so than he stopped loving her today. It's a song about a girl who he can't stop loving.

First verse begins, he said, I'll love you till I die. She said, you'll forget in time. But as the years went slowly by, she still preyed on his mind.

Another verse says, he keeps a picture on his wall. He keeps her letters by his bed with every I love you underlined in red.

The song keeps going and going. And he's saying, he can't stop loving her. It's not that he can't stop loving her because of all the good times they had.

[6 : 36] Because of the life they share. Because of the things they're doing. He can't stop loving her because he lost her. Because she's gone. Because she died.

That's why he keeps her picture on the wall. That's why he keeps her letters by his bed. There'll never be another one like her. Finally, eventually, stops loving her though.

When he dies. The final chorus says, he stopped loving her today. They placed a wreath on his door.

And soon they'll carry him away. He stopped loving her today. If that doesn't make you want to cry, I can't help you.

This morning, in our text, we encounter a man seemingly staggered by loss. Without this grid, you could seriously misread this chapter.

[7 : 38] Elijah had a dream of a nationwide revival. He had a dream of the people of Israel throwing down their idols and returning to the Lord. It seems that it's all going to come to pass as we'll see in 1 Kings 18.

But then the king's wife, that wicked Jezebel, swears she's going to kill him. And so Elijah is running for his life. He's running because his dream of revival is lost.

He's the only prophet of the Lord left in Israel. And they got a hit on him. He's not just running for his life. He's running because he's discouraged.

He's running because he's lost hope. The crushing reality is that life in this fallen world brings a string of losses. If you live long enough, you're gradually going to lose everyone you love.

And then you're going to die. Happy day. But the losses begin much earlier. The loss of a friendship in the preteen and teen years.

[8 : 47] The loss of a business dream that you'd stored up and sown so many thoughts and dreams and expectations to do. The loss of a chance to be a mom. The loss of the ability to run or hike or pick up kids.

The loss of a parent. The loss of countless expectations and hopes. To be in this fallen world is to be one who knows loss. What have you lost? What are your losses?

Life in the fallen world brings a string of them. When it does, the temptation to discouragement is always close at hand. In this series we've been walking through called Light on Dark Clouds.

Trying to figure out how to walk in the light underneath the dark clouds. Fear, as we saw, wrestles with the enormity of our circumstances. The problems that are out of our control.

Envy wrestles with the unfairness of our circumstances. Doubt wrestles with the uncertainty of our circumstances. And discouragement wrestles with the losses of them. The hopelessness and helplessness we feel because of them.

[9 : 56] And so discouragement is something we must pay careful attention to. In a word, where we're going, the losses sustained and suffering are discouraging.

But take heart, God is making all things new. The losses sustained and suffering are discouraging. But take heart, God is making all things new. We're going to break this out in five points.

So hopefully they're not too long. The first one is discouragement forgets who God is. Discouragement forgets who God is. The fact that 1 Kings 19 follows 1 Kings 18 is one of the most startling sequences in all of Holy Scripture.

In 1 Kings 18, Elijah is leading a showdown with the prophets of Baal and the Lord on the mountain. There's 450 prophets of Baal and one prophet of the Lord, Elijah himself.

He says to all his prophets, both of us, let's build an altar. Let's call down our gods to light a sacrifice on the altar.

[11 : 01] And whoever's God lights the sacrifice, that's the one we'll all say is the real Lord. So it's a showdown trying to win the hearts of the people of Israel in one act.

And so the prophets of Baal build their altar and they cry out from morning to noon. But nothing happens. Elijah even says, I wonder if he's using the restroom and needs a little bit of time.

He's mocking them and taunting them. And then Elijah steps forward after noon. Three times he tells him to pour water all over the sacrifice.

Just soak it down real good so it's ready to be lit. And then he calls on the Lord. The text says, fire comes down to consume the offering and lick up the water.

Elijah thinks, surely now all the people will turn to the Lord. They're giving their lives. They see it as it's plain as day.

[11 : 59] He is the Lord. And they do. They say, the Lord, he is God. The Lord, Yahweh, is God. Then Elijah has all the prophets of Baal killed. And the chapter concludes with Elijah outrunning a chariot back to Jezreel because the hand of the Lord is on him.

But in 1 Kings 19, Elijah's on the run. Jezebel says, I'll take you out.

Let him do to me as you did to them if I don't take you out by this time tomorrow. Verse 3, then he was afraid. He rose and he ran for his life. What a startling sequence.

Elijah taunting 450 prophets of the Lord because he rests in the sovereign hand of God. And then, 1 Kings 19, running across the border from one woman.

An infamously wicked woman, but nevertheless. What's going on? Text says, Elijah was afraid. Elijah's forgotten that God is the sovereign God of all.

[13 : 11] Elijah's name is my God is Yah. That's his name. So he's forgotten that the Lord is Yahweh, the great I am, who is in the heavens and does whatever he pleases.

That's what it means to be I am who I am. But Elijah is not just afraid. It's at this point that we could misdiagnose Elijah.

He's a counselee that would come in. We could misdiagnose him. Don't you remember what happened? People in Israel are forgetting all the time, just like we are.

Don't you remember? Isn't there a problem of forgetting? It's not merely that. Elijah's not just afraid. Elijah has had his world fall apart.

The righteous mission he believed the Lord had given him to call the people back to the living God has been squashed.

[14 : 11] His longing for national revival has been snuffed out in a moment. His greatest triumph is met by his death sentence the next day.

He's disappointed even more. Elijah is discouraged. He forgets the sovereign hand of God over all. But most importantly, he forgets the sovereign hand of God over the details of his life and loss.

One of my professors, David Pallison, says it like this. God is God. His reign is high and purposeful, yet reaches down into the details of our lives and suffering.

But we often misapply God's sovereignty when it comes to actually helping sufferers, both ourselves and others. So it begs the question, how do we misapply God's sovereignty to people in suffering?

Well, Pallison goes on to say we misapply the sovereignty of God. This is where we might misstep with Elijah. Don't you remember that he's the one who reigns over all? Also, we misapply it by just saying God's in control.

[15 : 40] What's happening must be his will. Trust in the Lord and accept it. Remember the truth. All those things are true.

But the high and purposeful sovereignty of God is not spoken in precisely that way in Scripture. Look at Isaiah 43, 2.

This is the high and purposeful sovereignty of God. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you. And through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm.

When you walk through fire, you shall not be burned. And the flame shall not consume you. Just hold that up for a moment. That's high sovereignty of God. That's a high sovereignty of God.

And what does it say to us? Staggering from law is that God himself calls you into the deep water. When you pass through the waters.

[16 : 47] Not if you pass through the waters. Just like the Lord led the people of Israel straight into the Red Sea. So he could deliver them through it.

So he does the same to us. But look, he says, God sets a limit on your troubles. They shall not overwhelm. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned.

The flame shall not consume you. And God is with you. Bringing good out of trouble.

I will be with you. So wonderfully, yes, God's sovereignty is high. He set his stone in the heavens. His kingdom rules over all.

But even more wonderfully, it's purposeful. Here it is. The high and purposeful sovereignty of God is going somewhere. We sometimes think about the sovereignty of God in this highway.

[17 : 49] And just a highway like that he's just up on the throne. Just moving the details. But no, his high sovereignty is moving into the details to take you someplace. To produce in you something you desperately need.

And so Elijah has not merely forgotten the sovereign hand of God over all. He's forgotten the sovereign hand of God over his life. And discouragement always presents us with a similar temptation to forget.

Point two, discouragement diminishes strength for the present. It diminishes strength to face the present.

And the next thing we notice about Elijah is he's tired. He takes off running south past Judah. So he's in Israel running south, southern kingdom, past Judah, into the wilderness to the mountain of God.

But he doesn't make it very far. Look in verse 4. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he asked that he might die. He lay down, verse 5, and slept under a broom tree.

[18 : 52] There's a physical tiredness that often accompanies discouragement. That's what Elijah is helping us see. Just like the psalmist said, my heart and my flesh may fail.

My strength may give out, but the Lord is my portion forever. The great preacher Charles Spurgeon described this loss of strength and discouragement very well. Now, Mr. Spurgeon was once preaching to several thousand people in London and someone yelled fire when there wasn't a fire.

A panic broke out. A mad rush to the exit. Seven people were trampled to death. 28 people critically injured.

Now, this is Charles Spurgeon. His messages are printed on the front page of the New York Times. The whole world began to criticize him. Blame him.

No doubt he blamed himself and the tragedy nearly broke him. His wife, Susanna, said of him, My beloved's anguish was so deep and violent that reason seemed to totter in her throne.

[20 : 07] And we sometimes feared he would never preach again. He was 22 years old. And yet, the staggering loss left him unable to put his thoughts together.

Unable to study. Barely able to preach. Why does discouragement diminish our strength? It's the grappling of a loss that leaves us feeling helpless and hopeless.

That's what happened to Elijah. He longed for a nationwide revival. He longed for the people of Israel. He thought he was different. He thought he was the one that was going to bring this out. But look in verse 4.

He says, He's saying, I'm helpless.

I can't bring this about. I'm hopeless. Look in verse 5. He lays down and slept under the broom tree. Again, in verse 6. He ate a little bit.

[21 : 14] And then he ate and drank and laid down again. The hopelessness and helplessness so debilitating. He cannot keep going and must sleep.

The same thing happens to us in losses. The losses may be sustained in another ways. It may be the loss of something. Because of something someone has done to you.

The loss could be betrayal. Gossip and slander. Abuse. Some bully husband.

Maybe the loss of something you've done. I'll never forget reading a story a couple years ago about a girl in college. By all accounts, a happy girl who made a pornographic movie.

Three days later, committed suicide. Because of the loss of a desire to live anymore.

[22 : 21] Maybe the loss of something that has happened. A sudden death. A failed dream. Whatever it is, the loss often leaves you grappling with a feeling of helplessness and hopelessness. Because it's erased your hope and your expectations and your dream.

In his provoking book, Lament for a Son. About losing his 25-year-old son to a climbing accident.

Nicholas Walterstorff says this. I lament all that might have been. And now will never be. That's what losses do.

And when the feeling hits, suddenly you have no strength to pull yourself up. No desire to present yourself as strong. Mind is so fragile and frail you can barely make it through the day.

Your heart is so burdened. Not with the question mark of uncertainty, but the dark period of hopelessness. It's right then, beloved, that we must remember that it's not always sinful to be discouraged.

[23 : 34] First off, there's certain people that are just prone to discouragement. Some people, it seems, are born with Prozac in their veins. Others, clearly, are not.

Even after conversion, you can have a difficult time keeping your feelings from dragging you downward. Some of it's because of the way you're made in a natural sense.

And these individuals, more naturally prone to discouragement, may even be clinically diagnosed as depressed. I'm not a doctor. I'm not going to render my opinion.

But I am a pastor. And clinical depression is over-diagnosed, in my opinion. I'd urge you to avoid just taking a drug and failing to give attention to the spiritual discouragement that could be dragging your soul down.

But not just for those folks, but for anyone, it's not always sinful to be discouraged. Life in a fallen world, as I've said, brings a string of losses that will tempt you to discouragement.

[24 : 44] In fact, I can guarantee you one thing in life, and that is that you will be discouraged. You'll want to throw in the towel. You'll want to give up.

You'll want to run from everything. You'll want to plan your own funeral. Please call me before you do. It's not always sinful to be disappointed and discouraged in those moments.

But be careful. What you do with your discouragement can lead you to serious sin. What you do with your discouragement can shape and color every aspect of your life in darkness.

Point three, discouragement despairs of the future. Discouragement despairs of the future. Sadly, Elijah's discouragement leads him to sin.

Threading through this passage is, passage are indications of Elijah's sinful response. The temptation to sin and discouragement often begins with complaining.

[25 : 42] Look in verse four again. That's what he's doing when he says, it's enough. Take away my life for I'm no better than my father's. And it may sound innocent enough. He's just, he's just hit a hard place.

He's just crying out about how painful it is. But you have to understand what he's expressing, what he's saying. He's a prophet of the people of Israel. He's a prophet of the Lord. So when he says, take my life, he's turning from the Lord and from his calling.

He's alerting us that complaint and discouragement is always vertical. Now we don't think that way.

We think of complaining as horizontal. We complain about coffee, about traffic lights, about friends who don't call, jobs that frustrates, children who don't obey. And most of the time we begin right at the beginning of the day and we just kind of grumble through the day.

Now when the alarm goes off in our house, my wife basically rolls over and says, what do you want to do today? I used to say, I want to die. You know, and stop talking right now.

[26 : 50] I can relate to Charlie Brown that says, there ought to be a better way of starting the day than having to get up. But all that complaining, there's no such thing as a horizontal complaint.

All of those complaints are lobbying and lodging injustice against the one who ordains all things.

Traffic lights and daily inconveniences aren't superficial things.

How much more is the temptation to complain great when staggering from loss, when standing up as a bridesmaid in another wedding while waiting to be a bride?

When hearing of the faith of a friend's daughter while yours continues to drift? When losing another job? When hearing the diagnosis you feared?

[27 : 54] Ever been in a room where someone read a diagnosis and suddenly everything got quiet? Because your worst nightmare. Before long, that heart starts complaining.

Sadly, complaining often leads to despair. It seems that the line between complaining and despair is when complaining about our life leads to completely giving up.

We see that beginning in verse 4 when he says, take away my life. Not in the good him sense. Take it away like kill me. Then Elijah runs into the wilderness and hides in a cave.

The Lord comes to him and says, what are you doing, man? You're the prophet of Israel. What are you doing here? This is his complaint. I've been jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts.

People of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, killed your prophets with a sword, and I'm the only one left. That's what I'm doing here. Then after the Lord reveals himself to him, he says the same thing.

[29 : 08] What are you doing? I've been jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts, for the people have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, killed your prophets with a sword, and I'm the only one left. Take away my life.

These are some of the saddest verses in the Bible. Elijah is saying, I don't care about your power. I don't care about your promises. I don't care about the calling of God on my life.

I quit. The greatest prophet since Moses quits.

Discouragement leads to a kind of deep despair, a kind of moral paralysis in which you no longer believe in anything, care about anything, love anything, want to live for anything.

Nothing less than a snare of unbelief. Despair now in that sequence is no longer a gloomy, half-empty kind of personality.

[30 : 25] It's a deeply offensive spiritual condition that will damn you to hell.

A God-denying condition. Point four, discouragement encounters God's kindness and compassion. What happens next is truly staggering.

Elijah runs to hide in discouragement, but the Lord comes after him. Oh, there's a hound on the trail. The Lord feeds him miraculously.

Look in verse 5. He lay down and slept, and behold, an angel touched him and said, Arise and eat. And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water.

He miraculously feeds him. He eats and lays down and sleeps. Then, verse 7, the angel of the Lord came to him a second time and touched him, said, Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you.

[31 : 39] The Lord is supplying him with food for the journey to run away from him. That's what he does when he sustains us in the midst of complaining and bitterness and all this stuff.

He's supplying you day after day. The rain is falling. He's satisfying you with good things, and you're denying him. He does that to us as well. He rose and ate and drank and went in the strength of that food for 40 days and 40 nights.

He was supposed to be dead by sundown. Now he's alive for 41 days on two meals. Then the Lord comes to him again.

The Lord calls him up on the mountain. Look in verse 11. Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord. Elijah goes out there. Behold, the Lord passed by.

And a great and strong wind tore the mountain and broke it in pieces, the rocks for the Lord. But the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind, an earthquake. But the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake, a fire.

[32 : 42] But the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire, the sound of a low whisper. What's going on here? Why are these verses in the...

Why is this encounter in the Bible? One thing you'll be sure. It's not so that we would talk about the still, small voice of the Lord. The whisper. God is being incredibly gracious to Elijah.

Do you understand? God is coming to him in the midst of his discouragement and despair. And being gracious to him. Elijah wanted to see the power of God.

Elijah wanted to see his might and his miracles and his greatness. So the Lord takes him up on a mountain and passed by. Who else did the Lord pass by? On the mountain, no less than Moses.

The Lord gives him the greatest revelation of himself in the Old Testament apart from Sinai with Moses. The Lord shows him his great and strong wind and earthquake and fire.

[33 : 50] All these things associated with the power and the presence of God in the Old Testament. And then in the sound of the low whisper. So he's displaying his power, but he's also trying to teach Elijah.

He's saying to him, I am with you. I am working through you. You want me to walk with you in the great and strong and powerful ways.

You want me to work with you in the ways that everyone sees. Everyone will notice and everyone will celebrate. But I'm working in your life in the quiet ways. I'm hunting you down on this mountain.

Because I want you to trust me. That's what he's saying. I want you to trust me. I want you to trust that I know what I'm doing. I called you to be a prophet of the Lord. And I may give you, be a prophet of the Lord with no fruit. I put the prayer and the longing for revival in your heart.

But I have purposes that are better than yours. That's what he's saying. And he responds to us with the same kindness and compassion in our discouragement and despair. The Lord would be justified to wipe us out.

[34 : 54] Every sin of complaining and despair is a sin of cosmic treason against the Lord. He created you for himself to render him a constant worship for who he is.

He always does good. It's the lie of the devil to believe he doesn't. But he doesn't wipe us out often. He says the same things.

You want the fireworks. Is that what you want? You want all the losses to go away? You want everything to just go back to normal? You want everything to be fixed?

You want all this to be over? But I want you. I want your heart. I want you to trust me. And so he says, come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden. I will give you rest.

Cast your burden on me and I will sustain you. You may have come here on the brink of despair this morning.

[35 : 58] The brink of giving up. You may have a good church smile on. But you may be hiding. The Lord wants you there.

Right as you are. He wants you to render up your life to him.

To trust him. To turn from sin. That's the offer of the gospel.

What we offer to you in Jesus Christ. He's in the light. He dwells in unapproachable light.

Yet he calls you out in the darkness. He says, come and walk in the light. If you confess your sins, he's faithful and just. Forgive your sins and cleanse you of all unrighteousness. To leave you with the down payment of his inheritance.

[37 : 01] Your inheritance. Until you see him face to face. The Lord is saying to Elijah and to all who are discouraged and depressed. I want you to believe I know what I'm doing. I want you to believe that these little small steps.

Even the ones that go backwards. It seems are going somewhere new. The best is yet to come. Wonderfully, the Lord is not done with Elijah.

After this scene. The next time we see Elijah is when the Lord calls him home. How does he call him home? Not through old age.

He rescues him in a chair to fire. He blesses him. The next time we see Elijah in the Bible. I mean, we hear in restaurants and the promise and Malachi and other places.

But next time we see him in the Bible. Is that the transfiguration of Jesus Christ. He's standing there with Moses. What's the Lord saying when he places him in that picture with Moses?

[38 : 05] Elijah, your promise, your dream of worldwide revival is coming. But he wasn't going to come through you. All of what you did was building up to this one. That's what he's doing.

Lord's not done with you either. John Piper says so helpfully. The life of the godly is not an interstate through Nebraska. But a state road through the Blue Ridge Mountains of Tennessee. There are rock slides and precipices.

And dark mist and bears. Slippery curves and hairpin turns. Make you go backward in order to go forward. But all along this hazardous twisted road that doesn't let you get see very far ahead.

There are frequent signs that say the best is yet to come. This is the truth of God's word. All the perplexes, perplexing turns in our lives are going somewhere good.

They don't lead off a cliff. In all our setbacks, in all the setbacks of our lives as believers, God is plotting for our joy.

[39 : 24] Point five. The way out of discouragement is to humble ourselves and obey. The encounter on the mountain is meant to lead Elijah to humble himself and continue to embrace his calling.

The still small voice of the Lord is saying, don't let your losses cause you to give up. Don't let your losses cause you to believe I'm not working.

The encounter is saying, humble yourself. Keep trusting. Keep obeying. Through seasons of discouragement. The result is incredibly sad. After the encounter on the mountain, Elijah covers his face with his cloak, goes back to the cave.

He's saying, I don't care. And then the Lord dismisses him. The Lord says, go and anoint Elisha.

I'm done with you. It's a warning. God does not tell you to hide your discouragement.

[40 : 33] Fake it till you make it. But God also does not tell you to give in to it. God calls you and me to keep humbling ourselves, keep trusting, keep obeying, even when the steps are small and the progress is slow.

The growth grows mostly unnoticed. God is working. Earlier this week, one of my kids showed me a book that he's reading called Cat Kid.

