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1 Kings 19

Second Message

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## THE MOUNTAIN OF DEFEAT

I was struck by several prayer requests in our Sunday bulletin last week. Prayer was requested for a woman who had surrendered herself to a mental health facility because of her depression; for a person who was distressed over a job change; for a boy from a misguided family whose “soul and spirit were slowly ebbing away and shutting down.” Cynthia Swindoll has written, “Depression...black as a thousand midnights in a cypress swamp. Loneliness that is indescribable. Confusion regarding God. Frustration with life and circumstances. The feeling that you have been abandoned, that you are worthless. Unlovable. The pain is excruciating.” Most of us have been there.

Last week we looked at the prophet Elijah’s mountaintop experience as he took on the prophets of Baal. Our champion stood tall and won a dramatic and conclusive victory. Before all of Israel, God carried the day through his man. Afterwards, the people returned to Yahweh, the great “I AM.” The God of Israel was indeed the true God of the universe. Following a prolonged drought, the rains fell once more, signifying that the people’s lives would again become fertile. What a day for Elijah! He had tasted of the thrill of victory.

But what about the agony of defeat? How do we handle failure? How do we deal with discouragement? In our first message we marveled at how Elijah, by the power of the Holy Spirit, engaged in a contest in which he seemed at first to be overmatched. But there are times in life when circumstances seem so overwhelming that we would much rather disengage. We lack the strength to carry on. Today we will see Elijah in a totally different mountaintop experience, this time a mountain of defeat.

1 Kings 19:

**Now Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with a sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, “So may the gods do to me and even more, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time.” And he was afraid and arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba [about a 70- or 80-mile run], 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 juniper tree; and he requested for himself that he might die, and said, “It is enough; now, O LORD, take my life, for I am not better than my fathers.” (1 Kgs 19:1-4 NASB)**

We have to ask the question, what happened to Elijah? Last week we saw that he was strong and mighty, and empowered by God to do great things. Today we see a defeated and scared man, running for his life. In a word, the problem is Jezebel, the foreign-born wife of King Ahab. When she married Ahab, she brought with her the worship of certain Canaanite deities. The king reports to her what had happened on Mt. Carmel, and she becomes enraged. This wicked woman effectively puts out a contract on Elijah’s life, and the prophet’s response is to run for the hills. In a *Peanuts* cartoon, Marcie says to Linus, “Today my name is Jezebel.” A startled Linus replies, “Jezebel was the evil wife of King Ahab in the Old Testament. In 2 Kings it

says her servants threw her out of the window and she landed on her head.” Marcie says, “Today my name is Susan!” Jezebel! The very name stands for everything that is evil and sinister.

Why is Elijah so fearful? He had just taken on and defeated 850 false prophets. Now he is running scared from a woman. He is defeated and depressed. I think there are three factors that contribute to his downfall. If we learn these things, then we can understand the tactics which Satan uses to defeat and discourage us.

The first thing Elijah does wrong is, he takes his eyes off God and looks at the circumstances. The word in verse 3 that is translated “he was afraid,” is translated “he saw,” in many manuscripts. The words sound very similar, but the rendering “he saw” gives us a much better picture of what happens to our hero. He looked away from God and saw the danger of Jezebel’s threat.

As a child in school, I wasn’t a very good rope climber in gym class. I never seemed to get higher than a couple of feet off the ground. One day, however, I climbed all the way to the top and touched the wooden disc that signaled I had made it. Then I made my mistake: I looked down. I slid down the rope so fast I burned my hands and lay in a heap on the mat. Just moments earlier I had never climbed that high before. I had never had such a great victory. But then I looked down and, like Elijah, that was my undoing.

Peter is another example of one who looked at circumstances rather than his Lord. When he saw Jesus walking toward him on the water he said, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” And He said, “Come.” Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came toward Jesus, but seeing the wind he became afraid and, beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me.” This is what happened to Elijah. One of our most vulnerable times is when we have just had a victory.

Fear is what causes us to be discouraged. And fear comes from looking at and dwelling on overwhelming circumstances: fear of rejection, fear of the unknown, fear of life or death, fear of failure, fear of revealing ourselves for who we really are, fear of not being able to go on. Fear is one of the deepest emotions that grips the human heart.

The second problem Elijah had was that he thought the battle was over. Following his great victory he let his guard down and became vulnerable. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, “If you think you are standing firm, be careful lest you fall.” Elijah had had a great victory. He imagined he would be rewarded with a promotion; perhaps a ticker tape parade back in Jezreel. This is when the enemy lands his surprise punch, and Elijah finds himself on the canvas.

The period after a great victory can often be a very vulnerable time. One reason this is so is because we are tempted to stop trusting the Lord and start taking things on by ourselves. When we know that we are up against overwhelming odds, we are on our knees all the time, trusting in God because we are aware of our limitations.

But then, following the victory, we begin to feel better; we feel we can handle things ourselves. We begin to trust in ourselves, and that is when we become vulnerable.

Another leading contributor to discouragement is unfulfilled expectations. Elijah was convinced a revival was breaking out in Israel. Even Ahab was excited by what had happened on Mt. Carmel. But it's important to realize that there are no guarantees; there are no time-outs, no safe bases, no break times. Even when God has given us great victories, there is no guarantee that life will be smooth sailing tomorrow. As much as we might like it to be so, life does not operate on this basis. As a matter of fact, if we begin to get overconfident following a victory in which the Lord used us, then we are almost certain to fall flat on our face.

In C.S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*, Wormwood's uncle gives him insight on how to create havoc in the Christian's life:

To produce the best results from the patient's fatigue, therefore, you must feed him with false hopes. Put into his mind plausible reasons for believing that the air raid will not be repeated. Keep him comforting himself with the thought of how much he will enjoy his bed next night. Exaggerate the weariness by making him think it will soon be over; for men usually feel that a strain could have been endured no longer at the very moment when it is ending, or when they think it is ending.

Lewis aptly points out that it is much worse to take away one ounce of expected pleasure than add a pound of expected pain.

The third thing that contributed to Elijah's defeat is that he was physically exhausted. All of his energy was spent and he was tired. After his great victory he had run to Jezreel (getting there ahead of Ahab who had gone by chariot), and then traveled another day's journey into the wilderness. He was exhausted. We, too, are especially prone to defeat when we are physically tired. Late at night we are susceptible to doubts and discouragement. Our problems loom much larger than they really are. That is when we think about the what if's, and the could-have-been's. How often do you sit late at night watching television, mindlessly viewing something that is not profitable for you, because you are too tired to change the channel? This is when we are open to the enemy's attack, when we are tired and all our energy is spent.

Elijah's response to Jezebel's messenger is very typical of discouragement and depression. The first thing he does is run. He flees into the wilderness. We all do this when we face discouragement. We have a place to escape to. As the song goes, "Hello darkness, my old friend, I've come to talk with you again." Where do you go when you are defeated? Some retreat to the world of alcohol and drugs. Others flee to the movie theater. Most of us, though, flee into moods of various kinds—self-pity, anxiety, doubt, a blue funk, even self-adequacy. Some of us turn to another person in an unhealthy way. Others go out and spend money. You know the adage, "When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping." The bottom line is, when we get discouraged, we try and run away from our failures.

The second thing Elijah does is to express his emotions: "It's enough, Lord, let me die." This is the ultimate expression of despair; a feeling of hopelessness and worthlessness. There's no reason to go on, we think. It would be better if we were not here. "Enough is enough," says Elijah. "I've done the best I could. I'm not better than my fathers. Lord, what do you expect from me?" Job expresses the same sentiment in the midst of his suffering. He even questions why he was born:

**"Why is light given to him who suffers,  
And life to the bitter of soul;  
Who long for death, but there is none,  
And dig for it more than hidden treasures;  
Who rejoice greatly,  
They exult when they find the grave?"**

When the stock market crashed in 1929, a number of people jumped off a bridge in Pasadena because they could not cope with defeat. This is where we find Elijah. He is afraid. He thinks his ministry is a failure. He fears for his life. He has no sense of wellbeing. And he is mad at God for not delivering on his expectations.

All of us can identify with Elijah and his defeat because all of us have felt the emotions which come with discouragement and failure. I think it is helpful for us at this point to realize that we all fail at one time or another. We all become defeated at certain times. James says that Elijah was a man with a nature just like ours. We can taste his victory, but we also drink from his cup of defeat.

How is Elijah going to get out of this mess? How does God respond to his defeat and depression? In the rest of this chapter we will see that God responds in four specific ways. Here we will discover some of the things we can do and look to in order to experience again a sense of wellbeing.

First, God provides in a physical way for his servant. Verse 5:

**And he lay down and slept under a juniper tree; and behold, there was an angel touching him, and he said to him, "Arise, eat." Then he looked and behold, there was at his head a bread cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. So he ate and drank and lay down again. And the angel of the LORD came again a second time and touched him and said, "Arise, eat, because this journey is too great for you." So he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mountain of God. (19:5-8)**

First, God provides nourishment for Elijah. He meets him in the midst of his discouragement and gives him food, drink and sleep. He even provides for him an angel to minister to him personally. In verse 7 we learn that this is not any angel but "the angel of the Lord," which may well be referring to the second person of the Trinity, the pre-incarnate Christ.

Our physical condition contributes much to our emotional and psychological health. The principle we can gather from this is, when you are down and tired, don't try to solve the problem. When it's late at night, don't try to figure it out. Get a good meal. Get a good night's sleep. Your problems will look a lot different in the morning.

After the angel had ministered to Elijah, the prophet rose and went on a journey to Horeb, the mountain of God, more than 200 miles away. There he wandered for forty days and forty nights, as Israel had wandered in the wilderness forty years. This is the same place where God met and talked to Moses, where God revealed to Moses his law and his life. Verse 9 says that Elijah came to a cave, literally *the* cave, implying that this is the very place, the very cleft of the rock in Exodus 33 where God met Moses in his discouragement after the nation had built the golden calf. This is where God gave Moses the Ten Commandments and encouraged his heart.

Verse 9:

**Then he came to a cave, and lodged there; and behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and He said to him, "What are you**

doing here, Elijah?” And he said, “I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant, torn down Thine altars and killed Thy prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.”

So He said, “Go forth, and stand on the mountain before the LORD.” And behold, the LORD was passing by! And a great and strong wind was rending the mountains and breaking 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, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of gentle blowing. And it came about when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave. And behold, a voice came to him and said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Then he said, “I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant, torn down Thine altars and killed Thy prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.” (19:9-14)

Having provided Elijah with nourishment, the second thing which God does is to challenge him. Twice God says to him, “Elijah, what are you doing here?” What he means, essentially, is, “Why aren’t you in the thick of things? Why did you take yourself out of the game? Why are you running away?” Elijah’s answer communicates very clearly what he is feeling: He is feeling sorry for himself. He is lost in self-pity. And he is mad at God for not getting what he wanted. “I am the only one left,” he cries, “the only godly man in Israel. Woe is me.”

It’s not true, of course, that he is the only servant of God left in Israel. Later, God will tell him that there are 7000 people in Israel who have not bowed the knee to Baal. But God’s question makes it clear that he will not allow us feel sorry for ourselves. This is not to say that we ought not ever get down and discouraged. We will all become discouraged at times. The important thing is that when discouragement strikes, God does not want us to hide in self-pity. He challenges us to not live this way.

Tim Hansel, who was severely injured in a climbing accident, writes in *You Gotta Keep Dancing*:

Next to the genuine fatigue of pain, possible the most energy-depriving thing I know is self-pity. I know from firsthand experience that it is one of the greatest wastes of my time and emotions, yet I confess my vulnerability to it. My greatest need at these times is for people who will listen to me compassionately, but then firmly and gently encourage me out of such dreadful behavior. It is important that people don’t join me in my self-pity party, but love me into remembering what I can do and must do...Most of us have enough excuses to last a lifetime. The sooner we let go of them and get on with living, the better off we are.

When I am in a bad mood, when I’m down and irritable, when I didn’t get what I wanted, when I am feeling sorry for myself, God and I have had the following conversation many times:

John, what are you doing here?

Lord, you just don’t understand. It isn’t fair. It should have worked this way. God why did you do this?

John, what are you doing here?

Lord, if you will just let me get my way, I’ll be fine, I’ll straighten out real quick.

John, what are you doing here?

Lord, I give up. I know I don’t have to stay here.

Feeling sorry for ourselves never accomplishes anything. It’s just a waste of time.

The third thing that God does is to speak to Elijah, and he speaks in a way different from what Elijah might have desired. Elijah goes forth on the mountain and the Lord was “passing by.” This is the same word used when Moses was on this mountain. God was “passing by.” Now there comes along a strong wind, but the Lord is not in the wind. There is an earthquake, but the Lord is not in the earthquake. There is fire, but the Lord is not in the fire. Then comes the sound of gentle blowing, the still, small voice and that is the Lord. Often when we are in the middle of discouragement we want God to speak with power and might, we want him to set things right, we want him to act. I am sure that Elijah was reminded of Mt. Carmel when the lightning came from heaven and ignited the sacrifice. I’m sure he wanted God to ignite Jezebel in the same way! But much more often, God speaks to us in other ways, in a small voice, the voice of a whisper.

Moses’ experience on this mountain is the key to understanding this passage. Israel had built a golden calf and Moses was discouraged. When he was standing in this very place, he asked God if he could see his glory. But he knew if he looked in the face of the Lord, he would die. He knew that his face would have to be hidden, just like Elijah does here. Both of these men knew that if they saw the face of the Lord they would die. In Exodus 33, God passed by Moses but as he did so, he put his hand over Moses’ eyes. Then he took his hand away and Moses saw his back. It was in this way that Moses saw the glory of the Lord trailing away.

Moses and Elijah needed that same thing: They needed to see beyond the circumstances and see the Lord. They needed to get their eyes off themselves and onto their God. They needed to see God’s goodness, mercy and love. When we are hurting, we want God to act. We want the fire, the earthquake, the strong wind. But more likely than not, God will not reveal himself to us in a dramatic show of power, but in a gentle way, one which will penetrate our hearts and change us on the inside, he will show us who he is.

When we are discouraged, we need to stop and listen for this still, small voice. We need to listen for his Word from the Scriptures. And there he will remind us that we are his children, that he is with us, that we are not alone, and that nothing will separate us from his love or his care. He will never ever forsake us. We are secure in his care and in his provision. Even Jesus felt this on the eve of the crucifixion. Matthew says that he began to be grieved and distressed, and so he went into the garden to talk and listen to the Father. That was when Jesus heard the still, small voice. It did not change his circumstances, but it changed him.

Finally, God does one more thing for Elijah. Verse 15:

**And the LORD said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus, and when you have arrived, you shall anoint Hazael king over Syria; and Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint king over Israel; and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint as prophet in your place. And it shall come about, the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall put to death. Yet I will leave 7000 in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal and every mouth that has not kissed him.” (19:15-18)**

Finally, in the midst of failure and dejection, God gives Elijah another assignment. He puts him back to work. No matter that he has failed. God will use him again. He wants him to carry on his ministry. He tells him to anoint two kings who will work in the affairs of the nations bring judgment and discipline, and to bring about the demise of Ahab and Jezebel. God was going to do what Elijah wanted, but he was going to do it in his own way. And he instructs Elijah to anoint Elisha as a prophet who will take over for him. In this way God provides a friend and co-worker for Elijah, one who will work beside him and encourage him. Just as John the Baptist paved the way for Jesus, so Elijah was to pave the way for Elisha. And even though Elijah would henceforth have a quieter ministry, his impact in the future would be even greater than it had been in the past.

This is what God does for us, too. When we are discouraged, he gives us another assignment. After we have talked to him, and heard the still, small voice, he tells us, "Keep on keeping on. Get back in the fight." After denying the Lord, Jesus met Peter in that beautiful scene on the shores of Lake Galilee. He asked him, "Peter, do you love me?" "Yes I do, Lord," said Peter, "Then feed my sheep," Jesus replied. Jesus pressed him back into service.

How does Elijah respond to all of this? Verse 19 tells us

**So he departed from there... (19:19a)**

I'm not sure Elijah got all the implications of what God was telling him. He responds to God's question in the same way in verses 10 and 14, so he is still feeling a little sorry for himself. But he makes a decision to not trust in his feelings. He chooses to be obedient to God, and prepares to get back into the thick of things. He put his life back on the line.

This is how we, too, can deal with defeat, discouragement, failure, and even mild depression. First, we should nourish our body. Get the right amount of food, exercise and sleep. Second, refuse to feel sorry for ourselves. Third, listen for the still, small voice of God. Get your eyes off yourself, your circumstances and failures, and focus them on the glory of God. And finally, after you have heard that voice, get back into the fight.

My own father was a wonderful model for me in many ways. One quality he had always impressed me. I could never tell whether he had won the daily double or lost \$100. I mean by this that I could never tell by his expression whether he had won a major victory or suffered a galling defeat. After he learned that he had cancer, he had surgery and was in intensive care for 75 days. The doctors were amazed that he made it past that point. And then for nearly two years he suffered through chemotherapy and radiation, until finally he passed away last year. But I never once heard him complain. I never heard a discouraging word come from his mouth. I never heard him feel sorry for himself. I kept hearing a man who was trusting in God, thankful for the gift of life which God had given him.

Winston Churchill said, "Success is never final; failure is never fatal. It is courage that counts." Rudyard Kipling wrote that "if we can meet triumph and disaster, and treat those two impostors just the same, then we are on our way to becoming men." We do this by getting our eyes off ourselves and focusing them on the glory of the One who can provide for us and sustain us.

**let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart. (Heb 12:1b-3)**

Elijah got back into the thick of things. By the grace of God we can, too.

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