

Dealing with despair

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[0:00] And before we do, while you turn there, I just want to give a bit of introduction because we're jumping in here at the middle of the story of this prophet Elijah. And if you're not familiar with who Elijah is or how he served the Lord, as Elijah in chapter 18, he's fighting these prophets of Baal.

And it's kind of this contest that occurs on the top of Mount Carmel there where he says, well, why don't you sacrifice a bull to your gods and call on your gods that they may bring down fire on your sacrifice?

And then I will do the same to my God and we'll see whose God is the one true God. And so the prophets of Baal, they go first and they call down fire on this altar and nothing happens.

And they shout some more and they even cut themselves and no response from their gods. And then Elijah goes and it's his turn. But before he calls on the one true God, he has these prophets of Baal pour water three times on top of the altar.

And then he calls out to the one true God, Yahweh, to bring down fire. And fire comes from heaven and not only consumes this burnt offering, but also the wood and the stone and the dust and even the water.

[1:10] And it's at that point that those who are witnessing bow down to worship the one true God. And these prophets of Baal are gathered up and they're slaughtered. And this was actually a time that brought an end to a year long drought that was occurring in the land as well.

And so we see this mountaintop experience for Elijah where God proves his sovereignty. We see Elijah kind of be this spiritual giant. And then we quickly transition to chapter 19 and we see a very different change of course.

He goes from what would likely be, looks like his greatest hour to his darkest hour. Where his own life is threatened and we see this pain of discouragement and despair come upon him.

And maybe we feel the same way at times when we are discouraged or we face despair. And the question is, where do we find hope? Where do we find comfort? And it's easy when we look at Elijah and we kind of try to connect chapter 18 and 19 to think, we can kind of judge Elijah to say, what happened?

Why the lack of faith? But hopefully when we see Elijah face this hardship, it actually can be a means of giving us comfort. Because we recognize that Elijah, though he's a man of God, he's very much like you and me.

[2:21] And we are very much like him. That we are prone to discouragement. That we face hardship in our lives. We recognize just how fearful and feeble we can be. But yet we have a God who loves us and protects us.

Who gives us hope even in our darkest hour. So let's turn and read God's word. 1 Kings chapter 19 starting in verse 1. And now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with a 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. He came to the broom tree, the 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. At all at once an angel touched him and said, get up and eat.

[3 : 31] He looked around and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals and a jar of water. He ate and 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.

And so he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled 40 days and 40 nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. There he went into a cave and spent the night.

And the word of the Lord came to him. What are you doing here, Elijah? 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. And after the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.

[4 : 42] And when Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, what are you doing here, Elijah? And he replied, I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty.

The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn 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 Hazei, king over Aram. And also anoint Jehu, the son of Nimshi, king over Israel. And anoint Elisha, the son of Shaphat, from Abel Mahaloah, to succeed you as prophet.

Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazei. And Elisha shall put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. Yet I reserve 7,000 in Israel, all whose knees have not bound down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him.

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

[5 : 58] And so, Lord, we ask that you may send your spirit that in the preaching of your word, our eyes may be opened, our hearts may be softened, and our wills may be renewed. Lord, may we receive your truth and be comforted by your promises and be compelled to walk in your ways.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, I'm sure many of you are familiar with the book Pilgrim's Progress, a book that was written a long time ago by John Bunyan, an English preacher and writer back in the 1600s.

And it's a story that's really an allegory of the Christian life. It tells a story of a man named Christian who's traveling from the city of destruction onto the celestial city. And it recounts many of his trials and temptations and struggles he goes through.

And there's one portion of the story where he meets a traveling companion, a guy named Hopeful. And they start to travel together to the celestial city, but the road starts to get rocky and difficult.

But as they look off to the side, they see this green meadow with this path. And so they think, well, if we go on this path on this green meadow, we can kind of skirt around this difficult part and then get back on the king's highway.

[7:05] And so they decide to do that. But it doesn't take long before they get onto this path and this green pasture that they realize they've made a horrible mistake. Because darkness falls and the storm rises and the rains and the winds come.

And they realize at this point they can't go back anymore because they can't see where they're going. And now the floodwaters have risen that has kind of trapped them on this land. And so they decide, well, we're going to find some shelter for the night.

And then in the morning we'll return to the way that we came. But as they find shelter, there's this giant named despair. And this is his land. And he captures them and accuses them of trespassing and takes them back to his castle called Doubting Castle where he throws them into this dungeon.

And while they're in this dungeon, they're left there for days with no food or water. And this giant despair comes every day and he beats them and he beats them. And he taunts them and threatens them and says, take your own life because you're never going to escape.

And so after days and days of this happening, this Christian, this traveler, he's about ready to take his own life, to take this advice because he realizes he thinks he's without hope. And so we recognize that Elijah may be in a very similar place in our passage this morning where he, a man of God who has been faithful, now reaches this point of desperation where he thinks he's without hope, where his own life is being threatened.

[8:28] And so this is what I want us to focus on today. Certainly, I don't think any of us have our lives threatened at this point in time, but we certainly face discouragement and despair of different kinds. And so as we walk through this passage, there's really three things I want us to consider about this discouragement.

I want us to see that the cause for discouragement, I want us to consider that the characteristics of discouragement, and lastly, the cure for discouragement.

The cause for discouragement, the characteristics of discouragement, and the cure. And so if we think first about the cause for discouragement, I think we can kind of think about it in two different ways, both the circumstantial causes and also the spiritual causes.

Because if we think back to chapter 18 again, how that concludes with Elijah seemingly at victory here, King Ahab, he sees this happen, he rushes back to his wife, King Jezebel, to tell her all that had happened.

And actually says that Elijah travels too. He's not just staying there on the mount. He's excited. He travels back. He's on foot. And it says that somehow he beats the chariots back to where King or Queen Jezebel is.

[9:34] It seems as though he's very excited about maybe this is going to be the point in time where her heart of stone is going to be broken. Maybe she's going to turn from her wicked ways and finally recognize the one true God and worship him alone.

But what we see is the exact opposite happens. When Jezebel hears of this news, she now threatens Elijah that she's going to do the same thing to him as what happened to these prophets of Baal. And so you may think this seems like a really reasonable circumstances to be in despair or discouragement.

But the thing is, Elijah has faced hardship like this before and not come to this point of disappointment. We could just look back a few chapters where he has challenged this King Ahab before. He says that he's the troubler of Israel.

He's endured drought. He's raised the dead. Now he's shown God to be victorious on Mount Carmel. And so you realize, well, it's not simply the circumstances themselves that are the real reason for his despair.

We think about this discouragement really being something that is more than just circumstances, but oftentimes it reveals something more about our heart. It reveals something about our spiritual condition.

[10:45] Because if you think about all that had happened to Elijah in the past, he did so and he worked as a man of God under the power of God on the reliance of his power. And now what we see here is very much turning his focus from God to himself.

And so if we were to think about where it says in verse 10, he responds to this question from God a couple times. And he says, I've been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. Everyone else has rejected you. I'm the only one less.

Now everyone is trying to kill me. And so we see his focus is really about his own works, maybe considering his own merit, why he doesn't deserve to be pursued and killed.

Maybe this is one of the first times where he's actually not been met with success in ministry. And so now he's discouraged because the success isn't following.

And so success in and of itself can often be a God in our lives, even more so than trying to serve the God we claim to follow. And so what Elijah does here, he's trusting, rather than trusting in God and his promises, he's really listening to the threats of man and relying on his own ability.

[11:51] And so I think what the question then is, is how often does this happen to us? Certainly we face difficulties at time and circumstances that are hard to know how to deal with. And it come in various forms for different ones of us.

Maybe it's the loss of a loved one. Maybe it's difficulty at work. Maybe it's feeling like you can't make ends meet financially. Maybe it's trouble with your children at home.

Maybe it's a battling illness of some sort. And we can be discouraged. We can feel the sense of instability. I think it also happens, not in just the individual sense, but also in the collective sense.

Thinking about a young church plant like this, certainly opportunity for discouragement. To think, are we going to grow? I'm inviting people to church. They're not coming. Are we going to be financially secure down the road?

Are we going to see fruit from our ministry here and think the Lord just isn't answering prayer? The question is, how do we respond to these difficulties when we face them?

[12:54] What we see that Elijah did, he's turned his eyes from God and focuses on his own self, his own problems, and therefore falls into this depression and despair. If we think about Christian in the Pilgrim's Progress, he does the same thing.

Why is he captured? Well, it's because he's gone off the king's road. The road got rocky, so he chooses, I'm going to follow my own plan and my own path. I think oftentimes we can fool ourselves into thinking that the Christian life is meant to be an easy life, that we shouldn't face trouble and hardship, when actually when we look at the cross, the cross stands as a symbol, shows us that hardship will follow, following Christ.

We suffer as Christ suffered. We are not promised to be delivered from hardship. And so though disappointment, it may be sparked by our circumstances, it's often perpetuated by our own spiritual condition, where we choose not to follow after God, where we doubt his sovereign control.

And so that brings us to our second point. If that's the cause for discouragement, oftentimes our spiritual condition, what are the circumstances, or the conditions, or the conditions, or the characteristics for how and why we despair?

I think we see several in this story that maybe we can relate to ourselves, how this practically plays out. I think the first one is one of fear. When we face hardship, we can often begin to fear.

[14:17] And this is what Elijah does. He runs for his life. He's afraid that God has abandoned him. I think the same thing happens for us when we face this discouragement. It's a question, is God there?

Does he care? What's going to happen to my future? If we think back to the story of the Israelites in the Old Testament, as God brings them through the wilderness of 40 years of wandering, and they're finally ready to enter the promised land, they have this new leader, Joshua.

And what is Joshua reminded over and over again by God as he leads his people? He says, don't be afraid. Don't be discouraged. Do not fear.

Why? Because the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go. And so I think fear often comes when we forget God's promises of his presence and his power.

We can often develop this spiritual amnesia at times. When things are going well, we can trust God, right? But when things start to get hard, we can easily forget all the ways that God has provided for us and loved us and shown his sovereign will in our lives.

[15:25] This is what the people of Israel had to be reminded of. Kind of over and over again. When God would give them these new commands, how would he often start these commands? He would say again and again, I am the Lord your God who has brought you out of the land of Egypt.

He's saying, I know that you can become fearful when you forget my presence. When you forget that I am the sovereign, all-powerful Savior. And then another characteristic, oftentimes our fear is accompanied by this sense of loneliness or isolation.

Think again about what he says in verse 10. He says, I'm alone. Everyone else has abandoned you. I'm the only one left. And everyone's trying to take my life now. I think oftentimes when we face hardship, we can be left feeling like we are all alone.

Like no one has experienced what I've experienced. And we can have maybe this little pity party or think, woe is me. No one faces hardship the way that I do.

We see this reflected in the Psalms again and again. The psalmist writing out and crying out to God in his sorrow. If we were to look at Psalm 102, the psalmist says, I am like a desert owl in the wilderness, an owl of wasted places.

[16:36] I am like a lonely sparrow on a house stop. I am all alone. No one knows my distress. God has abandoned me. And I think what's true oftentimes when we get the sense of loneliness is we can also deprive, oftentimes deprive ourselves of the company of others.

This is what Elijah does here, right? He's fleeing from Jezebel. He flees to Beersheba. And what does he do there? He leaves his servant and continues traveling on his own.

No doubt the servant was a companion of his, a helper, maybe a friend. But in his despair, he leaves him behind. And so why do we do this? Why often when we face hardship, when we're met with disappointment, do we want to isolate ourselves?

I think oftentimes we just like to wallow in our sorrow. We want to feel some sort of justification for the way that we feel. Sometimes we just like feeling bad for ourselves. Or maybe we just don't trust others to bear our burdens.

People got their own problems. We won't want to trouble other people. And I think this is important to think about in the church context too, right? Because we want to build community together. We want people to feel cared for and loved and welcomed here.

[17:52] But oftentimes, again, when we face those hardship, we can try to isolate ourselves. We don't want to share our problems. We don't want to burden or inconvenience other people.

We want to keep up appearances. And so we can isolate ourselves. And certainly maybe even when we find our own problems, we don't want to be bothered by other people's problems either. And so what happens is we can just, in our isolation, we can perpetuate those feelings of despair rather than seek out how we can bear each other's burdens.

One more characteristic that I think we see here in Elijah's life is that despair just leads to exhaustion, right? He's had this mountaintop experience. He runs to see the queen.

She threatens to kill him. And now he's on the run again, fearing for his life, starting to doubt God. And he runs and he runs until he finally falls asleep, asking God to kill him.

Even when he's awoken by an angel, you would think that would be something that would kind of shock someone, wake them up, right? Angel wakes him up, eats some food, goes back to bed again. Maybe some of you know of Charles Spurgeon who was a minister down in London back in the 1800s.

[19:05] He was known as the Prince of Preachers, just a prolific preacher who preached at, his own church held five or six thousand that would be in attendance every week. Often would preach ten times a week to thousands of people each time.

He was really quite a giant of his day, but he was also someone that battled depression for most of his life. When he was age 22 preaching, he was in this large music hall and someone in the audience yelled fire.

And though there wasn't a fire, it caused a panic and chaos ensued and actually seven people were trampled to death as a result. And this, he says, oftentimes was something that just devastated them that was really the origin of a lot of his depression and anxiety because he felt personally responsible for the deaths of these people and it was a tragedy that really emotionally scarred him for life.

But beyond that, he faced other hardship and suffering multiple chronic illnesses. He was overwhelmed by his workload, preaching ten times a week, counseling, caring for the poor, writing. He was left utterly exhausted week to week.

And he described these times of depression that he'd go through as the dark night of the soul. And so I wonder if we ever feel the same way. That we just have so much going on in our lives between family and friends and church and activities.

[20:29] You feel like you're just doing the best that you can but you're failing at everything. And so maybe it's like Elijah, we just want to throw up our hands and say enough. God, I'm sick of trying.

Take my life. I really don't care anymore. And we can continue to spiral into a point of really being irrational. I mean, this is what Elijah comes to here because he's asking God to take his life while he's also running for his life.

If you truly want to die, just stop running. Jezebel will catch up. She'll kill you. But we see this spiral of fear and forgetfulness and isolation and exhaustion and it brings us to this point of just crying out to God, what am I to do?

And so that really brings us to our third and final point. What is the cure? What's the cure for our disappointment and our discouragement? Well, we see here it's the tenderness of God.

And we see this play out really in two different forms, both in deed and in word. When Elijah runs into the wilderness, what does God do? Does he yell at him?

[21:35] Does he chastise him? Does he try to punish him? No, we see he nourishes him and he gives him rest. And so for the parents here, I'm sure we've all experienced this before with a young infant or a toddler and they are just at a point of exhaustion and they're crying and they're screaming and they're inconsolable and they don't want to be held but they don't want to be put down and you know as a parent what they need most is sleep.

And you recognize this transformation that occurs from this little devil of a child as you put down, they wake up a little angel once again when they are well rested. My son, my youngest son is going to be four this week and he took a fall in nursery just a couple weeks ago and cut up his forehead and my wife was called to come collect him and when she got there he was still bleeding and crying a bit and so she's trying to comfort him and ask him how he's doing and he said, a cup of tea would make me feel better.

So, you know, an American in Scotland, there's no doubt, I guess I'm raising Scottish children here but it was interesting, something like that, he just needed the comfort of a cup of tea to make him feel better.

And I don't want to trivialize this point but I think honestly even as adults when we are at our lowest sometimes we just need a snack and a nap.

That's what we see happening here in Elijah because we recognize as humans we are finite beings but we have a God who is a merciful father, he is not a slave master and he desires to give us good gifts, even simple ones.

[23:13] And I think oftentimes in our despair we can easily overlook the goodness and the love of God. In our isolation we think we're all alone and we don't open our eyes to see his goodness all around us and that can come in different forms for different people.

Maybe it's a friend who makes you laugh. Maybe it's flowers in your garden. Maybe it's an opportunity to go walking in the hills. Maybe it's a cup of tea by the fire.

Even for myself as I was prepping for this sermon I've sensed a sense of disappointment in myself and thinking been here in Scotland for five years what do I have to show for it? Have I really made an impact?

Is the church really growing? What does my future hold? And I often go running and this was just last Saturday I was running and all these thoughts were going through my head kind of having a little pity party for myself and was running up if you're familiar with Edinburgh Braids Hill which is kind of on the south side of the city and it was an early run and I got to the top of the hill right as the sun was rising and the brambles were out so I just stopped and I was able to eat some brambles and watch the sun rise and just was convicted about my own my own pettiness my own lack of trust and was able to experience the goodness of God both in sight and in taste and so I think that's why God gives us our senses that we can see and we can hear and we can taste and we can touch that he cares for you we see this played out too not only in the nourishment and the rest that Elijah gets but also we see here that God listens twice God asked Elijah what are you doing here and I don't think he's asking this in a condescending way

I think he's really permitting Elijah to speak his grief because Elijah he doesn't really have a good answer his answer is really one that shows a bit of his pride and a bit of his frustration but yet God still listens he allows Elijah to pour out his heart to him and so I think often times when we think about prayer in our discouragement we can fear to pray this way because we think we've got to keep up appearances we've got to pray for the right thing when in fact honestly I think venting our frustrations in prayer to God is perhaps one of the best starting points for God to soften our hearts for God to align our wills to his own and so we can pray we can pray and say that I hate my job or that I'm sick of my family or that I'm sick of not having a family or I'm discouraged by church or I'm sick of this sickness I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired and we know that we have a God who listens we have a God who understands and we have a God who answers see what God does to Elijah here when Elijah comes to Mount Horeb that's actually just another name for Mount Sinai this is the same mountain where God gave the people of Israel the Ten Commandments where Moses goes up on Mount Sinai and he has this he meets God when he comes before him here Elijah has this same encounter in fact Elijah he kind of is mirroring the people of Israel because he's traveling for 40 days and 40 nights to get to Mount Sinai the same way the people of Israel spent 40 years in the wilderness and he meets with God in the same way that he appeared to Moses and says that

[26 : 40] God came in the strong winds and the earthquake and the fire but God was not in these elements God had shown his strength and his might on Mount Carmel when he defeated the prophets of Baal but here he comes to Elijah in this still small voice with a message of hope and a plan of victory and again God could have been very angry at Elijah at this point for his attitude for his actions but instead he's actually calling Elijah back into action like a general who's encouraging his troops not to abandon the battle that they have duties to fulfill and so of course God doesn't need Elijah he doesn't need Elijah to accomplish his purposes here but what he does is he's welcoming him into his mission and as he does so he's pulling him from this pit of despair and we see a good news announced to him he says you're not alone I'm raising up another prophet there are 7,000 other faithful Israelites when you think you're the only one I have 7,000 more and so he's telling

Elijah that my plan will not fail you may not understand the timing of it you may expect that it may come to fruition in some dramatic fashion but he's saying I'm sovereign and I am in control I have a wonderful rescue plan for my people because I'm going to send another one who is going to suffer in your place my own son Jesus who will conquer death who will fully and finally defeat the enemy forever and so take heart this is my promise to you so we think back again on this story of Pilgrim's Progress and this Christian who is stuck in this dungeon in despair ready to take his own life the giant comes one evening one final time and he suggests after he beats him you need to take your own life and if you don't I'm going to kill you in the morning I actually want to read how Christian responds in this state of despair it says that on Saturday about midnight

Christian and hopeful began to pray and continued to pray till almost the break of day now a little before it was day good Christian as one half amazed broke out in a passionate speech what a fool I am thus to lie in this stinking dungeon when I may well be walking in liberty I have a key in my bosom called promise that will I am persuaded lock 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 then he went to the outer door that leads to the castle yard and with the key he opened that door as well and after he went to the iron gate for that must be open too but the lock went desperately hard yet the key did open it then they thrust open the gate to make escape with speed but that gate as it opened made such a cracking that it waked giant despair who hastily rising in pursuit of his prisoners felt his limbs too frail for his fits took him again so that 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 outside of the giant's jurisdiction we see it was the promise of God that rescued Christian and hopeful and it was the same promise that was given to Elijah as well so it's funny though when we think back on this passage

Elijah pleaded with God to take his life when in fact if we only read a couple chapters further it was Elijah that hasn't actually experienced physical death at all he's taken up in a chariot to be with the Lord and so I wonder if he were to ever look back on this episode and just recognize just how foolish he was to doubt the promises of God and the reality is this promise that was given to Elijah is the same promise that's given to us and it's not a promise that we won't face hardship but it's a promise that even when we do we have an ever-present loving and sovereign God whose plan is perfect and whose victory is secure the death and resurrection of Jesus assures us that he is good and so when we fall into disappointment and despair we can recognize that we fall into the arms of a loving God who cares for you and who will raise you up again according to his power and promise let's pray

Thank you.