

“Elijah: Hope in Discouragement”

Elijah is a colorful and courageous Old Testament prophet. God does extraordinary, supernatural things through him, almost routinely! For example, at the brook Cherish God uses birds (ravens) to feed him. In a time of severe drought and famine, God sends Elijah to a widow and her family at Zarephath. This widow has only a small loaf of bread and a flask of oil left, but God miraculously replenishes the bread and oil every day until the rains come. And while there, God uses Elijah to raise the widow’s dead son back to life!

Elijah is a prophet in Israel during the reign of *King Ahab*. Ahab’s wife Jezebel, a Phoenician princess and worshiper of the pagan god Baal, wants to stamp out Israel’s worship of Yahweh (Jehovah) and force everyone to worship her own pagan god. This gutsy prophet Elijah says right to King Ahab’s face, “I have not troubled Israel, *but you have*...because you have forsaken the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals” (1 Kings 18:18). Then follows the dramatic scene on Mount Carmel where Elijah challenges 450 prophets of Baal. God sends fire to consume Elijah’s sacrifice, but not the sacrifices of the Baal prophets, exposing their religion as a worthless fraud.

But when we see Elijah now, he isn’t riding a victory high. He’s dejected, discouraged. Queen Jezebel has vowed to track him down and kill him. The Bible says “Elijah was afraid and ran for his life” (1 Kings 19:3). So he heads south, away from Israel, and we find him in place called Beersheba. "When he (Elijah) came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, 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'" (1 Kings 19:3b-4). Elijah is so despondent that he prays to die!

We all know discouragement, don’t we? Discouragement is a part of life. Young people get discouraged: maybe you didn’t get the grade you hoped to get on a test, even though studied hard...that boy or girl at school who makes your heart flutter doesn’t even know you exist...you look in the mirror and see the zits on your face, or know you’re too skinny or too heavy. Elderly people get discouraged: you don’t have the stamina to do some of the things you used to do... it’s not getting any easier to get by on a fixed income. Discouragement comes to everybody, no matter how young or old: our job isn’t going as we like...there are family issues that get us down ...we work hard and do the best we can, and people don’t seem to appreciate us.

If we’re believers, we can get discouraged when don’t see spiritual results like to see. We pray for our children, but they still aren’t interested in the Lord. Or we get discouraged because things aren’t moving forward in the church as we had hoped. I served a circuit that consisted of three small rural churches. There were lots of problems, lots of failures during that time, but one of the good things that happened was that singers in these three churches got together and did a contemporary musical called *Alleluia*. It was such a positive experience that those singers stuck together and began to do that performance in other churches. We did it in my home church in Lancaster. After the program, the choir director in that congregation, whom I knew well, came up to me and began to share some of her deep discouragement over her church’s music ministry. She appreciated the beautiful music we had provided that evening, and compared that to her own efforts and the lack of visible results, even though she had been in that church a long time. Now I’ve been on both sides of the fence. I felt so good about the way the Lord was blessing our

music ministry at those three little churches, but I've also known tons of failures in my ministry, so that I could identify with the pain and disappointment she was feeling.

Discouragement is a common thing, *even for Christians*. We can look at Elijah and be reminded that even great people of faith can have periods of despondency. Lonely, and afraid, Elijah is ready to give up.

But God reaches out to Elijah in his time of dismay. And maybe we can learn as we look at some of the things God did to help bring Elijah through his period of despair.

First of all, Elijah did some very practical things: he slept and ate. "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 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.' So he got up and ate and drank" (1 Kings 19:5-8a). Elijah fell asleep from exhaustion. Then God provided food. Now this, in itself, didn't lift Elijah out of his discouragement entirely, but it helped!

Sometimes, sleep, rest, food are gifts of God that can renew us and give us new perspective on things. I can think of many times, over the years, when I would come home at maybe 9:30, 10 o'clock at night from a long day at the church. Maybe it was a difficult day, or I had a meeting that evening that didn't go well, and I'd be feeling weary and discouraged. But how often, just getting a night of rest, and breakfast in the morning, and things would not look as bleak. I'm sure you've had similar experiences: just some rest, maybe a bite to eat, and your spirits would be lifted. Or maybe just a few days away from your job, or a mid-term break at school, or a vacation, or a night away from the kids, or a hobby or some other diversion - can brighten your outlook. *Elijah slept and ate*

Then, Elijah went to Mount Horeb. "So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God" (1 Kings 19:8). Do you know what Mount Horeb is? It's Mount Sinai! A special place for the people of Israel. It was there that Moses had met God. There God made a covenant with Israel to be their God and they His people. There God gave the Ten Commandments. It's like Elijah is going back to the place where he and his people had *spiritual roots*.

Do you and I have a "Mount Sinai"? A place where we can go that has a special significance for our spiritual journey? Perhaps a church sanctuary, a spot in our home where we regularly pray and meditate, a camp or retreat center, a place in the country, where we met God in a real way. As a kid, I attended Ross Street Methodist Church in Lancaster. At the altar of that church I knelt and gave my life to Christ. In the sanctuary, at the altar, I answered a call from God to be a pastor. There were times after that, when I'd be going through a period of difficulty, or perhaps feeling discouraged as I continued in school and tried to prepare for a life of service to God, when I would slip into that sanctuary, by myself, and just sit in there for a while and pray and meditate. I'd look at the stained glass windows, at the altar where I knelt, I'd think of worship

services there where my heart was stirred for the Lord, and somehow I would sense the presence of God, feel my spirits lifted, and experience new hope and fresh strength. That was my “Mount Sinai”.

Our “Mount Sinai” could even be a *person* – someone who helped us or encouraged us when we first came to Christ – and who has remained a person we can go to and know we will find encouragement and direction. *Elijah found encouragement going back to a place of spiritual roots.*

And then, God spoke to Elijah in an unexpected way – in a “still, small voice”. Look at verses 11 and 12: “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 rock before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. 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.”

Elijah is at Mt. Horeb, in a cave, and God says to him, “What are you doing here? Get out of this cave you’re in. Stand on the mountain. I’m about to pass by.” Then a great wind blows, so strong it shatters the rocks! But the Lord is not in that windstorm. Then there is an earthquake, but God is not in the earthquake. Then fire erupts, but God is not in the fire. Now remember, Elijah was used to loud and spectacular interventions from God. But God didn’t show up in the violent wind, or earthquake, or sizzling fire). The Lord spoke in a ***“still, small voice”*** (in the King James Version). Other translations have it a “soft whisper” “sound of a gentle silence” – ***not*** what you would expect!

God can touch us in our times of discouragement in unexpected ways. A “chance happening”, a surprising phone call from someone we haven’t heard from in months, a door that opens in a way we never expected. Perhaps healing from our discouragement comes so quietly and unexpectedly that we hardly even notice it’s taking place. *In our discouragement, when we’re willing to commit our life to God, God can work in unexpected ways to lift the burden and lighten our load.*

Part of God’s healing Elijah’s discouragement took place when Elijah was reminded that he wasn’t alone. There were others on his side. Elijah starts to throw a pity party and thinks he’s the only one left who’s faithful to the God of Israel: “Then 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, 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’” (1 Kings 19:9-10). Elijah developed a bad case of *meonlyitis!* Do you know what disease that is? Me only. “I’m the *only one*.....”. “I’m the only one who cares.” “I’m the only one around here doing any work.” “I’m only one who has this kind of bad luck.” But look at what God says back to Elijah: “I reserve seven thousand in Israel – all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him” (1 Kings 19:18). “Elijah, you’re not alone! There are 7,000 others as faithful to Me as you are!”

Sometimes God has to remind us that there are others who are on our side, others who can give us help and support. For Christian believers, there are sisters and brothers in the family of God to lift us up and encourage us. That's part of what the Church is for!

Sometimes God has way of bringing other Christians across our path to lift our spirits and remind us that we're not alone. Bruce Larson tells of having a wonderfully inspiring week during a Celebration of Evangelism event in Cincinnati. He says he was sure by the time he left the celebration on Friday afternoon that the spirit of love and brotherhood found there would last forever. Well, it lasted until he and 7 others got to the airport and found that even though they had reserved seats for a flight to Baltimore, the flight was overbooked. They watched helplessly as their plane took off without them.

The airline personnel didn't seem to care at all. He started to voice some anger when he realized that if the faith in Jesus they claimed at the conference was for real, it had to be lived out in this situation. So he moved on to other airline counters. At one there was a young man who offered to try to help them make their connections. Finally, he quickly wrote out a ticket, and Bruce ran toward the loading gate – but *that plane* was just taking off. Dejected and discouraged, Bruce went back to the young man behind the airline counter, and told his story. The young man said, "Don't worry, we'll find some way to get you there."

Just then another of the men who had been with Bruce at the conference came up. Bruce greeted him, "Don, my faith was being tested by the indifference of that airline down the way, but this man and his company are trying to help us out even though they're not responsible for our problem. Just to know there's someone who cares makes a difference. At that point, the young man looked up, and without a word, pulled out a picture of Jesus from his coat pocket, held it for Bruce and Don to see, then silently put it back and returned to his teletype and the business of making reservations. Surprised, Don said, "Hey, he's one of us, isn't he!" The ticket agent smiled, handed him a ticket for a later flight, and said, "Good luck, and God bless." Bruce commented, "Now a five hour delay in getting home is no fun, but meeting that unknown disciple behind the ticket counter made it all worthwhile."

That's what the Christian fellowship and the family of God are for, that we can uplift and encourage one another!

Whom has God used in the Body of Christ to encourage you in a time of discouragement?

Lloyd Ogilvie is one of my favorite Christians and writers. He was the Senior Pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Bethlehem, PA when I served in the Poconos. Then he became pastor of a very large Presbyterian Church in Hollywood, CA. Then he was appointed Chaplain of the United States Senate. During the time he served as Chaplain of the Senate, a pastor friend of mine was attending Local Pastor's School at Wesley Seminary in Washington. Twenty or so of these Local Pastor (all serving small United Methodist churches) were fortunate to be able to meet with Lloyd Ogilvie for a question and answer session. My friend sent out an email about

that experience. Listen to how he describes it:

“Twenty or so of us were meeting with Rev. Lloyd Ogilvie, Chaplain of the Senate. We were asking questions about his role on the Senate floor, when the question was asked, ‘So you serve a parish of 100 senators, their families, their staffs, and countless other office employees. Who are your Associate Pastors or Lay Ministers?’ Chaplain Ogilvie paused, and for the first time in our 45 minutes together he looked tired. ‘6,000 (people) all together, as many as at my church in Hollywood, California and there we had 8 ordained pastors and 68 lay staff. It is me and my small office staff here.’

“Lloyd had just returned from counseling the staff of a recently deceased senate member. He had spent this weekend praying with staffers and family through John Kennedy Jr.’s plane crash. Ted Kennedy’s dog was in his office now, waiting for his master to return...lines of weariness flitted across the Chaplain’s brow.

“And another voice, not mine though coming from my mouth, was suddenly saying to this man who has written over 40 books on life in the Spirit, and pastored more people in his lifetime than I will ever know, ‘Can we just stop and pray for you now? With a loud, firm ‘Yes’, Rev. Ogilvie took maybe four long, fast steps into the center of our group and knelt in our midst. There was no question that this man of God knew and appreciated being prayed for. We laid on hands. I found his shoulders, so strong looking as he stood before us in his finely tailored suit, thin and almost visibly depressed with the weight they carried for his parish, and his country.

“We prayed aloud as we circled him with our love. This man most of us knew next to nothing about just an hour before. Then Lloyd closed prayer himself by saying, ‘I came to give, and I have been the receiver.’ And with hearty farewells from us all he followed his secretary to his next task...

“All of us were stunned by the transformation that had occurred for us in that room...surely, in our tired, sweaty states the Holy Spirit wouldn’t want to use us in the life of this well-dressed, super-successful preacher, would he? Yes, He would, and did...in this moment, at this time, we 20 simple licensed pastors, striving in our small parishes to ‘offer them Christ’, had experienced a humility before God from this accomplished church leader that humbled each and every one of us...”

We all get discouraged at times! That's nothing to be ashamed of! It doesn't mean we don't have faith, or that we don't love God. It just means we're human. Sometimes we don't get the help and encouragement we need because we're too embarrassed or too proud to share our discouragement with others. But remember, *God reaches out to us in many ways to bring us out of the doldrums and renew our lives for His service!*

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