

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

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Sermon by Pastor Bart Brauer

When discouragement whimpers, God whispers

—1 Kings 19:9-18

“A man’s spirit sustains him in sickness, but a crushed spirit who can bear?” (Prov 18:14) When I know someone is sick, it’s natural to ask, “How are you doing?” The answers you expect back are “I feel better,” “I feel the same,” “I feel worse,” and usually it’s natural for the person to describe what the aches and pains are, what the tests have showed, et cetera. But if I really want to know how someone is doing, I find the follow-up question even more important: “How is your spirit doing?” When I ask that question, never do people in sickness say, “What does that mean?” They know exactly what I mean, and they do have an answer. Physical sickness is one thing. How your spirit is doing is another.

All discouragement doesn’t look the same because discouragement has a way of coming in phases. There’s an early phase where the inner engine is running rough. “I’m not appreciated. I’m not seeing results.” Patience with other people wears thin. The face and mouth express anger and annoyance. There’s still a desire to forge ahead, even if you feel like you may be driving ahead in vain. If not tuned up, phase one gives way to phase two where the inner engine is rapidly running out of gas. “I’m numb. I don’t care.” Oh sure, you still go through the motions, but you’re not really expecting anything to change for the better. And what does it even matter if it does? Phase two can’t last forever. It gives way to phase three where the inner engine seizes and comes to a grinding halt. “I’m done. I quit.”

“I’m done. I quit.” That’s where the prophet Elijah was. The great prophet Elijah—and he was truly a great prophet—reached the final stage of discouragement and came to a grinding halt. *Elijah went a day’s journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, 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 tree and fell asleep.* That’s discouragement. How did the great prophet Elijah get to that point?

Elijah had received a hard assignment. He was assigned by the LORD to deal with King Ahab, the king who did more to make the LORD angry than any other king in Israel’s history, and to deal with Ahab’s wife, Jezebel, a monster of a woman who ordered the execution of anyone who got in her way. Ahab and Jezebel were Baal worshipers, and they promoted and demanded Baal worship among the people of Israel. To answer such wickedness, the LORD sent Elijah to prove that Baal was a total fake and to make it clear that all good things needed for time and for eternity come from the LORD, not Baal. Elijah told Ahab there would be no moisture in Israel, neither rain nor dew, until he said so. While Elijah was away for over three years, being fed by ravens at a brook and then staying with a widow in Zarephath, where the flour never ran out and the oil never ran dry by the word of the Lord, there was no rain in Israel. After three and a half years, Elijah showed up in front of Ahab again, and he challenged Ahab to a showdown. The 450 prophets of Baal called on their god for a whole day, dancing around their altar and even cutting themselves, to zero effect. As evening approached Elijah offered up one prayer to the LORD, and the LORD answered by sending fire from heaven, which consumed the offering Elijah had placed on his altar. The prophets of Baal were immediately put to death according to the word of the LORD. After that dramatic showdown, Elijah prayed to the LORD, and it rained. “Wow!” you say. “Surely that must have had quite the effect on Ahab and Jezebel!” No, not at all. Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah telling him that by this time tomorrow he’d be dead. She would make it happen. For Elijah, it was fight or flight time, and Elijah fled. He ran for his life. That’s how Elijah got to the broom tree and eventually 300 miles away from Israel all the way to Horeb, the mountain of God. *“I have had enough, LORD. Take my life.”*

I want to be careful so we dare not belittle Elijah and call him a wimp. He was no wimp. You and I would probably have called it quits long before he did. By the time Elijah gets to Horeb, he is completely discouraged. He is deflated, he is defeated. He is withered up, and he is whimpering. The LORD engages him in conversation and asks him, *“What are you doing here, Elijah?”* Elijah takes up the conversation and answers back: *“I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken 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.”*

An interesting article came across my desk recently about gaining perspective and recognizing burnout. The writer pointed out that “burnout is not caused by working hard. It’s caused by unmet or unrealistic expectations.” If you are discouraged, why are you discouraged? What were your expectations? What happened that your expectations were not met? Were your expectations realistic? Discouragement doesn’t only get pressed on us from the outside. Discouragement and the whimpering that goes along with it also come from within the human heart. You detect it in Elijah’s words. He turns into himself: *I...me...my*. He complains about them: *the Israelites*. He isolates himself and adopts the “me versus the world” mentality: *I am the only one left* (meaning the only one on the planet still zealous

for God, which is what it may have looked like on the surface). All of it leads to capitulation: “Take my life before they kill me.”

What does God have to say to all that? *“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. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire (and in keep in mind, the LORD had just answered the chapter before with impressive fire), but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.* The voice of a thin whisper. His special presence was not in the powerful and destructive, though certainly he commands those things too. His special presence was in the gentle and the soft—but not gentle breezes or bubbling brooks, though certainly he commands those things too. His special presence was in a voice, a whisper. I wonder what it said. Maybe “Here I am” or “Elijah.” Whatever it was, it drew Elijah out of the cave he was in so God could speak with him out in the open again.

Same question from God: *“What are you doing here, Elijah?”* Same whimpering answer from Elijah: *“I have been zealous...the Israelites have...”* Elijah is in a running loop. Brooding and dwelling on the past (which was deplorable!). Fixed in present fear (which is dire—that death threat from Jezebel is more than credible!). Elijah is running through the loop again, and he can’t seem to get out. God breaks the loop and gets Elijah thinking forward.

Maybe you know what the loop of whimpering discouragement is like. You’ve been there, you are there, or you fear you might be headed there. How do you get out? Are you waiting for a dramatic show of force? Are you expecting a wind to tear everything apart? Are you hoping for an earthquake to shake everything up? Maybe a fire will immediately burn down and burn away everything you think is wrong with life and the world or maybe—dare I say it?—everything you think is wrong with God’s governance of the world? When discouragement whimpers, God whispers. Are you ready to listen to the word of the Lord?

The Lord’s message to Elijah is basically this. You have work to do for me. I know what I am doing. I have a plan to address your concern. I am dealing with the evil. I am also making sure the prophetic ministry goes on. *“Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. Also, anoint Jehu king over Israel, and anoint Elisha to succeed you as prophet. Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu.”* And one last thing. Remember how Elijah whimpered that he was the only one left? The LORD wanted to set the record straight. *“Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him.”* Though Elijah couldn’t see results on the surface, the LORD’s prophetic ministry was still doing its work: calling out evil, calling Israelites to repentance, calling some to faith in the Savior, and keeping some faithful to the LORD.

God has a lot to say to our discouragement, too. Discouragement is often connected to the tasks we have been given. God can change the task in which we have become discouraged. But more often he gets us back to the task he originally gave us, like he did for Elijah.

If you’re a pastor and you’re discouraged, he says: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

If you’re a teacher and you’re discouraged, he says: Set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity. Devote yourself to teaching. Do not neglect your gift. Be diligent. Like the rain comes down from heaven and waters the earth, my word will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

If you’re a parent and you’re discouraged, he says: As high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is my love for you. As far as the east is from the west, so far have I removed your sins from you through Jesus Christ. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on you. Tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD. And praise God our Savior, who daily bears our burdens.

If you’re a discouraged family member, remember that caring for your own family is pleasing to God. He says so. If you’re a discouraged provider, look at the birds and flowers and see how God provides for them. You are much more valuable than they. If you’re a discouraged public servant, serve with all your heart because it is really the Lord Christ you are serving, not people, and you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. If you’re a Christian serving the Lord in life and you’re discouraged, Christ lives, doesn’t he? God gives us the victory through him. Give yourself fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.

“A man’s spirit sustains him in sickness, but a crushed spirit who can bear?” Instead of whimpering with discouragement, listen to the whispers of God’s promises and his assurances for you. You have a faithful God. You have a Savior from sin and death. You have his Spirit within you. And now you have things to do for him. Amen.