

Compassion Camp: Be Kind
Second in a Series On Compassion
1 Kings 19:1-9
June 13, 2021
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Prayer - Dear God, show us through the life of Elijah, that gift of self compassion and the difference it makes for ourselves and others.

Message

There's an old legend that tells how God sent one of his angels to Satan with the message that all the methods the devil uses to defeat Christians would be taken from him. The devil pleaded to be allowed to keep only one. The angel, thinking it an unusual, modest request from the greedy devil, agreed Satan could keep that one. "Which one would you want to keep?" the angel inquired. "Let me keep discouragement," was Lucifer's reply. The angel agreed. Satan could keep discouragement. And the devil rejoiced for, said he, "In this one I have secured all I shall ever need to accomplish my dastardly work."

If there is one thing that will tear a person apart more than just about anything else, it is discouragement. Broken bones can be repaired. Torn muscles eventually heal. Even grief, loss, and disappointment mend in time. But a discouraged soul is hard to overcome.

Have you ever felt discouraged? Have you been at the point where you believed your best had already been? Do you know that feeling that leaves you wondering if God is through with you? If you have not been there, the chances are you will. Almost all of us experience spiritual discouragement at one time or another in our lives. It seems to be part and parcel of the normal human experience.

Even those we consider some kind of “super human” face discouragement at one point or another. In recent years more and more people of influence; actors, professional athletes, inventors, musical icons have cleared their throats of the embarrassment or shame and given voice to their experiences of discouragement and the toll it took on them; the manner in which it nearly destroyed their lives, careers, and families. Harrison Ford, Prince Harry, Adel, Lady Gaga, Dolly Parton, Micheal Phelps, Duane “the rock” Johnson,

Fame, fortune, or education. Status, accomplishments, or skin color. Experience, location, or lifestyle. Religion, spiritual formation, or biblical foundation. None of it matters to discouragement. Even the biblical greats found themselves at the mercy of the devil's use of discouragement.

Take Elijah for example. Elijah was perhaps the greatest prophet. Best known perhaps for his showdown with the 400+ prophets of Baal, a popular pagan god during the time of King Ahab.

During the reign of King Ahab, there was a horrible drought and famine in the land and people had turned to praying to and offering sacrifices to the pagan gods and following the pagan prophets in desperate attempts to appease them so that the rain would come, crops would grow, and life would get better. People were turning away from the God of Israel and prophets of Israel were being killed.

Elijah comes on the scene and confronts the situation. He tells the people of Israel to make a decision - to stop trying to please a pagan god, listening to the prophets of Baal, while claiming to worship the God of Israel. Stop worshiping

idols, make up your mind, and trust the One true God. So he tells them, get two bulls and prepare them for sacrifice. He tells them “You take one and put it on the wood of the altar with no fire to it while I take the other, prepare it and put on another pile of wood and put no fire to it. Then you call on the name of the gods of Baal and I will call on the name of the Lord and the god who brings fire, is God. The challenge commenced and the prophets of Baal called upon their god from morning til noon and nothing happened; no fire. Elijah comes and basically eggs them on saying, come on call louder, and they continued until late into the day. No fire.

Elijah took 12 stones, according to the number of tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord came, saying, “Israel shall be your name.” And with the stones built an altar in the name of the Lord. And he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two measures of seed. And he put the wood in order, and cut the bull in pieces and layered it on the wood. And he said, “fill four jars with water, and pour it on the burnt offering, and on the wood.” And he said, “do it a second time,” and they did it a second time. And he said, “do it a third time,” and they did it a third time. And the water ran around about the altar, and filled the trench also with water.

Then it was Elijah’s turn to reveal the power of the one true God. Elijah came near and said, “O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that these people may know that thou, O Lord, art God, and that thou hast turned their hearts back.” Then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt offering, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when

the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, “the Lord, he is God, they Lord, he is God.” The prophets of Baal were defeated, embarrassed, and publicly humiliated.

HUGE victory for God. Huge victory to the people of Israel. Huge victory for Elijah. Where in such victory could there be room for discouragement? As many know, discouragement doesn't need but a sliver of doubt to grab hold.

That is what happened. As you can imagine, following such defeat, the prophets of Baal were not pleased, nor was Queen Jezebel, wife of Ahab. She put out a threat on Elijah's life and ordered his capture and death.

At a time when Elijah should have been feeling incredible, undefeatable, secure in his calling, and like he was being used as a powerful voice for God, instead, he felt vulnerable, insecure, and scared. “After the heights of triumph come the depths of despair. And it is often when in this second state of heart and mind that we are more open to new learning.” What begins as running for his life, becomes a pilgrimage of compassion. Elijah learns the life giving and life saving message of compassion for self through God.

Read text: 1 Kings 19:3-9 MSG

When we listen to and observe the life of Elijah, we hear and recognize common emotions, questions, and struggles we have all had in times of stress, struggle, and maybe even during times of perceived victory. It often seems as though on the tail of success, discouragement can creep in.

In those moments it is easy to want to run and hide, or run away to the last place we felt safe, strong, or grounded. It is when we want to pull the covers back over our heads and say, “nope not today.” So often and especially in our western culture, self compassion is seen as being weak, or too some touchy feely, or some self-centered act of self help. When in reality self-compassion is the restorative work of God’s love for God’s people.

Elijah headed south, past Judah to it’s southern town of Beersheba, hallowed by its associations with his people’s first fathers. It also serves as a sanctuary of Bethel and Gilgal. What this tells us is that Elijah is on a “pilgrimage to the places of his very roots.” A journey of this kind is essentially a private, personal one, which is why his servant was left in Beersheba as Elijah headed further into the southern wilderness.

You’ve been there haven’t you? Given it your all, put everything you had into what you thought was right? Invested yourself, and then some, to the cause, the project, your work, a relationship, a career, or even our faith and yet you reach the end of your rope and there just ain’t no more rope to tie a knot in the end and hold on.

One of the things today’s text tells us is that that is where Elijah is, at the end of his rope. He goes as far as he can and falls before God exhausted in body, mind, and soul. He’s done. He’s toast. He’s over it. He feels defeated, alone, and that his work has been to no avail. I don’t think Elijah truly wanted to die. I think, like many people who reach that point, he simply wanted to stop feeling so overwhelmed. He wanted one thing to be easy. He wanted one person to come

along and say, “you got this, good job, or what you do matters.”

Is anyone tired after living over a year with the pandemic? After figuring out how things were and are going to work? After adjusting, readjusting, and navigating the uncharted waters called Covid19? Anyone tired of the uncertainty around what is and what isn't when it comes to this virus? Anyone tired from the mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical toll it's taken?

1 Kings 19 is Elijah's final plea to God. This chapter reveals the humanity of anyone who follows God. You've heard the words before. Perhaps even said them yourself. The words, “enough already God,” “God, help me please. I can't keep on like this,” “Now what?” or “I don't know what else, what more to do, God help.”

And God replies with what? God replies by making sure Elijah takes a break and gives himself a break. God begins with basic needs: food, water, and rest. None of us can face the battle of overcoming discouragement without physical rest and nourishment, which can be and are in this case expressions of self compassion.

There is this fascinating debate over whether or not Elijah was served by a natural or supernatural agent? A human or a heavenly being. The Hebrew word in these verses is simply the common term for “messenger”, and is used in the Bible for human and divine visitors and ambassadors and ordinary servants without distinction. The word “angel” automatically makes us think it was a divine being, but how often have we also said to someone's act of kindness or compassion, “you are such an angel, thank you”?

Most often, when the Old Testament talks of “God’s messengers” it is quite uninterested in the background or origin of the servant and far more concerned to recognize that God was behind the action performed. In the act of compassion, it is God; God’s love, God’s provision, God’s presence that is poured out, revealed, and given. Elijah learns that he is not simply being revived, but is being restored and prepared for a journey. A journey he could not take in his depleted state.

When you are depleted, church, you can’t carry out the vision of who and what God wants you to be - as individuals or as a community; we can’t be the parents, partners, spouses, colleagues, friends, families, workers, brothers, sisters, or people we are meant to be. We can’t offer compassion to others if we are drained of compassion for ourselves.

Signs your compassion tank may be running empty:

- Tired
- Unmotivated
- Grumpy / irritated
- Lack of patience
- Just don’t care about what you used to
- Low energy

Any one of us can have these signs. We have to be careful and sensitive because we know these are also classic signs of depression / mental health issues that need clinical or medical attention. There are times when we experience these signs and it is because we are in need of some self-compassion. If that is you, that is your “Elijah moment” and God stands at the ready to meet you in the middle of it with compassion. Compassion is a gift of love from God - a gift to be given to

others, and to ourselves. True self compassion is not selfish, weak, or cowardice, it shows courage, confidence, and trust in a God that is bigger than our greatest fear, disappointment, or defeat AND bigger than our greatest success, gain, or victory.

We have all been through a lot this past year and a half. Many have been through a lot without the pandemic. Now, it seems, we have the relief and joy of seeing things on the other side a little bit, which feels like victory. Let's not allow discouragement to take that from us. Be kind church - to others, yes **and** to yourselves. Do not let discouragement steal potential of new beginnings and possibilities, or stifle creativity and hope. Be kind. Don't make a big splash about it. Don't overthink it. Be kind to others AND to yourself. Don't feel bad about it. Don't wallow in it. Just be kind to yourself too. Laugh a little more. Play a little. Rest. Do what feeds your soul and be prepared for the journey we have ahead.

In the name of Jesus, may it be so. Amen.

Resources Consulted

Daily Bible Study Series 1 & 2 Kings

Esermons.com

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