



If you've been following along in our E100 readings you know this past week we read Psalm 23, 51 and 103. I love the Psalms because they give voice to what I so often feel in my walk with God. It's been said misery loves company. There's some truth in that. It comforts me to know men like King David experienced what I experience. In Psalm 23, he speaks of walking through the darkest valley and sitting at a table with his enemies. I've been there. In Psalm 51 he confesses his sin. He says he has a broken heart and God has crushed him. He begs God to forgive him and cleanse him and restore him to the joy of his salvation. I've been there, too. Then in Psalm 103 he praises God but in the midst of it he says, "he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust." In one way or another, each of these ancient songs express the reality that we're frail, weak and rebellious people. We're often discouraged and fearful. A glance through my own journal entries from years past confirms how often I'm broken, discouraged, anxious and lonely.

It encourages me to know not only did King David experience these things, but so did great men and women like John Bunyan, Martin Luther and Amy Carmichael. John of the Cross called this the dark night of the soul. He wrote, "God perceives the imperfections within us, and because of his love for us, urges us to grow up. His love is not content to leave us in our weakness, and for this reason he takes us into a dark night. He weans us from all pleasures by giving us dry times and inward darkness.... No soul will ever grow deep in the spiritual life unless God works passively in that soul by means of the Dark Night."

Discouragement. Despair. Depression. The dark night of the soul. It doesn't matter what we call it, sooner or later it's a beast we all have to tangle with. It doesn't matter if you're a successful pastor or a stay-at-home mom; a mature follower of Christ or a spiritual toddler. You can be young or you can be old. Spiritual gloom is no respecter of persons. It afflicts us all, especially those most committed in their faith. Those who've tasted the joys of God's presence feel more acutely his absence. Those who've enjoyed his mercy feel more acutely his hand of discipline.

Whether it's spiritual discouragement or just generic depression, Christians have different ways of dealing with this beast. Some say the only cure is found in therapy and medication. On the other side, there are those who say the cure is healing prayer, or more Bible study, or simple obedience to the Word of God. Most of us agree any one of those things could be helpful. But today I want to take a look at how God restored one particular person in the midst of a very dark season of his life. This man knew God, and knew the thrill of being used by God in a way that touched many. But this was a man who became so depressed he wanted

to just die. I want us to look at how God counseled him out of this; how God nurtured one great saint out of great despair.

His name was Elijah. He was a prophet, called to be God's mouthpiece to the nation Israel during a dark chapter in their history. King Ahab was a spineless leader who allowed the nation to fall into idol worship. He was also a spineless husband. His wife, Jezebel, really ran the show. She'd imported the idolatry of her own native country into Israel so the whole nation became a mixture of religions. Elijah's job was to call Israel back to the One true God, and he was having some success. He'd just had a massive showdown with 950 false prophets of Baal on top of Mt. Carmel. All of them had been destroyed in a spectacular show of God's power. He then prayed and rain returned after three long years. It looked like the nation would finally turn around when Elijah hit the wall.

Elijah's Dark Night

Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. 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. 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 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" (verses 1–4).

After the prophets of Baal were defeated on Mt. Carmel, Ahab returned to Jezreel where Jezebel was. I can see his knees knocking as he reported to her all that had happened. He's like a spoiled child telling his mommy someone was mean to him at school. Jezebel fumed when she heard the news. She scratched out a threatening letter and sent it to Elijah, bringing a curse down on herself if he wasn't dead in 24 hours. This was no idle threat. She was a violent woman. Elijah saw she was serious and so he ran for his life to Beersheba, which was 80 miles south of Jezreel. The important thing is he left Israel proper and entered the southern kingdom of Judah. It's like he's washing his hands of Israel, sending in his letter of resignation. "I'm done serving this nation!" He acts like the classically depressed person, leaves his servant behind, heads for the wilderness and isolates. He sits down under a broom bush and tells God, I've had enough, Lord. Take my life."

If you know much about Elijah this has to surprise you. He wasn't a rookie prophet. He'd been standing up to Ahab and Jezebel for years. Why does he take the fetal position now? There are a couple of things we can observe about how and when we might be most vulnerable to this kind of despair. Like Elijah, we're probably most vulnerable when we're just coming off a great victory. Mountain climbers will tell you they're most vulnerable after they've reached the summit, as they descend the slope. It's the same with us. Perhaps that's because, even though we won, the battle has taken so much out of us. Perhaps it's because with victory we have a tendency to let our guard down. Be careful when you think you've won and you're done with the battle. Someone once said, "Beware of human reactions after holy exertions."

Another thing I notice is we can become discouraged and depressed by battles long fought but never won. Elijah had been dealing with Jezebel his entire ministry. She was like a bad cold that wouldn't go away. Have you noticed there are some battles that just seem to go on and on? It might be a battle to have a decent marriage, or to break free from some addiction, or to shake a paralyzing propensity towards insecurity. We can fight and pray, but when it ceases to go away, we fall into despair.

One thing Elijah had going for him was he knew he could be absolutely honest with God. He shows us we can go to the Lord and say, "I quit. I've had enough, Lord. Take me. I'm finished." The Lord is so understanding he invites us to come to him at times like these. Jesus said, "Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden..." Do you think God is surprised when you share with him what's on your heart? One day one of my kids was visibly upset. I approached her and said, "What's the matter?" She wouldn't tell me. I told her I wouldn't be mad; she still wouldn't tell me. Finally, I got it out of her, but as a father, the worst thing is to be shut out of something your child is feeling. I don't care what it is, I want to know. It's the same with God. Don't shut him out. Tell him what's on your heart.

So how does God deal with Elijah's depression? The short answer is God restores him. He doesn't take Elijah's life; he doesn't answer his prayer. Later, Elijah could have written that song, "I thank God for unanswered prayer." Instead, God wisely and tenderly restores his perspective and renews his spirit. There are three issues God will address in doing this.

God Provides in Our Physical Exhaustion

The first thing God will address is Elijah's physical exhaustion. Elijah was physically and emotionally drained. In the last few days he'd walked 30 miles to Mt. Carmel. After climbing Mt. Carmel a few times, he'd sprinted 20 miles to Jezreel, ran 80 miles to Beersheba, and walked a day's journey into the desert. All of this in the face of emotionally exhausting circumstances with little or no food! I'd want to die too!

Look how God deals with his physical exhaustion.

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" (verses 5–7).

Isn't this great? God doesn't take Elijah by the scruff of the neck and say, "Suck it up, Elijah. If you really loved me, you'd keep driving ahead!" He doesn't rebuke him or correct him or quote a Bible verse to him. He lets him sleep. Then he sends an angel who gently wakes him and provides food and water for him. Can you imagine how good that bread baked on hot stones must have tasted, made by the hands of an angel? Fresh and sweet and warm! Then he lets him sleep some more. Who knows how long he slept. Isn't sleep a wonderful thing? I love sleep. I thank God for a good sleep. You wake up and everything that happened yesterday melts into the hopefulness of a new day. Look what the angel said to him when he woke up a second time, "Arise and eat, for the journey is too long for you." God was leading him deeper into the wilderness. God knew what he needed, and he knows what we need.

Vince Lombardi once said, "Fatigue makes cowards of us all." Its true! When we're physically and emotionally drained, we're most susceptible to discouragement and depression. Sometimes we think if we're really spiritual, we won't get tired. Or if we're doing the Lord's work, we can ignore our physical limitations. Or if we're really depending on the Spirit, he'll allow us to just go on and on without rest. None of those things are true. Regardless of how spiritual we are, or what kind of work we're doing, or how empowered we are by the Spirit, we're always and forever human. We have limitations. Even Jesus got tired. Even he couldn't ignore those limitations. I'm reminded of this every Monday after I preach. The way my week works, Sunday morning is my Mt. Carmel, and Monday is my Beersheba. On Sunday the adrenalin is pumping and God comes through, but on Monday my defenses are down and Jezebel comes knocking at my door. So do you know what I do on Monday? I rest, take a bike ride, piddle around the house, avoid the phone. I get recharged.

When our kids were young I remember being at Disneyland all day. We were all exhausted, especially our kids, and they just fell apart on the way home. But I didn't get mad at them; they were just tired. Why rebuke them when they just need to go to sleep. Remember Psalm 104:3, "*God knows how we are formed; he remembers that we are dust.*" He knows our frailty and he's so much more tender than we think. When you're depressed or discouraged, he may just tell you to eat and take a nap. Maybe you need to pop some popcorn and rent a movie! When we're depressed, God restores us physically.

God Reveals Himself in Our Disappointment

The second thing God will address is Elijah's disappointment. I'm convinced part of Elijah's depression is he was ambushed by his own expectations. He'd just come off this great victory at Mt. Carmel where it looked like a life time of ministry would finally bear fruit. He outruns Ahab's chariot back to Jezreel after the

victory. No doubt he hoped to show Ahab it was time to stand up to his wife. Elijah had visions of heading up a national revival. Baal worship would be wiped out. Jezebel would meet the same fate as her prophets. He'd lead legislative prayer breakfasts as chaplain of the Senate. But it didn't work that way, and when all he got was a contract out on his life, he was crushed.

Anyone here struggling with disappointment? Anyone hamstrung by your own expectations of what God would do with your life? Have you ever woke up one morning and realized you aren't living your dream, and since time is running out you never will? Are you making the impact you thought you would? I talk to many people who struggle with the same disappointment over unmet expectations Elijah struggled with.

So how does God deal with this disappointment of unmet expectations? We're told Elijah walked on the strength of that food to 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. There he went into a cave and spent the night (verses 8–9a).

It took him 40 days and 40 nights, which means he moved very slowly; about 5 miles a day. You can do that in a couple of hours. I think Elijah was still depressed. Forty days and forty nights always means testing in the Bible. The people of Israel were tested in the wilderness, but God provided. Elijah is being tested, but God will provide. He comes to Horeb, which is another name for Mt. Sinai. Mt. Sinai is the place where God reveals himself to his people. This was the place God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. The first commandment was to have no idols. At Sinai, God promised he'd judge idolaters. Perhaps Elijah was there to hold God to his promise to judge this nation with fire and brimstone. Elijah sets up camp in a cave, which may have been the same cave or "cleft" Moses hid in when God passed by.

Look what God said to Elijah.

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" (verses 9b–10).

God asks, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" God loves to ask these kinds of questions. It's not because he doesn't know the answer. He's the God of the universe. He knows why Elijah is there. God asks him this question not to get information but to get Elijah to take a hard look at himself. Sometimes in answering these questions we're able to reflect on ourselves and see how foolish we are. Elijah pours his heart out to God. He's completely honest. God has let him down. He's been very zealous for God, but where has that got him? The whole nation is following idols and now he's the only one left and they're going to kill him too!

Once Elijah revealed his heart to God, God was ready to reveal his heart to Elijah. Look what happens next.

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. 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. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave (verses 11–13a).

God tells Elijah to stand on the mountain because he's about to pass by. The question is, how would God's passing be seen and experienced? It wasn't experienced in the strong wind, or in the earthquake, or in the fireball. This had to be surprising to Elijah. This was how God had revealed himself to Moses up on the same mountain. This is how God had acted in finishing off the prophets of Baal. God is big and strong and powerful, right? A wind that breaks rocks; God is in that! An earthquake that shakes flimsy humans off their proud feet. That's the God I serve! A fire to burn hot as Hell and consume sinners! That's a God to reckon with! But God wasn't revealing himself in those things, instead he's in the gentle blowing, the nearly inaudible whisper. When Elijah heard that, he came out to listen.

So what's the lesson? Remember, Elijah was struggling because God wasn't doing what he thought he'd do. He wanted Jezebel struck by that fireball like the prophets of Baal were, but instead she's the recipient of God's patience. He wanted the whole nation Israel destroyed because they were idolaters, but God was slow to act. God is far more patient and gentle than we think. It's not that he doesn't act in judgment; we'll see in the next section he does, but he doesn't do it when we think he should. He doesn't wash his hands of the whole nation, either. He's more gracious than we are. His fuse is long. He works in quiet, gentle ways.

In the movie, *The Horse Whisperer* Tom Booker employs his special gift of "gentling" horses. A tense, New York magazine editor can't believe her eyes as she witnesses the gradual transformation of her daughter's horse from traumatized to tamed. In one scene, the horse, frightened by the editor's ringing cell phone, gallops off into the far end of a large pasture. Booker walks into the pasture and sits down, where he waits for what appears to be hours. The horse, drawn by its curiosity, inches closer and closer to him. Finally, it cautiously approaches close enough to touch the "whisperer," and allows itself to be led back to the safety of its stall. That's the way it is with God. He "gentles" the untamed or traumatized people who run from him.

One of the issues God deals with in our depression is who we think he is. So often our despair results from an inadequate view of him. We think he should do this or that. We think he should

act in spectacular ways. We discover we're trusting in a view of him that's false. We expected him to act in ways and do things that are part of our agenda, not his. And so, again, God tenderly restores us. He restores us by giving us a fresh new vision of who he is and how he works. He's far more gracious than we ever thought. He's far more gentle and patient than we are.

God Commands Us to Act in Our Self-pity

After this lesson you'd think Elijah would be restored. But look what happens next .

Then a voice said 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" (verses 13b–14).

God asks the same question and Elijah gives the same answer. I take it Elijah is still struggling. He still feels alone. His dark night is still dark. This leads to the third thing God addresses—Elijah's self pity. You can see it in his answer to God, "I alone am left." He feels like he's the only one. As we'll see, it wasn't true, but this is often what happens to us. We get self-absorbed. We start having a pity party. Eugene H. Peterson writes, "The attractiveness of pity and the ugliness of self-pity are unarguable. Yet we live in a society in which self-pity far exceeds pity. The excessively popular genre of literature, the celebrity autobiography, that smothers us in self-pitying subjectivism is the unpleasant evidence that we may be the most self-pitying populace in all of human history. Feeling sorry for yourself has been developed into an art form. The whining and sniveling that wiser generations ridiculed with satire is given best-seller status among us."

Look how God deals with this.

The Lord said to him, "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 son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elishason of Shaphat from Abel Meholah 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. Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him" (verses 15–18).

God tells him to anoint three men who'll be instruments of his judgement in dealing with idolatry. One of them would be the king of nearby Syria. Another would be king of Israel in place of Ahab. Another would be his successor as prophet. But not only

would there be judgment, there'd be grace: 7,000 faithful left in Israel! That's a lot of people! You've heard of the 700 Club, well, this is the 7,000 Club! Elijah wasn't alone. God hasn't completely rejected his people. There's still a remnant! There's always a remnant. You may feel alone, but you're never alone.

Notice how right in the midst of his despair, God calls Elijah to do something. He gave him a job to go and anoint these three men. Elijah couldn't change his mood, but he could obey the Lord's command. We should never allow our depression to be an excuse for disobedience. If God calls us to do something, he'll give us the strength to do it. Weariness and disappointment can soon lead to self-pity. And the way God deals with self pity is to put a sword in our hands and tell us to fight. You may need to get some sleep, but woe to the one who never gets out of bed. The worst thing a depressed person can do is stay in bed too long. We need to get up. We need something to do. Others depend on us. George MacDonald wrote, "God will carry us in his arms till we are able to walk, and he will carry us in his arms when we are weary and can't walk, but he will not carry us if we will not walk."

God takes us through seasons of discouragement, gloom and even depression. The good news though is not only does God take us through it, he also brings us out of it. He's the Wonderful Counselor. He knows when to listen and just when to push. He knows the right questions to ask. In our deepest discouragement, he restores us. He provides for us in our exhaustion. He reveals himself to us in our disappointment. He commands us to act in our self-pity. When we come out the other end of it, we're better off. Luther said without seasons like this no person can "understand Scripture, faith, the fear or the love of God."

The great thing is God himself understands. He understands because he came to us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Like Elijah, Jesus came raising the dead and performing miracles, but most of Israel continued in their hardhearted ways. Before Jesus came, Isaiah called him the Suffering Servant who cried out, "*I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing at all*" (Is. 49:4). That one understands. Like Elijah, he spent 40 days in the wilderness being tested, and when it was over an angel came and ministered to him. He understands. And he knows how God often works not through a powerful wind or earthquakes or fire, but through the gentle, nearly inaudible whisper. The whispers of the cross are so much more powerful than the thunder of Sinai in bringing people to repentance. In these 40 days of Lent we remember the God who cried out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me." That one understands, and that one can restore us.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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