

Fighting Temptation: God Gives the Victory!

A sermon based on 1 Kings 19:9-18 – ***“There Elijah went into a cave and spent the night.***

And the word of the Lord came to him: “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

¹⁰ 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.”

¹¹ 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.¹² After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. ¹³ 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?”

¹⁴ 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.”

¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him.”

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

It was a pyrrhic victory. You know what that is, don't you? Basically, it's a victory that inflicts such a devastating toll on the victor, that it's about the same as a defeat. Any of you history buffs would know how the history of civilization – and even the somewhat brief history of our own nation – is littered with pyrrhic victories.

One that comes immediately to mind is the Battle of Bunker Hill. Any of you familiar with that? In the early stages of our Revolutionary War, near Boston, the colonists outmaneuvered the British to fortify a couple of hills – strategic locations – surrounding Boston, and when the British troops tried to mount an attack to take over those fortified positions, they were successful...to an extent. They did force the colonials to retreat, but they lost a lot of men in doing so, about 1000 (either wounded or killed) to the colonials' 500 soldiers killed or wounded. Now, a 2-1 ratio doesn't sound that terrible, but among the

British casualties was a large number of officers, which, understand, wasn't easy or convenient to replace because headquarters were, well, across the ocean. So that was a huge loss. And, on top of that, the Battle of Bunker Hill drastically altered the way the British planned and executed their future engagements, with them being a bit more cautious while the Continental Army grew more confident as the war dragged on. The Battle of Bunker Hill was a pyrrhic victory.

I think an online article headline said it best, **"Winning isn't always worth it."**

Winning isn't always worth it. As Elijah sat inside a cave at Mt. Horeb, you'd have to think that thought was running through his mind. I know we're only exposed this morning to what took place in and around that cave, but do you remember why Elijah was there? What happened prior to this?

In chapter 18, one of the most incredible moments in Elijah's life took place. On another mount, Mt. Carmel, Elijah faced off against the prophets of Baal. It was a contest of sorts to determine who the real God was – Elijah's God or Baal. And the rules were simple...build an altar, put your sacrifice on it, pray to your "god," and whosoever "God" would rain down fire from heaven to consume the sacrifice was the true God. As you might recall, the prophets of Baal failed miserably, in spite of their dancing, wailing, screaming, cutting themselves. Elijah made things tougher on his "God," drowning his entire altar and sacrifice in water. But in the end, God rained down fire on Elijah's sacrifice and revealed himself as the true God.

Again, it was incredible. You'd think Elijah would've been riding a high he would never come down from. Read the next section, however, and you see the repercussions were overwhelming. 1 Kings 19:2, evil queen Jezebel, infuriated at her loss, breathed out murderous threats against Elijah, saying, ***"May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that one of [my prophets, who were seized and slaughtered as frauds]."***

And things just kind of spiraled down from there. He fled into the desert, basically asked God to take his life because he felt his work for the Lord was fruitless. Then, in the cave, he mentioned how he felt so alone, like he was the only one left serving the Lord. He concluded life wasn't worth living, if winning looked like this. He felt like a loser. He felt defeated. To him, it appeared to be a pyrrhic victory.

You don't have to raise your hand if you've ever felt like that before. I think we've all been there...impacted by defeatism. You know what that is...defeatism? It's acceptance of defeat without struggle, often with negative connotations. It's taking a pessimistic approach to a lot of situations because you assume you're just going to fail anyways...because you've failed in the past. And it's hard not to get down on yourself. Again, have you been there before?

What does it look like? I've tried to be faithful at my job, go above and beyond what I'm being asked to do, and no recognition...but one little screw-up, and my boss is threatening my job. I try my best to take the high road, be ethical in how I do my job, and others who don't are the ones rising to the top.

I've tried to be kind to my spouse, be a little more helpful around the house or with the kids, being attentive to and tending to his/her needs, and I feel like he/she doesn't even notice, they're quick to point out the things I did wrong, nothing's ever good enough for them, and it's enough to get me feeling like a complete failure in this marriage.

I work hard – even overtime, and the bank account gets slimmer. I finish one house project and something else stops working. I take care of my body, and the doctor tells me I have diabetes or cancer or heart disease. And I want to throw my hands up in defeat, like, “What gives? Why me? Why is everything always going wrong for me?” And it gets to be depressing, doesn’t it?

And it’s not just in our personal lives, but in our church lives – as a congregation – too. When we’ve put so much effort into what we do here, like our VBS, and over 7 years of it, how many families have joined our church as a result? Zero. You hand out invitations to your friends or neighbors to come to a Friendship Sunday, or we do a mass mailing inviting people to Christmas or Easter...and no one shows (or maybe only a couple). It’s hard, isn’t it, to face the rejection and maybe even fall into the mindset, “Why bother? It’s not going to work.”

I’ve been there. I put together this lavish feast of God’s Word week after week, I’m excited to share the gospel, and it’s one of those weeks where not a lot of people show up for worship...it’s discouraging. Or we spend this time talking up canvassing, even encouraging how this what God wants us to do – share our faith in Jesus – and the day of, a couple people show up. The lull in church activity after Christmas, coupled with winter, the lack of daylight, it can become downright depressing, where it’s hard not to focus on the negatives. And I’ll tell you, being circuit pastor sometimes and helping other congregations deal with their difficulties, it can be a lot at times. Defeatism creeps in.

Even these Sundays in Lent, as we’ve been looking at all these temptations we’re guilty of – selfishness (wanting only what we want), not willing to change and be more like Jesus (especially when it comes to standing up for what the Bible says in hostile environments), grumbling and complaining (telling God, “I’m not happy with you.”), finally, getting caught in this vicious cycle of sin (either a pet sin or the fact we all sin)..it’s easy to get a little down, wouldn’t you say? So much so that, even when you hear the good news of the gospel, you brush that off and quickly dismiss it as you continue to focus on the law and how bad it makes you feel.

That’s defeatism. And we’ve all been there. But what’s the danger? Well, there’s a number of them, right? Getting into this scary, depressive funk, like Elijah did, as he lost his confidence in the triumph of the kingdom of God – completely disregard the victories God had brought about through his work. He was withdrawing from the arena of conflict. He was giving up on doing what God had called him to do. A fellow pastor, in a paper her presented at a conference, put it this way, **“Life and ministry (doing God’s work) will never be easy. However, I wonder if we use it as a crutch when it comes to our congregational mission strategy...The theology of the cross (which is that, as followers of Jesus, we ought to expect hardships as we serve him)...the theology of the cross doesn’t mean that we mope around like Eeyore, saying, “Woe is me. Oh well, that didn’t work.”** But have you been there?

Or, another danger is falling prey to another sin, as in, “What can I do to take away the pain of failure?” And people turn to sex, porn, drugs, drinking, or again, withdrawal....whatever’s going to be the easy way out.

But ultimately, the danger of defeatism is it takes the focus off of Christ and what he’s done. That’s exactly what Elijah seemed to have done. I’ve done it before, and I’m sure you have, too. “I’m so bummed I can’t go to church today, or I neglect my Bible reading, or I become lax in my living for Jesus.” And that’s not good.

“What are you doing here?” That’s how God started out our verses this morning. It’s how he started out his meeting with Elijah at Horeb. A question meant to get Elijah thinking, “Why are you so depressed? Why are you so down? Why are you so discouraged? Why are you so defeated? Why...when you’ve seen what I’ve been able to do for you? Did you forget?” .

“What are you doing here?” That’s a question Martin Luther had self-reflect on as well, especially once, where his wife, Katie dressed up in a black dress because of a depressed mood Martin was in. When he noticed it, he asked her, “Are you going to a funeral?” To which she responded with something along the lines of “No, but since you act as though God is dead, I wanted to join you in your mourning.”

What are you doing here? We’re not here to have ourselves a pity party or find someone who will commiserate along with us, either. We’re here for encouragement. We need encouragement.

And God gives it. Do you remember how God appeared to Elijah? In really not the most spectacular or triumphant way, through a mighty display of his power. Right, there was a great and powerful wind, but God wasn’t there. There was an earth-shattering earthquake, but God wasn’t there. There was a blistering fire, but God wasn’t there. Where was he? In a gentle, quiet whisper. And, in a gentle, quiet whisper, God reminded Elijah he was still in control, and there were still many more who were faithful to him.

If we’re looking for God to do something spectacular to get us out of these defeatist funks we get into sometimes, we’re looking for the wrong thing. Because the encouragement we need is found in the gentle, whisper of his Word, where God tells us, **“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness...For when [you are] weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:9,10).**

In our weakness, when we feel like failures, God shows his power in the most unassuming way...reminding us of what his servant, Jesus, did for us through his life, death, and resurrection. Now, I know Jesus received lots of notoriety and praise throughout his earthly life, with his miracles and his awesome preaching, but the fact he was here on earth, showed complete humility, as God became man to live for us...perfectly and in humble submission to his heavenly Father.

But he also became man to die for us, which looked like real weakness and real defeat, didn’t it? God died there on the cross, and it appeared the Jewish religious leaders had won. It seem Satan succeeded. It looked like death got the last laugh. Yet, it was a pyrrhic victory, because in that death, remember Jesus took our sins – all of our defeats – away, for good. Hear that again. On the cross, Jesus took all of our failures away for good.

And well, his resurrection, it was neither quiet nor humble. Why should it have been?!? By his living and dying and rising, Jesus defeated sin, Satan, and finally death for you. That’s it. His power made perfect in our weakness, defeating our sin, opening the door to heaven for every one of us. That’s victory!

That’s the solution to defeatism, isn’t it? We are victorious in Christ, no matter what!

We talked about this in Council last month, how, there are things that happen here that are discouraging, but we’re not discouraged. We can’t possibly be. We have a Savior, who we have not only been seeing walking the road to the cross throughout this season of Lent. We have a Savior who hung on that cross and by his death crushed that old evil foe, and by his resurrection, proclaimed eternal

victory for you and me over our final enemy, death. If we keep that gospel at the front of our minds, how can we possibly fall into the trap of defeatism? We can't!

That's the thing, though, how will you keep that always before you? That same pastor shared another story in his paper, how in the British Royal Air Force, there are pilots who need to be involved in air-to-air combat. One of the difficulties in combat is there are so many voices and noises coming into pilots' ears that they start to lose track of the voices. There's so much chatter they start to phase out the noise and won't even hear the stall alarm when they are climbing too high too fast. Obviously, that's a problem.

Do you know how they solved it? Programmed into the computer with the stall warning is each pilot's child's voice, so that in the midst of the battle when all the chatter is so intense, "Daddy, you're about to stall," comes through. It's the voice you will hear amidst all other voices.

This is the way it is for Jesus' voice in the gospel. Friends, there are so many other discouraging voices shouting at you, "You're not good enough. You're worthless. You're a failure. You're a loser. Give up!" And you'll be tempted to listen. But amidst those voices, we hear our Savior's gentle whisper, "I lived and died and rose for you. I won the victory for you. You are mine. You will be with me in heaven forever."

That's the only victory we need. That's the victory God gives. That's the victory that encourages us and keeps us serving Jesus...always...gladly. And it's worth it. Amen.

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