

SERIES: The Good News, as reported by Matthew

SERMON: **The Elijah Syndrome**

SCRIPTURE: 1 Kings 1:18, 19

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January 21, 2007

Due to the huge snow we experienced last night and the relatively small crowd we have in the one service, I have decided to preach a different sermon this morning than what I had planned. So I apologize that you won't have the outline in the bulletin or on the screens. Last Lord's Day we examined the baptism and temptation of Christ, noting how the former represented Christ's coronation, while the latter was Satan's effort to put Him in the crucible. I had intended for us to study the Temptation of Christ in detail this morning, along with biblical counsel on how to overcome temptation. But I believe that message is so critical that I decided to wait until most of our congregation could be here (Lord willing, I will speak on that topic two weeks from today).

Instead I want to take an illustration I gave last Sunday and expand upon it—the example of Elijah, a real-life example of someone who enjoyed a mountaintop experience and almost immediately hit the skids. But we're also going to see how God responded to him in his time of need. This is a message particularly for troubled Christians—those who really feel under the gun, those who think they're standing all alone, those who wonder why God is so silent. But even if that isn't where you are, I can guarantee that someone around you is, and hopefully Elijah's experience will enable you to minister to that person.

Consistent spiritual victory is very difficult to attain and even more difficult to maintain. There are, of course, countless biblical examples of those who accomplished great things for God only to succumb later to the pressures of trials and temptations—Moses, Samson, David, Solomon, Peter.

And Elijah. This fearless prophet of God who denounced the sins of Ahab and Jezebel and stood all alone against the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel, himself took a dive. Let's begin our reading in 1 Kings 18 where we find God's prophet on the heights of Mt. Carmel, where he achieved great success and exercised great power in prayer. We're going to read two long sections this morning, but this story constitutes one of the classics of biblical literature, so I trust you will give it you full attention.

To set the stage, Elijah has been told by the Lord that the 3 ½ year drought is going to end and he should present himself to King Ahab. So Elijah went to Obadiah, a devout believer in charge of the king's palace, and told him to announce to Ahab, "Elijah is here." We'll pick up the reading in 1 Kings 18:16:

So Obadiah went to meet Ahab and told him, and Ahab went to meet Elijah. When he saw Elijah, he said to him, "Is that you, you troubler of Israel?"

"I have not made trouble for Israel," Elijah replied. "But you and your father's family have. You have abandoned the LORD's commands and have followed the Baals. Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the

four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table."

So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. Elijah went before the people and said, "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him."

But the people said nothing.

Then Elijah said to them, "I am the only one of the LORD's prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets. Get two bulls for us. Let them choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD. The god who answers by fire—he is God."

Then all the people said, "What you say is good."

Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose one of the bulls and prepare it first, since there are so many of you. Call on the name of your god, but do not light the fire." So they took the bull given them and prepared it.

Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. "O Baal, answer us!" they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made.

At noon Elijah began to taunt them. "Shout louder!" he said. "Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened." So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.

Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come here to me." They came to him, and he repaired the altar of the LORD, which was in ruins. Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD had come, saying, "Your name shall be Israel." With the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD, and he dug a trench around it large enough to hold two seahs of seed. He arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces and laid it on the wood. Then he said to them, "Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood."

"Do it again," he said, and they did it again."

"Do it a third time," he ordered, and they did it the third time. The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench.

At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: "O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again."

Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench.

When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, "The LORD -he is God! The LORD -he is God!"

Then Elijah commanded them, "Seize the prophets of Baal. Don't let anyone get away!" They seized them, and Elijah had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and slaughtered there.

And Elijah said to Ahab, "Go, eat and drink, for there is the sound of a heavy rain." So Ahab went off to eat and drink, but Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees.

"Go and look toward the sea," he told his servant. And he went up and looked.

"There is nothing there," he said. Seven times Elijah said, "Go back."

The seventh time the servant reported, "A cloud as small as a man's hand is rising from the sea."

So Elijah said, "Go and tell Ahab, 'Hitch up your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.' "

Meanwhile, the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain came on and Ahab rode off to Jezreel. The power of the LORD came upon Elijah and, tucking his cloak into his belt, he ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel.

It's hard to imagine a more dramatic demonstration of God's power or a time of greater personal triumph for a man of God. I recall standing on Mt. Carmel and reliving this scene in my imagination—a very moving experience. Let's review the story quickly.

God's prophet achieves great spiritual victory on Mt. Carmel.

Elijah champions the truth in the face of Ahab, a great deceiver. Ahab wanted to blame Elijah for the famine, calling him "the troubler of Israel," but Elijah said, "I have not made trouble for Israel, but you and your father's family have." He is willing to tell truth to power, much like John the Baptizer..

He confronts the faint hearted with a challenge that is still applicable today: "How long will you waver between two opinion? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him."

He fights the forces of darkness. (22-29) And what a battle it was! Elijah's taunts drive the false prophets into an absolute frenzy. "Shout louder! Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened." God hates idolatry so much that He will ridicule, mock, and humiliate those who practice it.

He demonstrates great faith in God. (30-40) Contrary to so many would-be miracle workers today who use sleight of hand, heal only undiagnosed, psychosomatic illnesses, and prey on the gullible, Elijah made sure that there could be only one possible explanation for the miracle they were about to witness.

Elijah exercises great power in prayer.

If we look closely at the context we discover that what brought about this confrontation between

Elijah and Ahab in the first place was a proclamation by Elijah that there would be no rain or dew on the land until he gave the word because of Ahab's idolatry. But now that Ahab's idolatry has been exposed as powerless, Elijah says to him, "Go, eat and drink, for there is the sound of a heavy rain." Please note that the "sound" Elijah heard was not heard by his physical ears but rather by the ears of faith. So sure was he that God was going to keep His promise that he speaks of the storm as already on its way.

He believes God's promises. (41) Back in the first verse of chapter 18 God said to Elijah, "Go and present yourself to Ahab and I will send rain on the land." And Elijah took God at His word. Not for a moment did he doubt that He could or would do what He said. After all, hadn't God stopped the rain for 3 ½ years? If He had stopped it, then certainly He could start it again.

By the way, I have a question for you. If God promised rain, why pray for it? Because God not only ordains the end; He also ordains the means. You see, God's promises are given, not to restrain prayer but to incite it. His promises have been likened to a signed check, made payable to us, but which we must endorse and present for payment before they do us any good.

Elijah also persists in earnest petition. (42-44) Seven times he prays and seven times he sends his servant to the west side of the mountaintop to look toward the Mediterranean Sea. Six times the servant returns to report that there was nothing to be seen. Still Elijah persists in prayer. The book of James says in James 5:18: "Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for 3 ½ years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops." That phrase fascinates me, "a man just like us." I don't feel like Elijah and I are in the same league, but God says it's true. He didn't have any resources I don't have; he wasn't a super-saint. He had just learned the secret of earnest prayer.

His faith is rewarded. (45) It began in the form of a small cloud, the size of a man's hand, coming off the horizon of the Mediterranean. Then the sky grew dark, the wind increased, and a terrific thunderstorm resulted--all in response to one man's humble, earnest, persistent prayer. So exhilarating was the experience that Elijah ran all the way back to Jezreel, a distance of approximately 18 miles, and God enabled him to even outrun the chariots of Ahab. It was Elijah's greatest day. Perhaps never since the days of Moses 600 years earlier had a mortal man been used in such a mighty way by God.

To go from Carmel to Jezreel involved a descent in elevation of approximately 1400 feet. Unfortunately Elijah didn't stop there. He kept descending, at least spiritually and emotionally.

The second major act in our story finds Elijah going from the heights of Carmel to the Wilderness of Horeb in the dessert of Sinai several hundred miles south. (19:1-19). Let's read chapter 19.

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 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.

All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." He looked around, and there by his head was a cake of 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. 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.

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, 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."

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.

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, 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."

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 Elisha son 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 all whose mouths have not kissed him."

So Elijah went from there and found Elisha son of Shaphat. He was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen, and he himself was driving the twelfth pair. Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak around him. Elisha then left his oxen and ran after Elijah. "Let me kiss my father and mother good-bye," he said, "and then I will come with you."

"Go back," Elijah replied. "What have I done to you?"

So Elisha left him and went back. He took his yoke of oxen and slaughtered them.

He burned the plowing equipment to cook the meat and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his attendant.

God's prophet experiences bitter defeat.

It all started when Elijah and Ahab reach Jezreel, one by foot and one by chariot. This was the location of the king's summer home, and apparently Jezebel had remained there during the battle of the gods on Mt. Carmel. When Ahab arrived home naturally the first thing he did was to tell his wife all that had happened, including the fact that Elijah had killed all her prophets with the sword.

Jezebel was livid and summoned all the evil passion in her heart and sent this message to Elijah: "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." And what was Elijah's reaction? Verse 3 says, "Elijah was afraid and ran for his life." Singlehandedly this prophet took on 850 prophets but one woman said, "I'll get you," and he ran. "Lord, I've had it. I'm turning in my prophet's badge." How do you account for such an amazing turnaround? I believe it's important to see there were both external and internal factors in Elijah's crash:

The external circumstances: Jezebel was not just any woman; she was a wicked woman whose reputation for godlessness and murderous violence was unprecedented. Her threats were not idle threats, and knowing that she had put out a contract on his life sent Elijah into a spiritual tailspin. But in addition to the severe trial of having his very life threatened, Elijah also faced a very subtle temptation—the temptation of self-pity.

Look again at his response to God's question, "What are you doing here?" In verse 10 he replies, "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." Whenever we go through deep trial we are tempted to engage in self-pity. We rehearse all we have done for God, we compare ourselves to others who are much more wicked than we, and then we play the martyr's game.

But there are also some important internal factors that contribute to Elijah's collapse.

The Internal factors:

Physical exhaustion (18:46) The guy had just run a marathon, and even though he did it in the power of the Lord, there is little doubt that it left him in a physically depleted state. Second, he allowed himself to become socially isolated.

Social isolation (19:3,4) It says in verse 3 that "when he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day's journey into the desert." We often withdraw at a time of severe trial to nurse our hurts. But that's probably the last thing we ought to do. It's at a time of trial and temptation that we most need others, and the isolation only contributes to the

feelings of self-pity. I think of one person in our church who has been through an extremely difficult time of unemployment and financial reversal for the past 18 months, but he never quit coming to church or reaching out to other people. I commend him and his family.

Emotional depression (4,5). This shouldn't surprise us, for the physical and emotional often move in the same direction. Elijah had gone through an extremely emotionally draining battle on Mt. Carmel and I suppose he had been awake for 36 hours or more in a row. I think it would have been a miracle if he hadn't suffered a let-down. It says in verse 4 that "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." I believe Elijah gives evidence of severe clinical depression at this point.

We must realize that even believers are subject to the laws of nature. Our physical and emotional condition does affect our spiritual life and we dare not ignore it. Too little sleep, too little exercise, the wrong kind of diet, the change of life, irregularity, pressure on the job—all of these things can produce depression. And these external and internal factors can really do a number on us spiritually. They can take us from the mountaintop to the valley in no time at all if we don't keep our eyes focused on God who gave us victory in the first place.

Who were these gods by whom Jezebel swore anyway, causing God's prophet to cowardly cringe in a cave? They were the very ones whom Elijah had completely discredited the day before. And the God of Israel had been totally vindicated. And yet here is Elijah looking at things through the wrong end of the binoculars.

God refuses to abandon him.

Instead He does three specific things to convince Elijah of His presence and concern.

He miraculously provides sustenance (5-8) In fact, twice God sends His angel to provide food and water for him. Why, if Elijah is cowering in fear, running away from his responsibility, and out of God's will, does God provide for him, miraculously at that? *Only* because He loves him. You see, God's love is completely unconditional. You may at times be out of His will, but you are never out of His concern. There are no upbraiding speeches, no words of reproach, no threats of dismissal, only sleep and food and thoughtfulness for the long journey he is bent on making.

Perhaps there may be someone here this morning who has wiped out because of troubles that have piled up or because of being overpowered by some temptation. You have failed, you are ashamed, and you want to hide. You don't enjoy coming to church anymore and the only reason you are here today is force of habit. Please believe that you are not forgotten by God. He loves you and wants to restore to you the years the locust have eaten. You may not feel His love. You may believe you have forfeited it. You may imagine that you are hopelessly estranged from Him. But you are not.

Take heart, God loves you, and I for one believe He will do the same today for those facing

severe trial that he did for Elijah. The angel may be in the form of a friend or fellow-believer, but He has promised to meet the basic needs of His children. That will at least include food, clothing, and shelter.

God gently prods Elijah's conscience (9,13) Elijah was now living in a cave in the rugged wilderness of the Sinai desert. God speaks to him and asks, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" If I were God, I don't think I would have addressed him quite that gently. I think I would have said, "Why you ungrateful bum! Look at what I did for you on Mt. Carmel. Now quit your pity party, get your rear in gear, and get back to the front lines." Fortunately, I am not God. In a very gentle way God asks, not once but twice, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He gives him the opportunity to think through his position and to evaluate his attitude.

God reveals Himself in a unique way. (11-13) Because of Elijah's apparent loss of confidence in God's activity in his life, the Lord said to him in verse 11: "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." And in quick succession Elijah experienced an incredibly strong wind, an earthquake, and a fire, but each time we are told that the Lord was not in it. But after the fire came a gentle whisper and the Lord was in it. What's going on here?

I believe God is saying to Elijah, "You had no problem with your faith when the battle was hot and I was performing great and mighty miracles. But I don't always or even usually operate that way. I usually work gently, softly and unperceived. But still you must not doubt my presence." We tend to think that unless we are seeing dramatic things happen, God must be absent. Unless we are seeing miracles and healings and various manifestations of the Spirit we assume that God is not present.

Believe me, I would be as delighted as anyone to see miracles, but this passage and others like it convince me that God is not present only where great things are happening, where great growth is occurring, where there is lots of frenetic activity. He is also present in trial, when we face temptation, or when we are feeling depressed. The problem is, we aren't willing to be quiet enough to hear Him.

Quietness and solitude are two rare experiences in the average American Christian's life. (By the way, I think solitude is different from isolation in that solitude is an effort to get away from noise and distractions in order to center ourselves on the Lord, while isolation moves us away from relationships.). Some people turn the TV on in the morning and leave it on all day. The minute they get in the car the radio or tape player starts blaring. Even the telephones play music when we're put on hold. Morton Kelsey wrote, "Most modern life is a studied attempt to avoid ever being alone." Yet constantly in the OT and the NT the advantages of quiet and solitude are conveyed. God is not easily found in noise or restlessness.

Turn with me to Psalm 46. (I didn't know the choir was going to be singing this Psalm today!).

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.

Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the

*heart of the sea,
 though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging. Selah
 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most
 High dwells.
 God is within her, she will not fall; God will help her at break of day.
 Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts.
 The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah
 Come and see the works of the LORD, the desolations he has brought on the earth.
 He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear,
 he burns the shield with fire. Selah
 "Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted
 in the earth."
 The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.*

After revealing Himself to Elijah by the still small voice we should be encouraged at what God does next.

God re-commissions him.

He sends him back to the same place and the same ministry (15-17) Look at verse 15: "The Lord said to him, 'Go back the way you came.'" One of the best ways to conquer a fear is to face it head-on. God wants to teach Elijah that the problem is not in the circumstances but in his heart. But not only does God send him back to the same place; He also sends him back to the same kind of ministry. Elijah had been a prophet to royalty. When God wanted a message delivered to kings or generals it was Elijah He sent. While that is the very kind of responsibility that sent him hightailing it to the desert in the first place, God sent him right back into the thick of it—to anoint Hazael king over Assyria and Jehu king over Israel.

God provides companionship (16-21) In verse 16 Elijah is told to anoint Elisha son of Shaphat to succeed him as prophet. On first reading one might think that God is putting Elijah on the shelf and giving his ministry to someone else, but in the last verse of the chapter we find that Elisha actually becomes Elijah's disciple and his attendant. Isn't that just like God? When we come to the end of our rope He brings someone alongside us to share our struggle and provide encouragement. Moses had his Joshua, David his Jonathan, Paul his Barnabas and later his Silas.

God destroys the "I only" myth that had overwhelmed Elijah. (18) Twice Elijah had complained that "I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too." But God says, "I reserve 7,000 in Israel--all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him." It's very easy for us to experience aloneness. We get to thinking that we are experiencing greater trial and more severe temptation than anyone ever experienced. It isn't so.

Conclusion: A Quaker minister of the 18th century, very much depressed by his own spiritual life, was told by the devil that there was never another minister in such a state of mind as he. He

went to visit his friend and colleague John Richardson, a noted minister. When he asked him how he was Richardson replied, "As to the body very well; as to the pocket, very comfortable; but if you mean as to spiritual things, I was never worse." At that the Quaker threw up his hat and shouted, "The devil is a liar, and I was a fool to believe him," and rode home rejoicing. He wasn't rejoicing because his friend was in the tank but because he knew he himself wasn't alone.

You are not alone, nor are you tried or tempted more than anyone else. If you have received Jesus Christ as your personal Savior, then you are a child of God and He will *never* abandon you. If you have not received Christ as personal Savior, then you do not even have a personal relationship with God. Jesus Himself said, "No one comes to the Father except through me." I urge you to put your faith and trust in Him today—He died for you, He paid the penalty for your sin, and He will give you life eternal. And He will never leave you or forsake you!