

June 20, 2010
1 Kings 19:1-15a
Psalm 43

Discouraged?

There are days when God is good. Life is good. The weather is good.

Summer is good. It's all good. But there are days when things aren't so

good. When we get disappointed with life. Even though we've done our

best, and put in the effort, life still isn't good like it should be. And we

get discouraged. Like when you set your sights on that vacation coming

up. You researched the best location for it, a popular place, but not too

popular. You found the right hotel, weighing all those options of balcony

and free breakfast and indoor pool. You've been imagining how great

it's going to be. With your flip-flops and your shorts and not having to

set the alarm and pancake breakfasts at noon. Seeing the world's largest

cement Holstein. Visiting the museum of Salt and Pepper shakers. You

have imagined all of it. The cool water, the lawn chairs, and catching up

on your reading in between watching 5 channels of ESPN. It's going to

be so good. But when you get there, you find the hotel under

construction. And there is a week-long bachelor party going on next

door. And the water front is closed because of an oil spill. And 3/4 of the

family got food poisoning at Bubba's Corndog Factory. And everyone is crabby and it's not much of a vacation and this was your only chance to get away this year and what a disappointment.

There are times when we feel let down. Times when we get frustrated. Times when things haven't gone right. You know, the birthday party that flopped. The romantic weekend that failed. The family nights around the table that don't seem to happen. In your perfectly clean house. With your perfect kids who've got the perfect parents. And the magazines calling all the time to do stories about your amazing business and your amazing volunteer work and your amazing azalea bushes. It's just not happening. Even those little dreams that you had for your life. And it's disappointing and even a little discouraging.

God is good. Life is good. But there are times when the not so good stuff can get you down. Your work. Your school. Your relationships. Your direction in life. Your health. Your bank account. Things aren't where you'd thought they would be. You know it and everyone around you seems to know it. And it gets to where that's all you can see, all the disappointments and failures. And maybe you get to feeling like you

should give up and throw in the towel and just move to another town or another state or to Outer Mongolia where things could be different.

Have you ever been discouraged? Have you ever been so far down that you can't look up? That everything good in the world has turned bad?

That no matter what you've done or what you could do will not matter?

Have you ever been that discouraged? If you have, then you know right about where Elijah is right now. Elijah, the prophet of the Lord. The

man of God. Oh yes, even he got discouraged. In fact, he gets so

discouraged that he is ready to call it quits. On God. On the world

around him. On life itself. The prophet Elijah is 100% disappointed in

everything. It's over, God, he says. It's all over. I'm not doing this

anymore. It's not worth it. Just let me die now, God. Let me die. I'm

done.

What happened to Elijah, the prophet of God? How did he get to be so

discouraged? Why does he want to give up, this man who is so close to

God? I mean, Elijah had done some pretty cool things. Amazing things.

Things that normal people don't get to do. I mean, this was the guy who

took a little bit of flour and oil and fed himself and a widow and her son

for days and days. And when the widow's son died, he brought him back to life. And then he stood up to King Ahab. He talked back to Queen Jezebel. He faced off against the prophets of Baal and he had taken them down. And the people had turned from Baal to worship the Lord God of Israel. Elijah had done this. Elijah was at the top of his game. Elijah had stood up for what he believed. He had stood up in a world that sat down because it was more comfortable. Elijah stood up in a world that sat down because it didn't want any trouble, Elijah stood up in a world that sat down because it was afraid of what it would cost them. Elijah stood up for his faith in God. And it had made a difference. It had mattered. But here he is today disappointed with life. Depressed. And discouraged. What happened to Elijah? What happened to this man of faith? What happened to his courage and his confidence? What happened to make him run away and hide and say he was ready to quit? What could possibly have discouraged this man of God? I'll tell you what it was. It was because even men of God are afraid. They are afraid of what God asks and how impossible it is. And how much it will cost. It's not easy to be a man of God. Not when everyone opposes you. And the status quo is

against you. And no one supports you. And in the end, standing up for God won't change anything. Being an example of faith won't matter. Because people will move on to another god. They'll go to Baal or Marduk or Mammon or Wall Street or Hollywood or some other god that makes big promises. It will mean nothing, but it will have cost you everything.

Being a man of God wasn't easy for Elijah. It didn't mean that all the hard things in life were over. Being faithful to God didn't mean they would give him a parade and an award and put his picture in the paper. Or give him a nice job in the cabinet with a big pension or bless every square inch of his life with money and success. Being a man of God would not take away disappointment or frustration. And it would not make it easier. Not like doing what everyone else was doing. A little stealing from the payroll, a little false witness and gossip. A little coveting a house and truck and hot young thing. And little working right through the Sabbath. It didn't make things easier when you did them, so why do them? Why do it when they could cost you a lot? Because look

what they've done to Elijah. And even Elijah says, It is enough, O Lord, take away my life."

Being a man of God can be discouraging. Even when you put in the effort and you try your best. And again and again, it isn't enough. And we see what others have and how they live. That's one big way we get discouraged. When we look at others and see how much easier it would be to not live this life of faith. How everyone else pushes us to work on Sundays and sell ourselves out buy others cheaply and and pack our schedules and not take God seriously. And that faith and spiritual depth aren't important for our kids. And look at everyone else who is doing just fine serving so many other gods. "Look, says Elijah, look at all these people who have broken their promises. Everyone else has moved on from you, God. I'm the only one left."

Another way we get discouraged is when we compare ourselves to our ancestors. How things were much better way back then. In the good ol days, people knew how to live, they had character. But not me, Elijah says. I am no better than my ancestors, says Elijah. My ancestors didn't have to struggle like this. They didn't have hard choices. Back then

when there wasn't all this technology and all these things you had to do. Back then, church was easier and more straight forward. Back then, you could follow God because you knew what to do. Our father, our grandfathers, our parents, they knew what to do. But now, things have changed. And aren't as wise and strong. And we don't measure up to all those who came before. It's discouraging.

But when we look at the future, we can also get discouraged. When we can't see a blueprint for this anywhere. And we don't know if we can face what's coming. We don't think we have it in us to get through the loss of a job. The loss of a loved one. The loss of our health. The loss of our plans and hopes. All the losses of life. Then you add what you may lose if you are faithful to God. The people who will reject you. The friends who will turn on you if you speak for the outsider and the powerless and the poor in spirit and you talk about what matters in the kingdom of God. You look down that lonely road and think, I will be out here all alone. All by myself. That's what Elijah says, look God, it's just me out here. I am the only one left. I'm alone in this.

If we think it's going to be all up to us, that's discouraging. If we think about how much hunger around the world will increase in the next ten years. How there is no end to the fighting in Israel and Palestine and Afghanistan and Pakistan and North Korea and the Sudan and Ethiopia and the inner cities of America. How ice caps are melting and seas are rising and pollution is increasing, but people want more energy so we burn more fossil fuels. Prisons are full, there is violence in our schools, child abuse in our churches, elder abuse in our homes, women sold into slavery, millions without clean water or medicine. People are homeless and addicted and despairing. And the gods of entertainment and sports and technology and ½ price sales promise to save us. And we can't stand against it. "I alone am left" says Elijah. I'm the only one. The only one, Lord, and I just can't do it!

It's discouraging when we think about all those things that are against us. It's discouraging for Elijah and for all of us. But even though all those things seem to be against us, God is for us. God is for us. And has a life for us that is so much better and richer and fuller than the world has to offer. God is for us and for this crazy mixed up creation around

us. God is for us and if we are for God, then we might see how much more life can be, how much more we can be. But it won't be easy. Being a man of God, or a woman of God won't be safe or practical and we will get discouraged and ask the Lord to pass us by. I can't handle this God. The world is against me. But God is still for us, even in our deepest discouragement. But God comes with that still, small voice. In our crisis. In our doubt. In that little space right at bed time. In the pause at a stoplight. In the food pantry. In the sanctuary. In the garden. In your kitchen and at the office. In the fearful space of that hospital room. That funeral home. The Lord is there. Where we couldn't see God before. And asks us to believe in spite of the doubt. To have faith in spite of the fear. Because God is for us. Who can be against us? And our God is lord of the universe. Not work or disease or rulers or coaches or the past or the future nor any principalities or powers in this world, not even death itself. We will not bow to other gods. Even in the face of all the discouragement out there.

In the face of all of it, God says, go, return on your way. Go, Elijah, I'm sending you out. Go, and be faithful and let me worry about the rest. Go,

man of God. God, woman of God. God is for you and promises to make
all things good.