

1 Kings 19:3-8

³ *Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, ⁴ 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." ⁵ Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep. All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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." ⁸ 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.*

God's Consistent Kindness Sustains Us

The ups and downs and life can get the best of us, they can take a toll on us physically and emotionally, as well as spiritually. After a big moment in our lives, after an emotional high, there is bound to be some sort of a letdown. How we handle such adjustments varies from person to person from situation to situation? Sometimes we move on smoothly to the next challenge or the next event; other times we struggle. In life it can certainly be the case that one moment we are standing on top of a peak and suddenly we plummet down to a valley. From an emotional high, a big event, an uplifting encounter, a spiritual victory, and we might plunge all the way down to an emotional valley because of an unexpected challenge or we are faced with life as usual. These shifts, these ups and downs can be difficult to handle. But today we are encouraged in our handling of the ups and downs of life because God with his consistent love is there for us.

After a summer highlighted by enjoyable activities perhaps there is a bit of a lull right now as summer winds down. After having the grandkids visit, after family reunions, the summer trips to far off locations, the trips to the lake, now the house is so quiet and the pace so different. After all the parades, the special outreach events, the special services, the calendar, particularly the church calendar is a bit less crowded, for now. And while that can be a welcome reprieve for some, for others it is more of a challenge to adjust. That lull can nag at us and pull us down into an emotional valley. The ups and downs of life and the ups and downs of ministry and service to God can get the best of us, it can get the best of anybody.

That was certainly the case for God's prophet, Elijah. Fresh off his biggest highlight, arguably the very pinnacle of his remarkable ministry, suddenly Elijah plummeted from that emotional high, that huge victory on top of Mt. Carmel, to this depressing point of sheer despair that we see here. Utterly exhausted, this man of God, sits under a solitary desert

bush, a broom tree, out in the middle of the wilderness and he asks that he would die. The ups and downs of life and his ministry took a toll on this man of God and he didn't know quite how to handle it.

Remember what Elijah had just experienced. He had taken on the prophets of Baal and won. Threatened and outnumbered, but backed by God, Elijah watched as God delivered a crushing blow to those that opposed Him and his prophet. Elijah had challenged the king himself to a duel of sorts. Ahab's 450 prophets of Baal were to set up an altar on top of Mt. Carmel and Elijah would set one up as well, and this was the challenge. "Pray to your god and I will pray to the LORD and we will see who the true God is." And remember how Elijah proposed this arrangement with such confidence and bravado. He stood before the people and said, "the God who answers by fire, he is God" (1 Kings 18:24). Wow, I mean, what a scene that must have been? What confidence, what spectacular fortitude, Elijah must have expressed in that moment. And then the prophets of Baal prayed and no fire came. They yelled and they screamed and there was no response. Meanwhile Elijah was so sure that God would answer, he dug a trench, he soaked, I mean absolutely soaked, his sacrifice with water three times, and then he prayed to the LORD. And the fire of the LORD fell and burned up and consumed all of it, even licking up the water in the trench.

A pinnacle, a high point, a most striking victory for the prophet of God. The prophets of Baal were captured and destroyed, many of the people repented and called on the name of the LORD, and then to cap it all off, the prophet prayed to God and rain came. The drought that had plagued God's people would soon be over as a dark rain cloud formed and dropped a heavy and refreshing rain.

But not long after that cloud formed, not long after that rain fell, Elijah's confidence crashed, and a cloud of despair seemed to form and hover over God's prophet. After that emotional high, after that intense victory, Elijah wasn't able to adjust well to the next challenge. King Ahab was sent on his way by Elijah to report of the victory of God, but when Ahab told his wife, the wicked Queen Jezebel, it seems she was hardly impressed. She was undeterred in her unbelief and she sent a messenger to Elijah to tell him, that she was determined to see that he was put to death by the sword just like those prophets of Baal. At the very hearing of this message, Elijah was so afraid that he ran for his life.

It almost seems strange that all it took was a few words from this wicked woman and Elijah was sent reeling, plunging down from his victorious pinnacle, he suddenly plummeted down into a valley of despair. He had faced those 450 prophets of Baal and did not back down, but yet when faced with this one messenger he fled far away. Mt Carmel was near the northern part of Israel and when he heard of Jezebel's threat he fled clear down to Judah because he was so afraid. Upon arriving in Beersheba in Judah he left his servant, traveled out into the desert, and lay down under that bush. He was so exhausted emotionally and physically and spiritually that he was just done.

Maybe you can relate. Maybe there have been times that you have had similar ups and downs in life. There was this great moment, but then suddenly you were pushed from that pinnacle and it totally floored you. Some big challenge came up and you were taken aback,

or maybe, it did not even take much of a push, but something changed just a little bit you had a hard time dealing with this issue. As you went through the adjustment suddenly you were exhausted physically and mentally; and you were just done. All you wanted to do, all you knew to do, was to cry out in frustration, throw your hands up in exhaustion, maybe you even tried to slink away to be alone and you shut everyone out as you moped about in your anxiety.

That's sometimes how we handle things. As proud, and strong as we think we are, especially in those moments of victory and those highlights of life, we are weak, we are fragile and sinful human beings, and so when things are suddenly flipped, when life gets tough, when an unexpected challenge, or life as usual confronts us; sometimes we just don't know what to do. Many times we might respond in a way that is very similar to Elijah's reaction. No, we don't immediately hike down to the Minnesota and Iowa boarder and crawl under some bush every time trouble comes, but we do, quite often, look for relief in some rather shady and unhelpful places. We might crawl into a dark place and shut out people or refuse to be around people who want to help and support us. We might dive headlong into despair and self-pity, as well as other self-destructive behaviors. Instead of looking to friends and family, instead of looking to God, and clinging to our faith, we may curl up with some harmful form of negativity or immorality in order to dull the pain, to distract us from reality, because, well, we don't know what else to do. We forget and neglect or ignore what God has done for us. We overlook the faithful love and the kindness our God has shown to us, even though, clear displays of this kindness may have been very evident in our lives just days or hours before. How forgetful God's people can be as we carelessly overlook and disregard the many blessings that God provides new every morning. How foolish, how careless, how self-centered and faithless we can be when we wallow in self-pity.

But before we beat ourselves up too much, let's look at how our God responds to such faithless actions of his servant. Look at how our God responds to Elijah with such compassion. The LORD delivers his servant from despair in a way that reveals the kind of dependable and reliable, patient and compassionate God that we have. The angel of the LORD, that is, the second person of the Trinity, the pre-incarnate Christ, came to Elijah and everything about that visit made it clear that the LORD was there to strengthen and restore and help his servant. The angel of the LORD touched him and urged him to: "Get up and eat." Elijah got up and he looked around, and there by his head was a cake of hot fresh baked bread and a jar of water. ***He ate and drank and then lay down again. ⁷ 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." ⁸ 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.*** How tenderly, how graciously God deals with his servant in his time of despair.

The LORD blesses his servants with gifts from his hand to strengthen us. The LORD who gives us food to eat and water to drink, blesses us with the gift of rest, the gift of sleep. He blesses us with messengers of grace, Christian friends, and family, fellow believers, faithful spouses, and trustworthy pastors. He gives us all this to strengthen and sustain us.

These are remarkable gifts from his hand. These are sure signs of his consistent love that sustains us.

Still we might look at this lesson and think that of course Elijah would be encouraged; after all, God himself, the angel of the LORD, came to Elijah and personally assured him of his presence and love. That's the kind of encouragement I want, that's the kind of encouragement I need! But let us remember that the angel of the LORD comes to us also, in a way that is quite special as well. He might not leave fresh baked bread next to our beds each morning, but as the Bread of Life he comes to us through his Word. He touches our hearts with his gospel of truth, where he assures us of his love and kindness, and quite often that is only as far away as our nightstands as we can reach for our bible, or our devotional book, or nowadays a bible study tool or app on our tablet, smartphone, or personal computer. And we have something that Elijah did not have as an Old Testament believer, and I'm not just talking about technology, we have the words of the Gospel accounts that clearly, so clearly, reveal what Jesus has done for us. We have the very words of God of in the New Testament that show us how that second person of the Godhead, took on flesh, to save us. The bread of life, Jesus Christ, came down from heaven to bear the burden of our sin, to be tempted in every way, to go through the ups and downs of life for us. He came and faced horrible opposition and suffering to give us eternal life. Each day we can see this constant and reliable and steadfast love detailed for us in the Word of God. The LORD Jesus gives us this bread of life, he gives us his Word, and lays it before us each new day to strengthen us! What a tremendous blessing!

Through the Word of God he reaches out and taps us on the shoulder to grab our attention so that he might strengthen us. Through Word and Sacrament he restore our souls and he grants peace to our troubled hearts. The LORD is with you, he has forgiven your lack of trust, cleansed you from all of your sins, and in his steadfast love and concern he lays before you the bread of life. Be strengthened. Be at peace. All good things come from your heavenly father, and he loves you with a love that it is much more consistent than your personal faith. As human beings we may be prone to waver, to sway, to doubt, to question, to have ups and downs in our personal trust in God, but God's love for you and me is divinely constant, reliable, and unquestionable. He provides for us each day. He sent his Son to save us so that we may enjoy the eternal day of heaven. Enjoy God's gifts of food and drink, sleep and rest.

So enjoy God's gift of good Christian friends, fellow believers, and family members who are there to a be shoulder to lean on; who are there to offer support with an encouraging hug, a pat on the back, or just by being there for you. Enjoy God's gift of his Holy Word so that you may be strengthened to take on the next challenge, so that you may be sustained and made ready for the ups and downs of life. From pinnacles of victory to valleys of despair, the LORD is with you. He is the dependable, reliable, bread of life that is there each day as that consistent staple that sustains and strengthens you. Dear friends, get up and go forth, take on the next moment, the next day, the next challenge in peace for your God and his love go with you. Amen.