

INTRODUCTION

It's a joke in the South that all Baptist preachers love fried chicken. But I heard of one pastor who couldn't stand it. In fact, he hated fried chicken. Once this pastor was preaching a weeklong meeting at another church, and was eating in the homes of members before the services. Every night, he was served the same meal (you guessed it) fried chicken. After five nights of fried chicken, he arrived at a home for the final meal of the week. There in front of him was a big platter of crispy fried chicken. He could hardly look at it. To make matters worse, the host asked him to pray the blessing. So the preacher prayed this prayer: "Lord, I've had it hot and I've had it cold; I've had it young and I've had it old; I've had it tender, and I've had it tough, But, thank you, Lord, I'VE HAD ENOUGH!"

At one time or another, most people come to a place where they want to throw in the towel and say, "I've had enough!" One of the greatest prophets of the Old Testament was Elijah. But in I Kings 19 we read about his desire to quit. He's ready for God to end his life.

I Kings 19:1. "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 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."

Try to imagine this great prophet sitting under a solitary tree in the desert. Elijah just had one of the greatest victories of his life. In response to his prayers, God sent down fire from heaven and a three-year drought had been broken. He should have been on top of the world, yet we find him in the depths of depression, even begging God to let him die. We sometimes think these Old Testament characters were superhuman, but they were just like us, and we are just like them. Many of you know what it's like to go from the mountaintop of happiness to the valley of despair. Do you know *why* we have these stories from the Old Testament? They are written to give us hope. Romans 15:4 says, "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."

During this series of messages, we've been talking about HOPE. Most people are familiar with a famous statement about hope written by the English poet, Alexander Pope, but they usually only know half of the quotation. "Hope springs eternal in the human breast." That's the part most people recognize, but the next line says, "Man never is, but always to be blest." (*Essay on Man*, Epistle 1, line 95) Pope's take on hope is that man is always hoping, but never realizing blessing. But the Bible gives us a different understanding of hope. Hope is not merely something we dream about, we can have a living, breathing hope today—and that hope is in Jesus Christ. Remember, a good acrostic for Biblical Hope is Having Only Positive Expectations!

It could be you find yourself in the same place as Elijah. You've lost hope and you feel like

quitting. In this message, we're going to discuss the reasons people often lose hope and how God can restore your hope.

I. THE DISCOURAGEMENT OF LOSING HOPE

Even, committed followers of God sometimes get discouraged. Here was a prophet who was so discouraged he was ready for a non-prophet existence. He was an emotional mess. Have you ever heard the expression, "It's enough to make a preacher cuss?" I heard a story about a pastor who stopped at a yard sale to buy a used lawnmower. There was a kid who was doing his best to make the sale. The preacher pulled the rope several times to crank the mower, but it wouldn't start. The boy, "You have to kick it a and say a few cuss words before it will crank." The preacher said, "Son, I can't do that. It's been years since I used a cuss word." The kid said, "Just keep pullin' the rope, it'll come back to you."

Elijah had gone beyond frustration. He was suffering from full-blown depression. Many people struggle with depression in our day as well. Here are some depressing facts from the National Institute of Mental Health: (1) 17.6 million Americans deal with some form of depression each year; (2) One out of 5 Americans will deal with depression in their lifetime; (3) The rate of clinical depression among females is twice that of men; (4) Untreated depression is the number one cause of suicide; (5) Depression is the leading cause for alcoholism, drug abuse, and other addictions.

It's easy to see the reasons why Elijah wanted to quit. They're the same reasons that make people want to give up today.

(1) We want to quit when we feel physically drained

Elijah was literally running for his life. He ran all the way from Jezreel to Beersheba, which is about 70 miles. He was already exhausted from his confrontation with the 450 prophets of Baal, and his sprint only exhausted him further.

We're the same way. Sometimes we work and work until we're exhausted, and then we grit our teeth and work a little longer. People's schedules are more hectic than ever before. Moms and dads are so busy they seldom have time for their kids, much less each other. One reason I don't believe in evolutionary development is because if it were true, mothers would have four hands.

One hard-charging businessman started having chest pains. His doctor told him, "Your problem is that you're burning the candle at both ends." The man said, "I didn't come here for a lecture, I came here for more wax!" When you don't get enough rest, you are prone to discouragement that leads to depression.

(2) We want to quit when we feel emotionally deserted

The wicked queen Jezebel hated Elijah and was out to get him, but Elijah felt so bad he thought everyone was against him. In verses 10 and 14 he tells God that he is the only one still faithful. Elijah was having a pity party for one.

The devil wants to drive you away from the very people who can help you. He shoves you into fear and paranoia. Some people have become so paranoid they can't even attend a football game anymore, because they're certain the guys in the huddle are talking about them!

We all have problems. Some are big problems and some are small problems. Do you know the difference between a big problem and a small problem? A big problem is anything I'm going through and a small problem is anything you're going through. It's like minor surgery—it's never minor when it's on you! If you isolate yourself from others, you become an easy target for the devil's discouragement.

(3) We want to quit when we spiritually depleted

Elijah had just experienced a wonderful spiritual high on Mt. Carmel. Immediately after that, he was full of despair and depression. It's easy to go from the peak to the pit!

Sometimes you can be so involved with serving the Lord that you find yourself running on empty. It's often said that most preachers resign on Mondays, after pouring out their hearts on Sunday. So don't be surprised if you find yourself sagging after you've had a mountaintop experience with the Lord. It's common in the Bible.

So, watch out when you're drained physically, deserted emotionally, and depleted spiritually, because that's exactly the time you'll find yourself wanting to quit.

II. GOD'S DIRECTIONS FOR REGAINING HOPE

The Bible teaches there is great value in refusing to give up and quit. I saw a funny cartoon not long ago that communicated the value of persistence. The cartoon pictured a large bird standing in shallow water. The bird had caught a juicy frog and was in the process of eating it, but the frog wasn't going to go quietly into the darkness. Instead, the persistent frog was clutching the throat of the bird so the bird couldn't swallow him. The caption said, "Never give up."

An unknown author wrote a poem that says: When things go wrong as they sometimes will, / When the road you're walking seems all uphill, / When funds are low and debts are high, / When you try to smile but have to cry, / When your cares are pressing you down a bit, / Rest if you must, but don't you quit!

Elijah was ready to give up and quit, but God wouldn't let him. Instead, God gave him three specific directions that restored his hope. If you've gone from the pinnacle to the pit, these same three directions will serve you well.

(1) Don't give up—*get up!* Take care of your body

God sent an angel to say to Elijah, "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." (I Kings 19:7-8) If you want to quit, you should pay attention to your body. God gave Elijah three

things we all need. First, he slept, then he ate, then he exercised.

Elijah was so exhausted he slept for two days. If you aren't getting enough rest, then you develop what experts call a sleep debt—and it's a debt that will eventually be paid. It may be paid by poor performance or an emotional collapse, but it would be better paid by catching up on your sleep. A century ago, Americans averaged more than nine hours sleep a night, and today the average is slightly less than seven. The legendary football coach Vince Lombardi said, "Fatigue makes cowards of us all." That's why I've never minded if people slept during my message. I think, "If that's the only time you get still and can catch a nap, at least you got SOMETHING out of my message!"

Elijah caught up on his sleep, and then God fed Elijah. When he woke up, the angel had prepared a cake for him. It's the first mention of angel's food cake, I guess. Whatever it was, God was demonstrating that what we eat can affect how we feel. Then God put Elijah on an exercise program. He had him walk for forty days. He had run from Mt. Carmel to the Beersheba, but over the next forty days, Elijah traveled to Mt. Horeb in the Sinai Peninsula. He could have averaged about five miles a day and gotten there. It has been proven many times that people who exercise on a regular basis have much fewer bouts of depression and discouragement.

I mentioned several weeks ago, that the only way you can change your life is to change something you do daily. God's message to you today may be to start taking care of your body. After all, it's not your body, it's HIS temple.

If you've got the blahs, try paying attention to your body.

(2) Don't give up—look up! Listen for God's voice

The Lord said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord."...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..."What are you doing here, Elijah?" (I Kings 19:11-13)

After his eating and exercise program, Elijah arrived at Mt. Horeb, which is the same place as Mt. Sinai in Exodus. Elijah was sleeping in a cave. Caves are dark and damp places. In fact, the Greek philosopher, Plato, wrote about depression. I call it the "Blue Plato special." Plato wrote that depression can be compared to living in a cave, and when we are enlightened by truth, it's like walking out of the cave into the sunlight.

While Elijah was in the cave, God taught him something about how to listen to Him. God sent a tornado, then an earthquake, and then a fire. Just imagine for a moment you're Elijah in that dark cave. You're straining to hear God speak, and suddenly you hear the sound of a powerful wind blowing. But you can't hear God's voice in the tornado. Then there is the rumble of a mighty earthquake, boulders are dislodged and the rocks split, but, again, God's not speaking. Finally, there is a roaring fire. You're trying to listen, but all you hear is the crackle and sizzle of the flames. After these three colossal demonstrations, you hear a whisper. "Elijah." Then again, "Elijah." You walk to the mouth of the cave and you hear the still, quiet whisper again, "Elijah,

what are you doing here?"

God wants to talk to you, but it could be there are so many tornados, earthquakes, and noisy fires in your life that you can't hear His voice. God is speaking, are you listening?

You don't have to listen without to hear God's voice. If you are a child of God, Christ lives in you, and He speaks into your heart. John Fisher has written a beautiful poem entitled, "Listen Deep Inside." It says, "So let the noise subside, / And listen deep inside; / He will speak, / He will speak. / But it won't be an earthquake; / And it won't be fire; / Or the whirling wind; / Taking you higher. / It will be a still small voice; / And you'll have no choice; / But to hear; / But to hear."

Do you ever know for certain that God was speaking to you? You may be trying to listen to the wind or the earthquake, and God is speaking softly and simply. He doesn't have to use a voice like I'm using, He communicates on the level of your spirit, not your ears. For instance, God speaks most clearly to us in His Word, the Bible.

Okay, do you want God to speak to you right now? He will. At this very moment, if you open your heart, God will communicate with you. He wants to speak hope into your troubled soul. Here are His words directly spoken to you through the Bible. In John 16:33 Jesus said, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." According to Jesus, hope doesn't deny the reality of pain. Hope simply denies the finality of it!

(3) Don't give up—*link up!* Share your burden with others

Elijah only thought he was all alone. Two times he said, "I am the only one left, and now they're trying to kill me too." (I Kings 19:10, 14) God's reply was direct and specific: "Anoint Hazael king over Aram. Also, anoint Jehu, son of Nimshi, king over Israel, and anoint Elisha, son of Shaphat to succeed you as prophet...I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him." (I Kings 19:15, 18) God said, "Elijah, quit your pity party, you aren't the only one who feels the way you do." I've got some people who need you, and you need them. Link up with them!

One of the biggest delusions of depression is to think that "nobody knows the trouble I've seen." When, in fact, there are plenty of people out there who have struggled with exactly the same thing you're facing. And God's message to you is to link up with them. They are there to share your burdens.

The best place to find people to share your burdens is in church. I often say we are not a showcase for shiny saints, we are a hospital for suffering sinners. That's why we have small groups that meet, so people can open their hearts and share their burdens. Then we pray for each other. Every week, we have thousands of prayer needs that exist within our fellowship. Each Sunday Morning Bible Study group shares these prayer needs, and they pray for one another.

In addition we have lots of support groups that meet to encourage each other. There are more

groups than I have space to mention, but here are a few. We have a grief share group that brings people together who have experienced the death of a loved one. We have a POP (Parents of Prodigals) group for parents who suffer because of a rebellious child. We have a Cancer Support group for those who have made the journey through cancer. We have a Soldiers of Faith group for those who have relatives who are serving in the military. The list goes on. If you are in need of support, you should link up with these people.

I enjoyed the movie *Gladiator* starring Russell Crowe, because I love Roman history—and I love watching guys fight. Russell Crowe plays Maximus, who was once a military general now reduced to a slave. He becomes a gladiator, which was the WWF of Roman entertainment. In one scene, Maximus and his fellow gladiators enter the coliseum armed for battle. They look invincible. But then the doors open and about a dozen charioteers thunder into the coliseum, armed with weapons and shields. The chariots have razor sharp blades extending from the wheels. The Gladiators are outnumbered and overmatched. There is a moment of panic, but Maximus says six words that are the key to victory. Just before the fight ensues he says, "If we stay together we survive." So instead of separating the Gladiators to make them easy prey, the charioteers were forced to battle a tight knot of fighters who were protecting each other's backs.

That's good advice for us today—stay together. Satan's plan is always to divide and conquer. He wants to divide every marriage, every family, every church, and every community. We read in I Peter that Satan is like a roaring lion. His strategy is to separate weak Christians from the safety of the herd, and attack them. Our job is to stick together. We need each other. That's why every follower of Jesus needs to be a part of a local church. You've got to link up with others like you if you want to find hope.

Hollywood and MTV can easily out-glitz the church. We can never pull off the extravaganzas that they can. But the church of the Lord Jesus Christ offers something today you can't find anywhere else: HOPE. Every church that preaches Jesus offers hope.

I recall the first time I drove from Tyler to Canton. I saw a sign on Texas Highway 64 that said, "Little Hope Baptist Church." I almost skidded off the road! I remember thinking, "What? That's a terrible name for a church!" I thought that they should call themselves "New Hope" or at least "Some Hope." The only thing worse than "Little Hope" would be "No Hope Baptist Church."

But since then I've learned "the rest of the story." There is a thriving congregation that has the name, "Little Hope Baptist Church." I contacted the pastor not long ago and confirmed that the community got its name from a little girl named Hope Moore who died in the 19th century. Her family donated land in her honor for a church—thus the name "Little Hope." You can see her name on the "Little Hope Moore Community Center." That's how the church got its name.

But the sign can be puzzling to people who don't know the full story. If it was up to me, I think I'd add a sign on top of the current sign so it would read: "There's a whole lotta' hope at Little Hope Baptist Church!"

CONCLUSION

Life is tough, even for those who follow the Lord, but your attitude makes all the difference. One of my favorite stories is about a farmer who owned an old mule. The mule was old and almost blind. The farmer knew the mule should be put down, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. One day the old mule accidentally fell in an old abandoned well. The farmer heard the old mule braying, (or praying) and went to investigate.

As he assessed the situation, the farmer determined that neither the old mule or the old well was worth the trouble of saving. So, he enlisted some neighbors and they hauled in some dirt to fill in the well and bury the old mule at the same time. When the first few shovels of dirt fell on him, the old mule became frantic. But then the mule made a choice that saved his life. Instead of giving up and being buried he decided in his mule mind that whenever dirt landed on him, he would simply shake it off and step on it. So, that's what he did. Shovel after shovel of dirt fell, "shake it off, step on it. Shake it off, step on it." No matter how painful the blows, or distressing the situation, he wouldn't give up. He kept on shaking it off and stepping on top of it. And before long, the old mule, battered and dirty, stepped over the edge of the well.

That may be what God is telling you today. Life throws a lot of dirt on you. Are you going to quit? Or are you going to shake it off and step on it?

Even if you feel like quitting, you can find hope. God is saying to you, "Get up! Take care of yourself physically." He says, "Look up! Listen to what I'm telling you." Then, He says, "Link up! There are some people out there that you need, and they need you."

OUTLINE

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- (2) Emotionally deserted
- (3) Spiritually depleted

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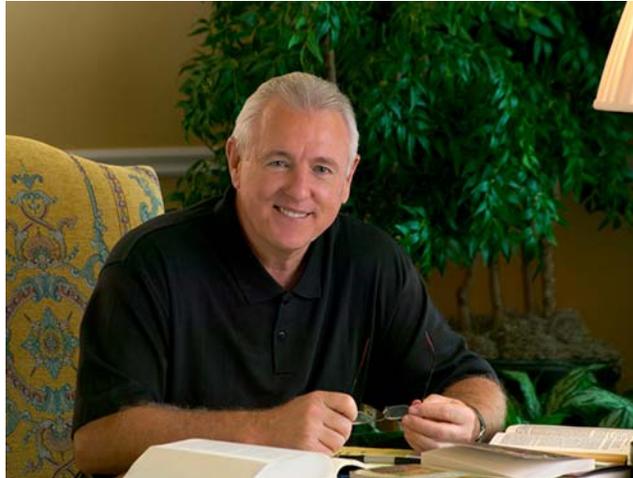
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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes