

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 1:2) Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Has it ever happened to you that things were going really well for you, and suddenly everything fell apart? If you are like most people, you have great ups and downs in your life. This includes our spiritual life. Sometimes we are sure of our standing with God. Sometimes we feel particularly close to God. Sometimes our faith is strong and sure. Sometimes we are sure of his purpose for our lives. But other times, we are filled with doubt. We feel as if God is far from us. We wonder what possible purpose God could have for us in life. Have you ever experienced these extremes as a Christian? If you haven't, I'm sure you will. And it often seems to happen that our lowest times come right after some of our highest times. We feel full of life... and something comes along and knocks the life right out of us. Do you know what I'm saying? If it's not one of those times right now, you still know what I'm talking about, don't you?

The father of one of our good friends, Bob Kapke, was the epitome of being in shape. He was a pig farmer with 800 pigs to take care of. He ran marathons and half-marathons regularly and was always competitive. When Bob reached his 50's, a friend of his persuaded him to run the Leadville Trail 100. It's a grueling 100 mile race over the roof of the Rockies with an average elevation of 10,200 feet. Bob actually completed the race... in 27 hours. And over the years he entered the race 5 more times. Only one time did a nasty spill keep him from finishing the race. Bob also ate right. He was teased about how broccoli and bananas he ate.

43 days after winning his age bracket in the Lincoln half-marathon, Bob was diagnosed with incurable cancer. In January of this year, Bob lost the battle with cancer and went to be his Lord in heaven. In spite of good diet and an incredible amount of exercise, Bob's body was attacked by cancer. Bob simultaneously faced a great spiritual challenge and obstacle in his life.

We continue our series on Jesus, the bread of life. Today we will see how vital it is to receive the bread of life... especially when we get the life knocked out of us by spiritual obstacles and challenges we sometimes face. We'll pick up Bob's story again a little later.

But first let's look at another story, the one recorded in our Old Testament lesson today. This is a premier example in the Bible of someone who went from the highest spiritual high to the lowest spiritual low. It happened to the great prophet Elijah whom we heard about in our Old Testament reading.

Elijah had just come off one of the biggest highs a prophet could ever experience. The nation of Israel had been divided into two kingdoms. The Northern Kingdom, where Elijah was to be God's messenger, was under the rule of an evil king named Ahab. Under Ahab's rule, the northern Kingdom of Israel prospered from a worldly point of view. At the same time, however, Israel became morally and spiritually corrupt. Evil King Ahab led the Israelites away from the true God. He even married Jezebel, the daughter of a heathen king. When he married her, he adopted her worship of the pagan gods, Baal and Asherah. For the first time, the king of Israel forbade the people of Israel to worship the true God.

It was in these circumstances that God raised up Elijah to be His prophet. One day Elijah appeared to Ahab and told him that there would be drought in Israel for several years because

everyone had turned from the true God to worship false gods. Three years later, Elijah reappeared. At Mt. Carmel there was a big shrine in honor of Baal. Elijah confronted 450 prophets of Baal and suggested a contest which would show who was the true God. Elijah said, **“You build an altar to your god, and I’ll build an altar to the true God. We will place a sacrifice upon our altars, but we will not set fire to it. We will each pray to our God that He send fire to burn the sacrifice. The true God will be the one which answers and sends fire.”**

The prophets of Baal agreed to this proposal. Elijah allowed them to go first. They prepared their altar, and prayed to Baal earnestly. They prayed all day, even cutting themselves to draw blood in order to get Baal’s attention. But their god did not answer them.

So Elijah prepared his altar. Then he dug a trench around the altar. He ordered gallons and gallons of water to be poured over his altar so that even the trench was filled. Everything was totally waterlogged and drenched. Here’s what the Bible says happened next: [1 Kings 18:36-38] *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.*

The Lord answered Elijah’s prayer immediately and impressively! The people were amazed at this. They acknowledged the true God and turned from Baal. In fact, the 450 prophets of Baal were put to death.

After this event, Elijah prayed for rain. Soon dark, heavy clouds filled the sky and rain drenched Israel. This seemed like a great victory to Elijah! Baal was defeated! The drought was over! He immediately went to Ahab’s home town. He probably expected a hero’s welcome. He probably envisioned great numbers repenting and turning to God.

But Ahab had told his wicked wife Jezebel all that happened. Amazingly, the miraculous events did not move her to repentance, nor cause her to turn from her false gods. Instead she was extremely angry at Elijah, and said, **“If you don’t leave town by tomorrow, you’ll be as dead as those prophets of Baal.”**

Elijah fled for his life. What a complete turn in circumstances! Elijah’s pride was shattered. He was a broken man. One moment he saw himself as the victorious prophet who would lead all of Israel back to the Lord. The next moment he realized he was a fugitive and an outcast. No one came to his defense. There was no mass conversion. Elijah felt like an utter failure.

Understanding these circumstances we can understand how Elijah felt in our reading today. He was afraid and he ran for his life. He headed south and left the Northern Kingdom of Israel. But he still didn’t feel safe. Depressed, he left his servant behind, and all alone, he went a day’s journey into the desert. There he sat under a broom tree and prayed that he might die. He said, **“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.”**

What can we learn from Elijah? From Elijah we see very clearly that even the strongest of Christians sometimes tire in their life of service to God. Even those who seem the solidest and firmest in their faith get depressed and want to quit. Elijah was so depressed, he prayed that the Lord would end his life! He not only did not want to continue to serve the Lord, but he did not even want to continue to live.

When people get depressed, they usually feel that they are all alone in the world. They feel that they are the only ones who have ever felt the way they do. If you ever experience such

feelings, remember the great prophet Elijah. He wasn't just the man who stood victorious over the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel, he was also the man who sat under a scraggly tree in the middle of the desert, all alone, hoping to die. It's important for us to know that we are not the only ones who are feeling or have felt depressed. If it could happen to Elijah, it can happen to anyone!

Now let's look at how the Lord dealt with Elijah in these circumstances. **“Then [Elijah] 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.”**

Elijah felt all alone and he felt like his life no longer had a purpose. But God showed that this was entirely untrue. God in his love sent an angel to help Elijah in his difficult time. Although Elijah didn't even ask for it, **God helped Elijah through his difficult time.**

Don't we often have times in our life where we feel God is distant from us, and that he doesn't hear us? The truth is, it's not God who is missing, it's we who are not looking for Him. God is always there. He loves you dearly and will never leave you. You can be confident that God will also help you during your difficult times. More than that, he will carry you through those difficult times.

Now Elijah was not only depressed, but he also felt his life no longer had meaning. He felt he had no purpose to live. God addressed this also.

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.

Although Elijah felt his life had no purpose, God had a definite purpose for his life. Elijah was simply not patient enough to wait to see God's purpose. The Lord supplied Elijah with the food he would need to do what the Lord wanted. Then he told him to go to Mt. Horeb. Here the Lord would speak directly to Elijah, and tell him what he wanted him to do. It's easy for us to feel at times that our lives are a waste, and that we are of no use. But be patient! God has a plan for you. Trust in Him, and believe that in his love, he will give you direction.

And how can I be so sure that he has a purpose for you? Because God went to incredible lengths and pains to make you his very own. God the Father sent his one and only Son, Jesus. Jesus, true God from eternity, willingly accepted the Father's mission. Set aside heavenly glory and wisdom and power, and became fully human. He experienced the worst this world has to offer, but he remained true and faithful. He suffered at the hands of men, even suffering death on the cross. All this he endured for you personally. God knows you from eternity, including your faults and failings. But in his love he has not rejected you... but rescued you. Jesus' holy life, God counts as yours. Jesus' suffering and death, he considers payment for all your sin. The costly blood of God's own Son was the payment for your forgiveness, life and salvation. He has adopted you into his very own family. Now, if God went to that extreme to make you his own dear child, I guarantee that he has a vital purpose for your life. Am I right? Scripture says I am. Sometimes we don't know that purpose and sometimes we wonder if we maybe God forgot about us, but I promise you he knows you and remembers you and he's working this all out for his good will and purposes. Just be patient.

A man once told about a very difficult time in his life. He was a pastor who enjoyed serving the Lord. One day he began to have chest pains. He went to the doctors, and after numerous tests, they couldn't determine the cause of his chest pains, but they assumed it must be his heart. Finally, they said he would have to quit working all together because it was bad for his heart. This young

pastor retired from the ministry, and he was not able to do anything. For two years, he was depressed. He felt the Lord had no purpose for his life. He prayed to God about it, but it seemed to him that God wasn't listening.

Finally the doctors determined the problem wasn't with his heart at all. The pain was coming from his rib cage. He somehow had strained the tissue between two of his ribs. He was able to begin working as a pastor again. This man who was so depressed and ready to give up on life, became a professor at our Seminary – he was one of my professors – and has authored several books. His amazing gift for the Greek language and his tremendous gift for teaching have prepared hundreds of men who have gone through our Seminary for translating and interpreting New Testament Scriptures.

Yes, even the strongest Christians have moments of weakness in their lives. All of us sometimes get depressed, and weary of our Christian duties. But we can be certain that just as God helped Elijah, he will also help us.

What do you do when you get the life knocked out of you? Remember Bob Kapke whom we talked about at the beginning of the sermon... the very fit man who got terminal cancer? Two years before his diagnosis, Bob was quoted in a newspaper article about Leadville 100 mile race: "We all have mountains in our life. We get tired and discouraged, and the easy thing to do is say it ain't worth it and quit. Maybe the better solution is to keep one foot plugging in front of the other." We don't know what our future holds. But we do know that God has a purpose. Trusting in him, he is indeed pleased when we keep one foot plugging in front of the other.

After diagnosis, Bob said: "I presume the Lord is doing these things to teach me I'm not as tough as I thought I was. I need to accept the fact that I need to rely on other people more instead of being so self-sufficient." And he quoted Jeremiah 9:23-24: **"This is what the LORD says: 'Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,' declares the LORD."**

When you get the life knocked out of you, brothers and sisters, turn to the Lord Jesus, the bread of life. With him, I guarantee you'll have the life knocked back into you. He will make you strong, firm and steadfast. Your God is always with you and he watches over you. He always loves you. He always has a purpose for your life. He always promises to safely bring you to eternal life. Trust these promises, for they are most certainly true. Amen.

*"And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast." (1 Peter 5:10.)
Amen.*