

The Worst Day Ever: Elijah

10th Sunday after Pentecost

August, 9, 2009

We're starting a new series today that, I admit, has a little bit of an unusual title. The title of this series is, "The Worst Day Ever!" Doesn't that just sound nice and inviting, and give everyone warm fuzzies? Why this title and why this series?

We are going to be exploring many main people in the Bible who experienced let-downs, disappointments, and heartaches, and what came out of those times. The reason why, is because I bet you I could ask each of you to tell me about your worst day ever, and almost all of you could tell me what it was. But if I ask what you did in response, I'm also willing to bet not everyone would have a clear answer, but most would be along the lines of, "I didn't *do* anything, but just let time heal all wounds", or "I just struggled through and somehow made it by the skin of my teeth", or "I got even!".

What does God's Word say to us, and what can we learn from those who have experienced the bad times and how God responded to them? That's the point of this series, so that when we've finished we see that even the 'biggies' in the Bible had rough patches of time, and we can learn from them regarding what to do during our rough patches of time.

Imagine for a moment, that someone was able to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the God we worship – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – does not exist. This person was able to perform a miraculous wonder at the Washington Monument in Washington D.C., that proved God is not real, and the real god that we should be worshipping is a god that literally lives on top of the clouds, rides a gold chariot, and shoots out lightning bolts from his hands. Not only that, but after he proved his god was the real god, he had his followers kill all the Christian pastors in the country.

In response to this person proving our God is not real and killing all the pastors, President Obama called on the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, National Guard Units, the CIA, FBI, ATF, Homeland security, every police officer and anyone who could walk throughout the entire USA to go after this guy, kill him, and bring back his remains to the Oval Office.

This scenario is exactly what happened to Elijah, in our Old Testament reading today. You can turn in your Bibles to 1st Kings 19. 1 Kings is the 11th book in the Old Testament, so the order goes, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy – known as the Torah or Pentateuch, and were written by Moses. After these come the books that are labeled as "History: Joshua which records what the Israelites experienced when they left their wanderings in the desert under Moses and entered into the Promised Land under Joshua; Judges which tells about the people of Israel before they had a king; Ruth which tells about a young woman who, though a foreigner, is the great-grandmother of King David and thus a descendant of Jesus, and then

comes 1st and 2nd Samuel, and 1st and 2nd Kings, which tell about King David and what happened to the nation of Israel leading up to their eventual conquest and destruction. Again, we are going to 1st Kings chapter 19, verses 1-8.

So, let's set the context. The nation of Israel had split in two. Under King David and King Solomon, Israel was *the* world power – you just didn't 'mess' with Israel. After King Solomon died, his son, Rehoboam ended up splitting the Kingdom of Israel in two with the northern Kingdom keeping the name "Israel" and the southern Kingdom, where Rehoboam continued to rule, calling itself "Judah."

Now, fast forward a few hundred years. The northern nation of Israel had turned its collective back on YHWH, on God the Father. There *was* a remnant of people who still worshipped God, but they were in the vast minority. The 'god' of Israel was Baal, who was thought to be the god of rain and storms, who lived in the clouds and cloud-hopped in his chariot. The problem that Israel was having is that *our* God, Elijah's God, YHWH, was punishing the nation of Israel for rejecting Him by not sending any rain. They were suffering through a severe famine, which was a direct slap in the face from our God to this god Baal who was supposed to be the god of rain. And Elijah, as God's prophet to Israel, was getting blamed for it. The King of Israel, Ahab, even went so far as to call Elijah the "troubler of Israel."

Elijah, under God's command, called everyone together at Mount Carmel – a big and important spot in Israel – like the Washington Monument in D.C., and proved through a miraculous sign of asking God to send fire from heaven, that YHWH is the real God, and Baal does not even exist. You can read all about this in chapter 18 of 1st Kings. Not only that, Elijah then had all the priests of Baal put to death, and only then did God send rain to validate Elijah and prove *God*, as in YHWH, is the one and only God. Now, how is this the worst day ever for Elijah? Seems like he's had some major victories! Enter now our reading today – Ahab tells his wife Jezebel, a Baal worshiper, what has happened, and the Queen makes it clear: Elijah has a target on his back and is a marked man. In response, Elijah runs away and gets to a point where he lies down and prays to die – verse 4 of our reading today, "*Take my life. I am no better than my ancestors.*"

It was a bad day – probably the worst day of his life.

Fast forward a couple of thousand of years to today. A loved one dies unexpectedly; test results come back and there's a problem; the boss pulls you aside and says though he likes you, he just can't keep you on, and then tells you, 'it's just business, no hard feelings'; someone you loved and trusted broke that trust, and your heart, and now you're not sure what to do or how to put your life back together.

The worst day ever. Most can relate, most have been there. If you've not been there yet, congratulations! But be aware and be ready: we are sinful, broken people, living in a sinful broken world, the result of which is sinful broken lives. The worst day ever will come, and

doesn't it seem like sometimes it's more than just one day? Doesn't it seem like sometimes the worst day ever is not just a day, but a week, or month, or year?

What can we learn from what Elijah experienced? How can we apply what God did for him to us today?

First, and this is the most important thing: no matter how bad our worst day seems, God is still there, He's still in control, and He will not leave His children alone. Elijah prayed to die, and in response God came to Him in the form of an angel and gave him food. God wasn't finished with Elijah yet, and wasn't going to let Elijah's temporary feelings distract him from the life God had planned for him.

God is not finished with you and me or LCC yet. Until He comes back, or takes us to our Home with Him, we're not done. And that's a wonderfully exciting adventure to be on! Think about it: no matter what happens, God has a plan and a purpose for each one of us that doesn't end in this life, no matter how we may feel from time to time.

Second, let's take a closer look at verses 4 through 6: ... Elijah 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.*

Here's the second point: we need rest, we need to take care of ourselves, and there's nothing wrong with that. On the worst day of his life, Elijah lay down and took a nap. He did it because he was despondent and depressed, but the point is, he rested, and God validated that period of rest, even to the point of providing Elijah some refreshment during his time of rest and allowing him to go back to his nap.

Here's a point for us to think about: when our worlds blow apart, we need to have a rest-filled heart and mind. We can't make any clear decisions about anything when we are filled with anxiety, fear, and sadness. The same was true with Elijah – he was letting his own emotions and thoughts and feelings get in the way of the truth. He laid down hoping to die; we need to "lay down" to give our hearts and minds time to clear and be calm.

Notice the next thing Elijah did on his worst day ever: he went to Mount Horeb. Now, what's the big deal about that? Mount Horeb is just another monument, another place, right? Not quite.

"Horeb" is another name for Sinai, as in Mount Sinai... as in the place where God met the Israelites while they wandered in the desert with Moses and gave them His Word in the form of the Ten Commandments and all the other instructions for living. You can make a note in your

Bibles that Horeb is the same place as Sinai, and reference Exodus chapter 19 and following – those chapters are all the Words of God He gave to His people.

Here's the point: when Elijah experienced his worst day ever, he went back to the place where God had first come to His people and given them His Word. Elijah went 'home', if you will, to the place where he could meet God once again, and learn what God would have him do. He went back to the beginning.

On our worst days ever, we need to do the same thing: go to God. We go to God by going to His Word that He's given us in the Bible. On your worst days ever, read through some of the psalms, like Psalms 4 and 13 and 22. Read the book of John where Jesus reminds us of who He is through all His "I am" statements that we just finished talking about. Read the book of 1st Peter that reminds us that Christians are "*a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God.*"

We need to hear what God has to say, both the Law – that which we have done wrong and need to confess and repent of, and the Gospel – the promise of forgiveness of confessed and repented sins, and eternal life in Heaven with Jesus. Just like you can't separate the crucifixion without the resurrection, you can't separate the Law from the Gospel. They are both good and needed for us, and God gives them to us freely in His word.

I'd like to tell you that if we spend time in God's Word every day, we'll never experience any 'worst days ever', but that just wouldn't be true. Even Jesus had His fair share of 'worst days ever', and I'm not actually talking about His crucifixion! We're going to talk about one of those days in a few Sundays.

We also go to God by approaching Him in prayer. Prayer is more than just telling God what we want, prayer is opening our hearts and minds to Him, and being quiet long enough to hear what He has to say to us, and letting Him minister to us.

So what's next? Is there anything else we can glean from Elijah's life at this point that can help us today? The answer is 'yes', and we find it in the next couple of verses.

First, on our worst days ever, we need to express our feelings. Look at verses 9 and 10: "*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."*" You can express your feelings freely to the Lord. God is big enough to handle our concerns and feelings, and the truth is, He knows what we're thinking and feeling anyway. Expressing those things to *Him* helps to clarify them for *us*. The interesting thing we find out in just a few verses, is that Elijah was very wrong about what he thought on his worst day. But we'll get to that in just a moment, for now this first point is we can express what we are feeling freely to God.

Second, take a look at verses 11-13: *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?”*

On our worst days ever, we need to remember that God sometimes speaks to us in gentle whispers. We can't always expect the big booming responses or the quick fixes; most often it's the quiet, small voice of God in the midst of the chaos we think is surrounding us that says, "I'm here. I'm still here. I'm with you." (Gospel) "What are you doing here?" (Law)

The final two things are sometimes the hardest things to do on or after our worst days ever. Let's look at verse 15: *“The LORD said to him, “Go back the way you came...”* Elijah just literally ran for his life, and now God is sending him back! Yes there are times when we need to rest, yes there are times when we need the quiet places, yes we need to confess, repent and be in a relationship with God, but we also need to get back to work. Inactivity feeds depression that often comes after the worst day ever. God had a task for Elijah that would give him a renewed sense of purpose. Our Triune God has a task for each of us regardless of the circumstances of the day. That task is to reach just one more lost person for the Kingdom of God.

Finally, after we experience our worst day ever, we need to reality-test our perceptions. And that's hard, and a lot of people don't like doing that, because they just might find out that they are wrong, just like Elijah did. Anyone who is feeling despair will have his or her view of things colored by that emotion. Elijah felt alone – "I am the only one left!" he said, but in verse 18 God gave him a reality check : You're not the only one left Elijah. You're letting your emotions on your worst day ever get away with you. The truth, Elijah, is *“... I reserve seven thousand in Israel – all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him.”* We need to let facts shape feelings, rather than letting feelings distort the facts.

On our worst days ever, remember:

- God is still here, and He's not finished with us yet.
- We need to take care of ourselves, to give our hearts and minds time to clear and be calm.
- We need God's Word, Law and Gospel, and to be in prayer.
- We need to know we can express our feelings to God, and remember, God often speaks in the small, quiet ways.
- And finally, we need to get back to work, and have regular reality checks.

Would you pray with me please?

God of Elijah, God of us, hear us as we come to you in Jesus' name. Thank You for Your promises that You will never leave us, and will always be our one, rock-steady God. Help us to remember that on our worst days ever.

Thank You Jesus, for enduring one of Your worse days ever on the cross, being forsaken by God for us. Thank You for Your best day ever – coming out of that tomb and providing a way to Everlasting Life for all who believe in You as their one and only savior.

Holy Spirit, come to us again and again, and give us the peace that passes all understanding during those hard times. Strengthen our faith, open our eyes to see and ears to hear and hearts to believe all You have written in Your Word.

Be with us today, tomorrow and every day of our lives. The 'good' days, the 'bad' days, and every day in-between. We know You will, and we Thank You for it.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.