



WHEN YOU
FEEL LIKE

Giving Up

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We live in strange times.

Someone has called this the Age of Anxiety, and it seems appropriate enough. Not long ago I found this headline: “Most Think Country Headed in Wrong Direction.” Those words could be slightly altered to read like this:

“Most Think Family Headed in Wrong Direction.”

“Most Think Marriage Headed in Wrong Direction.”

“Most Think World Headed in Wrong Direction.”

After living under the threat of a pandemic, lockdowns, political turmoil, and trouble in our major cities, I don't blame anyone for feeling a bit shaky. Patience is in short supply everywhere. I ran across a little poem by Virginia Brasier that seems to describe contemporary life:

*This is the age of the half-read page
And the quick bash, and the mad dash*

*The bright night, with the nerves tight
The plane hop, with a brief stop
The lamp tan in a short span
The big shot in a good spot
And the brain strain and the heart pain
And the cat-naps, till the spring snaps
And the fun's done!*

Sooner or later, we all come to the place where “the fun’s done.” Sometimes it happens without warning. The phone rings and a voice says, “I’ve got bad news.”

- A failed exam.
- You tested positive for Covid-19.
- The child died.
- She said no.
- “We’re getting a divorce.”
- The company doesn’t need you anymore.
- “I’m being sued.”
- A friendship suddenly ends.
- Suicide.
- A move to a new job 1400 miles away.
- You discover there is another woman or another man.

Time stops. Life will never be the same again. How will you find the strength to go on?

Tom Landry, longtime coach of the Dallas Cowboys, often told his players that “fatigue makes cowards of us all.” Most of us can handle a little bit of adversity, and some of us can handle a lot of adversity, but everyone has a breaking point. It doesn’t matter who you are or where you are or what your track record may be. We all have a breaking point, and sometimes we discover it without warning. There is a lesson here if we care to take it.

You're not as strong as you think you are, and neither am I.
You're not as wise as you think you are, and neither am I.
You're not as clever as you think you are, and neither am I.

The mightiest oak tree in the forest looks invincible, but if you hit it in just the right place with a tiny ax, it comes crashing down. The ax may be small, but it can bring down a tree in just a few seconds.

We encounter this reality whenever we read the Bible. God wants us to know the unvarnished truth about Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, Moses, David, Thomas, Peter, and Paul. Scripture records their victories and their defeats. The Bible paints the full portrait, including the dark colors of fear, doubt, sadness, difficulty, temptation, and depression.

Let's consider the strange case of Elijah, God's mountain man.

We pick up the story in 1 Kings 19 right after his stunning victory over the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. Instead of celebrating what God has done, he is in trouble. He is messed up, depressed, discouraged, stressed out, burned out, mentally fried, physically drained, and spiritually out of sorts. He has a bad case of the "Monday morning blues." *He's exactly like many of us, in other words.*

Elijah is ready to give up.

We shouldn't be surprised that his greatest victory leads to his most humiliating defeat. *Without a pause he goes from the top to the bottom.* After his great victory over the false prophets, he expected the nation to experience a vast turning to the Lord. But when Jezebel threatened him, he cracked under the pressure and ran south to Beersheba, and from Beersheba he went a day's journey into the desert. There he sat under a broom tree in utter dejection. Judging himself a failure, he prayed that God might take his life.

One writer calls this "Elijah's nervous breakdown." That's a good description for what happens in 1 Kings 19.

Because we are all made of the same clay, let's pay close attention to how God deals with his discouraged servant. We find in the text that Elijah needed four things, and those four things he received from the Lord.

Before we start, just note that nowhere does God insult Elijah or put him down. He doesn't say, "Stop being a wimp." Instead, God meets him at the point of his need. What God did for Elijah, he will do for you and me.

Here are four steps to take when we feel like giving up.

STEP #1:

GET SOME REST AND HAVE A GOOD MEAL

Elijah sat under the broom tree so discouraged that he prayed that he might die. Then he fell asleep. The Lord sent an angel with a command from heaven: "All at once an angel touched him and said, 'Get up and eat'" (1 Kings 19:5). How's that for spiritual advice? Get up and eat. He doesn't say, "Get up and pray," or "Get up and read the Word," or "Get up and serve the Lord." The angel tells Elijah to get something to eat.

Here's a profound truth. *Sometimes we need to eat. Sometimes we need to sleep. Sometimes we need to eat and sleep even more than we need to pray.* There's a time for everything. Sometimes the best thing we can do for the Lord is to take a vacation. Play tennis. Ride your bike. Watch a football game. Knit a sweater. Have a date with your sweetheart. Play with your grandchildren. Eat an ice cream cone. Take an evening, make some popcorn, sit on the couch, and watch a video. There are times when God's work demands strenuous action. And there is a time when you need to sit in the recliner, crank it back, get a bowl of Cheetos and a Coke, pick up the remote control, and watch a good movie.

That's why God commanded man to work for six days and to rest on the seventh day. God built into the fabric of the universe that we need to work and work hard and serve the Lord, and we also need some downtime. *We need some rest, and we need some relaxation.* Sometimes the most spiritual thing you can do is to get up and have a good meal because you'll feel so much better.

So the angel gave Elijah a specific command: "Get up and eat." He looked around and found a cake of bread baked over hot coals and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and then he lay down and slept again. God's mountain man is tuckered out. He took a nap. He got up, had some food, and went back to bed again. Is he a sluggard? No. He's just worn out in the service of God. "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'" (v. 7). Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached the mountain of God. There he went into a cave and spent the night.

Now, he's still got all kinds of problems. We've not gotten to the real issues of life yet. *But sometimes you can't get to the deep issues until you deal with things like hunger and physical exhaustion.* God arranged for Elijah to have a six-week vacation, all expenses paid. That sounds good until you recall that he had to walk across the desert by himself to Mount Sinai.

Why did he go to that particular mountain? Because he knew Mount Sinai was the place you went when you know you need to meet God. He didn't pick just any mountain. If he wanted to find a cave, there were caves a lot closer to home. He went back to where Moses met the Lord.

There is a value in going back to certain places. There's a value in returning to certain milestones in your life and certain physical locations in your life, places where you met God in the past.

When you are depressed, you need three things, and God made sure Elijah got all three of them.

You need good food.

You need some rest.

You need some physical exercise.

Walking forty days across the desert qualifies as good physical exercise. You need rest. You need food. You need exercise. You need more than that, but that's a good place to begin.

God's restoration of Elijah begins with rest and relaxation for the body, the mind, and the soul. But there is more to come.

STEP #2:

FACE YOUR FEARS

“And the word of the LORD came to him. ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’” (v. 9). That's a good question. The last time we saw Elijah, he was winning a great victory on Mount Carmel. What is he doing cowering in a cave, hundreds of miles away? Not that the Lord didn't know. This question was not for God's benefit but for Elijah's. “So explain yourself, son. You were my man up there on Mount Carmel. What are you doing here?” God was saying, “It's time to face your fears.” This is Elijah's response: “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” (v. 10). Everything he said was true.

He had been zealous.

The people had rejected the covenant.

They put the prophets to death. No exaggeration at all.

If Elijah had stopped there, he would have been on solid ground. Now look at the next sentence. “I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too” (v. 10). The last part of that sentence is true; the first part was not true. But it was that first part, that feeling of being utterly alone, that needed an adjustment. He was so far gone in self-pity that he actually thought he was the only righteous man left in Israel.

Let me make a simple application. *Self-pity is the enemy of all spiritual growth.* As long as you feel sorry for yourself, you’ll make a thousand excuses for not facing your own problems, and you’ll never get better. I met a man who got in trouble because of the internet. He got drawn into pornography and ended up committing adultery. When the truth came out, it nearly cost him his marriage. He told me that part of the restoration process included going to a weekly meeting of men struggling with all sorts of sexual sins. It was a tough group. They had only one rule. No self-pity. No blaming your wife. No blaming your colleagues. No blaming your parents. No blaming your inner tendencies. No blaming something that happened to you when you were a child. If you started down that road, they would stop you. And the man said, “If you continue with self-pity, they throw you out of the group because self-pity is the enemy of all spiritual growth.” As long as you feel sorry for yourself, you cannot get better. As long as you blame others, you will be stuck where you are.

You may be stuck spiritually because you are wallowing in a sea of self-pity. Once you convince yourself that your problems are caused by other people, you will make a career of blaming others for your problems. And you wonder why you aren’t getting better. You are stuck, and you will be stuck until you stop making excuses and start taking responsibility. You cannot and you will not get better. *Self-pity is the mortal enemy of all spiritual growth.*

STEP #3:

GET A NEW VISION OF GOD

Note how these three things go together. Rest and relaxation speak to the body; facing his fears and his self-pity speaks to his mind; a new vision of God speaks to the need of his soul. He needed to be changed body, mind, and soul.

When Elijah began to wallow in self-pity, notice how God responded. Or more particularly notice what God didn't do. He didn't say what many of us would have said. "What is wrong with you? Get your act together." We would have argued with Elijah and told him to snap out of it. "Come on! Get a grip!" God didn't put Elijah down, rebuke him, or ridicule him. Instead, God met him at the point of his deep despair. He just said, "Son, come with me. Get up. That's right. Get up. Get out of your cave. Come on, Elijah. Come on out. I won't hurt you. Come on out of the cave. I want to show you something." That's all God did. *He did not condemn him because condemning depressed people generally doesn't work.* It doesn't help us when we're depressed if somebody condemns us, and it doesn't help for us to condemn somebody else. It just makes the situation worse.

What follows is amazing. A mighty wind tore across the face of the mountain, shattering the rocks. But the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake. And after the earthquake there was a fire, but the Lord was not in the earthquake, and 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 he went out and stood in the mouth of the cave.

Why does God put Elijah through this demonstration of divine power? He's getting his man back in touch with spiritual reality. Psalm 46:10 says, "Be still, and know that I am God." The Lord wants Elijah to know that it is not in the earthquakes or the fire or the huge events where we

most often encounter the Lord. *We more often meet God in the small, forgotten places of life.*

I remember a day when I was complaining about something that had happened. My wife listened to me complain for a while, and then she listened some more. Finally she decided she had heard enough so she said what wives have said to complaining husbands since the beginning of time: "Grow up." I didn't like that at all. For one thing, I didn't want to grow up. I wanted to complain. So my wife said to me, "Stop complaining and open your eyes and see how good God has been to us." She was right, of course. We started to play a little game to see how many God sightings we could find every day. And do you know what we found? We discovered that if we paid attention, every day there were always a handful of God sightings — a phone call or somebody dropping by with an unexpected word of kindness or a card in the mail or an answered prayer. Sometimes it was just a little thing God would do, just something that caused us to say, "That was the Lord who did that for us." We learned that if you keep your eyes open for God, pretty soon you'll see him everywhere.

We want to see the earthquake; we want to see the fire all the time. *We want the big demonstration.* We want the spectacular answer to prayer. God says, "That's not always where you're going to see me, but just listen for the gentle whisper." God always speaks loud enough for the willing ear to hear. I have found myself praying over and over, "O Lord, open the eyes of my heart that I might see you everywhere." And you know what? It has enabled me to see God at work in places where I never saw him before.

We all need a little spiritual pep talk from time to time. Psalm 42:11 says, "Why, my soul, are you downcast?" When these moments come, and they come to all of us again and again, we must do what the psalmist did. Talk to your soul. Find out why your soul is upset. *Tell your soul to trust in the Lord.* Lift your eyes to heaven. If you focus on your troubles, you will sink ever deeper. If you focus on the Lord,

at least you have set your compass in the right direction. You may still be in the darkness, but if you follow hard after God, the light will shine again.

STEP #4:

REMEMBER THAT YOU'RE NOT ALONE

In verse 13 God repeats his question, and Elijah repeats his answer. There are times when a mistake must be corrected with accurate information. The Lord said to him, “Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus” (v. 15). That’s a long journey from the Sinai desert, through Israel, all the way up to the Syrian desert. After giving specific directions, the Lord gives Elijah some good news: “Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him” (v. 18).

While Elijah felt like giving up, God was planning his future.

God reminds Elijah that he’s not alone. Not only is God with him; God has another seven thousand in Israel who have not bowed down to Baal. Understand there is no spot in this world so lonely where God is not already there. *God is not just to be seen in the big things of life. He’s also to be seen in the stillness and in the small things.* God is not limited by your small vision. In all of this the Lord is reminding Elijah, “You are not alone. I am with you, and I’ve got seven thousand more just like you. I’m going to give you a man to be a man to be your partner and your successor. You never were alone, you’re not alone now, and you’re not going to be alone in the future.” Elijah had accomplished more than he thought. Those seven thousand were men and women who took strength from Elijah’s brave confrontation with the prophets of Baal. So his life had not been wasted after all. *No life is wasted that is spent in the service of our Lord who promised to reward even a cup of cold water given in his name.* And this is the ultimate

irony of the story. Elijah thought he had failed, but out of his perceived failure came assurance of his ultimate victory in the lives he touched who, like him, would not bow down to Baal.

Learn this lesson. *You are not in a position to estimate your own effectiveness.* When you think you have won, don't be so sure. When you think you have failed, let God render the final verdict. You and I are as likely as Elijah to estimate wrongly both our victories and our defeats. Better to do our best and leave the results with God. He knows better than we do the lives that have been changed by our service for Christ.

Here, then, are the four steps that will help us when we feel like giving up:

- 1. Get some rest and have a good meal.**
- 2. Face your fears.**
- 3. Get a new view of God.**
- 4. Remember that you are not alone.**

If Satan cannot get to us externally, he'll get to us internally. It is no surprise that Elijah's greatest victory and his greatest defeat come back to back. *It is not a sin to be discouraged.* Life knocks all of us down sooner or later. It's what happens next that makes all the difference. Remember God's promises. Get some rest. Refuse to become a victim. Don't give in to self-pity. Don't fight the battle alone. Lean on your brothers and sisters. Listen to Christian music—and sing along! Get all the help you need. And remember this: God is still there.

If you know Jesus, you have all the resources of heaven at your disposal. They are yours for the taking. You have his strength, his wisdom, and his compassion. Reckon on it. Ask Jesus to help you, and he will come to your aid.

There's no pit so deep that the love of God is not deeper still. If you are discouraged, lift your eyes to heaven. *The Lord still loves you.* You are not alone because the Lord has not forgotten you.

Keep believing.

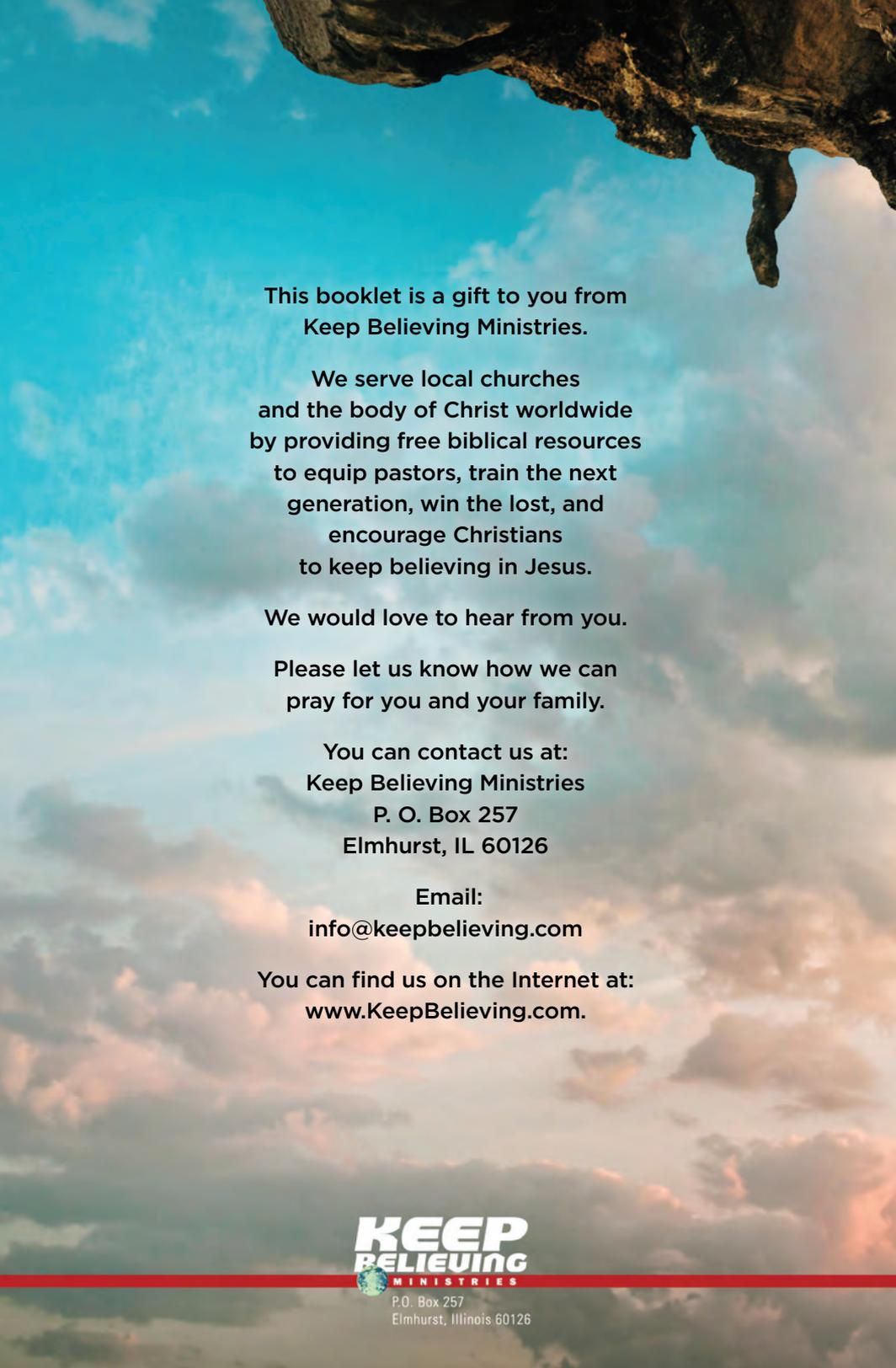
Never give up.

The Lord is on your side.

GOING DEEPER

1. When are you most tempted to give up?
2. Of the four steps in this message, which one do you need most right now?
3. Why is it no surprise that Elijah's deepest depression came immediately after his greatest victory?
4. Where have you seen God at work in your life lately?

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