

Run for Your Life! (1<sup>st</sup> Kings 19:1-8 ZCC 8/25/13)

*1 Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. 2 Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I don't make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time!" 3 When he saw that, he arose, and ran for his life, and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. 4 But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree. Then he requested for himself that he might die, and said, "It is enough. Now, O Yahweh, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers." 5 He lay down and slept under a juniper tree; and behold, an angel touched him, and said to him, "Arise and eat!" 6 He looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on the coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. 7 Yahweh's angel came again the second time, and touched him, and said, "Arise and eat, because the journey is too great for you." 8 He arose, and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, God's Mountain. (World English Bible)*

I grew up in the mid south. One of the facts of for my generation, in that place, was that fathers and their children often didn't have a close personal relationship. It was very much that way for me when I was a child, but by the time I was in my middle twenties, my dad and I had figured out that spending time deer hunting each year was a great way to develop our relationship. For nearly 12 years, we drove to a swampy wildlife refuge near the Louisiana line and spent a week or so together in the deer woods—camping and hunting. Sometimes others went with us but sometimes it was just us. Those are some of my favorite memories.

One year, we decided to make a trip to the Rocky Mountains together hunting for mule deer and elk. I had lived out there and I knew that climbing up and down the mountains, more than a mile above sea level—in the thin air—was going to be a physical challenge. So, in order to make sure I was ready, I started running—not jogging, but running.

I decided on a course and I decided on three rules. (1) I would begin the first morning running as far as I possibly could in the other direction, then I would walk back. There would be no "looping" I would always run away from my front door and then walk that distance back. (2) Each day, I would mentally mark the furthest distance and the following day I would run at least one step past that marker the next day—more if possible, but AT LEAST one step. (3) I would not miss even one day for any reason.

The first day I only made it about a half block before I was so winded that I had to stop. I vowed to do better the next day and it was all I could do to go ONE STEP further but I did. The next day was the same—one step past the marker and on and on and on day after day. Soon I was going a half block further each day and then a block and more. I got better and better at it because I was trying to reach a goal and I wanted my trip to be a good experience. I pushed and pushed and ultimately had to get up earlier and earlier to make it happen.

Finally, just a few weeks before our trip, I was so tired that I could only go a step or two further and I was so worn down that I dreaded the run each morning. I was so physically broken down that I wondered if I would even be able to go on the trip. I had run miles and miles and I had pushed so hard that I was breaking down instead of building up. One morning I started out, dreading the run, and only made a few blocks and couldn't go any further. I had had it. For the next few weeks, I went out and walked and sometimes ran a ways. I quit pressing so hard because I didn't have anything to give. At the time it felt like I was failing and that I wasn't going to meet my goal, but when we got to the mountains I was rested and ready—I was in the right shape to have a successful hunt.

Sometimes we forget that we can do so much that we tear ourselves down physically instead of building ourselves up. Reality is that we can do the same thing spiritually.

When I was younger, the songs we sang in church talked about working for God and then joy of working for him. I remember singing “We'll work 'till Jesus comes” and “Work for the night is coming” and others. There was a lot of talk about how it is pleasure to pour yourself out before the Savior. If we take it seriously and if we constantly empty our spiritual beings down to the core, sooner or later we will wind up tired and weary. We may wind up exhausted spiritually, mentally, emotionally, and even physically.

I thought I was in pretty good shape before I started to get ready for that trip. I thought I could run a bit. I could lift heavy things. I wasn't overweight. I never was too tired and I didn't get sick. I was doing just fine thankyouverymuch—I could even run across the front yard without breathing hard.

You may be the same way spiritually. Never tired. Never bone-weary. Never broken down. Never bent over at the waist with your hands on your knees, gasping for breath, having to sit down and rest—only to get leg cramps.

We Christians are engaged in a contest that goes way past getting ready for a trip. Way beyond getting ready for basketball season or a marathon. We are involved in a contest with eternal implications. The stakes are real—we aren't using spiritual monopoly money. We are dealing with eternal life and eternal relationships. Not only are the stakes high, the contest never, never, never takes a break.

If you and I are really and truly involved spiritually—doing the work of a Christian, participating in church and our own devotional life and generally working to follow God's will and direction in our lives, sooner or later we will become weary.

Sometimes, we may find ourselves with a spiritual weariness similar to what I experienced physically. If we are fighting the battle of our two natures—spiritual man and physical man—and if we are really running hard to keep up and trying to keep up the pace, then we may get so tired inside and out that we can't go another step.

When you and I find ourselves there, we need to be reminded, as we gasp for breath, that sometimes only God can give that second wind.

When I was a pastor before, I began to realize early on that some people see a pastor or someone else called and ordained as being different. I never saw it that way. When I went to Smyrna church, I told them immediately that I wouldn't let them put me up on that pastoral pedestal. I don't belong there. That pastoral pedestal is artificial. Every Christian has ups and downs—ministers included. Every Christian struggles to know God's will just like everyone else. When I went to seminary, they didn't issue me a direct-line-to-God red phone to put on my bedside table. You have never had—and never will have—a pastor whose potential in the kingdom of God is any greater than yours.

Any pastor's responsibility is exactly the same as yours—to do God's will in their lives and work to do the jobs God has for them. Guess what every Christian's responsibility is? That's right, the same. How about the rules—are they different? Nope. Whatever you can think of that a minister shouldn't be doing or SHOULD be doing is the same as your list. The pastor doesn't represent God and represent the church any more than the rest of the members of the church.

You and a minister have exactly the same potential. A Christian reaches his or her potential by doing the work that God has put before them and by being the person God wants them to be—created them to be.

For a pastor, the job is different. The position in the church is not the same, but the responsibility is EXACTLY the same.

The struggles and the spiritual battles are the same also. The doubts that spring up and the fears that haunt the back of the mind are the same also. And the weariness that sometimes comes is the same. You may think, as I did, that a called minister is more spiritual—supra-human in the spiritual sense. One of my seminary professors had a saying that I love—it really levels the ground, so to speak, for all of us. “There are no super-spiritual Christians—we all get weary and we all struggle and we all fight battles.”

For every Christian, there are times when the journey is just too much—when we've come to the end of our strength and our energy and our ability. That's bad. Well, actually, that's good—because it is at the end of ourselves that we find God's power and God's strength. That's when he sends a neighbor or a brother or a sister or an angel to fill our cups.

In the passage for today, God literally did just that.

We've talked about this story in the recent past. Elijah had challenged the prophets of Baal to a duel of sorts and they all gathered to see which of their Gods had the power to send fire from heaven to burn up a sacrifice—to see who the real God really was. Of course Yhwh God was the one who performed the miracle, burning up the water soaked sacrifice and the wood and the water and the alter itself. Elijah had just stood the spiritual and mental and emotional strain of facing Ahab and the prophets of Baal and had won. The scripture says he personally executed 400 false prophets.

With his days work accomplished (and Ahab right on his heels—threatening to kill him), Elijah hitched up his robes and ran about 90 miles from Carmel to Beersheba. He left his servant there and went another day's journey into the desert.

In spite of his successes and in spite of his closeness to God and in spite of all he had seen and done in God's name, Elijah collapsed. Unable to go one step further. He crawled on his hands and knees to the partial shade of a desert broom tree. “No MORE!” “That's IT!” “God—I'm done!” “I'm beat—take my life—kill me and be done with it.”

God knew Elijah was weary—that he was at the end of himself. As the discouraged, self-destructive words poured out of the prophet—God gave them all the consideration they deserved—none. Instead of arguing with Elijah, God allowed him to fall into much-needed sleep.

When we are spiritually weary. We may think the answer is starting a new bible study or fast a few days or put our spiritual and physical noses to the grindstone and volunteer to do more for God and more for the church. Sometimes that may be the case, but for Elijah, God's prescription was food, water, and lots of rest. Elijah had been going too far for too long and he had been doing too much and he had been running too fast and he had carried too heavy of a load. It was time for him to rest in the LORD.

How un-spiritual! Rest?—I've heard it said that we can rest on the other side!!! There is too much to be done! Yet we see here that God knows that sometimes we need to rest and Elijah was at the place. God knew that and provided a place and a time. An angel even catered a meal for him.

In the passage, the angel wakes him up and serves his meal—and Elijah was so tired that he simply rolled over and went back to sleep. Funny, but I think that if an angel brought me some food I wouldn't be able to sleep.

Later the angel returned and said, “Arise and eat for the journey is too great...”

Notice two things here—one, the Angel would have gotten along just fine with your mom. “Get up sleepy head!” Two, notice that the angel acknowledges that Elijah couldn't continue to work under his own power—that he had come to the end of himself. “The journey is too great for you.”

With the strength of those cakes and the power of God, we know that Elijah was able to accomplish all that God required of him. When Elijah had come to a screeching halt and when he had come to the end of his strength—God showed him where his strength really came from—where the power really was. THEN he was ready for what was next.

When he had come to the end of himself, he rested and he dined on the power and strength of God—then, and only then was he ready to move forward. to the mountain of God and there meet God in a strange and powerful way—finding out that God was not where and as he expected but was to be experienced in the sound of nothing.

Before he could go on and become what God wanted him to be, Elijah had to come to the end of his own strength, rest in God's provision, and THEN move forward. Even a mighty prophet can't just leap from mountain top to mountain top.

Elijah was scared and tired and at his wit's end. He was running for all he was worth and then suddenly he wasn't even sure he was running the right race or if he was running in the right place.

Turns out he WAS running the right race and running in the right place—but he was running at the wrong pace. He had run so fast and so long that he almost killed himself. When he could go no further in his own strength, after he had God's angel and had God's provision, he then walked to the mountain of God and met God in a new and profound way.

Some of you may be walking for your health these days. They say that your walking pace is right if you can still carry on a conversation while you walk. If you can't do that, you are walking too fast. God didn't want Elijah to retire or quit doing the work of God. He just wanted him to set a reasonable pace. Fast enough to get the job done but slow enough that they could still carry on a conversation and keep their relationship strong.

When you are working for God—seeking to do and be what God asks—if you are running from task to task like a ball in a pinball machine, morning, noon, and night—if you are running too fast to carry on your conversation with God and too fast to refresh your soul in Christ, sooner or later you will crash and burn. Sooner or later you will collapse in the desert and crawl under a broom tree and tell God you are ready to go. If that's where you find yourself—listen and do what God says and you may find yourself on a new plane of ministry.

I don't believe God put Elijah in the desert, under the broom tree. I believe Elijah did that for himself. God used Elijah's coming to the end of himself for Elijah's good and for the completion of God's work. I wonder if God intended for Elijah to strike out on his own and head out wide open with no support and no direction—I certainly doubt it.

God wants to walk beside us, pacing us, talking to us, teaching us, providing support to us—providing spiritual nourishment and rest. If we do it on our own, we may find that we grind to a halt—numb and hollow and weary. If we just shrug our shoulders and put one foot in front of the other—determined to keep going, we may put ourselves in a place to fall or fail or to be attacked.

1st Peter 5:6-11 says: 6 *Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time;* 7 *casting all your worries on him, because he cares for you.* 8 *Be sober and self-controlled. Be watchful. Your adversary, the devil, walks around like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.* 9 *Withstand him steadfast in your faith, knowing that your brothers who are in the world are undergoing the same sufferings.* 10 *But may the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a little while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you.* 11 *To him be the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.*

We all get weary. Every one of us. We shouldn't be ashamed. It is a fact of life. Sometimes we come to a place where our rope breaks—and it is then we find that God is in the restoration business. The invitation today is the same as it was in Elijah's day and as it always has been, “come unto me, all who are weary and heaven laden and I will give you rest...”