



DESERT DESTINATION

*Jeff Peabody
New Day Church
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This past week in Gallatin Tennessee, a 20 year old man attempted to shoplift a new pair of jeans from WalMart. He sort of accomplished it. He grabbed the jeans from the shelf, went into the dressing room, changed into them, and promptly walked out of the store without paying. He might have actually gotten away with it if it weren't for the fact that the old pair of jeans he had left on the dressing room floor still had his wallet and I.D. in the back pocket.

This is why it's good I'm not a thief. That's exactly the kind of mistake I would make. Don't you wonder just when it hit him? Strutting around in his brand new boot cut Wranglers, feeling like he had gotten away with something big. Then giving that back pocket a little pat and realizing something was missing and that his past was about to catch up with him.

Wouldn't it be nice if life were as easy as going into a dressing room, shedding your problems, and walking away from the whole mess and leaving it behind? We all fantasize at times about escaping the stuff that weighs us down and starting fresh. When there is a crisis, a difficult situation with a lot of pain, we long for a clean exit. We might even try to make it happen. Or we might escape into our TV or computer or a bottle. Anything feels better than dealing with what's on our plate.

The thing is, our identity is still stuck in the back pocket of the old jeans. It's never that easy to leave one mess behind without creating another one for ourselves.

The good news is that God is right there in the mess with us. He's present and available to us in our worst moments. And sometimes a mess presents a unique opportunity to see God at work in ways we'd never notice if everything was fine.

Annie Dillard once said, "You do not have to sit outside in the dark. If, however, you want to look at the stars, you will find that darkness is required."

Over the next few weeks, we're going to look at different stories from the Bible where people were sitting in the darkness. The reasons for the darkness varied from case to case. Each person had their own crisis to deal with. But all of them saw the glory of God shining brightly in the middle of their mess.

Again, I just want to encourage you to think who you might want to invite, someone who might need a word of encouragement. These are some heavy topics, but they're hopeful and comforting because our premise is that God is in the mess with us.

I've been reading a book by Dr. John Townsend called "Where Is God?" and he lays out some underlying assumptions that I think provide an excellent framework for this series. As we talk about each of these situations and how they relate to you and me, I am going to be operating with a few beliefs in mind. The first is that **God is for you**. You may think God has forgotten you or is even against you, punishing you for your mistakes. But the Bible says God is a God of grace, and that essentially means he is on your side. He wants to help you. So in this series, we will be looking for how God's grace shows up in the middle of the mess. As Dr. Townsend puts it, "His grace may come in a way you don't expect or even in a way you wouldn't have wanted in the first place. But God is for you nonetheless." I'm not quoting him because this is a nice thought or because it will cheer you up for a while. I'm saying it because this is what I believe to be absolutely true about God. He is for us – not against us.

Secondly, **your experience matters**. God cares about your pain. Sometimes we feel it is bad for us to admit we're hurting, because if we really have faith, things should be okay. That's not what this is about. As we will see, the Bible is full of examples of people who were honest with God about their struggles. There's no shame in admitting we're going through a tough time.

The other thing we might tend to do is compare what we're dealing with to what other people have on their plate. "I shouldn't complain. Compared to some people I've got it great." All that does is make us feel guilty and it's not helpful. Everyone's pain is individual and real. Comparisons distract us from the work of addressing what's really going on. You don't need to apologize for it or minimize it or "get over it." Your experience as it is matters to God and is worth exploring fully.

A final assumption I'm operating on is that **the Bible is our source for understanding God's ways in hard times**. So often when we are going through hard times, we don't actually turn to Scripture for help, and that's tragic. The pages of the Bible are filled with comfort and encouragement and examples and conviction and direction. If we're wanting clarity, that's where we'll find it.

The story I'd like to look at with you this morning is out of the life of Elijah, the great prophet from the Old Testament. He had just had an incredibly successful run as far as prophets go. He prayed and made it stop raining for 3-1/2 years. He had performed all kinds of other miracles. He had faced down 450 prophets of the god Baal and proved that the Lord is the true God when he sent down fire from heaven. And then he prayed again and the rains came on cue. It was spectacular enough that you would think he would be riding high and feeling really good about himself.

But that's not how things unfolded.

1 Kings 19:1-18

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 that of 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.

This seems like such a surprise. You read the chapter before this one and it's an Elijah who is confident and defiant. He's a fiery, bold leader who seems like he can do anything.

But here we find a very different man, a deflated and discouraged man. This Elijah is showing classic signs of depression. It's so bad that he wants God to end his life. Not your stereotypical holy man.

One of the things I hope we can strip away is the idea that if you're suffering emotional or mental pain, you must be unspiritual. We have it in our heads that good Christians shouldn't feel what we're feeling in those moments. So we add guilt to our pain and we feel bad about feeling bad, which makes us feel further from God and more depressed.

There's no one much higher in the spiritual category than Elijah, and there's no one much lower than he got that day in the desert. All of us are susceptible to times of being down. And unless we are honest about how deeply we're discouraged, we won't be able to find a way out.

So how did Elijah end up in that place? It started with **anxiety**. He got the word that Jezebel wanted to kill him and it made him afraid. Now logically, you would think that Elijah would be feeling pretty invincible after the showdown with Jezebel's priests. But for some reason, her threat caused him to panic.

Stress and anxiety don't need to be 100% logical. We may know in theory that God will take care of us, we may know in our heads that he's bigger than our problems, but it can be hard to convince our hearts that that's really true when we are overwhelmed.

Depression has a myriad of causes, and I don't want to minimize its complexity or severity. Everybody's situation is different. But I think it's safe to say that in general, a root of discouragement and depression is a sense of hopelessness and being overwhelmed. Whatever the threat is that we face, it feels like too much to go up against.

The verse says that when Elijah felt that way, he ran for his life. He took his **escape**. It was a self preservation move, although the only effect it would have would be to delay Jezebels plans. It didn't solve the crisis – it just ignored it.

Some situations call for getting out. It can be unsafe physically or emotionally for us to remain in certain relationships or circumstances. You don't stay on a raft that's headed for a waterfall. Unhealthy escape is when we just aren't dealing with the problem, we're simply delaying it. It still hangs over us like a cloud. We still know its there, and we know we're avoiding it, and that only increases our sense of depression. Because now we've added a layer of feeling like a failure on top of feeling overwhelmed.

For Elijah, escape meant running to the desert. It also meant **isolation**. He began pushing people away. He left society behind, then he even left his close personal assistant behind.

It's ironic that when we feel most alone in the world, rather than reach out to people we tend to retreat even further. Author Bill Crowder says, "Loneliness breeds loneliness." We just want to hole up and not talk to anybody.

If you begin to notice someone pulling away from community and cutting off friendships, it may feel like the right thing to do is give them their space. And if it's just you they're avoiding, that may be a good idea. But if someone is retreating further and further into themselves, it may actually be a cry for help in a backward way.

When Elijah sits down under the broom tree, he makes this fascinating statement to God. He says, "I'm no better than my ancestors." He looked back at his lineage and saw history repeating itself. As much as he wanted to be different, he felt trapped in the same cycles.

Sometimes, **family baggage** weighs heavily on us. There are generational patterns that get passed down that are incredibly difficult to change. Alcoholism, anger, depression, abusiveness – breaking free of any of those can seem impossible. We don't want to repeat the mistakes of our parents and grandparents, but we don't know how to avoid them either.

All his thoughts and feelings have led Elijah to a place of complete **despair**. He wants to die. Which is strange, because the whole reason he ran away in the first place was to save his life. You want to say, "That makes no sense." But suicidal thoughts rarely make sense to those not having them. They come out of despair, not logic. Life looks so bleak to him at this point that he can't see any reason to keep going.

Some of you know exactly how he felt as he prayed for God to take him home. Here's the man who always seemed to get what he asked for from God, and this is the one time Scripture has him praying and getting "no" for an answer. God was not through with him. And if you're in that place of despair right now, hear me when I say that God is not through with you either. There is help and hope, and if you are feeling that despair, let

someone know. Today. Do not make a plan and do not bear this burden alone. You were God's idea and he wants you to be healed and whole.

This section ends with Elijah just falling asleep there under the tree. He is wiped out. **Exhaustion** is the inevitable result of discouragement and depression. It is draining to go day to day fighting against despair. The fatigue is a symptom of how much energy it takes.

Can you relate to any piece of what Elijah experienced? The anxiety? The desire to get away? The isolation? Maybe your family history is like a chain around your neck pulling you down. Or maybe you're just so tired of the day to day battle that you can hardly keep going. We all face one or more of the same struggles Elijah faced.

Thankfully, God didn't abandon Elijah in that place. Take a look at what happened next:

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.

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." 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. There he went into a cave and spent the night.

This is an incredibly encouraging passage to me, because it shows God's tenderness. If I were God, I think I would have wanted to scold Elijah. "Quit feeling sorry for yourself, you big baby. I just did a whole bunch of miracles for you. What's your problem? You know what I call this? A pity party."

Aren't we glad I'm not God? There is no chiding here at all – just concern for Elijah's well being. It reminds me of what David said in Psalm 103:

Psalm 103:13-14

*As a father has compassion on his children,
so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him;
for he knows how we are formed,
he remembers that we are dust.*

The first thing God does is provide food for Elijah. When our kids were little, I can remember times when they were a complete disaster emotionally. Karin and I would try to reason with them and they couldn't even respond. Finally, it would dawn on us that they really needed to eat something to raise their blood sugar a bit, and sure enough – a few minutes later they would be a completely different child and actually able to have a conversation.

Sometimes before we can overcome our mental and emotional and spiritual challenges, we need to deal with the physical challenges. We are not disembodied spirits trying to make it through life – we have to take care of our bodies. One author has said that some days the most spiritual thing you can do is take a nap. Sometimes a chemical imbalance is behind our depression and that will require a chemical correction. It is not a lack of faith if you need an anti-anxiety prescription. We take medicine for all kinds of problems but have this stigma when it comes to what's going on in our brain. Medicine is a wonderful gift, it won't address the core issues going on, but it might enable you to function better to address the real issues. If you need it, use it in conjunction with a good Christian counselor and with medical supervision. God knows that if we aren't taking care of the physical issues that confront us, we won't be able to function enough to deal with deeper issues.

God did not make Elijah get up right away and get right back to work. The angel said, "The journey is too much for you. You've got to get some strength." The bottom line is that **God fills our tanks before filling our agenda**. If you are feeling compelled to do something for God but you are totally depleted, give yourself a break. The journey is too much for you and you have God's permission to rest and recharge.

Elijah had planned to just stop for good there under the broom tree. That was far enough into the desert for him. But God extended the trip and had him go much deeper into the wilderness. After travelling for weeks, in the middle of nowhere he came to the mountain of the Lord.

God has a history of communicating with his people on mountains. It was on a mountain that Abraham's faith was tested to the limits and where God dramatically provided a sacrifice so Isaac could live. It was on a mountain where God met directly with Moses, showing him his glory and writing down his law. Moses came down and had to cover up his face it was glowing so brightly from being with God.

Now it's Elijah's turn. He is asked to go to deep into the desert to and find this mountain, this place where he will have a heart to heart with God that will change him forever. Out of his discouragement and depression will come a fuller understanding of who God is.

God calls us to an encounter with him. That's always the goal. If we're in a dry place that feels like a desert, the good news is that right in the middle of that desert is a mountain – a place to meet God. For us, the mountain is Calvary – the hill of Christ's cross. It is the spot where God provided a sacrifice for us, a place where God showed his glory by suffering on our behalf. It is where Jesus connects with our pain and hardship, and it is the place we can go whenever we suffer. The Bible says God is close to the brokenhearted. He is always within reach because he knows suffering from the inside.

Some of you may recall the hostage crisis in Russia in 2004, where terrorists took over an elementary school for three days in September. It was a horribly tragic and traumatic event. The violence was unspeakable. But in the middle of it all was a remarkable act of selflessness.

Khanayeva Irina Zakharovna was a 74 year old teacher in the school. She was partially disabled and had actually been shot in the leg during the initial fighting. But she adored children and would do anything to protect her students. So she ignored her pain and knelt down by a window and instructed the young children to climb on her back and then jump out the window where Russian troops were waiting. She saved her entire class that way, even though it cost her her life when the terrorists discovered what she had done.

When we are in our worst situations, Christ doesn't stand off in the distance or above us and lower a rope. His way of rescuing us is to get down on the floor next to us and say, "I'm right here with you. Climb on my back and we'll get you out of here."

God gets our pain on a level we can't even begin to imagine. Our dark days can just be dark, or they can be an opportunity to find how close he is to us when we suffer. His mountain is always right in the middle of our desert.

Elijah reached his destination and climbed up the mountain to talk to God.

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."

Normally, we think of ourselves being the ones with the questions for God in times of crisis. "Where are you? Why are you letting this happen to me?" But God is the one doing the asking this time, and he wants Elijah to articulate what's on his heart.

And Elijah unleashes a complaint. "I've been trying to live for you God, and look where it's gotten me. Your people have totally rejected my message, now they're trying to kill me, and I'm the only dog you've got left in this fight."

Instead of responding to what Elijah had to say, God changes the subject.

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.

Isn't that a beautiful sequence? The brief history we have from the life of Elijah is filled with impressive miracles – spectacular displays of God's strength. He had seen God perform amazing and powerful feats. So when he got to the mountain of the Lord, I can

only imagine that Elijah expected God would meet him in a similarly big way. Maybe thunder and lightning. I would have asked him to zap Jezebel and make my problems go away.

Instead, God showed him the emptiness of such displays. The wind was loud, but God wasn't in it. The earthquake was terrifying, but God wasn't in it. The fire was blistering, but God wasn't in it. Those were all just preludes to God's arrival.

If I were Elijah, I would be thinking, "What could possibly be bigger than all these? How could God show up in an even more powerful way?"

And then comes the shock and surprise of a tiny whisper. So small you have to sit up and pay attention or you'll miss it. Gentle and quiet and personal. You don't whisper to a crowd, you whisper to an individual.

This is the God Elijah needed to meet – a God who was a person and not just a force of nature. A God who cared about him on an individual level and could meet him in his deepest pain. A God who was as gentle as he was powerful. **God meets us with love and gentleness.**

It's the same theme God used when Moses met him on the mountain and asked to see God's glory. God could have chosen to do or say anything in that moment, but here's what he did:

Exodus 34:6

And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness..."

This picture of God makes some people uncomfortable. People who are really focused on doing the right thing are uncomfortable when God expresses his love in such an unconditional manner. They would rather have God communicate who's in and who's out so they can know where they stand. Elijah was used to pronouncements of judgment.

When it came time to declare his essence, God chose to talk about his love – not his control over nature. The core essence of God is holy compassion. So often when we run to God, we go asking for a fix – something big to get us out of our mess. God show your power. God work a miracle. And he can and he does sometimes. But what we are needing more than a fix is a new vision of who God is. We are needing to know God's quiet presence right next to us in whatever we're going through. We need to know him as a person as much as a power.

Elijah recognized God in that whisper. And in that whisper, God asked the same question he had before:

Then a voice said 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."

There's no change in Elijah's response. You would think that if God repeated a question to you, it might mean your first answer wasn't quite on target. But Elijah has come to believe certain things are true and they are entrenched in his mind.

Our minds tend to think in grooves, and over time, those grooves become ruts and we get stuck. And sometimes our discouragement is in part because we are thinking and believing things that aren't true. Elijah feels like a failure, he feels isolated and like there's no hope. None of those things are true.

I love God's response to him:

The LORD said to him, "Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus.

In other word, go back. Don't keep running away – Go back the way you came. Your healing will be found by confronting the source of your pain and working through it, not by avoiding it. Maybe this means seeking the help of a Christian counselor like I said before and exploring what shut you down. Maybe it means going back and accepting responsibility for actions in your past that you haven't owned yet. Maybe it means repairing a relationship you have been keeping your distance from. God sent Elijah right back into the mix.

The next thing God says to him is this:

When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu.

Guess what? You will be instrumental in replacing Israel's leadership. Your legacy will outlast Jezebel. Not only that, you don't have to do this forever. I've already got someone in mind who can take over for you. And these people you appoint, they'll have your back.

There was still work to be done. Another way God helps us out of our dark days is by **renewing our sense of mission**. Getting our focus off of ourselves and onto a bigger task helps us see that we have a purpose and a calling. God gave Elijah an assignment that lifted his eyes again. And then God says one more thing:

Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel -- all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him."

It's a last word, almost a parting aside. But Elijah had convinced himself that a lie was true and it was affecting everything he did. He thought he was all alone in his fight when there were 7,000 other people who were still faithful to God.

God corrects our perspective. We all tend to see ourselves as being alone in our struggles. Our problems are unique. Nobody understands us. We're the only ones. But God says, "No, there are other people in this with you. You don't have to fight this battle by yourself."

Maybe you're feeling isolated this morning. Your problems seem worse than everyone around you and you're convinced that if anyone knew how deep your crisis is, they would abandon you. That's not God's voice – that's the enemy's. There is nothing the devil likes more than to separate us from one another. But you are not alone.

God is calling you to the mountain this morning. And the question he posed to Elijah still echoes today. What are you doing here? What is it you most want and need? Elijah held nothing back from God. He told him exactly what he was thinking. And that's what we can do to. God wants to meet you in a fresh way through Jesus. He is right there with you in the middle of your discouragement. Let him fill your tank and expand your vision of who he is.