

August 9, 2015
1 Kings 19:1-8

Proper 14b
The Right Kind of Encouragement

Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Boddy Dodd, Georgia Tech's athletic director, tells of the coach who, with his team leading 7 to 6 in the last minute of play, carefully instructed his quarterback not to pass under any condition. But when the ball was carried within the opponent's ten-yard line, the quarterback was overcome by temptation. He passed and the ball was intercepted by the rival's fleetest back, who broke into an open field and raced toward pay dirt. He was speeding past midfield when suddenly, out of nowhere, the quarterback who had passed overtook him and brought him down.

After the game, the losing coach remarked to his barely victorious counterpart, "I'll never understand how your boy overtook my fastest back."

"Well, I'll tell you," came the reply. "Your back was running for touchdown—my boy was running for his life."¹

The coach probably thought his quarterback had gotten it, but upon realizing he didn't the quarterback was running for his life to track down the fast cornerback. The quarterback had great encouragement.

In our text, Elijah thought he was encouraged. In chapter 18 of 1 Kings he heard the people of Israel say, "The Lord, He is God; the Lord, He is God." This was after Elijah's prayer. This was after God sent fire from heaven to consume the sacrifice of a bull, the kindling wood, the stones of the altar, and the water he poured over it. After this confession, at Elijah's command, the people slaughtered the 450 prophets of Baal. Elijah then told King Ahab to mount his chariot and leave because it was to rain and end a three-year drought. And it happened just as the prophet said. Finally, all his work had been rewarded. Finally, he thought the people of Israel had gotten it. Looks like encouragement...

Except...nothing had changed. Jezebel was not repentant but angry, threatening to kill the prophet. Now, that was it! The people had forsaken God's covenant, broken down his altars, and killed prophets. Elijah thought He was alone. So left Israel, crawled under a broom tree, and asked God to take his life.

God always answers our prayers, but sometimes in much better way than we ask. Certainly in this case. Far better than Elijah asked. For him just as for us...the Lord has an answer for our discouragement.

¹ Tan, P. L. (1996). *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times* (pp. 862–863). Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc.

Training camp is now open across the NFL. Football is back, and for some much encouragement is building. For others, perhaps they are building off of the discouragement of last season. Losing in the playoffs on bad calls, deflated balls, or even epic collapses can lead to discouragement. Yes, even in the NFL there is discouragement, but yet as training camp starts there is much to be encouraged at. It's not this type of discouragement that we are going to focus on this morning.

It's the discouragement that comes when hard work doesn't seem to be yielding results. Like Elijah, we love the Lord and what God's kingdom—and perhaps even our congregations here—to grow. After all I keep hearing comments about how back then there were 100 kids in Sunday School and 150 in worship. Wouldn't it be nice to have that again?

So what do we do? We pray, we attend worship as often as we can...perhaps we make it every Sunday, perhaps not. Some of you volunteer to teach Sunday School, while others usher, while others serve on the church council, and so forth. We give generously of our income. Disappointment and discouragement comes...the congregation doesn't grow...in fact we lose people and there are times we are financially struggling.

Sometimes I too find myself discouraged, wanting to start more bible studies, but no one seems interested. Wanting to start new programs, but no one wants too. What happens, frustration sets in, perhaps out of frustration we try to do new things or we bring back the old. Perhaps we read the advice of others, think about starting up new programs. We urge our members to do more and give more. We even try to be better at the vocations God has given us in the church. Yet at times it looks as if everything we've ever done was a waste of time. Why bother? We think.

What we often forget is that we cannot make our congregation grow by our own efforts. Our energy is not endless, human talent is limited, and both we and the people inside and outside the walls of this church are sinners. While our human work may surely succeed from time to time, it will eventually fail.

With this in mind, know this, God does not call us to be successful, but to be faithful. What does it mean to be faithful? Does it mean we give up our doctrines and teachings so that we might look a bit more loving by the world's standards? Does it mean we give up on God's Word as our only norm for faith and life? It's neither of those, being faithful looks like diligent study of God's Word. Being in worship. Standing our ground on all matters of faith and life. Being faithful means following God's law and even living out the Gospel. Being faithful is being at the Lord's Table to receive His gifts. It's not about material or numerical success. It's about being faithful. After all, it is Jesus who saves. It is the Holy Spirit, who calls by the gospel and enlightens with His gifts. He calls us to hear God's Word, to use in faith the gifts he gives to us, to love him and our neighbor, to witness to his love in Jesus, to cherish and receive the Sacraments He gives us.

When we try to do other things, we are, at best, doing things God has not commanded us to do. And when we expect things to happen because of our own efforts, we may well burn because of our own efforts, we may well burn out, sooner or later. At times like these...

WHEN WE ARE DISCOURAGED, CHRIST HIMSELF WILL RAISE US UP.

The Lord gives Elijah his better answer. We hear in the second part of our text that God feed Elijah. This is as God fed his people Israel in the desert with manna and as God the Son fed 5000 men plus women and children in the wilderness, so now God feeds his prophet.

Remember that Elijah prayed that the Lord would take his life, while Elijah slept under the broom tree, waiting to die, God did not grant his prayer. Instead, as the angel of the Lord, the Son of God came to him and brought bread and water to him. God, Christ Himself, personally gave His prophet the strength to go on.

When Elijah is at Mt. Sinai some forty days later, God tells the prophet that he is far from alone and his work is not in vain.

Jesus invites us, too, to cast our cares and burdens unto Him. This is why He came. He came for you to take your worries, your burdens and cares to the cross. He came to take your sins all the way to the cross. He came to take your discouragements straight to the cross. You see, at the cross, He took all this upon Himself. There at the cross He died the death we deserved and paid all the debts we owed for them. He won for us there at the cross forgiveness of sins. On Easter Sunday as we walked out of the tomb alive, He won for us life and salvation.

Because of his death and resurrection we have the encouragement to keep on going, and He gives us this encouragement in vary tangible ways.

As God did for Elijah, He does for you as well. He gave Elijah water. For Elijah it was to strengthen His physical body. But with water and God's Holy Word, the Holy Spirit unites you to the family of God. This morning little Otto became a child of God and through witnessing the baptism, we are encouraged in our baptismal life. Since baptism is not just a miracle fix, but it's the beginning of life lived out in faith to God. It's the beginning of a powerful journey, a journey of salvation.

The Son of God also fed Elijah. He also feeds you and me, not with bread and water, but with a more powerful food, that comes in the form of bread and wine. He feeds you with His body and blood in the bread and wine of His supper. Here at the altar, the forgiveness of sins and all the blessings of Jesus' cross are given to you personally. As your pastor, I have the privilege of providing you through Christ's stead this great gift. As you receive this gift, yet again, today, you again realize the sin that once separated you from God is removed. It is no longer there and we have the assurance that He is always with us. It's an encouragement that continues to encourage.

As the Son of God fed Elijah and gave Him strength, so this meal that He feeds us, gives us strength to meet the days ahead. It's a great way to begin the week as we dump all the sins at the foot of the cross and go refreshed into the new week as forgiven and refreshed children of God.

When you become discouraged at the things of this world, the answer is always Christ, He is your encouragement, He embodies encouragement. He is the one who forever feeds you and reunites you with God. With His strength, we arise and go on. And you see, being with Him means we are not alone, even as we look about us. God has called your brothers and sisters to the same work. Together we witness to Christ and His Cross, love our neighbors, and allow God the Holy Spirit to call others to join us.

In Jesus Name. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and your minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior. Amen.