

SESSION 5

Serve Even When Discouraged



QUESTION 1:

Who has a way of always cheering you up?

THE POINT

Don't let discouragement keep you from serving.

THE PASSAGES

1 Kings 19:1-5a,11-18

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

On May 15, 2016, 28-year-old Australian golfer Jason Day won the Players Championship tournament on the Stadium course at TPS Sawgrass in Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida. He was the first wire-to-wire winner (leading in every round) at Sawgrass in sixteen years. Day's solid victory that day over the best golfers in the circuit established his number one ranking in the golf world.¹

But once he clinched the number one spot, Jason Day floundered. He never won again in 2016, and not at all of 2017. In 2018, he explained: "I got burned out being Number 1. It's easy to get burned out in a position that you're in the spotlight. It can be demanding at times."²

Day's story sounds a lot like Elijah's in 1 Kings 19. Coming off his spectacular victory against the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, the prophet stumbled into deep discouragement. How God met him in that moment can inspire all of us who find ourselves burned out and ready to give up.

1 Kings 19:1-5a

1 And Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and withal how he had slain all the prophets with the sword.

2 Then Jezebel sent a messenger unto Elijah, saying, So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I make not thy life as the life of one of them by to morrow about this time.

3 And when he saw that, he arose, and went for his life, and came to Beersheba, which belongeth 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: and he requested for himself that he might die; and said, It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers.

5a And as he lay and slept under a juniper tree.

KEY WORDS: **Juniper tree** (19:4)—More commonly known as the broom tree, this white flowering bush grew between five to ten feet in height, tall enough to offer scarce shade in this dry, desolate region.

At the end of 1 Kings 18, Elijah was at the pinnacle of his prophetic ministry. He had just challenged the 450 prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel and vanquished them in humiliating defeat. Elijah stood unwavering in his faith that God would perform the miracle the false god Baal could not. He was fearless against an overwhelming majority, even defying wicked King Ahab and Queen Jezebel.

On the heels of the great victory, Elijah led the slaughter of the 450 prophets of Baal to rid the land of the idol's influence (1 Kings 18:40). Then he warned King Ahab to get ready for the rain God was about to send to end the three-and-a-half-year drought (v. 41). God sent a downpour, validating Elijah's bold faith (v. 45). Elijah was the picture of spiritual and physical strength: "The hand of the LORD was on Elijah; and he girded up his loins, and ran

before Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel” (v. 46). On that day, in the circuit of Israel’s prophets, Elijah was number one.

Yet, no one is invincible. Elijah had withstood opposition, rejection, and danger. He had prophesied God’s truth to Israel. He had left home and relied on God for sustenance. He had been patient with God’s process over the years. But when he learned Queen Jezebel had determined to kill him, that was the “last straw.”

News of Jezebel’s threat sent the bold prophet of God into a tailspin of fear and despair. He took off, running for his life. At Beersheba, he left his servant. Apparently, Israel’s number one prophet was quitting his ministry. Alone in the wilderness, he plopped down under a broom tree—a large, shade producing bush—and prayed to die.

The sudden change in Elijah’s demeanor is as puzzling as it was dramatic. What would make one whose faith was so strong run in cowardice with a single turn of events? Danger and opposition were not new to him, and Elijah had just experienced God’s power in two miraculous spiritual victories. His response was a very human reaction to long and ongoing struggles that had left him weary and discouraged.

It had been three-and-a-half years of drought and hiding. The rain had stopped and restarted just as Elijah had prophesied. Elijah had won decisively over the prophets of Baal, but worship of Baal continued and Jezebel was threatening his life. This wasn’t the outcome he expected. But God had a bigger plan than Elijah could have imagined. God would meet Elijah at his lowest point. He would challenge Elijah to finish his race.

The writer of Hebrews echoed this message centuries later. Hebrews 11 lists great warriors of faith, including “the prophets” who endured to the end. They held fast to their hope through persecution and suffering, believing in the promises they could not yet see. Their examples give encouragement to the weary: “Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which

doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us" (Heb. 12:1).

QUESTION 2:

What might discourage us when serving God?

1 Kings 19:11-14

11 And he said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD. And, behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake:

12 And after the earthquake a fire; but the LORD was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice.

13 And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave. And, behold, there came a voice unto him, and said, What doest thou here, Elijah?

14 And he said, I have been very jealous for the LORD God of hosts: because the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.

Corrie ten Boom in her timeless classic, *The Hiding Place*, tells how her family's home became a refuge for Jews during the Holocaust to protect them from the Nazis. Someone betrayed Corrie and her family, and after being arrested by the Gestapo, she and sister Betsie were sent to the notorious concentration camp, Ravensbrück. There, the sisters endured inhumane living conditions and horrific brutality from their guards. Yet, they held fast to their faith and encouraged others around them. Betsie did not survive the concentration camp.

Sick and approaching death, she told Corrie, "... we must tell people what we have learned here. We must tell them that there is no pit so deep that He is not deeper still. They will listen to us, Corrie, because we have been here."³ Betsie died on December 16, 1944. Corrie was released from Ravensbrück two weeks later due to a clerical error. For the remainder of her life, Corrie wrote books and traveled the world speaking of her experiences. Her message was the message of hope Betsie said they must share: *God is with us even in the darkest place imaginable.*

Elijah found himself in such a dark place as he ran from Jezebel. In a cave on Mount Horeb, God met him and spoke. Elijah needed to hear from God in that moment. He had been used to seeing God show up in big, dramatic ways. He had previously encountered God in miraculous signs and wonders. But on this occasion, Elijah would not hear God as expected in the mighty wind. The prophet would not feel God move in the earthquake. Nor would he sense God's presence in the fire. Instead, with a mere whisper, God let the discouraged prophet know that He was present. He beckoned Elijah to tell Him what was wrong.

When God whispered to Elijah and asked why he was there, the prophet responded with a litany of everything that was wrong in the world and his life. Essentially, he said, "I've been serving you with everything I've got. But I'm the only one. No one else cares. Everyone else has abandoned you and they all want to kill me. This mission you gave me is a lost cause. I give up."

Elijah was shockingly transparent in his complaint. Yet God did not upbraid him for his negative attitude. Instead, God invited Elijah into His presence. What the prophet did not yet realize was, in that moment, he did not need God to change his situation. He needed God to be with him in his struggle. God's presence changes everything. It is not just *what God does for us* that makes the difference. It is *who He is with us* that is the game changer.

God can move mountains. He can do impossible things in the world and in your life, but He doesn't always do that. Sometimes

there is no big, dramatic change, no instant fix. Sometimes the answer is just God quietly present with us in our discouragement, urging us to hold on for one more day, knowing He is with us.

QUESTION 3:

What are some ways God tends to speak to you?

1 Kings 19:15-18

15 And the LORD said unto him, Go, return on thy way to the wilderness of Damascus: and when thou comest, anoint Hazeal to be king over Syria:

16 And Jehu the son of Nimshi shalt thou anoint to be king over Israel: and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abelmeholah shalt thou anoint to be prophet in thy room.

17 And it shall come to pass, that him that escapeth the sword of Hazeal shall Jehu slay: and him that escapeth from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha slay.

18 Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him.

Elijah may have thought he was finished, but that was not God's view. You are never too old, too tired, or too discouraged for God to use you. In that lonely place where Elijah found himself at the deepest point of discouragement, God whispered a message to the prophet: I'm not done with you yet. Life had not turned out as Elijah expected, but God was still very much in control. He was working out His greater plan with Elijah playing the vital role God had designed him to play.

Any believer with some life experience can relate to Elijah's state of mind. We've had that feeling of "What more can I do?"

I have nothing left to give. I've been faithful in serving God, but I've reached the end of my rope. Someone else will have to carry on." When Elijah was ready to quit, God reminded him his purpose was not over. He instructed Elijah to do three things:

1. **International politics.** Elijah was to anoint Hazael king over Aram (Syria). This would demonstrate God is sovereign over a non-Israelite country.
2. **National affairs.** Elijah was to anoint Jehu king over Israel. This would reestablish God's sovereignty over the Northern Kingdom.
3. **Spiritual leadership.** Elijah was to anoint Elisha as his own replacement.

QUESTION 4:

How would you summarize God's response to Elijah's discouragement?

God was working out His purposes by placing in leadership those who would carry out His plans. Jehu would aid Hazael in ridding the land of idol worshipers. And any who escaped their purge would be subject to the spiritual judgment Elisha brought.

When we're discouraged, prayer is vital. We can ask God to change a discouraging situation, but sometimes we need to hear from Him to change our perspective. After reaffirming Elijah's purpose, God left him with a word of encouragement by showing him the truth that seven thousand faithful Yahweh worshipers remained in Israel. Elijah had been looking at his situation with the perspective of one who is beaten down and burned out. In his mind, he was the only one still serving God

Chris Hill-Scott was one of the three cofounders of a company called SwiftKey®. Chris and two friends started the company in 2008. They created auto-correct keyboard software. In millions of smartphones, the SwiftKey app and software predict what the user intends to type and corrects mistakes based on machine learning.

But Chris became discouraged with the long hours, low pay, and ongoing pressure of working in a start-up company. After the second month, he quit, trading in his shares for a bicycle. He might have persevered through his discouragement if he had known the outcome of sticking with it. SwiftKey's popularity grew until Microsoft® bought it in 2016 for \$250 million. ⁴

What's true in the secular world is far more true in the spiritual realm. We'll never know what's on the other side of our temporarily discouraging situation if we don't keep on investing in what has eternal value. Serving God through the long haul brings its rewards, both for the servant and for those impacted by that servant's life.

QUESTION 5:

How has our group helped you pursue the work God has called you to do?

ENGAGE

People hear God's voice in many ways. Record what God has spoken to you through two or three of the following methods:

Through the Bible

Through prayer

Through worship

Through other Christians

Through sermons and podcasts

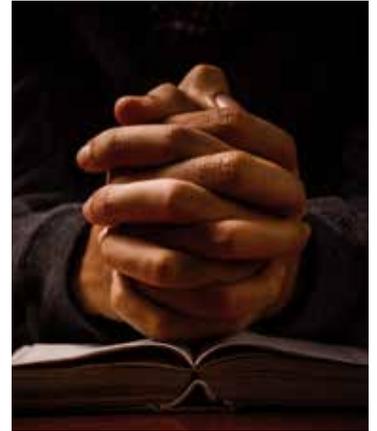
Through circumstances

Other:

LIVE IT OUT

Discouragement fades when we recognize God's presence with us and receive His strength to fight the battle one more day. What will you do to keep discouragement at bay while you serve?

- ▶ **Pray.** Revise your prayers this week from “God, change my situation” to “God, change my perspective.”
- ▶ **Thank.** Thank someone who has encouraged you by their perseverance to serve God through discouraging circumstances. Commit yourself to be that example for one person you know.
- ▶ **Recommit.** Recommit yourself to a God-given task you've been ready to quit. Make your recommitment public.



END NOTES

1. “Victorious Day,” *The Players*, May 15, 2016, <https://www.theplayers.com/photos/gallery/2016/day-wins-the-players-2016.html>.
2. Dan Yaeger, “How Can Too Much Success Lead to Failure? Golfer Jason Day Will Explain,” *Forbes*, May 11, 2018, www.forbes.com/sites/donyaeger/2018/05/11/how-can-too-much-success-lead-to-failure-jason-day-will-explain/#4bdc57d93b39.
3. Corrie ten Boom, *The Hiding Place* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009), 240.
4. “The Story of Three Entrepreneurs Who Quit Too Early,” (blog) *GKI Group*, gkigroup.com/story-three-entrepreneurs-quit-early.