

Elijah – 1 Kings 18-19

I took my dogs for a walk down to the boat ramp the other day and as we were walking down there, a man was in his boat at the dock talking to another man standing on the dock and I overheard the man in the boat say he had caught 25 crappie that day. As I got a little closer, I was just trying to make conversation and I asked the man, “So, *what’s your secret?*”

The man looked kind of leery at me as he eyed me up and down and thought about his answer. He finally just said, “*Well, I work real hard.*” And I knew that conversation was over. I wasn’t asking to know all his secrets and the exact location of the honey hole. Most fishermen are glad to tell you something about how they were successful and I wasn’t expecting lots of details but I guess he considered all of that none of my business.

His sentence wasn’t very helpful to me. Most people know if you want to be successful at much of anything that matters you have to work hard. I get it. I understand. I believe God blesses the work of our hands when we work hard. **Colossians 3** says, “*Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the LORD.*”

But aren’t you glad that our salvation has nothing to do with how hard we work? We are saved by God’s grace. We get to go to Heaven, not because of our good deeds and hard work but because God doesn’t give us what we deserve. That’s grace and that’s amazing. I think we all understand that, at least to the best that we can. We accept it even if we don’t fully understand it. Thank you, Lord, for your grace that gets us to Heaven!

But what about in this life? What about while we are still here on this earth? In **John 10:10** Jesus said He wants us to have a full and abundant life. How hard do we have to work to get that? How hard do we have to work to get peace in this life or even joy?

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., was a member of the U.S. Supreme Court for 30 years. His mind, wit and work earned him the unofficial title of "the greatest justice since John Marshall." At one point in his life, Justice Holmes explained his choice of a career by saying: “***I might have entered the ministry if certain clergymen I knew had not looked and acted so much like undertakers.***” Today In The Word, June, 1988, p. 13.

I know a lot of busy, busy pastors and the busiest of them don’t seem to have the kind of joy I want so evidently joy doesn’t come from hard work. So, how do we get joy and how do

we keep it? I believe scripture is clear that, like our salvation, joy is given to us by God's grace. It is not something we earn.

Romans 15:13 says, "May the God of hope fill you with all **joy** and peace as you trust in him." You know that **Galatians 5:22** says that part of the Fruit of the Spirit – the proof that you have Him in your heart – is joy. So, if we have the Holy Spirit living inside of us as Christians do, then why is it so hard to find and keep joy? Why do we struggle with it?

And everybody struggles with it. Even the great old saints struggled with joy. **Job** wished He had never been born (Job 3:11). **David** wished he could find a place to escape reality at times (Psalm 55:6-8). **Jeremiah** cried a "fountain of tears" (Jer. 9:1). And what about Mr. Wisdom, **Solomon**? Vanity! Vanity! All is vanity! (Ecc. 1:2)

One of my favorite characters in the Bible is **Elijah**. Good grief, he's like superman or something. There are so many good stories about Elijah doing incredible things. Elijah just said the word and it didn't rain for three years. Elijah was fed by ravens for a while and then fed by a widow whose jars of oil and flour wouldn't run out. He brought a young boy back from death. But my favorite story is when Elijah called down fire from Heaven on Mount Carmel.

You know the story but go ahead and turn to **1 Kings 18** and I want to read just a small part of it. The people of Israel had a choice to make. They were trying to serve Jehovah God **and** the false god Baal and that wasn't working so Elijah comes up with a test. You sacrifice a bull to your god and I'll sacrifice a bull to my God. Whichever one accepts the sacrifice by fire, that's the true God.

So, the prophets of Baal went first and they called on their god to answer by fire. They called and called and wept and prayed and beat themselves up all morning and into the afternoon and evening begging Baal to answer them. Of course, nothing happened. But then old Elijah has his turn and he builds an altar and puts a bull on it and then he has them soak it with water several times. They even built a trench and filled it with water. Now, turn to **1 Kings 18:36-39** and let's be reminded of what happened.

At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: "LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. 37Answer me, LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again." 38Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the

wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench. 39When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, "The LORD-he is God! The LORD-he is God!"

Wow! Now that's a revival! Can you imagine? What an incredible day for Elijah and all of Israel. Can you imagine the joy they all had seeing God at work like that? Especially Elijah. He must have been ecstatic. Talk about a mountaintop experience, right? Now, this surely disproves what crazy old James wrote about in his book of the New Testament. In the book of **James**, between **Hebrews** and **1 Peter**, James makes the crazy claim that Elijah was a man just like us. That's what he says in **James 5:17**.

James was obviously delusional when he wrote this book. He is the same guy that starts off by saying we should consider our trials as pure joy (James 1:2) so we know he wasn't right in the head. That's impossible, right? When James says Elijah was a man like me, I am reminded of all the times I have called down fire from Heaven. Ah, those were good times. And it is always such a delight to bring a person back from the dead. And, just the other day I was walking toward the lake and I took off my cloak and slapped the water, it parted in two and I walked over to the Northside Marina over there. So, yea, Elijah and I are a lot alike.

Now, which sounds more ridiculous? Elijah being like me or me parting Lake Bridgeport? It's hard to say until you read just a little further in 1 Kings. I hope you still have your Bibles open to 1 Kings because I want to read just a little more from **chapter 19:1-5**. This is the very next thing that happens with Elijah as he came down from Mount Carmel. Read **1 Kings 19:1-5** with me and see if Elijah doesn't start to sound more like one of us.

Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. 2So 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." 3Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, 4while he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, 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."

You've been there, haven't you? It happens all the time with all of us. You aren't out of church good when it happens. You leave church where you just saw blessings and miracles and healings and answered prayers and oh, God is so good. Praise His holy name! Then your car won't start or your wife says the wrong thing in the wrong way or maybe the restaurant you go to for lunch doesn't have the ice cream you want and that is

it! I can't take it anymore! It's just too much, God. Why me? Poor me! This is just the worst day ever.

There are a couple of things we all need to be reminded of. First, Satan hates you and he hates your church and he will attack you as soon as possible. Just expect it. Second, everything is harder when you are tired. You've heard it said that sometimes the most spiritual thing you can do is take a nap. I'm a big believer in the Sunday nap. I recommend it and I recommend you not call me on Sunday afternoon at all. Satan was attacking Elijah and he was exhausted. That accounts for a lot of this.

But sometimes there is more to it. Sometimes it's just dealing with the attacks and the tiredness day in and day out and it starts to wear on you. That full and abundant life is more like dry and sparse and you are mentally and even spiritually tired and you no longer have that joy, joy, joy, joy down in your heart and it's just hard.

I saw a tweet from a man not long ago that struck me. He said, *"After 20 years, I had to take a break from being a local pastor because my soul was tired from constant output, my nerves were shot from constant criticism and my physical body was hurting from being a constant scapegoat. No nap was going to fix it."*

You ever been there? What do you do? Quit the ministry? Curl up in the fetal position? Cry? Die? Well, let me just tell you that if God has called you to a certain ministry, giving up is not an option. If God has called you to pastor...or to mother; if God has called you to teach...or clean toilets; if God has called you to sing in front of thousands or sing babies to sleep, giving up is not an option.

So, what do you do? Who do you look to for a model? Who is going to show you how to have joy again in this dark time of your life? Is it me? Oh, certainly not! Is it a leader of today; a politician? Mercy, no! Billy Graham? Franklin Graham? The Pope? What about Elijah? He's in the Bible. He must be a good role model for finding joy again, right? No. No. No. Let's see our Model in **Hebrews chapter 12, verse 2**.

The chapter before this one, **Hebrews 11**, is the "faith chapter" of the Bible and a lot of good and faithful people are mentioned there but the author of Hebrews is not mentioning them for them to be our guides and mentors to find joy. He says in **chapter 12 verses 1-3**, *"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and*

*perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3Consider **Him** who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."*

Now, I know you are going through a very difficult time right now. Okay, I don't really know that but I know that if you aren't then you are about to. It's just the way it is in this sin-sick world. But as you go through those difficult times you will find yourself searching for joy. And whatever you are going through does not compare to what Jesus was about to go through and He knew what it was and yet we read here that He had joy.

Adoniram Judson was a missionary imprisoned in a horrible Burmese jail for preaching the Gospel and a man that had heard him preach mocked him and said, "Well, Judson, what are your prospects now?" Judson answered, "**My prospects are as bright as the promises of God!**" Now, if one of the promises of God is that we can have joy in all difficulties then how do we do that?

Again, let's use Jesus, not Judson, as our model. The first thing to know is that Jesus was being obedient. Without obedience, there is no joy. Oh sure, unbelievers can find a little joy every now and then like a blind pig finding an acorn but to have joy when your world is crashing down on you requires complete obedience to God. Jesus was being obedient to God the Father and was on His way to the worst kind of death imaginable and Hebrews says He had joy.

Jesus was also living out His purpose. The very reason that He came to earth was to die for us on the cross and in living out that purpose, Jesus, in His obedience, found joy. **George Bernard Shaw** may have been that blind pig with an acorn when he said, "*This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one: the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap, and being a force of nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.*"

We spend so much time trying to make ourselves happy and expecting others to do the same that we miss joy. Do you know the difference between happiness and joy? We have talked about it lots of times here but I found a really good definition of joy. Happiness we know. Happiness is when your circumstances are good. Everything is okay in your life and so you choose to be happy. But joy is different. Joy can be had no matter the circumstances and is really proven to be joy when your circumstances are difficult.

My concordance defines joy as “**calm delight.**” Can you picture that? Can you picture yourself having calm delight in the midst of whatever storm you are going through? Even better, can you picture Jesus having calm delight knowing He was headed to the cross to be tortured and die? How did He do that? First, He was obedient. He told the Father, “*Not my will but yours.*” (Luke 22:42) Second, He was fulfilling His purpose. There is great joy to be had when you are doing what you are called to do or what you know you are supposed to do.

But there is one last thing about getting and keeping joy. You first have to be obedient. You need to be fulfilling your purpose but lastly, you have to choose it. And I mean you have to. Now, some people won't choose to even be happy when their circumstances are good. That's between them and their therapists. But you, as a Christian, have to choose joy. It is a gift from God. We don't deserve it even when we are obedient but by His grace He gives it.

Romans 15:13 says, “*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him.*” Now, God can give us joy but we have to take it. Elijah was being obedient and was fulfilling his purpose but he didn't choose to take the gift of joy and I am going to tell you right now that is disobedience. It is a sin not to take up the gift of joy from God.

If I set a birthday present in front of you and you never open it, that is going to hurt my feelings. That would displease me. When God sets a gift in front of you and you don't accept it, that displeases Him. He wants you to have joy and I am here to say that He wants you to have joy not just for your sake. He wants you to have joy because other people are watching you.

When Paul and Silas were thrown in jail in **Acts 16:25** it says that about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Just like people were listening to them and watching them, people are listening and watching you to see if this whole Christianity thing is for real. They want to know if what you say in the good times matches up with what you do in the bad times.

When James – who come to find out was not a crazy person – says to consider it all pure joy when you face trials, do you realize that is a command? That is God speaking through James to give you an order. Consider it all joy! When Paul says in Philippians to rejoice always, that is not a suggestion. That is not a friend of yours saying, “*Hey, you ought to maybe, kinda, sorta try a little bit of that joy.*” No. That is God commanding you to realize

that He is in control and He loves you and He wants you to have joy and so He is providing it for you. Be obedient and pick it up.

I am reminded of Greta. Greta was probably in her nineties and living in a nursing home. A disease had attacked her face and she had lost her eyesight completely and the skin and muscles of her face were distorted and broken and she always had some kind of bandage on it. She didn't have any family to speak of and her savings would only allow her to stay at this run-down place where the food was poor and the service was less than great. She was hard of hearing and confined to a wheelchair and if anybody deserved to be bitter, it was her. But she chose not to.

When asked, she always said, *"I'm fine. How are you? How can I be praying for you?"* And then she would pray right then, right there. And partly because she was hard of hearing and I think partly because she wanted other people to know she had the privilege of going to the throne room of God, she would muster herself up and with a loud, clear voice she would humbly, yet boldly go to God in prayer for whoever she was talking to.

Greta never faked it. Sometimes she couldn't help but show she was in pain. But in her voice you could hear her smile even if you couldn't see it on her face. She had a relationship with God. She was obedient to God. She was fulfilling her purpose even in her old age and limited abilities. And Greta chose to have joy. She had calm delight knowing that God was in control and that He loved her and His will was perfect and His sovereignty is a blessing.

How about you? If you are like me, I dread Mondays. Sundays are my favorite days. I love our church and I love to worship here with my family. I am spiritually fed and filled up and every Sunday is better than the last. But then, every week(!) Monday comes and every week the height of the crest of one wave measures the depth of the trough of the next as MacLaren said. Every Monday Satan attacks and if I am tired it's easy to give in and lose my joy.

Helen Keller said, *"Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it."* We can overcome it and find and keep our joy. We can have calm delight on Mondays knowing our God is in control and He loves us. Just be obedient and choose to have joy like Jesus did. We have to because the rest of the world is watching.

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