

The Lord is Your Strength in Times of Need

I. When You've Had Enough...

II. God Provides

If you were to go to the southeastern peak of Mt. Carmel today, you would see an impressive statue of Elijah with his sword raised to heaven. It was built as a tribute to the victory God gave Elijah over the false prophets of Baal. Elijah had challenged these idol worshipers to a contest to prove whose God was the one true God. Each would offer a sacrifice on the altar. Elijah would pray to the Lord and the false prophets would pray to Baal, and the one, whose G/god answered by consuming their offering with fire, would be proclaimed the true God.

People from all over Israel gathered on the mountain and watched in anticipation as the prophets of Baal danced around the altar and wailed and cut themselves with swords and spears and pleaded with their god all day long to answer their prayer, but there was no response. Then it was Elijah's turn. He cut up a bull and placed it on the altar, and for good measure, even doused his offering with eight large jars of water. He prayed that the Lord might show everyone watching that there is only one God in all the earth. The Lord responded by raining down fire from heaven that not only burned up Elijah's sacrifice, but also the wood, the stones of the altar, and the soil beneath it. It even licked up the water that had pooled in a trench at the base of the altar. All the people fell face down to the ground and cried out, "The Lord—he is God! The Lord—he is God!" Then, at Elijah's command, the people seized the prophets of Baal and put them to death.

It was an incredible display of the Lord's awesome power. Not only had the prophets of Baal been defeated, but the Lord also answered Elijah's prayer to send rain on the land, ending a three and a half year drought. Elijah must have come down that mountain brimming with confidence and trust in the Lord and eager to do his work. And yet we see quite a different picture in our text for today, don't we? Instead of a triumphant prophet standing tall atop Mt. Carmel, eager to do the Lord's work, we see a worn out and defeated shell of man lying underneath a broom tree in despair.

Quite a contrast, isn't it? These two events weren't all that far apart. It's almost hard to believe that Elijah could go from such an incredible high to such a terrible low so quickly. But that's what life's like, isn't it - a series of highs and lows, of triumphs and failures, of victory and defeat, of happiness and disappointment? And sometimes, it seems like the lows outnumber the highs, and much like Elijah, we get to the point of despair.

The devil tempts us to lose trust in the Lord's loving caring in our lives and to forget all that he has done for us. But through our text today the Holy Spirit renews our confidence in God's love and protection and strengthens us for our journey through this life to heaven. We are reminded that the Lord is our strength in times of need. When we've had enough, God provides.

I.

So what drove Elijah to his spot sleeping under the broom tree? We just heard about the great victory the Lord had given to Elijah. And Elijah hoped that on the basis of this that the people of Israel were finally going to turn away from their idolatry and turn toward the Lord. King Ahab himself had witnessed the power and glory of the Lord. Perhaps he would lead the people back to the Lord. Perhaps he would stand up to his evil wife, queen Jezebel and put her in her place. But that isn't what happened. Instead of turning from his evil ways, Ahab whines to Jezebel about how Elijah had killed all his prophets, and in response, Jezebel swears an oath that Elijah himself would be dead by the end of the next day. And so on the heels of his greatest victory, and really one of the greatest signs of the Old Testament, Elijah runs away. He went south into Judah and after leaving his servant behind in Beersheba, he traveled by himself another day into the wilderness. And finding a broom tree, he laid

down underneath it and prayed, "It is enough! Now, Lord, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers!"

Elijah says, "That's it; I'm done! Shouldn't this great victory over the prophets of Baal have accomplished something? Where is the great restoration of Israel that should have happened? At least, I should have seen the fiery sword of judgment drawn against your enemies, Lord! But nothing! Nothing really happened, and for my trouble, I get a death threat. "I have had enough!" Let me die like my ancestors did in the wilderness. I couldn't do any better than they did at bring the people back to You."

Do we see ourselves in Elijah? I know there have been times in my life when I have. There have been times when I wanted to throw in the towel, times when it has seemed like God just wasn't working in my life, times when I was discouraged and tired.

Are there any tired people here this morning - tired of working, tired of failing, tired of being sick, tired of people, tired of being criticized and put down, tired of bad habits of being in debt, of being misunderstood, of being unappreciated, tired of the burdens, the rat race of life, the routines, tired of being tired?

Does anyone feel self-pitying like Elijah here this morning? Who carries a heavier load than you do? Who is sicker or sadder, more burdened, less blessed and fortunate than you are?

And what about the struggles we face for being confessional Christians. We know what Elijah felt like too. Instead of the people we talk to about Jesus turning to the Lord, how often do that instead make fun of us, call us superstitious. How often is it when we confront someone with their sin out of love for them that they lash out at us in anger.

We know the feeling all too well - that feeling of helplessness and hopelessness, the feelings of our own shortcomings and failures, feelings of discouragement and wanting to give up. We know what it's like to be where Elijah was.

II.

Even when Elijah was at his lowest point, God came to him. In his despair, Elijah lay down and fell asleep. Then, "suddenly an angel touched him, and said to him, 'Arise and eat.'" Elijah looked up and there was some baked bread and a jar of water. He ate and drank and fell back asleep. The angel came back again and again and told him to get up and eat. That food strengthened him to travel forty days and forty nights to Mount Horeb, which is also called Mount Sinai. And as we read later in this chapter there on Mount Horeb, God gave Elijah work to do again: to anoint two kings and Elisha, his own successor. And by God's grace, feeding him with bread and water from heaven, and with the Word of that gentle whisper, Elijah's defeatist attitude was gone and he was ready to go to work again.

God had provided relief for Elijah in the form of food and drink for his body and in a miraculous way. But more importantly, God provided relief for Elijah's troubled soul that was filled with despair. That food and bread did much more than just keep Elijah's body going. It reminded him that the Lord was still by his side, still caring for him. The Lord found his worn out prophet in his time of despair and gave him rest and refreshment, for both his body and his soul.

Doesn't He do the same for us? First of all, consider all the rich physical blessings our Lord has given to us - the clothes we wear, the homes we live in, the cars we drive, the food we eat - these are all wonderful gifts from a gracious God. And we probably take these things for granted, but every one of these gifts, great or small, is a reminder of God's loving care for us, just like the bread and water he supplied for Elijah. Secondly, recall what we know from the Scriptures. The physical blessings that God gives to us are a reminder of the even greater spiritual blessings he gives to us in Christ. When we are weary and burdened he invites us to come to him for rest. We can unload our burdened consciences at the foot of his cross and receive assurance that all of our sins have been forgiven and that heaven is ours. When we are stressed out and worn out by all the worries, anxieties, pressures, illnesses, and hardships that plague us in this life, the Lord invites us to bring our every need to him in prayer as

boldly and confidently as a child approaching his loving father.

And how do we know that God's going to answer our prayers? How do we know that he's going to help us and do what is best for us and turn the difficulties in our lives into blessings? There are a lot of people who rattle off the familiar phrase, "I know God has a plan for me," but they say it with little or no conviction. It's nothing more than a faint hope that there is a loving God out there somewhere who might give them a break. So why are we so confident? Why do we so firmly believe that all the trials and hardships we face in life are truly a part of God's good and gracious plan for our lives? Because unlike us, Jesus never said, "Lord, I've had enough." When the soldiers spat on him and mocked him and drove nails into his hands and feet and hoisted him up on the cross to die, he didn't say, "Lord, I've had enough. Get me out of here. I don't want to do this." Instead he endured the pain of death and hell for you and for me and for the whole world. Instead of "I've had enough," Jesus said, "It is finished."

Life in this sinful world isn't always easy. It often leaves us discouraged, distressed, tired, and wanting to throw in the towel. But just as God provided for Elijah in his darkest hour, so he also provides for us. He comes to us through his Word. He forgives our shortcomings. He strengthens us. He encourages us. He nourishes us through the Bread of Life, Jesus himself, who gives himself to us in Word and Sacrament.

It's been said that "When God lets you stumble, he does so that you might fall into his arms." So the next time you're feeling depressed, discouraged, and overwhelmed, the next time you feel like throwing in the towel because you've had enough of life, turn to God. Confess your inadequacies, your failures, and your sins to him. And be filled up again with the nourishment he has to give. For the Bread of Life has taken away your every failure, your every sin. And he gives you the energy you need to get to work for him again! So remember the lesson the Lord taught Elijah in the desert that Jesus repeated to his disciples just before his ascension - a wonderful promise for us today, "Surely, I am with you always till the very end of the age." Amen.