

November 3, 2019

1 Kings 18: 7

“When Your Best Isn’t Good Enough”

The voice is Jim McCay’s. The show was called ABC’s Wide World of Sports. It debuted on Saturday afternoon April 29, 1961. This is what literally millions of homes were filled with at 3PM Eastern time for 3 decades. **(PLAY VIDEO)** Vinko Bogatai was the ski jumper who has become an affectionate icon for stunning failure. And, while we may have been conditioned to believe the moment of victory is pure exhilaration and defeat as being completely devastating, that is not always the case. Often, these are the pictures of victory. Here is Lance Armstrong at his moment of victory in the mountains of France. This is the moment of victory for this particular Olympic runner. She won’t be paraded around on shoulder’s waving gloriously to the crowd. She was actually carried from the stadium on a stretcher and spent several hours in a hospital. Could it be that instead of the agony of defeat that there is also the agony of victory?

One might think that the solution to shame’s taunts is victory. Succeed enough and victory will silence the shaming voice that has haunted you for so long. I once thought the answer to my esteem was to win a grand enough victory, realize a great enough dream and all self doubt would be eclipsed. It would certainly seem that our shame should be swalled up in the wake of the grandeur of our accomplishments. But, sadly, I have experienced enough victories to know that that isn’t really the case. We are tempted to think that when the medal is hung around our neck, when we cut down the net or our picture appears on the front page then the lasting joy and release from the shame we feel and so desperately seek will be ours. But, somehow, strangely, it isn’t enough. Let’s put it this way, have you

ever found a victory great enough to dissolve your anxieties? Have you ever accomplished something so profound that you were not tempted with some nagging discontent in your soul? In reality, even our best moments are tainted with the taunts of shame. If you become a finalist in a beauty contest and just before you step back on the stage for the talent portion you feel a small bump on your chin, you didn't see it in the mirror moments before, but that slight blemish will consume your thoughts. I know a Miss Indiana who experienced just such a moment. Get the promotion you've worked so hard to get and you will find that you spend that night nearly sleepless wondering if you can really perform to your bosses expectations. There are probably two dozens folks who can give testimony to such a night. Here's one from my own experience. I've preached sermons before and received a hundred compliments about how it touched persons lives and then got one disparaging note. Which do you think I remember most, the hundreds of grateful handshakes or the one accusatory letter?

We have all learned that shame, like God is no respecter of persons. Shame lies in the gutter with you after your worst failures, *"Look at you, you failure! Can't you do anything right?"* But shame also escorts you down victory lane, *"Sure, you've won, but so what? It's still not good enough. It's still not perfect. And what about next time. What if you lose next time?"*

There is a unique vulnerability in our seasons of accomplishment. I find my greatest temptation to despair is Monday morning after a glorious Sunday. Adam and Eve's temptation came in the midst of the glory of Paradise. Israel's cowardice to conquer Canaan came close on the heels of the Passover and a parted sea. David's rooftop lull for

Bathsheba came after he had built the borders, bolstered the economy and won the praise of a nation. Jesus' wilderness experience followed his Dove-descending baptism and launch of his public ministry. Then there is Elijah.

Elijah, the greatest prophet perhaps of Israel's history. The man who some thought Jesus cried out for when he hung on the cross. Elijah, the one who stood with Moses and Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. Elijah. His name literally means "The Lord is my God." He had such an anointing that by his mouth, there is famine or there is rain. He was fed by ravens, brought a boy back to life and proclaimed to have been "a man of God whose word of the Lord from his mouth is true."

On a divine commission, Elijah moves resolutely against King Ahab and is neither deterred nor distracted by Ahab's disdain. This unflappable prophet issues a challenge to 850 prophets of Baal and summons them to Mount Carmel. The challenge is that two altars will be built. On one will be placed a bull and these 850 prophets will pray to their Gods to consume the Bull. Send fire from the heavens. They writhe on the ground, cut themselves, cry and dance but nothing happens. Then Elijah commands that a ditch be dug around his altar, buckets of water poured on the top till the ditch is full. Then he prays to God, fire descends from above, consumes the wood, the bull and licks up the water in the ditch. Elijah commands that these 850 prophets be put the sword. He wades in along with the people and they are utterly destroyed. What victory could be greater? It was a triumph against great odds. It is the ultimate, "I told you so." And, almost better than anything it is one of those very public, in front of everybody victories. This isn't a hanging-chad-subject-to-question victories. It was a landslide. It is hard to imagine a more

comprehensive victory that Elijah's triumph at Mt. Carmel. Surely after such a display, surely Ahab would repent, rise up, call the prophet blessed and say like the widow of the resurrected son, "Now I know that you are a man of God and the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth." You'd think that but it would not be so. Instead of repenting, the evil King creeps back to his castle and whimpers to his wife, showing himself to be more mouse than man and as our scripture begins, "Tells Jezebel everything Elijah had done." Look at her response and Elijah's response as well.

¹ Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. ² 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." ³ Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, ⁴ 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." And the word of the LORD came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁰ 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." ¹⁸ Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him."

You may have your moments of miraculous accomplishments, president of your senior class, PTA, win the lottery, the hand of the man or woman of your dreams or win the

admiration of a whole society. But this side of heaven, there will never be a season so sweet, no a platform so high that you are exempt from the attack of the enemy. There will always be a Jezebel. She may be quiet for a while, she may be waiting in the wings but...count on it...she's there. As long as the devil is allowed to roam the earth there will be a voice of shame that follows you even to the pinnacles of success. Your best will never be good enough to silence her angry, vicious tirades. You might think that this would be like a gnat and an elephant. Our hero Elijah, just defeated 850 prophets, called fire down from heaven. He stands on the podium as victor arms raised in triumph, they're playing the national anthem. But verse 3, which we just read says, "Elijah was afraid and ran for his life."

I don't know about you but I want to shout, It's just one woman. She's a queen. She probably just got her nails done. She isn't going to jump on her chariot and race to a confrontation, her hairdo would get mussed up. Let her bluster, dismiss her threat, you raised the dead, you can defeat her, you can do it. But Elijah has no energy to face another opponent and the apostle whose prayer life the apostle James commemorates as the model for our own faith doesn't pray, he runs. And, in the agony of his victory he runs pell-mell into a shame filled depression in the desert, ponders the benefits of death and imagines himself alone. In his exhaustion and false expectation of a respite after Carmel, Elijah makes a tragic mistake. Instead of releasing his shame to God and finding the courage and companionship to face his adversary, Elijah tries to bear it himself in isolation. Step #1 in the process of dealing with our shame is Quit chasing the rabbit; Step #2, fix your eyes on

Jesus; Step # 3, surrender to the conviction of the Holy Spirit, run to the Father; Step #4, Learn to set appropriate boundaries; and Step #5 is, the pressures of life, defeat or victory cannot be faced alone nor in a weakened state.

Stop here and let the following words sink in. There is no accomplishment great enough to obliterate the pressures of life. There is no level of success high enough to exempt you from Jezebel. You never become so strong or so spiritually mature that you can imagine that you can handle life's pressures and life's challenges alone. You can get it done for a while but eventually battling alone will send you to a wilderness of depression where you even disparage life. Trust me...I know what I'm talking about here.

You will always be substandard in somebody's eyes. There will always be people ready to criticize, critique, demean and utter threats toward you. It comes with the territory. It is as predictable as rain in April and mosquitoes in July. So don't let it throw you, don't let it deflate your joy, don't let it pull the rug out from under you and don't let it drive you from the presence of others who can stand with you to a wilderness where you ask God to take your life. God's answer for your shame is not your personal success nor God's pledge to remove your thorn. God's answer is, as it has always been, to be with you in your pain, to bear your shame and nourish you for the journey ahead. God has promised that he will not leave his children comfortless and that is also something I can give testimony to. When you give up on yourself, God doesn't. God's reply to Elijah in the wilderness may in fact be what we need most in times of shame. Look at the progression of action steps God took.

First, he sent an angel who touches him. Elijah had left everyone behind when he ventured into the wilderness. Feeling ashamed and defeated, Elijah felt that what he needed most was solitude. In reality, it is what an ashamed person needs least. The angel touches Elijah and never underestimate the power of a simple touch. What Elijah most needed was a touch and that's what God provided. We shouldn't be surprised. After all this is the same God who walked with Adam in the Garden. This is the God who became flesh and dwelt among men. This is the God who says, "Abide in me and I will abide in you." This is the God who touched lepers and unclean women. When we feel no desire for company or even worthy of it, God comes near. When we settle for sinful distraction, God knocks at our heart's door and asks for intimacy. God always is waiting to touch. It is touch that seems so go so wanting in our culture. We usher our children from pillar to post in our cars and vans. They don't roll in the grass much any more. I can remember as a child that I discovered the world and my role in it mostly from touch. As we grow older we insulate ourselves behind locked doors and alarm systems. When we do touch it is only fleeting, "How ya doing?" Or, the touch is inappropriate. But touch is what is always needed when someone is in pain, in despair, depressed and alone. God sends a messenger to touch Elijah, get him up from under the broom tree to eat, refresh and then rest again and then a rather ironic statement comes after the rest. The angel has already told Elijah that the journey is too much for him. Too much for Elijah but not too much for Elijah, a companion and Elijah's God.

The shame of our past may be overwhelmed, debilitating, too much for us...but not too much for our God. The scriptures resound with that message. 1 Peter 5:7, “Cast all your burdens upon him because he cares for you.” 1 Samuel 17:47, Don’t try to bear the unbearable because, “the battle is the Lord’s.” And, truly, it is, he cannot lose. Listen to the good news that propels Elijah forward from his shame. It’s a bit ironic. God says to the victorious prophet who thinks is all done in, “You have a great journey still ahead.”

That, in reality, is God’s message to us all. Life is a journey, not a destination. Shame-based saints tend to focus on arriving at a point of success, we do our absolute best and... “There I have arrived.” That’s shame-based saints mind you. But grace-filled saints focus on walking with God. To say, “You have a great journey still ahead” is to say, “There is more life to be lived, the best is yet to come. Elijah had a destiny still to fulfill, a mantle to place on Elisha. The anointing he left would be a double portion and then he would ascend in a whirlwind. Elijah would shimmer next to Jesus, speak with the Messiah on the Mount of Transfiguration and he will stand awaiting our return to God and our eternal home as well.

Get up Elijah, you’ve won a great victory but there is a greater journey ahead. That is truth for us all here today. Savor your successes but don’t idolize them. Awards will never be your answer. Your prize never has been and never will be dependent upon your perfection. The real prize is not a pinnacle but a Person. Get up, refresh yourself...Take God’s hand, the journey is greater than you could possibly know.