



BREAKING THE HOLD OF PESSIMISM
1 Kings 19:1-13; John 15:11-13; Romans 7:25-8:2

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October 15 is National Grouch Day. All of the “scrooges” in life can march in parades and say, “Bah! Humbug!” The grouches are the pessimists of life. They look at a glass filled with water half way and declare, “It’s half empty.” The optimists of life say that this is the best of all possible worlds, and the pessimists are afraid that it is. The pessimist says, “I will not fail, because I will never try.” You may have heard about the wife and husband, who were eighty years old, and had been married for sixty years. They came before a judge to get a divorce. The judge asked, “Why in the world would you want a divorce after being married sixty years?” The husband replied, “Enough is enough!” There are many who go through life with a pessimistic refrain.

Several years ago there appeared an interesting Hagar the Horrible comic strip. Hagar had just awakened and was stretching while sitting on the side of his bed. “Good morning, world!” he says. “Another day full of challenges to be met, new worlds to conquer. Battles to be won...Fame and glory to be gained...” But then he adds: “Dragons to be slain...Bills to be paid...Arguments to settle...Complaints...” He sits on his bed in silence for a moment, then gets back in bed and turns over and goes to sleep. He is representative of the pessimist of life. Life is so hard and difficult. Why try?

A Discouraging Voice

The pessimists say, “It can’t be done!” If the pessimists had their way, we would have no books. We would have no hospitals or colleges. We would not have celebrated Columbus Day this year. We would have no ships. We would have no cars or airplanes. We would have no electric lights, radios, televisions, computers or telephones. No man would have landed on the moon. Because the pessimists of life say “It can’t be done.” Pessimism is a discouraging voice that always sees everything new as too difficult.

Not A New Problem

But pessimism is not a new refrain. Listen to these words: “Children now love luxury, have bad manners, contempt for authority, show disrespect for their elders, and love chatter in place of exercise. Children are now tyrants, not the

servants of their households. They no longer rise when their elders come in the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up their dainties at the table, cross their legs, and tyrannize their teachers.” Sounds like today’s newspaper, doesn’t it? But these words were written by Socrates four hundred years before Christ!

A Hopeless Attitude

The pessimists look at the world and say, “There is no use in trying.” They think our young people are hopeless today. The world is in turmoil and they see no place to turn for hope. They only see problems with our homes, schools, churches, colleges, the economy, and our nation. The problems of pollution, drugs, international terrorism, and the threat of nuclear war drive them to cynicism and despair. They are ready to throw in the towel. I saw a sign which was written on three levels. “Nothing really matters—except a few things—that really don’t matter very much.” The cynics march around the world and lift up their voices and cry: “stop the world, I want to get off.” They end up in despair. The writer of Ecclesiastes echoes this spirit: “All is vanity and vexation of the spirit.”

A young boy watched a man who weighed at least three hundred pounds get on a broken scale. When he registered only seventy pounds on the scales, the little boy exclaimed, “I knew it! He’s hollow inside!” T. S. Elliott said it years ago, “We are the hollow men. Headpieces filled with straw, leaning against each other.” Pessimism can drive us to cynicism and despair. Pessimism reveals a hollow-ness within. Pessimism unveils a lack of strength and vitality. The pessimist refuses to confront life and deal with its issues. He or she runs from problems and refuses to solve them or even try. They have become locked in by pessimism. They see only dead ends or roadblocks in their pathway. Their lives are bolted shut behind the locked door of pessimism.

The Prophet Elijah

Look at Elijah. If there had ever been a hero in Israel, Elijah was that man. He had taken on the pagan religious establishment of his day. He had put their gods to a test against his true God. God had sent down fire on a mountaintop and consumed Elijah’s sacrifice instead of the sacrifice of Baal’s high priests to demonstrate that the God of Israel only was the true God. But Queen Jezebel cried with fury: “I will get you for what you did to my priest.” Elijah fled as far away as he could to escape this woman’s wrath. He first went to Beersheba, and then continued further into the desert to get away from everyone. In this lonely place, Elijah’s despair was revealed. He had come to the end of his rope. Look at him.

Elijah Had Lost Faith in Himself

Notice, first, that he had lost faith in himself. At one time he had been so confident. He stood before all of the priests of Baal and challenged them to show whether their god was as powerful as his God. Now he had hit bottom. He wanted to throw in the towel. He was a burned-out cinder. Self-pity dominated his life. He had lost confidence in himself, he wanted to die. This is pessimism at its worst. Elijah reveals how one's attitude toward himself really affects his outlook toward life. Our attitude toward life is greatly influenced by how we feel about ourselves. Our attitude toward ourselves can determine how we live.

For example, I can walk into a hospital room and visit one patient who is filled with pessimism. Nothing is right. The bed is uncomfortable. The nurses do not do their job. The food is awful. The doctors are inattentive. But in the room next door I see a patient who talks about how nice the nurses are, how attentive the doctors are, how good the food is, etc. This is the same hospital, and only one room away from the other. What's the difference? It's the attitude of the patients. It can make all the difference in their perspective.

Jesse Owens, the great athlete of several decades ago, told his coach, when he was a young boy, that he had a dream. "I want to be," he said, "the fastest man in the world, the greatest runner." "You have to have a dream," his coach said. "But you can be great only if you can build a ladder to your dreams. Your ladder needs to have least four rungs. The first rung is determination. The second is dedication. The third is discipline, and the fourth rung is attitude. The first three rungs are important, but the fourth rung is vital. If you will form the attitude of mind that you can overcome every discouragement, that you can surmount all your difficulties, and if you put your life in God's hands, you can build that ladder to your dreams." Later Jesse set world records and became one of the great athletes of all times. His attitude helped him attain his dream.

We cannot overcome our pessimism until we have a different attitude about ourselves. Often our pessimistic and critical attitude toward others is a reflection on how we feel about ourselves. We do not like ourselves and feel only contempt and self-pity for ourselves. When we do not feel good about our own person-hood, we reveal this in our reaction to others. If we have lost faith in ourselves, healing will come when we see ourselves in a different, more positive light.

Elijah Had Lost Faith in Others

Secondly, notice though that Elijah had lost faith in others. "I and I alone am faithful to God," he declared. "I am the only person true to God!" Down in his pit of

despair, he thought that he was the only person who was right with God. You have seen that attitude before, haven't you? The pessimist surveys everybody else's viewpoint and concludes that she is the only one who has the right perspective. Everyone else has a price. Their motives are always selfish. Only the pessimist has the "clear" vision. This is a sure pathway to misery. When you only see weakness and faults in others, there is no possibility for *good*. You just give up. If the pessimists have their way, all progress will stop.

I have a minister friend who told me about the struggle he was having in his church. He had been greatly loved in his former church. But in this church he was constantly experiencing difficulty. No matter what he did or said, no matter how much he tried to lead the church forward, he constantly met a stone wall. He slowly began to realize what the problem was. Within his church there was a small pessimistic element that continuously complained about everything. Whatever he tried, he was met only with complaints and criticism. Those few saw only a dim future for their church. They felt that they could never *do* anything worthwhile. You have seen this pessimistic attitude destroy churches, schools, civic clubs, community projects and many other organizations. Pessimism has destroyed football, basketball, and baseball teams. Attitude makes all the difference in how well an athlete will play. If pessimism prevails, then defeat is likely. Pessimism and defeat walk hand in hand.

You may have heard about the young pastor who went to his first church. He was met by a man who said: "Now pastor, I only have one talent. My talent is criticism. I can criticize your sermon. I can criticize your leadership. I can criticize the choir, the deacons, the Sunday School teachers. I can criticize everything that happens in church. What would you like for me to *do* with my talent?" The pastor said, "You know the man Jesus told about who buried his talent in the ground? Why don't you go and *do* likewise!" Those who see themselves as the chief critics in the world are usually pessimistic. Their attitude often brings conflict, unhappiness, and despair into churches, schools, our nation, and almost every arena where they go. They think that they alone have the right perspective. As Bernard Shaw once wrote, "A pessimist is one who thinks that everybody else is as nasty as he is." The pessimist is quick to criticize but slow to help get involved to bring about changes for good. I have found that the pessimists are big on criticism but short on trying to help make things better. In churches, they are seldom the workers and faithful givers. In their despair they often want to bring walls tumbling down around them.

Elijah Lost Faith in God

Thirdly, Elijah had also lost faith in God. At one moment he was able to stand on the mountaintop and challenge the great opponents of God. But now he

was sulking in a corner feeling that God had abandoned him. He felt abandoned and ended in despair. Isn't it interesting that even the greatest saints have their low days, difficult times, and feel that God is distant from them? Elijah's story reminds us that no one stays on a level plane in his or her feelings toward God. We may all have high and low days.

A Time For Food and Rest

What did God do to deliver Elijah? The first thing we notice is that Elijah was told: "Get some rest and nourishment." Elijah needed sleep and food. Healing needed to begin at the most basic level. Our attitude toward life is affected by our physical condition. Elijah was exhausted-- worn out-- burned out. He needed time for his body to be replenished. He had pushed himself too hard. We all know that condition. Your work may sometimes be overtaxing, and you feel crushed under its weight. Your stress load has brought you to the place that you realize you need some help. You may, like Elijah, need to get some rest and proper nourishment before you can recover.

Keep On Going

Secondly, God instructed Elijah to "get up ." "Arise and eat" (I Kings 19:5). Sometimes, like Elijah, we have to get up and keep on keeping on. There are duties that need to be done even when we are tired and weary. We don't work just when we feel at our peak and everything is pleasant. There are tasks that have to be done. A mother continues to take care of her sick child even if she is worn out. A wife continues to take care of her husband, who may be ill, for many months. A man may work at his job when the going is difficult and the rewards are few. He has to provide for his family. Remember there are tasks that need to be done. Get up! Self-pity does not get the job done. You have to learn early in life that you don't do your duty just when you always feel good or when everybody praises you. There are always tasks, responsibilities, and duties to perform. Get up and get on with them. You never know what you can accomplish until you try. Better to try and fail than not to try at all.

Experience God

In the third place he was told "to get before God." "Go forth and stand upon the mount before the Lord" (19:11). Let the presence of God come back into your life. Elijah needed to be fed anew by God's spirit. In this experience he sensed God in a way that was different. On the mountaintop at Mount Carmel he had seen God in a dramatic, forceful way. Here in this cave, God came in "the sound of gentle stillness." He was not in the roaring fire, earthquake, or wind. In a quiet,

unpretensive way the majesty of God manifests its presence. In a quiet, desolate place he found God.

How do you experience God? You never know when God is coming. God may meet you in the needs of an outstretched hand. God may encounter you in the face of a friend on the street, through a telephone call at night, the cry of a child, the loneliness of a young person, the illness of a loved one. God may come into your life in an unexpected way or at an unexpected time. You can't program God.

A Different Perspective

The experience with God also gave Elijah another perspective on life. Elijah probably thought that, when he defeated the high priest of Baal on Mount Carmel, he had won a victory for God once and for all. He likely thought that this dramatic act had changed the whole country forever. He thought the enemy was destroyed and that everyone would believe that Jehovah God was the only true God. But it is a mistake to think that there are permanent victories in the struggle of good against evil. We are always trying to reach new victories as we share the Word of God with others. Evil will constantly stick its ugly head in the path of righteousness. The battle against evil must be waged again and again.

Forces of pessimism and defeat will always be around us, but Elijah's meeting with God gives us a perspective on the way God works in the world. God does not always manifest the divine presence through dramatic, forceful ways. God's Spirit may move slowly and silently within the hearts of persons who open them to God. As Reinhold Niebuhr, the great theologian, once said, "I will be a pessimist decade by decade, if I can be an optimist eon by eon." God is at work in the world, but it may take God decades or centuries, working slowly through countless individuals to nudge humanity forward toward righteousness and justice. Unrealistically, we wait for God's kingdom to be ushered in a moment—in a flash of splendor. But God is working instead ever so slowly in the world. In the divine work of redemption, God always gives men and women the freedom to accept or reject God's love. God does not overpower us with love, but God seeks to draw us to God's self by the power of divine love and not force.

When I visited one of our church members after Hurricane Floyd hit our community, I discovered that two large oak trees had crashed through her roof. She had a very positive attitude toward the situation. "I am fine," she observed. "My kitchen, den, bedroom and my son's room are not damaged. I am fortunate. I was blessed. The other rooms and roof can be repaired. It could have been a lot worse." She took a long look and knew she could get beyond the mess and inconvenience of the present.

A farmer worked hard one day trying to split a boulder in his field. He was unsuccessful. Later he returned with some seeds and planted them in the dirt in the middle of the boulder. Then he turned to his son and said: "Let's wait: Time will split the boulder." God's spirit may work slowly in the world. But it is working. We live by faith and hope. Fortified with hope, we go forward to serve in God's name, knowing that we may not always have quick results in our service for God. But we do believe, however, that ultimately God's will shall prevail.

New Tasks to Be Done

God had a further word for Elijah: "Get up and go on to the new task that I have given you" (19:15-21). Elijah arose and anointed Hazael to be the king of Syria, Jehu to be the king of Israel, and Elisha to be his disciple. He then cast his cloak upon Elisha as sign that he would succeed him. Later he discovered that there were seven thousand other believers in Israel. He was not alone. There were many others who had remained faithful.

It is astounding, isn't it, that as we get on with the work which God has given us, we begin to discover that there are other workers who are busy in God's kingdom beside us? There are many other people who are committed to Christ. There are others who see tasks to be done and have put their shoulder to the wheel of responsibility.

A New Testament Word of Joy

Finally, let us bring a word from the New Testament that reminds us that, when Jesus Christ comes into our life, we get joy. To be a gloomy, grouchy Christian is a contradiction. A Christian who is filled with pessimism and despair is unlike Jesus Christ. "I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly," Jesus said. "I have come that your joy might be made full." Why do we rejoice? Our joy arises out of the joy we have experienced in redemption and in the reality of our risen Lord. We worship a God who has given us new life—life out of the death of sin. Paul raised an interesting question in Romans 7:25. "Who will rescue me from 'this body of death?'" The image, "this body of death," may have been a reference to an ancient practice of punishing a criminal by forcing him to carry the corpse of the person he murdered on his back. He had to sleep and eat with the body strapped to his back. He had to bear this burden all the time. Paul used this figure to describe the intolerable weight of sin. "Who will deliver me?" he asks. "God will," he asserts. "Thanks be to him, through Jesus Christ our Lord." Jesus Christ set him free from that body of sin. In Jesus Christ you and I can know that same freedom from "that body of death."

We have new life in Jesus Christ. Let us rejoice in the new life we have. We live by the power of the risen Christ within us. Do not be locked in by pessimism, despair, and defeat. Jesus says, “Behold I stand at the door and knock. If any person will open the door, I will come in.” Open your life to Christ. He will give you joy, life, and hope. As his children today, lift up your voices and rejoice. He has come that you might know life and know it abundantly.

When Emily and I were in Nashville, Tennessee attending a conference several years ago, we saw some of my former students when I taught at the seminary. One of them, David Hull, asked about Owen Clifford, who used to be his high school principal. When I told him he had died, he expressed his sorrow upon learning that and told me how Owen encouraged him to speak at speaking tournaments and even use to drive him to some of them. “I’m in the ministry today,” David continued, “because Mr. Clifford encouraged me to be in those speaking tournaments.” Owen was a layman who touched the life of a young man in his church. Although David’s father was a New Testament scholar and the Dean of Southern Seminary, David pointed to this lay person’s influence on him. Lay people, never under estimate the influence upon those you work with in church!

Owen was an optimistic Christian who tried to encourage others, especially young people. He knew the joy of helping and not the sadness of hindering others. That’s what a Christian should be like.

Lift up your torch of hope. Punch holes in the darkness of pessimism and despair around you. Let the light of Christ shine into the gloom that covers too much of our world. See a need and meet it. See a child who needs teaching—teach her. See someone in despair—bring him the hope of Christ. Right the wrongs, give courage, inspire hope, render kindness, show justice, understanding and mercy. Reach into the world with love. Get on with the task that Christ has called you to do. Pessimism is destructive. Christian optimism is constructive. Be a builder, not a destroyer.

Eternal God, through Jesus Christ we have experienced new life and seen new visions. Forgive us for falling into pessimism and despair when you have called us to rejoice and live the abundant life. May we sense your strong presence that enables us to live the abundant life. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

O Loving God, you have blessed us with food to nourish our bodies and we thank you for our physical food. We come now to nourish our souls on spiritual food. Feed us the Bread of Life. You have blessed us with water to quench our thirst

on a hot day. We come now to drink from your fountain of Living Water. Feed us until we hunger and thirst no more.

We know, Lord, that there are persons in our congregation who are hurting today. They have known the pain of illness, grief, moving, new beginnings, loneliness, anxiety, separation, fear, and tragedy. We thank you for the assurance that nothing separates us from your love. We long to sense the embrace of your supportive love. O Shepherd of our souls, we need your tender care. We pray to be more sensitive to your presence.

Come now, O God, in the midst of our routine worship, tired spirits, unexpectant attitudes and worn habits, and surprise us with the moving power of your Spirit. Open our minds, warm our hearts, enlighten our thinking, encourage our spirits and empower our efforts to serve you. Through Christ, who loves us and goes before us, to guide and direct us in the challenging days before us. Amen. ■