

Unbelievable

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1 Kings 17:8-24

“Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.”

Movement 1 – A Dry Spell

Have you ever had a dry spell? Have you ever had a moment when you felt empty, when things seemed to be void, or when it felt that you were out of resources? Have you ever had a dry spell? Maybe it was a time when business was not going to well and money was tight. Maybe it was a time when your workload was greater than normal and it was difficult to keep up. Maybe you just had a long week, with a lot of things pulling at you, and you feel empty. You just need to rest and replenish, and retrieve your strength.

Have you ever had a spiritual moment of emptiness and distance from God? Maybe it was a time when you felt distant from God for no particular reason, when you sang the hymns but didn't feel anything moving you and every time you sat down to pray, nothing seemed to happen. Have you ever had that dry spell, that moment or that time or that experience when you just felt empty?

It is that moment when it feels like the water table has gone below the well line, and you are waiting for the next rain to replenish you energy. It is that time when you felt sluggish for days and days. It is a dry spell.

The Northern Kingdom, the Kingdom of Israel and the surrounding lands were experiencing a literal dry spell. They were in the midst of a drought, and the land was quickly becoming barren. It was a way for the Lord God to show to the King Ahab, to the prophets of Baal, and to all the people that God was still in control and in charge of all things including the weather. The people were losing faith in God, so God was reminding the people of the Lord's divine power. The people were beginning to think that maybe other gods were more powerful than their God, so they were reminded who was truly in control. God showed the people that the wind and the rain were in the hands of the Lord, not in the hands of some false god. There was a drought in the Kingdom of Israel, and Elijah was living in the midst of it.

Maybe some said at first that it was only a dry spell. Maybe some said at first that it was only a passing weather pattern and soon the rains would come. Maybe some knew that they were going to have to struggle, but expected that with time the struggles would be over. That is why we call it a dry spell. We expect that with time things will pass, with time things will change, the market will fluctuate, the weather will change, and even our spirituality will be revived. It is only a spell, only a passing experience and with time things will return to normal.

Have you ever had that dry spell? Have you been in that funk, experienced that droll, dip in your life. Fallen into the hitting slump? But keep hope; because with time, things are bound to change, after all, it is only a dry spell.

Movement 2 – The Long, Dark Hopelessness

What if that dry spell becomes permanent? What if things do not change, what if things do no get better? What if that dry spell, the drought became a desert that was to be a permanent aspect of the landscape? Have you ever had that fear?

I think of the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. This was a series of dust storms that ripped through the plains and into Oklahoma, Nevada and Kansas. These were storms that covered

Chicago and colored the snow of New England red. I can imagine that maybe after the first storm some may have said that things will get better, but after then next one and the next one many began to wonder if it was possible for things to ever improve. As the sky darkened and the ominous cloud of dust loomed on the horizon, some claimed that the end of the world was at hand. Some felt that this was not just a spell, but a sign of devastation beyond repair. Fifteen percent of the population of Oklahoma moved to California, and around 500,000 Americans were left homeless as the banks foreclosed on their homes. How could one claim this to be just a dry spell? How could one find hope on the horizon in such a difficult and dark time?

Often the difficulties mount and mount and we wonder if we are in a dry spell or if things are moving into a permanent part of our experience. Maybe our spouse has been drinking to cope with the stress, and we say, it is only for a little bit of time. But then it feels like the drinking has increased more and more and we wonder if the dry spell has become permanent. Maybe the struggles of the church have been constant but you say that it is only for a certain amount of time. Yet months pass into years and still things do not seem to be improving in the life of the church, and you wonder if the dry spell has become a permanent part of your experience. Maybe you have been having a difficult time praying, but you hope and believe that in the near future you will experience something that will move you and revive you. Yet months pass after months and you still feel nothing when you try to center yourself on God, and you wonder if your dry spell has become a permanent part of your experience.

The 16th century Christian mystic John of the Cross talked about the “dark night of the soul.” This was a time when the individual felt distant, alone, and absent from God. John of the Cross believed that this was a passing experience, yet when you are in the midst of the darkness and the angst, maybe you find yourself wondering if this is ever going to end.

Elijah came upon a widow gathering sticks. She was someone who held on for a while that things might change soon. She was someone who hoped that with time things would turn and the rains would again fall upon the earth. Yet when Elijah finds her she had resigned to the belief that things were not going to get better, and that she was going to be living in a long, dark hopelessness. She had resigned to the idea that she was going to make one last morsel of bread for her and her son, and then they would die. The dry spell became a long, dark hopelessness in her life.

You have been in that hopelessness; you know what it is like to wonder if things are ever going to get better. When the diagnosis moves from curable to terminal, the dry spell becomes permanent. There are some of you here today who are struggling in your life, and maybe you are wondering if things are ever going to get better. Maybe you are afraid that the dry spell, the glimpse of darkness will become permanent.

Movement 3 – Gnawing Disbelief

Have you ever felt like giving up? Have you ever felt like just accepting the state of things? Have you ever felt like giving up?

Was there a time, when the work piled higher and higher and you finally just said that enough is enough and you were done? Did the sorrow of your life grow greater and greater and you decided that all was lost? Have you ever felt like giving up?

I think this is a common reaction and a place where one’s thoughts may lead. The widow had given up. She had lost her faith in a false god, did not have any faith in any other god and was ready to give up. She had resigned to the belief that she and her son were going to die. She had given up.

It is not just accepting that life is going to be difficult, but it is deciding not to play the game any more. It is selling the business; it is pulling out of responsibilities. It is closing the Bible and saying that God has left, there is no longer any reason to pray. The darkness of doubt has cast a blanket of despair so heavy that you collapse under its weight and give in to the struggles and the despair. You feel like giving up.

The soldier Paul enlisted to fight with the Germans in WWI with great hope and enthusiasm in the book and movie *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Yet as time went on, as he saw and experienced the horrors of war, as he watched his friends lose their sanity, lose their dignity and then lose their life, he began to lose his own sense of hope and belief in the war. He returned to his classroom where he was inspired by a teacher to enlist, and heard him making the same appeal to a new bunch of young boys, and shared bitter discontent with the movement and the war. It wasn't until his last friend, the Sergeant Katczinsky was killed while Paul was carrying him that he gave up all hope, saying that he does not care if he dies or not, and that he can face the rest of his life without fear, that the coming years "...can take nothing from me. They can take nothing more..." He had given up.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote in her poem *De Profundis* (st. 5) "The world goes whispering to its own, 'this anguish pierces to the bond;' And tender friends go sighing round, 'What love can ever cure this wound?' My days go on, my days go on." These are words of someone who has falling into the hopelessness and accepted the gnawing disbelief that things might ever change, improve or get better.

This is a place where we can all find ourselves – a place where it seems that all hope is lost, that all promise of something better is gone, and we think that perhaps it would be best to throw in the towel, and give up. We have been to that place where we wonder if we have been abandoned, if we are on our own, and we give in to despair.

The woes of the world, the challenges of the world, and the difficulties of the world pull at us to the point where we feel that the only thing we can do is give up.

Movement 4 – God's Audacious Demands

Yet God still calls us to continue to do ministry. God still challenges us, God still leads us, and God still calls us. Here is a widow who has suffered much. She is trying to take care of her son on her own. She is trying to keep her life together, and then a drought comes. The food becomes more and more scarce, and it becomes more and more difficult for her to take care of her son. Finally the day comes when she only has enough in her jar of meal and jar of oil for one more morsel of bread. Finally the day comes when she can only make one more meal until she and her son will have to wait and accept death. As she is out, collecting sticks for the final meal, Elijah, prompted by God, asks for some bread. Unbelievable! The audacity of Elijah to make such a demand from someone who has nothing! It is unbelievable!

But let's not blame Elijah. Let's not place all of the responsibility on Elijah's hands, for it was God who called Elijah to go to Zarephath. It was God who said that the widow would be the one who would take care of Elijah. Maybe Elijah is thinking the same thing. Maybe Elijah is also thinking that such a request is more than he should ask. Maybe he feels ashamed to ask and to presume such action on the part of this widow. Unbelievable! It is unbelievable that God would use this widow, someone who not only has nothing but is also an unbeliever. The woman is not a follower of God, she does not believe in the Lord, but in Baal. She is from the same people of Jezebel, and God will use her to take care of Elijah. Elijah is going to have to rely upon her, trust her – that is unbelievable.

You are struggling, you are trying to get by, you are at the place where you are ready to give up, and someone comes to you and asks for your help. How can you offer help when you have nothing? You have paid all of your bills, you have just paid your taxes, and a charity calls looking for something. How can you offer something when you have already given all that you have? You are struggling to stay true to God, yet your faith feels weak, feels absent and you feel empty. Yet someone comes to you with a broken heart that you can see, with pain in their eyes, and asks you to pray with them. How can you pray when you do not have the words to say? How can you offer hope when you have none yourself?

A church is struggling to stay alive, it is struggling to keep its doors open, and still someone comes and asks the church to give and to help with a cause. It is too much. It is more than feels appropriate, the request seems unbelievable. We are told in 1 Corinthians 10:13 that “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength but with your testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.” But maybe, maybe from time to time it feels like God is sending audacious demands your way. It is too much, it is more than you can handle. It is unbelievable.

You can’t get blood from a stone, and the place of hopelessness has turned your heart to stone. Yet there are still times when the Lord pulls at us, challenges us, and calls us to do ministry. There are times when we want to help, but we feel helpless. Think of Elijah when he picked up the body of the almost dead boy. Think of what might have been going on in his head. He had asked so much of the widow. He had invited himself into her home, and now her son, her only child was seemingly at the end of life. You can imagine his own heart dying. You can imagine his own desire to reach out and help the woman in any way that he could, but what could he do? What could he offer, how could he help. All he could do was to pray and to plead to God, without any resources, or abilities to bring the child back to health. He felt the pull, but could not respond.

In the midst of our own sorrow, our despair, our difficulties, we are still called by God. We are all pulled to do ministry of one kind or another, but often we find ourselves saying, we don’t have the resources, we don’t have the abilities, or we can’t get involved. Often we find ourselves saying that we need to take care of ourselves, we need to try to worry about ourselves, and let the Lord help that person in another way. Yet God still moves us, God still challenges us, even when it seems unbelievable, even when it seems hopeless we are still pushed. Even when we are in the darkness of our own life, God still calls on us to continue to do ministry.

Movement 5 – Finding Blood in a Stone

But God works through us changes us and transforms us even in our weakness. God takes what is nothing and makes it something. This is the hope that in God’s grace we can be instruments of glory. God prompted Elijah to ask the widow for food and drink, and then God blessed the widow with the resources to provide. The widow had nothing, and from the very weakness of the widow, God gave her greatness and gave her something. This is unbelievable. This is amazing! That in the time of a drought, in the time of despair, in the time of darkness, God provided so that the widow and her son and Elijah would live. Unbelievable! Unbelievable that food would continue to be present. Unbelievable that a foreign widow would be the person to serve the prophet Elijah. Unbelievable that the resources would be there for ministry. Unbelievable!

It was unbelievable that the son was given life. There really was nothing that Elijah could do. All he did was go off by himself and complain to God over the unfair treatment the widow

received. Yet God gave the child life. Unbelievable that someone so close to death would again find hope. Unbelievable that in the darkest hour God shines a light. Unbelievable!

We may feel as if we are at the end, we may feel as if we do not have any hope, yet God is still with us, and blesses us so that we can continue to do the good work we are called to do. We have to trust in God. The widow took a chance when she made bread first for Elijah. The widow put her own life and the life of her son on the line, but she trusted the words of Elijah, and trusted the Lord. Elijah took a chance when he picked up the child and carried him to the upper room. It was almost as if he was promising the widow that things would get better, but he didn't know if they would. Elijah put his reputation on the line and trusted the Lord. And the Lord responded.

It would be as if your resources continue further than you could have ever hoped. It would be as if you found money in your pocket every day. It would be as if you had an apple tree that always had fruit. It is unbelievable, but it is the work of the Lord.

The cornucopia, the endless supply of food and sustenance comes only from the Lord. We have to remember that the resources we need to do ministry come only from the Lord. We may say to ourselves, only after I make my first million will I be able to do the good work that I feel compelled to do. We may say to ourselves, only after I focus my prayer to God as I think would be appropriate will I be fit to do the work for the Lord. We may say to ourselves, only until I have learned the entire Bible, its meaning will I be fit to do the ministry of the Lord. But Elijah could do nothing. The widow had nothing. Both were used by God for ministry.

You may feel empty, you may feel exhausted, but God can take blood from a stone, God can bring water from a rock, and much much more. It reminds me of Mendelssohn's violin concerto. The second movement of that concerto is a beautiful, somber piece singing a sad song. As the piece ends, the music seems to melt away into the silence bit by bit. It is as if the notes are falling further and further into the darkness. Yet at the very end, when it seems that all is lost, one note sustains, one note continues and grows into a grand third movement. We may say that all we have is one note. We may say that nothing can amount to this note, but the Lord can take it and grow a whole other movement for all to enjoy.

Our drought of despair can lead us to be paralyzed in our walk, in our ministry and in our life. Our drought of despair can lead us to give up, give in and say we have nothing more to offer for the world. Yet we must remember that we cannot do the Lord's ministry on our own. We must remember that we are called to rely upon the work of the Lord. We cannot rely upon our own strength to do the Lord's ministry, we can only rely upon the strength of the Lord. Isaiah 40 reminds us that even the youth will grow tired and faint. Isaiah 40 reminds us that even at our top strength, and in our best condition we will not be able to continue to serve the Lord forever. We will grow tired, we will grow weary and we will stumble. But God gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless. God will renew our strength, and we shall mount up with wings like eagles, running and not growing weary, walking and not fainting. No matter what we have or what we do not have, God will make a way for us to go into glory.

It is the strength, the resources and the ability of the Lord that gives us the grace to continue in ministry.

Movement 6 – Jeremiah's Tree

Can we let our faith rest on that hope? Can we rest our faith on the hope that God is with us that God stays with us and will not leave us? Can we rest our faith on that hope?

Can we trust that God will stay with us? Even in those moments when it feels like all of our strength has dried up, that all of our hope is lost, and that we can no longer go forward, can we trust in the Lord? Can we trust that in the darkest night, in the time when we feel the furthest from God that God is still with us even if we cannot feel that divine touch? Start with that hope that promise, that peace and then continue to listen for God's call. All this year we have been talking about walking with Jesus. We have been talking about growing in our discipleship, growing in our faith as we walk closer and closer to Christ. Yet for some of you, for some of you that path have taken you through the brushes, through the thorns and you may have felt that you have lost your way. You may have felt that you have been held back, and that you are miles away from Christ. Yet Christ is still with you, God is still with you, open your eyes and see, and hear the presence of God in your heart.

That is our strength and that is our grace. From that hope we gain our power and our peace, because we are still called to walk with Jesus. We may enter into a drought in our lives. Stay with Christ and you will find strength. We may enter into a time of challenge in our lives. Stay with Christ and you will find strength. That strength is not ours, but it is the strength of Christ.

We are all called, and we may say that we do not have the resources, the people or the energy. Let God give you the resources, let God give you the strength, and let God lead your way. As the prophet Jeremiah says, we will be like a tree planted by the water, its leaves stay green even in the time of drought. Let go, and walk with Jesus. Let go and trust God. Let go and believe that God can and still work with you in ways unbelievable, in ways blessed.

Listen, people have let themselves fall from walking with the Lord because of hardships and difficulties. People have let themselves be moved from ministry because of a fear of scarcity. Let God guide you, lead you, and do not be moved from your place of grace. Do not be moved from your place of glory. Just like that tree, planted by the water, do not be moved.

AMEN