

Stuck in the Middle
Unbearable
September 29, 2019

Good morning everyone.

We're in the fourth week of our series *Stuck in the Middle* and we're talking about how to deal when things change in our lives; especially when that change is undesired, unexpected, and/or unpleasant ...

... which was illustrated so well by the song we just heard: change that is undesired, unexpected and unpleasant (such as the ending of a relationship) is *painful*. It *hurts*.

And, as we've seen throughout this series, the key in being able to move forward from "what was" to "what is" (and could be) is to deal with that pain in a constructive way.

Of course, we're typically not very good at that because, when it comes to pain, our culture encourages us to ignore it, minimize it, medicate it or even to become a permanent victim of it.

For those of us who are Christians, *it's* even worse because we have it in our heads that following Jesus means being happy all the time no matter what ... which means ... if you're *not* happy, something must be wrong with you. You must not have enough faith.

And you'd better not let anyone else know or *they'll* think something is wrong with you. *They'll* think that your faith is weak and you must not be a very good Christian.

So, we just don't deal very well with the pain associated with change, which is why a lot of us end up emotionally and spiritually stuck;

where *time* has moved on but we have not. We get trapped – anchored to the past by the pain.

That's why we've spent so much time in this series talking about the "discipline of lament." *Lament* is an intentional process that allows us to face our sadness and anger, and bleed off the emotional toxins that keep us stuck.

Bottom line, what you do in a lament is you let the poison of your jacked-up emotions drain from *your* heart and soul ... to *God*. You describe your losses and pain – you write it down or you verbalize it – and you confront God with how you feel about it.

And you may have to do that over and over and over depending on how hard the change is and how bad you're hurting.

I talked about lament in great detail in the first week of this series and if you missed that message, I strongly suggest you go to the media section of our app or our website and watch, listen to or read it because ...

- Lament is where you begin leaving the pain behind and moving into the future.
- Lament is where you begin to end “the ending” of whatever was so that you can embrace “the new beginning.”

And that is the goal.

Remember, we grieve it – whatever “it” might be – *in order to leave it*. The goal – what we want to accomplish emotionally and spiritually – is *release* so we can move on.

Now, in the past two weeks of this series,

we've talked about two specific laments that many of us have when we are dealing with change.

1. "*It's just not fair.* This shouldn't have happened to me. I didn't deserve this. I shouldn't be in this situation at all."

We talked about that one two weeks ago. The second lament we talked about last Sunday.

2. "*They hurt me.* They did me wrong. If it hadn't been for him or her, I wouldn't be in this situation. What he or she did was unforgivable and I'm angry."

And if you have either of those going on in your life right now, I encourage you to check out the message if you missed it.

Today we're going to talk about a third

lament that often happens when change is unexpected, undesired and/or unpleasant ... and that is that *"this is just too hard. It's unbearable.* And I'm seriously thinking about quitting."

And "quitting" can mean all sorts of things from ...

- The extreme of taking your own life
- To turning away from God
- To leaving your job
- To walking out on your family
- Or maybe just emotionally running away and hiding – allowing yourself to slowly wither up and die on the inside while you continue to go through the motions on the outside.

Maybe some of you have felt that way. Maybe some of you are feeling that way right now because it's too hard and you feel like "the middle" – the zone between what was and what is and could be – is unbearable.

If it helps you to know, there've been more than a few times over the past 25 years when I've felt that way. When you get to be a pastor in the same church for that long ...

- You see a lot of people you've cared about and invested in move on. Or, worse, they *die*.
- You see a lot of marriages of people you love come to an end.
- You see a lot of people get mad and leave the church without trying to address the issue (as Christians should

according to Jesus in Matthew 18).

- You see a lot of people turn away from God and leave not just the church but their faith.

Don't hear what I'm not saying in this: I love my job but, honestly, sometimes it's just really hard.

In fact – and I'll say a lot more about this next week –this past year (almost to the day, actually) has been one of the hardest and most difficult seasons I've ever experienced as the pastor of this church.

I'm not thinking of quitting my job or my family or, God forbid, taking my own life. But emotionally running away and hiding? Just kind of going through the motions on the outside?

As they used to say: been there, done that, bought the t-shirt.

But enough about me – and you – at least for now.

This morning I want to tell you a story about a guy who also went through a time where he felt like it was just too hard.

The Despair of Elijah

His name was Elijah and, according to the Bible, he was one of the greatest men of God to ever walk the planet.

This guy was so amazing – so in touch with God – that, instead of dying, one day God just took him off the earth in a chariot of fire. One day, God said, “E-man, you’re done here. Let’s go.”

And Elijah was gone. Pretty amazing.

And yet ... there was a time in Elijah's life where he felt that that the path God had put him on was just too hard and he thought about quitting.

Actually, he *did* quit. He ran away ... *literally* ... from where God had called him to serve.

Let me set the scene for you.

The king of Israel in those days was a man by the name of Ahab and not only was he a terrible king, he was a terrible person. In fact, the Bible says that, of all the kings in the entire line of the kings of Israel, he was the most evil.ⁱ

His wife – a woman by the name of Jezebel – was even worse.

And, as the senior prophet in the land, Elijah was called to be the “voice of God” to them ... which means, as you might imagine, there was never-ending conflict.

- On the one hand, *they* were leading the people to worship the idol Baal in a horrible religion which included ritual torture and rape as well as child sacrifice.
- On the other hand, *Elijah* was preaching and teaching the Law of Moses and encouraging the people to love and worship the God of Israel who had brought them out of Egypt.

This back and forth went on until one day, the Bible says, Jezebel had had enough of Elijah and all the other prophets of YWHW. She arranged to have them all killed but, through Divine Providence, they were able to escape.

And at that point, Elijah had had enough of Ahab and Jezebel so he called for a big showdown.

“Look,” he said to Ahab, “we’ve been going round and round about this for years, so let’s settle this once and for all. If Baal really is *the* god, let’s all serve him and worship him and forget about YHWH. But, if YHWH is god, then let’s all serve him.”

Ahab and his court agreed and they invited everyone in Israel to come to Mt. Carmel for “the battle of the gods.”

When everyone is ready, Elijah stands in front of them and says ...

“I am the only one of the Lord’s prophets left, but Baal has

*four hundred and fifty
prophets.” 1 Kings 18:23
(NIV)*

Point being ... it seems like the deck is stacked in favor of Baal.

Elijah continues, “now set up two altars – one for Baal and one for YHWH. And on each altar put a bull that has been slaughtered.”

And they do that.

Then Elijah says, “Okay, now, here’s the test. We’re not going to light a fire like we normally do. Instead, we’re going to see which god can light it up himself. We’re going to see which god can consume the offering with fire that comes from Heaven. And I’ll let you guys go first.”

To make a long story short, after many hours of prayers and pleadings and even slashing

themselves with their own swords, the prophets of Baal fail to move their “god” to action.

Then, Elijah prays a very simple prayer (after a bit of trash talking to the prophets of Baal) and fire comes down from Heaven. And it burns up not just the offering but the altar, too!

And, at this, all of the many people who are watching the contest fall down on their faces in worship, shouting, “Yahweh is God! Yahweh is God!”

Then Elijah says to them, “Seize the prophets of Baal. Don’t let anyone get away!”

And that’s what the people do. They capture the prophets of Baal and take them all down to the Kishon Valley where Elijah puts them to the sword. They will no longer be a threat to him or to anyone else.

... which means that, after so many years and so much turmoil, it's a great day of vindication for Elijah and his ministry ... which is why the next part of the story is so odd.

Chapter 19 of 1 Kings says ...

Ahab [went back to the palace and] told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword.

1 Kings 19:1 (NIV)

But instead of repenting and acknowledging YWHH as God, Jezebel ups the ante.

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."

1 Kings 19:2 (NIV)

In other words, "Elijah, by this time tomorrow, you're a dead man."

And the Bible says that Elijah, full of confidence because of the great and miraculous victory he has just experienced, tells the messenger to go back and say: "Lady, you want a piece of me? Bring it on."

No, that's not what the Bible says.

What it really says is ...

Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. 1 Kings 19:3 (NIV)

Wait a minute. This guy who had just defeated 450 prophets of Baal ...

No, wait - this guy who had just seen God defeat 450 prophets of Baal *on his behalf* ... is now all of a sudden *afraid* ... of a girl? (No

offense ladies).

Yes, he is afraid. And he begins running for his life.

And he keeps on running – kind of like Forrest Gump ... until he comes to a place known as Beersheba which is over a hundred miles south of where he had started – well out of reach of Jezebel.

But then Elijah does something really odd.

When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness. 1 Kings 19:3-4 (NIV)

That seems like a pointless detail but it's not because a day's journey south of Beersheba is to a point in the desert where no one can survive. This, friends, *is a suicide attempt!*

But, that's where Elijah goes.

The Bible says ...

He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die.

"I have had enough, LORD [it's too hard]," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors [this is how the prophets always end up – nobody ever listens.]"

Then he laid down under the bush and fell asleep. 1 Kings 19:4-5 (NIV)

Now, remember, this is the guy who had challenged Ahab and Jezebel again and again. And, because of that, there had been a price on his head for years and that never bothered him before.

So, *what's different now?* Why is he slithering off, wanting to die?

Four reasons, I think.

1. First of all ... it *had been* years – years of underlying spiritual stress with Ahab and Jezebel and the fickle-hearted people of Israel, and that took a toll on him. He was weary of the battle.
2. Secondly, there was the emotional stress of that huge all-or-nothing “which god is the true God” contest.

I mean, can you imagine being in Elijah’s shoes at that exact moment? If God doesn’t come through *right then*, at the moment of his prayer, Ahab and the prophets of Baal will surely kill *him!*

Fortunately, for Elijah, God did come through but it was still stressful.

3. And, then (and this is the third reason) it's up to Elijah to do what has to be done: wiping out the leaders of a religion that had been the source of so much evil and death in Israel.

I don't think we can underestimate the emotional impact of that. It's just one line in the story – "Elijah killed all the prophets with the sword" – but it's not that simple.

Elijah has never killed anyone before, and now, he singlehandedly carries out the death penalty which makes him, in a way, kind of like Jezebel – although his cause is just and eventually leads to the saving of many lives.

But that kind of thing does something to

your soul. It's hard on the heart as anyone who fought in Vietnam or Iraq or Afghanistan can attest.

4. On top of all *that* (and this is reason number 4), after the miraculous fire came down from Heaven and the prophets of Baal were wiped out, Elijah probably expected King Ahab to go home and say to his wife, "honey, you won't believe what I just saw. You won't believe what just happened. We've been wrong. Baal is just a lifeless hunk of stone. Yahweh is the true God and we'd better start worshiping Him."

But that didn't happen. And that had to be a huge disappointment to Elijah.

I mean, if the unquestionable miracle that everyone saw couldn't change things, then what else could?

Can you see why Elijah might have had enough? Why he might have reached the point where he said, "I'm done. This is unbearable."

I can.

In fact, there is an interesting little snippet of a verse in the New Testament where James is talking about praying in faith and he mentions Elijah.

He writes ...

*Elijah was as human as we
are ... James 5:17 (NLT)*

And humans sometimes get to a point where we feel like it's just too hard and we want to quit. And that's where Elijah was ... when God showed up.

When God Shows Up

The Bible says that as he's sleeping under the broom tree in the desert, hoping to die ...

All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat."

He (Elijah) looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again. 1 Kings 19:5-6 (NIV)

The angel of the LORD came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you."

So he got up and ate and

drank. 1 Kings 19:6-7 (NIV)

And I love this part of the story because this special dispensation of God's grace – this special expression of God's love and care for Elijah ...

- Doesn't happen after his victory over the prophets of Baal.
- And it doesn't happen when he is in Jerusalem at the temple and worshipping.
- And it doesn't happen when he's praying or reading the scripture in solitude.

Instead, it happens when Elijah is in the wilderness. It happens when he's depressed and suicidal. It happens when he's a deserter from the cause.ⁱⁱ

That is when God's grace comes to him.

I think there is great encouragement here – that no matter what “desert” some of us wander off to in our discouragement, God still seeks us. If we belong to Christ, God still pursues us and says, “I’m with you. I’m there.” (We actually sing a couple of songs about that these days and this is an example of it).

Now, as the angel says, the purpose of the food and drink is so that Elijah will have strength for the journey, but the angel doesn't tell him where he is to go. I think that's because *there's no question where he is to go*.

This man, Elijah, is the senior prophet in Israel. And where he is to go is back north 100 miles to where Ahab and Jezebel are. And he is to do what God called him to do in the first

place!

But that's not what Elijah does.

Instead, the Bible says ...

Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. There he went into a cave and spent the night.

1 Kings 19:8-9 (NIV)

Now here's what's interesting: from where Elijah began – a day's journey south of Beersheba out in the desert – it *wasn't* a forty day journey to Mt. Horeb. At most it was seven, maybe eight days if you lollygag and take your time.

So, what's Elijah doing?

He's just wandering around, kind of like the

children of Israel had wandered around for forty years.ⁱⁱⁱ

But in another demonstration of God's grace, *God is actually leading him as he is wandering*, which is how Elijah "just happens" to wind up at the special mountain where God had first revealed himself to Moses.

And, again, I think there is encouragement here for us when we reach the point where we feel like "it's just too hard."

Even as we are wandering around in trying to find our own solutions, even as we wander around trying to numb the pain, if we belong to Christ, God is leading us *even through that* and drawing us to Himself.

So, Elijah is in a cave ...

And it's at this point, the Bible says, God speaks to him.

The word of the LORD came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 1 Kings 19:9 (NIV)

I just love the softness of that question; that God doesn't yell at him.

And then Elijah laments.

He says:

"I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. But, the Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword.

What's he saying? "It's not fair. I'm doing what you said and look at what's happened."

He continues:

"I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me, too." 1 Kings 19:10 (NIV)

Of course, as we know, the fact that they were trying to kill him wasn't a new development. Truth was, *they had been trying to kill him all along* but they could never find him because God would always protect him!

Now, what happens next is fascinating. God doesn't respond to Elijah's complaint. Instead he tells Elijah to go out on the mountain and stand in His presence.

But before Elijah can get out of the cave, the Bible says that ...

A great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the

*LORD, but the LORD was not
in the wind.*

*After the wind there was an
earthquake, but the LORD
was not in the earthquake.*

*After the earthquake came a
fire, but the LORD was not in
the fire.*

*And after the fire came a
gentle whisper.*

*When Elijah heard it, he
pulled his cloak over his face
and went out and stood at the
mouth of the cave. 1 Kings
19:11-12 (NIV)*

Then God speaks to him again. "Elijah, what are you doing here?"

And Elijah gives the same lament again, "God, I have done what you asked me to do without wavering, but it hasn't worked. This

nation is as messed up as ever. And now, I'm all alone and they're going to kill me. It's unfair and it's unbearable. It's just too hard."

And again, God does not respond to Elijah's complaint.

Instead, He says (and I'm paraphrasing here), "Elijah, I'm not finished with you yet, so go back to where you came from and be my prophet."

"And the first thing I want you to do when you get there is to appoint a new king over Israel. And the second thing I want you to do is to find a young man by the name of Elisha and make him your apprentice. Train him up to take your place when you're done ... which, again, is not yet."

"Oh, and by the way, let's get one thing straight ..."

"I still have 7,000 people in Israel whose knees have not knelt to worship Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him." 1 Kings 19:17 (NIV)

Translation: "you are not alone, Elijah. You have never been alone. And it's not all up to you. It never has been."

In fact, if you read the entire story of Elijah closely, you'll notice that it's right before the "battle of the gods" contest when Elijah, for some reason, begins telling himself "I'm in this all by myself."

Remember what he said?

"I am the only one of the LORD's prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty

prophets."
18:22 (NIV)

I Kings

That's what he said but *the truth* was that there were *many other prophets* who were hidden away in the caves of Samaria, thanks to a guy named Obadiah, a priest, who also served in the King's home.

In fact, right before the contest, Obadiah meets Elijah and tells him about these prophets (one of which is Elisha).

He says ...

"Haven't you heard, my lord, what I did while Jezebel was killing the prophets of the LORD?"

"I hid a hundred of the LORD's prophets in two caves, fifty in each, and supplied them with

*food and water.” 1 Kings
18:13 (NIV)*

See, Elijah’s problem – the source of his despair – wasn’t just that he had been through some terrible things. He had been through some terrible things, and he had good reason to lament.

But Elijah’s despair was, in part, because *he had lost sight of the truth*. He just completely blanked out on the truth.

And so, after listening to his lament, God spoke truth.

Actually, God spoke *four* truths ... and I think these may be helpful to anyone who is in Elijah’s situation, feeling like “it’s just too hard and I’m done with this. It’s unbearable and I quit.”

Truth #1. “You are not alone. You never have

been.”

“From a human perspective it may have felt like that, Elijah. But I have been with you.”

“Even when you have run away to the desert – to a place where you think I don’t know where you are, I show up and I feed you! You’re not alone. You’ve never been alone.”

“Furthermore, you *know* that there are a hundred others like you. Obadiah told you about them. And you can connect with them and be encouraged by them.”

That’s truth number one.

Truth #2. “Elijah, I may not meet your expectations in how I do things, but my purpose will be accomplished through you.”

Elijah thought it was the display of God’s power in dramatic and spectacular ways that

would bring about change in the nation, which is why he called for the contest.

And when that didn't happen – when Ahab and Jezebel didn't repent after that huge spectacle – he concluded there was no hope.

But he was wrong.

That was the point of what happened on the mountain when Elijah was in the cave. All those big dramatic things happened but God wasn't in any of those. Instead, He was in the stillness and smallness of a whisper.

And God was saying, "Look, Elijah, you think it's got to be all this spectacular stuff for me to work, but I can do it however I want. And sometimes I don't do it the way you expect. But my purpose still gets accomplished."

Truth #3. "Elijah, I'm not expecting you to be

the one to fix things; What I'm expecting of you is that you will be faithful to your calling."

See, Elijah had been in the middle of so many big things, and so many amazing things that God had done that He started taking himself a little too seriously.

He started thinking that "unless I'm in the middle of this, and unless it's really going well with me, there is no way God is going to get His work done. There is no way."

And what God was saying is, "Look, I have things I'm doing in this world that do not depend on your success, or lack thereof." I'm not expecting you to fix things. All I'm expecting you to do is to be faithful in what I've asked you to do."

[SPACE] Truth #4. "I do not call you to a task for which I do not also give you the strength."

“Go and appoint a new king who will get things going in the right direction.”

“And among those prophets hidden in the caves of Samaria is a young man by the name of Elisha. I have appointed him to help you. For I do not call you to a task for which I do not also give you what you need.”

Lamentation & Truth

That’s the story of Elijah.

But what’s *your* story? More specifically ...

- What in your life, right now, is just too hard?
- What seems unbearable?
- What unexpected, undesired and unpleasant change has taken place in

your life and left you in a place where you just want to quit?

And maybe it's not a change that's taken place. Maybe it's just really, really hard right now.

So, here's what I want to do as we close this out.

And I'm going to ask everybody to do this because, even though it may not apply to you, don't want the people who do this to feel weird.

I want you to close your eyes right now and I want you to get a picture in your head. I want you to visualize a person or a situation or an event, that when you think of it, you get this clench in your chest, your gut just turns because ... *it's too hard*.

I want you to get that image into your head. What is that situation? Who is that person? What happened, what is the event?

Now, without words, at least not audible words, let God know how you feel about that. Be angry if you need to be. Plead with God if you need to. Lament what has happened to you.

And I'll be quiet just for a minute.

And, now, hear the truth, the truth that God spoke to Elijah and that God is speaking to you right now.

Truth #1. You are not alone ... you never have been.

If you belong to Christ, the Holy Spirit is in you, and He is with you in every situation of

your life. You're not alone.

Truth #2. God may not meet your expectations.

Your job situation might not work out the way you think it should. Your marriage may not work out the way you think. Your children might not exactly follow the path ... but, guess what? God's purpose is going to be accomplished if you follow him.

Lean not on your own understanding. Instead, trust Him and He will direct your paths.

Truth #3. God doesn't expect you to fix things.

In fact, you *can't* fix things. You're only human. You can't change a person's heart.

Here's what God expects of you: He expects

you to be faithful to your calling. Just do what He asks you to do.

Truth #4. God does not call you to a task for which He does not also give you the strength.

He will be your strength. The people around you, who love Him, will be your strength.

In fact, there may not be a hundred of them but there are many people in this church and in your life who would encourage you and build you up ... *if* you would let them know what you are going through. You just need to swallow your pride and ask for help.

Now, we're going to sing one more song together which expresses those truths.

And as we do sing, I want you to continue to visualize the person or situation or event and imagine yourself opening your hands and releasing it to the Lord.

<PRAYER>

Let's stand together and sing.

1. Anniversary

a. So...the reception is from 5:30-7:30 pm and will include appetizers and dessert, lots of photos, videos and memorabilia, a caricature artist, tattoo artist and a selfie station and more. To register for this part, go here

<https://nhcckc.churchcenter.com/registrations/events/292516>

b. Childcare will begin at 7 pm for children up to Kindergarten.

c. Doors open to the auditorium at 7:20 and the service will begin at 7:30 pm.

Endnotes

ⁱ 1 Kings 21:25-26

ⁱⁱ From <http://bible.org/seriespage/restoration-elijah-1-kings-195-18>

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid*