

Encouragement For Dark Times

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[0:00] 1 Kings 19, the first 18 verses. Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword.

! 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.

Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, 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've had enough, Lord, he said. Take my life. I'm no better than my ancestors.

Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep. All at once an angel touched him and said, Get up and eat. He looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals and a jar of water.

[1:09] He ate and drank and then lay down again. 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. 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. And the word of the Lord came to him. What are you doing here, Elijah? 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 a sword. I'm the only one left, and now they're trying to kill me too.

The Lord said, Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by. Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord.

[2:15] 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.

Then a voice said to him, What are you doing here, Elijah? 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 a sword.

I'm the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too. The Lord said to him, Go back the way you came, and go to the desert of Damascus.

When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shamphat from Abel-Meholah to succeed you as prophet.

[3:28] Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal, and all whose mouths have not kissed him.

I've heard a refrain going around, around here lately, and it sounds like this.

It's gotten so bad. How people can have children in the world today. I just don't know with the way things are going.

Look at where our nation is headed. Things like that. Now, do you have a right to be discouraged, distressed, downhearted, with our nation's present course?

Sure. Yes. Elijah, in our passage that I just had read, had a right to be discouraged in a certain way.

[4:44] The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. Things were bad. Things were very bad.

And then, there is our situation. One Christian wrote, America's decline in the past ten years has been spectacular.

Economically, politically, morally, and ethically, culturally, religiously, we are barely a shadow of our once great selves.

So, do you in some way have a right to be discouraged? I think so. But, should Elijah have been saying, I've had enough.

Take my life. I'm as good as my ancestors, which means I'm as good as dead. The Israelites have completely abandoned you. And now, I'm the only one left, and they're trying to kill me.

[5:52] The government is after me. Did he have a right to be so discouraged? So downhearted? So distressed?

So afraid? No. No, he didn't. And God doesn't let him just go on his way. And God doesn't just let him get away with that because it just wasn't true.

Just wasn't true. There were 7,000 people, 7,000 Israelites who were true to God, who had never kneeled down before Baal. And God had prepared Elisha to take over for Elijah.

Elijah wasn't the last one. There was going to be another prophet after him. God was working.

God's plan was still in place. And God hadn't given up. God hadn't thrown in the towel.

God wasn't discouraged. And so, Elijah shouldn't have been either. Elijah needed encouragement, though.

[6:55] He needed encouragement when it was so dark everywhere he looked. And as I've listened to some of you, I think some of you or many of you, I'm not sure how far it goes, but you need the same kind of encouragement.

You need to know some of the things that you need to remember some of the things you already know. I'm not going to say anything new tonight, but I just want to bring before you some truths that maybe have fallen sort of in the back of your mind.

You need your faith reinforced. And that's my purpose tonight. And with God's help, I want to give you a little bit of that, a little bit of Paul's attitude when he said, what does it matter?

Remember, he's writing to the Philippians and he said, you know, I could get, I could get riled up about all these men who are preaching for the wrong reasons. I could get really worried about that, but he says, what does it matter?

Christ is being preached. What does it matter? Christ is being preached. There's a certain sense of that's not my concern. I'm not going to worry about that right now.

[8:17] And so, there is a certain sense where we need to take on board that attitude. And so, I want to put a little, put rebar into the concrete of your heart.

Maybe you know what rebar is, maybe you don't. Rebar is just a simple steel bar. It comes in different lengths. It comes in different gauges that you drive in, that you put into concrete. And its main purpose is to give the concrete strength, to help it bear up under heavy loads.

But it also helps, so when there's temperature changes, it helps keep the concrete from cracking. Well, temperatures are changing in our culture.

Temperatures are changing. The load might be getting heavier. And so, what is going to keep you from cracking under the pressure? Well, I have six steel bars to drive into your heart.

Six truths that I want you to remember while our culture is crumbling around us. And the first steel bar of truth is found in the passage that we looked at.

[9:28] And it's this, God will always have his remnant. God will always have his remnant. Satan will rage. The American government itself might positively turn against the church.

Right now, we're thankful for the freedoms that we enjoy, but we have no guarantee that those freedoms will last. The American government might positively turn against the church in violence, in open persecution.

But there's always going to be 7,000 Israelites who will not bow to Baal. There's always going to be a remnant because Satan is strong. The American government is strong.

It has lots of power, has lots of resources, but Christ is stronger. And Christ has more resources. Satan will not overcome the gates of Zion.

He'll break upon it like a flood, but he will not prevail. They'll stand. Well, how can they stand against such fury? Well, Paul in 2 Timothy says, you have to look down at the foundation.

[10:38] What is at the foundation of the gates of Zion, of the church? It says, look at that foundation and written there, inscribed on the stones of the foundation are these words.

God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription. The Lord knows those who are his. He knows them. He's in relationship with them.

He holds them. He loves them. And in Elijah's day, he knew 7,000 Israelites. He knew their names. He knew all about them. He loved them.

He was in a relationship with them. And all of hell's fury and Jezebel and Ahab and their great power and their strength could not snatch them out of God's hands.

God will always have a remnant. Now, the question is for you is, will you be a part of it? Will you be a part of it? Will you overcome?

[11 : 34] Will you stand strong? Because Paul goes on and he says, now you keep looking down at that foundation and right before that phrase or right beside that phrase, the Lord knows those who are his.

It says this, everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness.

Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness.

So there's two sides to this coin. There's preservation. God, the Lord, knows who are his. But then there's perseverance.

Those who know the Lord, they must turn away from wickedness. So, night is rising. Satan's strength is waxing strong in our culture.

And so, what is the call of the hour? Is it to complain? Is it to worry? Is it just merely to reminisce about the past and the good old days?

[12 : 36] No, the call is to turn away from evil or the darkness will take you. But take heart, people of God. That foundation is strong.

The Lord knows who are his. If he knows you and you are one of his, then he will hold you. And so, that's the first steel bar of truth. God's always going to have his remnant. As bad as things get out there, God's people are safe.

Two, the second steel bar of truth I want to put into your heart. God has decided our time and our place. God has decided our time and our place.

Why do you live in the United States now? Why do you live in the United States? That's one question. Why do you live in the United States now and not in 1820?

Well, turn in your Bibles to Acts 17, 26. Acts 17, 26. Paul is talking to the philosophers on Mars Hill in Athens.

[13 : 41] Acts 17, 26. And we looked at this passage a couple of months ago now in our study on Providence.

But this is what it says, 17, 26. From one man, he made every nation of men that they should inhabit the whole earth. And he determined the time set for them and the exact places where they should live.

Who decided your address? God did. Who decided your timeline? Your birth date? And yes, your death date. Well, the Lord did. God determined the times.

God determined the exact places for them. God put you in the United States at the beginning of the 21st century at whatever stage of your life that you are at.

He put you here now and it's not without a reason and it's not without a purpose. purpose. Now, you might say, well, I don't want this to happen to me.

[14 : 51] I don't want to live in a place like this. I don't want to live under an oppressive government if that comes to that. I don't want this to happen to my children. My worry is not so much about me, it's for my children.

But it's not for us to decide our times and our places. It's for us to trust and obey the Lord.

There's this wonderful passage in the Fellowship of the Ring by J.R. Tolkien where Frodo, the hobbit, is very discouraged and afraid.

Remember, he's the one doomed to carry the ring. And everything is against him. And he says this, Frodo says this, I wish the ring had never come to me.

I wish none of this had happened. Now, you know how that feels. I don't want these things to be happening to me. And then Gandalf answered, so do all who live to see such times.

[15 : 56] But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us. There are other forces at work in this world, Frodo, besides the will of evil.

Bilbo was meant to find the ring, in which case you were also meant to have it. And that is an encouraging thought. Now, Tolkien was a Christian.

He had a keen sense of providence. Some things that we don't like are thrust upon us. Some things that we would never wish for, that we would say with Frodo, I wish that never had happened to me. I wish I wasn't here. And yet it is. And we must remember when those things come upon us that there is more than evil at work. There's more than evil at work.

We were meant to live here. We were meant to know the trials that we face. And we were meant to know them not by Satan, but by God. He has decided the exact place and time that we live.

[17:04] Now, God loves you. He loves you. And he put you here for a purpose. And he's using these trials to work for your good. And he means to use you here and now.

And that's an encouraging thought. Now, three. So, those are the first two steel beams or bars I want to drive into your heart.

Here's the third. Suffering is not a strange thing. Suffering is not a strange thing. And this is a strange encouragement, but yet it's encouragement nonetheless.

Now, I don't know what the future holds. I don't know what the future holds for the United States. But, if it is suffering for the church, we can't be standing, caught standing there with our mouths wide open, so surprised that something like this has happened to us.

Like, nothing like this has ever happened to anyone. Turn over to 1 Peter 4.12. 1 Peter 4.12. Peter had to remind the people he was writing to of this.

[18:30] Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. So, don't be surprised, but rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

Suffering is not an exceptional thing. It is not a strange thing for a Christian. We bear the name of Christ, and so often we forget that Christ's life was a life of suffering, and then glory.

And so it is our honor then to suffer with him. Did you notice that he calls our sufferings participating in the sufferings of Christ?

We share in these sufferings. Our life is becoming like his life, one of suffering. So, what did Jesus say to those disciples as he was walking on the way, after his resurrection, on the road to Emmaus?

They're so discouraged, they're so downhearted, they couldn't believe what had happened. And Jesus' words were, did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter into his glory?

[19:51] There's a pattern there. There's a pattern for us that our life is going to be laid over. A pattern that our lives must follow.

Suffer, and then glory. glory. It has never been the case, and it never will be the case, that it's comfort, and then glory, or ease, and then glory.

That is not how it is. Am I a soldier of the cross, a follower of the lamb, and shall I fear to own his cause, or blush to speak his name?

Must I be carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease, while others fought to win the prize and sailed through bloody seas. Part of us wants to make it to heaven on a feather bed, but that's not how it's going to be.

Others go through bloody seas, so we are not the exception. Let me say that again. We are not the exception. Americans have the tendency to think that we're the exception to everything.

[21:01] Well, Christian, you are not the exception. Suffering is not strange. It is the normal context of the Christian life. It might be great suffering, it might be small suffering, but there's always suffering.

Look back at verse 7, 1 Peter 4, 7, the end of all things is near, therefore be clear-minded and self-controlled so that you can pray.

So what do you do when you're on the brink of the edge of the end of days? Well, you pray. Be self-controlled so you can pray. Above all, love each other deeply.

Verse 9 says, offer hospitality to one another. Verse 10 says, each one of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others. What do you do at the end of days?

What do you do when you're suffering? Verse 12, dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial that you are now suffering. The end is near, you're suffering. What does Peter say that you should do? Run and hide?

[22:05] Buy guns? Stock up on food? He says, pray, love, serve. That's not extraordinary Christian living.

That is the normal Christian life. Christ knew he was going to suffer. when no one else believed him, when no one else understood, he knew he was going to suffer.

And, you know, that fear did not control him. That fear did not turn him into a coward. He believed his father would raise him on the third day, and so he prayed, and he loved, and he served those around him.

He set his face like a flint to go to Jerusalem. No, I'm going to suffer, but I'm going to obey. Our Lord was no coward, and we shouldn't be either.

One of the most striking things about the book of Revelation is that end where it says who's on the outside. And among all the bad people on the outside, two times it says on the outside are the cowards.

[23 : 23] You could have all sorts of faith, or pretend faith. You could have all sorts of moral good deeds when the going is good, but if you falter when times are hard, and you run away and hide, you do not overcome.

You're on the outside. Outside are the cowards. That's a striking and a startling truth. Our Lord was no coward.

Suffering isn't unusual. It's the context of the Christian life. Others have suffered. Christ has suffered. And if we suffer, if our country goes to the dogs, goes down the tube, what does it matter? Christ has still called us to follow him. God has still called us to obey him, to suffer and then receive the crown. Now that's the third point.

Suffering is not strange. fourth, God's providence regarding the nations is not easy to fathom.

[24 : 32] I know that's a long point. God's providence regarding the nations is not easy to fathom. It's not easy to understand. Now one thing that I keep hearing from Christians is, well, it's just over for this country.

America is coming to the end. We won't survive. The end of America is near. Now, may I respectfully say that no one knows the future, including Christians.

No one knows the future. And all this fortune-telling is unfounded will be because God has a plan. He alone knows it.

And he hasn't told you what it is. And someone might say that, well, an evil nation cannot survive. And you've seen what's out there. You know how bad it is in our country right now.

So isn't it true that the end must be nigh? Well, I don't know. I don't know. And you don't know either. The fact is, a lot of nations have been evil for a very long time, and they weren't destroyed right away.

[25 : 46] There isn't a pattern in history. As you look back over history, there's not a pattern of countries where nations were virtuous, and then they turned evil, and then they were destroyed.

That's not how it is. God's providential control, his raising up nations and bringing them down, is more complicated than that.

So think about the Assyrian Empire. We're going to do a little history. The Assyrian Empire. It was the empire before Babylon. Remember, Babylon lasted 70 years, and that was pretty much it. Assyria lasted 1,400 years. 1,400 years. That's six times longer than our nation has been a nation. And they were evil the whole time.

They were evil the whole time. They sacked cities, they raped women, they threw babies over the walls, they crushed, they dominated, they weren't good moral people, not at the beginning, not at the end.

[26 : 54] Their government, their government's policy was idolatry. Their government's policy was violence. And yet, they lasted, and they lasted.

And God's reasons, we have to say, are beyond ours. Or think about the Roman Empire. Now, Rome is a very interesting case because Christianity was introduced, it came into being under Rome's power.

It's very instructive for us. For the first 300 years, the 300 years before Christ's coming, the Roman Empire became stronger and stronger, grew in strength, conquered all the nations around it, and it made the Mediterranean its lake.

And then, at the height of their power, Jesus was born. He lived, he died, he was raised again. The beginning of the church happened, and what did Rome do?

They persecuted the church. For 300 years, Rome, on and off again, persecuted the church. They violently persecuted them.

[28:02] But did Rome fall like that? Did God say, you treat my people like that? Fine, you're done. That's not what happened.

Actually, something much stranger happened. In 390 AD, Christianity became the official religion of Rome. To the exclusion of all others, it became illegal to be anything but a Christian.

Rome became officially a Christian empire. Twenty years later, Rome was sacked and fizzled into nothing.

The point of that history lesson is to say that God's ways with dealing with nations, as we look back in history, it's hard to understand what's going to happen in the future.

It's not simply virtue equals power. It's not simply if you mistreat Christians, your nation is going to be destroyed, your nation will fail. It worked the exact opposite with Rome.

[29:08] God's ways with nations are past fighting out. What can we say about the future of our own country? Only this. It's in God's hands.

It's in God's hands. He's going to do what he wants to do. That might mean a thousand years of unchristian America. I don't know.

No one knows. And so I think we need some perspective on what's going on around us. We need to be careful not to draw conclusions that we can't actually back up.

Now fifth. Here's the fifth steel rod of truth. So the church can grow in persecution. That's the fifth truth.

The church can grow in persecution. The church praise God is not a human organization. If the future of our country is a thousand years of unchristian America does that mean that the church is going to fall apart and be destroyed?

[30:18] Not at all. Human organizations, human governments, human businesses, they need peace to thrive. They need peace to grow. But the church is not human.

We are joined to Jesus Christ, the God man. Our life, our strength, our vitality comes from him. He's the head, we are the body, all of the resources that the church needs to grow, to thrive, to multiply. It doesn't come from out there.

It comes from above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. And so we are not dependent on outward peace, worldly prosperity.

We are attached to Jesus Christ, the living one. Now, isn't that what the churches in Revelation, in the book of Revelation, needed to hear and to see?

[31:20] They were in a situation much like ours. Some of them were being openly persecuted, some of them were being seduced with the prosperity of the world around them. In either way, the call was to overcome, to persevere, to be encouraged, to keep believing.

And so what does Jesus, how does Jesus present himself to the people, to the churches? Well, he says, do not be afraid. I am the first and the last.

I am the living one. I was dead, and behold, I am alive forever and ever. Zion's life and power doesn't come from this world, it comes from the next.

If it came from this world, then persecution would destroy us. And we would have every reason to be afraid, but our life is in Christ, and he's the living one, and he's already died, and he's defeated death and risen to new life.

life. So, what is the worst that this world can do? They can kill us, and perhaps they will, but death itself can't separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord, because he died and rose again.

[32:40] And if he loves us, then, what can trouble our hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword do? They are of this world.

We are of the next. Our life is hidden with Christ and God, and when Christ, who is our life, appears, we will also appear with him in glory.

And so, our future is bright, no matter what happens out there, because Christ is our life. life. Now, that leads us to our sixth and our last point, and that's this.

This world is not our home. This world is not our home. Do you want some encouragement? So you watch the news, it's distressing, you're discouraged, you're downhearted, maybe the thing to do is to not watch the news, and instead, lift up your eyes and look to the heavens.

Who's there? Christ is, seated at the right hand of the Father. And so, Colossians 3, 2 says, set your minds on things above, not on earthly things, for you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ and God.

[33:59] Set your mind on things above, not on earthly things. Why not on earthly things? Because you died already. You died with Christ. You died to this world.

You died to the present order of things. You died to this present evil age. You died to the world's way of thinking about success and failure and prosperity and poverty. You've died to all of that. This world is not your home. You've lost your citizenship here because you've gained a citizenship in heaven. And so you're pilgrims, and you're just staying here a while.

This past week we went on vacation and we rented a cabin. It was a bit on the rustic side. There's no oven, so there's no brownies, no cake, none of my favorite things.

No oven, the bathroom was less than perfect. I didn't like the couch very much. The beds were not all that comfortable. But you know what? I didn't get worked up about it.

[35:04] And you know what else I didn't do? I didn't go to Sears and buy an oven for this place. I didn't do a bathroom remodel. Of course I didn't.

It wasn't my home. Not where I was putting down roots. I was just staying there for a while. And you know what? Some of those things were just uncomfortable. They were inconvenient.

They were less than ideal. But it wasn't mine. And so what did it matter? Pretty soon I'd be home.

To my own bed. To my own oven. To my own bathrooms. To the place where I belong. Now, dear Christian friends, this world is not your home either.

The present is not your future. What you are experiencing and what is going on here now is inconvenient. It can be uncomfortable.

[36:08] It could be bad and it might get worse. But what I want to say is that whatever the present brings, that is not your future. God is storing up for you an eternal glory that far outweighs all these momentary difficulties and sufferings and trials that you are going through, that you are suffering now.

And so he's storing up for you. he's piling it up. He's got a place for you and he's storing up glory and good things for you.

And he's bringing you to that place. And so let me ask you, Christian, are you living like this world is all that you have? Like this world is all that there is, like this country is all that there is?

Have you been living like this is your home? There's many things I could say, but if that is so, let me say this, what a shame that is.

How far underneath your privileges you are living, if you're just living like this is all you have, and this is all you have to look forward to. Listen to what Jesus said as he was meeting with his disciples on his last night with him.

[37:28] Do not let your hearts be troubled. There's a lot to be troubled. Government was about ready to take away their leader, their best friend. Do not let your hearts be troubled.

Trust in God. Trust also in me. In my father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, I would have told you.

I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and I prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me, that you also may be where I am.

What does Jesus say his disciples should do in the face of all the darkness outside? He says, don't be troubled. Trust in God.

Trust in me. I'm doing something far more than you can ever imagine. Jesus is preparing a place.

[38:29] He's preparing a place for you, brother, sister. He set his love upon you. And he wants you to be with him.

We saw it this morning. We have a new name. We're called the ones that he delights in. My delight is in her. And married.

See, even now he's making a room for us. He's making a place for us in his father's house. He's doing some remodeling. In the ancient world, you didn't set up house at some other address.

When a man got married, he built a house, a room, onto his father's family and brought the wife in. And that's what Jesus is saying. I'm building you a place so I can take you and be married to you.

And his heart was eager for that day. He's looking forward to that day when he brings you home.

And so he's saying, I love you. Trust me.

[39:29] Trust me that what I say I'm going to do. Trust me that what you go through is going to be worth it. Trust me that I'm working for your good.

Trust me that I will and I can protect you. That even though you die, you will live, he said. trust me that it's all going to be worth it.

And so will you trust him? That's the application. Will you take just some of these truths that we've talked about, these six truths.

I originally started out with 11 and I cut them all down. So six truths. Will you take them and will you believe them? Will you put those into your mind, into your heart and say, I'm going to live like these things are true?

that's the only way that you're going to be able to overcome. That's the only way you're going to be able to overcome, to resist the darkness, to not be seduced, to not be made so afraid that you walk away.

[40:33] The only way to survive is to trust that the Lord is going to do what he says he's going to do. Now, a lot of people are worried about the future.

A lot of people are worried about our country, but you have this wonderful privilege to look past the present and look to the future and say, what does it matter?

Christ is coming. Christ is coming, and when I see him, I'll be like him. And Christ is coming, and when he comes, I will appear with him in glory.

His glory will overwhelm me and transform me, and in the twinkling of an eye, my body will be changed, and I'll be made forever like him. I'll appear with him in glory.

And he says, yes, I'm coming soon. And so the church says, amen. Come, Lord Jesus. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for these many great and precious promises.

[41:44] Thank you that they are all yes for us in Christ. Pray that we would then believe them, that while everything is dark and dreary, and it seems that things are going from bad to worse, thank you that your promises are still secure, that the right man is on our side, the man of your own choosing.

And yes, you even now dwell within us, and our names are written on your heart, and your name is written upon us.

You've called us your own. You've owned us. So I pray that we would not be so discouraged, so afraid, that we wouldn't let our light shine, that we wouldn't be so discouraged and so afraid, that we would let the dark conquer the light that you have put in us.

Pray that we would trust and obey. Thank you that we can go forward, knowing that our future is secure, knowing that our best things are in front of us.

Thank you that for the endless ages to come, you're going to show us the glory of your grace for us and Christ Jesus. And so we look forward with expectation to your coming, we look forward to the day when all things will be made perfect, and there will no longer be any evil in this world.

[43:14] And so we pray, come, Lord Jesus, come. It's in your name, amen.