

Sermon for Sunday, November 14, 1982, by Dr. Andrew A. Jumper, Senior Pastor
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"WEEPERS UNDER THE BROOM TREE"
I Kings 19:1-18

Text: "But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom tree; and he asked that he might die, saying, 'It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am no better than my fathers.'" I Kings 19:4

Do you ever feel sorry for yourself? I know I get to feeling that way sometimes. That's the way Elijah felt. He told the Lord he was no better than his fathers. But the truth was, he thought he was a lot better. He wouldn't have said it if he didn't think that he was. So there he sat, out there in the desert under a scraggly broom tree, weeping in self-pity, wishing he were dead.

Do you ever get to feeling that God doesn't appreciate you? Or your husband or your wife or your children or your boss or your church or whomever or whatever? Over in the book of Hebrews the writer talks about the great men and women of faith in times past. He talks about how they suffered. He says they..."suffered mocking and scourging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, ill-treated. And then when he has told how badly they were treated, he adds, "of whom the world was not worthy." (Hebrews 11:36ff) Listen, do you ever get the feeling the world isn't worthy of you--of your efforts, of the sacrifices you make of the things you do? Do you ever get the feeling your wife--or husband--doesn't really appreciate you? Do you ever feel your children just are not aware of how much you do for them? And in your business, do people ever realize the contribution you make, the skills you have, the things you do?

Well, I suspect most of us feel pretty much unappreciated at least part of the time. Let me share with you why Elijah felt unappreciated.

After the death of Solomon, as the tenth century B.C. drew to a close, the kingdom of the Jews had split--Israel in the north and Judah in the south. In the north, Ahab was king. Now, Ahab was not the best king you could want, but he was pretty astute politically. That's why he married the daughter of the king of Tyre Ethbaal--a young lady named Jezebel. It was politically expedient for Ahab and Tyre to be allied. Jezebel was a very religious person. When she arrived in her new homeland, the very first thing she did was import her native religion, the worship of a pagan god called Baal. She endowed a seminary for aspiring young priests who felt called to serve Baal. Now, nobody in Israel liked it, being good Jews, but then by the same token, nobody minded enough to rebuke the queen--probably because they liked having their heads where they were--on their shoulders!

However, there was one hard-nosed, conservative die-hard who had no ecumenical spirit about him at all and who didn't like the National Council Churches. He criticized Jezebel and her priests of Baal.

His name was Elijah. Being a prophet of Israel, he was particularly incensed when his number one parishoner, King Ahab, went to visit his wife's church occasionally. Over in II Kings, chapter ten, verse eighteen, the Bible says, "Ahab served Baal a little." Can you believe that? He served Baal a little! Well, Elijah thought that was the same as being a little bit pregnant and he told the king so in no uncertain terms. Ahab didn't like that. He thought the church shouldn't be involved in politics and should stick to preaching the gospel. He told Elijah that if he didn't preach the Bible and stop meddling in politics he would cut off his pledge--and maybe Elijah's head, too.

Being the hard-headed, Jewish Presbyterian that he was, Elijah responded by challenging the priest of Baal to a sort of theological debate. A sacrifice was put over some wood and it was agreed that whichever preacher could get his God to set it on fire and burn up the offering, why that person's God would be the number one God.

Well, the priests of Baal went first. From morning until noon they danced and whirled around the offering and in a final frenzy cut themselves with lances and swords. Nothing happened. Elijah taunted them and said their god was either out to lunch or had gone to sleep on the couch watching re-runs of "General Hospital".

Then it was Elijah's turn. He had servants pour water on the wood and then knelt by the offering and prayed a simple prayer to God. Suddenly, fire fell from heaven and the wood began to burn fiercely and consume the sacrifice.

If you had been one of those watching this debate, I'm sure you would have agreed that Elijah was the winner. And that's how the people felt. So when Elijah suggested that the priests of Baal be removed from the church rolls, they did it--with a sword, of course.

Unfortunately, the president of the Women of the Church--Queen Jezebel--did not appreciate this unilateral action by the pastor and informed him so in no uncertain terms. She sent him a scorching note that said, "So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow."
(I Kings 19:2)

Well, there is nothing worse than having the President of the Women of the Church on the pastor's neck--especially when her name is Jezebel. The Bible says of Elijah, "then he was afraid, and he arose and went for his life..."(v.3) The next time we find Elijah he is out in the desert sitting under a bush called a broom tree. A broom tree is a desert bush growing in wadies sometimes to a height of ten feet. It provides little shade against the desert sun, but it was the best that Elijah could find. And there he sits under the broom tree, feeling sorry for himself and weeping in self-pity. Back there at Mt. Carmel he had won a great victory, but a few days later he is under the broom tree, crying his eyes out!

Does that ever happen to you? Do you ever do some good or kind or loving thing for your spouse or your family or your company only to have them turn right around and not appreciate you? I don't know about you, but it happens to me all the time! Out there in the desert weeping under

the broom tree, Elijah made some discoveries. The first discovery he made was this: there are no permanent spiritual victories. Back there on Mt. Carmel when he had won the spiritual battle with the priests of Baal, he thought he had won Israel back to God. Back then the crowds had supported him and acclaimed him. But when Jezebel made her feelings known, the crowds had deserted him and he felt he was all alone.

So Elijah had won one spiritual battle only to turn right around and lose the next one. And sitting out there in the desert he cried out to God, "Lord," he said, "It is enough. Take away my life."

Well, there are no permanent spiritual victories on this earth. Truth and justice and righteousness must be fought for again and again. Hasn't that been true in your life? You fight to win some spiritual battle in your life, only to turn around and fight it again and again. For example, the battle against lust is never won. The fight against greed is never over. The war against selfishness must be fought again and again.

Isn't that the way it is in the church, too? Last year we agreed to teach in Sunday School, but there are new children coming up into our class this year. We gave to the poor last week, but other hands are stretched out to us today. We prayed for the sick last night, but others are ill this morning. We did a good deed yesterday--gave a cup of cold water, visited in the prisons, supported a missionary--and today it is to do all over again.

No, there are no permanent spiritual victories. At least, that is the way it is working out in my life. Even my surrender to Jesus is never complete, for I keep discovering new areas of my life that must be surrendered and given over to his lordship. Is that true for you? Have you completely and permanently succeeded in your prayer life--or your Bible study--or your devotional life? Well, neither has any one else--there are no permanent spiritual victories and if we think there are, we'll end up in some spiritual desert weeping under a broom tree in self pity.

A second reason Elijah was crying under the broom tree was because he wanted to be popular--he wanted to be liked and respected and followed. Don't you want that in your life? Well, I know I do. But sometimes following the Lord doesn't lead to popularity. Ahab called him a troubler of Israel. The queen sought his life. But let me ask you this: are we in a popularity contest?

Was St. Paul trying to be popular or was he trying to be faithful? In one city he was stoned and left for dead, in another he was whipped, in another imprisoned and in another he barely escaped two jumps ahead of a sort of biblical Klu Klux Klan. You see, Paul was not trying to be liked, not trying to be popular, he was trying to be faithful. And at the end he could write of himself, "I have finished the course, I have kept the faith..."

When Luther stood before the Diet of Worms and was asked to recant, was he trying to be popular and accepted, or was he trying to be faithful? He replied, "I cannot and will not recant. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me."

Do you ever compromise in order to be popular, to be liked? Another--a third--mistake Elijah made was this: he had the wrong standard of success. How do you judge success? Is success always to win, to have bigger crowds and more numbers? Is success to have a growing bank account, to accumulate other economic indicators of success? After all, what was Elijah crying about under the broom tree? Wasn't he crying because in terms of numbers he thought he was the only one who was faithful?

But success must be judged in terms of God's purpose and God's plan for human lives. For example, by American standards we wouldn't call the life of Jesus a success. He was born in an obscure village and raised in another village equally obscure. He never set foot in a major city nor traveled more than two hundred miles from home. He never held a major public office, never wrote a book, and was never even invited to speak at Jerusalem's downtown Rotary Club. The fact was, he concluded his wretched career in poverty (he had no place to lay his head) was executed between two common thieves as a public nuisance (made himself to be king), was buried in a borrowed grave, was deserted by his closest friends (they all forsook him and fled) and was betrayed by a dear companion. Yet, as someone has written, all of the kings and princes and emperors of the world combined--with all of their armies and navies--have not done as much to influence the course of human history as did that one solitary life.

What is your standard of success this morning? What things are important to you? Let me ask you this question: when you get to heaven, will those things be important then? A lot of us are investing our lives in things that will not stand the test of time. I do not know how you are investing your life and spending your time. But you know. Those ways may bring you great success in the eyes of the world, but will you be successful in God's eyes? Do you remember the parable Jesus told about the men who were entrusted with the things of their master? When he returned and called for an accounting, to the faithful ones he said, "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Lord." When you give Jesus an accounting of your life, what will he say to you?