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**Date: August 20, 2023**

**Title: HOW CAN WE EXPERIENCE EMOTIONAL VICTORY?**

**Text: 1 Kings 19:1-21**

Today I'm taking a detour away from 1 Corinthians. I thought chapter 5 of 1 Corinthians was a challenging chapter. I guess I had forgotten what chapter 6 held. I could have shared from chapter 6 today and we WILL touch on chapter 6 briefly BUT... I felt we would be better served if I gave chapter 6 at least another week of study. If you think of me this week, pray for me as I prepare for next Sunday's message. (I know many of you do that regularly and I appreciate that more than I know how to express.)

True or False – Change is hard? Most deem that change is hard. This morning our scripture portion speaks to us about HOW TO CREATE LASTING or PERMANENT CHANGE in your life. Too many people spend much of their lives feeling trapped – bound to one thing and then another – as if their life really isn't their own. It doesn't have to be that way.

Let me ask a few questions here: Qualifying questions - How many of you got up and came to church this morning? (Apparently not everyone did!) In my questions this morning, how many of you are willing to raise your hand to indicate YES? How many of you will probably NOT raise your hand for any reason? (So, a few have raised their hand to tell me that they would not raise their hand. I'm not sure how to process that.) Now, let's get to the REAL questions: How many emotions are there? Psychologist Robert Plutchik contended that humans can experience 34,000 unique emotions. That thought stirs up even more emotions in me. He also said that ordinarily we experience 8 primary emotions – anger, fear, sadness, joy, disgust, surprise, trust, and anticipation.

How many of you consider yourself to be an EMOTIONAL person? Some were slow to answer that question. Anyone care to tell me why you were slow to answer? How many of you are NOT emotional at all? Is being emotional a bad thing or good thing? The truth is that we are ALL emotional people. God made us that way. True – some are more emotional than others. For some, their emotions are out of control. God intends that we be in control of our emotions. Sometimes one's emotions can cause them to lose hope. If we have lost hope, the first step for good change is to HOPE AGAIN! Hoping again might be a simple step, but by simple I do NOT mean it is easy. We are in trouble when we give up hope. You may think that you're alone and forgotten, that you will always feel the way you feel today, that there is no way out and no hope for a brighter tomorrow. But... THAT'S NOT TRUE! God is with you. God has seen your struggle. God has heard your cry, and... "Even when we don't see it, HE'S WORKING!"

God is at work even now to bring about that which Jesus promised in the very first sermon He is thought to have preached: *"I have come to bring liberty to the captives and to set the prisoners free"* (Luke 4:18). If you are discouraged with life and with yourself, if you feel bound or trapped today, I want you to know that if you're ready to get plugged into God it's only a matter of time that you will experience the freedom and change that Christ promised, BUT... BEFORE you can experience change on the outside – or BEFORE you will experience better circumstances – it is highly likely that you must experience change on the inside. If you don't have a SOUL change, a MIND change, a THOUGHT change, a SPIRIT change, it's unlikely that any amount of external change will do you any good.

Now, we probably all know of people who are rich and famous and successful and accomplished whose inner lives are a mess. Their problems serve to underline the fact that one's circumstances cannot lead to happiness or peace of mind. If it doesn't exist INSIDE you, it likely doesn't matter what's going on around you, you're likely to be miserable.

Today I want us to focus on breaking free from EMOTIONAL BONDAGE. We want to answer the question – How can we experience emotional victory? Let me remind you that we are ALL emotional beings, so we ALL have the potential to be bound emotionally. I'm talking specifically about a persistent feeling of

DISCOURAGEMENT, a persistent feeling of WHAT'S THE USE? I'm talking about dealing with RESENTMENT when you don't want to feel resentment. I'm talking about dealing with ANGER & IRRITABILITY when you don't want to be angry and irritable all the time. I'm talking about dealing with DESPAIR when you would rather be optimistic. If you feel like you're a slave to your feelings, and they always seem to be getting the best of you, then today's message should help you get a handle on creating lasting change. I will tell you up front that this is rarely a snap of the finger process. It usually takes time and effort, but it can be done. I also want to tell you that I'm basing today's message on what I've seen and heard, what I have personally experienced and MOST IMPORTANTLY – THE WORD.

Over the years I, too, have lived through some emotional highs and lows. In case you had any doubts, sometimes it is rather emotional being a pastor and dealing with people. One statistic I read said that 85% of people who begin in ministry won't last 5 years, AND... 90% of those in ministry now will not make it to retirement. I don't know how accurate that may be, but it is concerning. Part of the reason for that is that there are emotional people in the pews. Some such people are angry, aggressive, hateful, arrogant, and egotistical. I know first-hand that the lows can be devastating. I've thought more than once (a LOT more than once): "I can't help how I feel." (Anyone else say or think that?) BUT... I've discovered that this statement isn't true. You CAN help how you feel. Maybe not with a snap of a finger, but with a disciplined strategy for taking charge of your life.

What kind of people experience emotional storms? The unspiritual? Yes! The spiritual? Yes! The super spiritual? Yes! Today we'll look at a story in 1 Kings about an Old Testament prophet named ELIJAH who went through an emotional storm. On the surface, everything looked pretty good for Elijah. God had used him to demonstrate His power in a mighty way – not just once or twice, but several times. Then one day, word came to Elijah that King Ahab's wife QUEEN JEZEBEL had put out a contract on Elijah's life. For Elijah, this was the straw that broke the camel's back. HE LOST IT! He lost it EMOTIONALLY. This one whom most thought to be strong and powerful was having what many would call an emotional breakdown. He fled for his life. He left his servant behind. He went into the wilderness, and cried out to God... *"I've had enough, Lord...Take my life."* That is what our emotions can do to us. They skew our perspective and cause us to blow matters out of proportion. Elijah was a powerful prophet of God. If Elijah were here today, he's the one we'd all probably be looking up to. Through his ministry he had seen a DEAD BOY BROUGHT BACK TO LIFE! He had called down FIRE FROM HEAVEN – literally, in a stand-off with the prophets of Baal, a false religion. And... Then he PRAYED FOR RAIN and a mighty thunderstorm filled the skies. Elijah was no stranger to God's power, and now, all of a sudden, Jezebel and her weak-willed husband Ahab were too much for him to handle. And so, he cried out to God, "Take my life. I don't want to do this anymore."

Emotional turmoil makes melodramatics of us all because it causes us to have a DISTORTED VIEW OF REALITY. This is why the prophet Jeremiah said... *"The human heart is the most deceitful of all things and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?"* (Jeremiah 17:9). The heart is where our emotions lie... and we can't always trust our heart because our emotions lie. They trick us into ignoring what really matters, and... They persuade us instead to focus all our attention on things of lesser significance and sometimes on THINGS THAT AREN'T EVEN TRUE. This is why Solomon said... *"He who trusts in his own heart is a fool"* (Proverbs 28:26 NASV). If your heart tells you something contrary to scripture, you better hold to God's Word because He NEVER LIES.

Here is where Elijah found himself – completely overwhelmed by his EMOTIONS. But... This was not the end of the road for Elijah. He got ahold of himself, so to speak, and got straightened out, and went on to experience more and more of God's power throughout his ministry. This story gives us three hints of what it takes to make an emotional turn around. If you find yourself emotionally trapped today, here are three things that will help you find the freedom that God has promised for His people.

There are three steps to take, and I will warn you that the first one doesn't sound so spiritual ... but I am as serious as I can be about it. The first step to emotional freedom is...

**1. TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF.** I'm talking about the most basic of your physical needs – the ones we tend to ignore when our lives become difficult and troubled. Listen for several things that Elijah did in this portion of scripture. 1 Kings 19:3-8 – <sup>3</sup> *“Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, <sup>4</sup> 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 have had enough, LORD,’ he said. ‘Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.’ <sup>5</sup> Then he lay down under the tree and FELL ASLEEP. All at once an angel touched him and said, ‘Get up and EAT.’ (My question – Why did an angel wake him to tell him to eat? – The simple answer would seem to be that he wasn't eating.) <sup>6</sup> He looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ATE and DRANK and then LAY DOWN again. <sup>7</sup> 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.’ <sup>8</sup> So he GOT UP and ATE and DRANK. Strengthened by that food, he TRAVELLED forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God.”* So, what did Elijah DO in those few verses? After Elijah fled in fear to the wilderness, after his emotionally over-the-top prayer asking God to take his life, the Bible says that he laid down and fell asleep underneath a tree. He SLEPT. After a while an angel woke him up and told him to eat, and to drink some water. He TOOK NOURISHMENT. Then he laid down again for a little while longer. He SLEPT. Then the angel touched him again and told him to eat again, because he needed strength for the journey he was about to take. He ATE (took nourishment). He then traveled 40 days to Mount Sinai – He WALKED – and he found a cave and got another good night's sleep. He SLEPT. And... Then God began dealing with him. Let's summarize – what are the main things Elijah did here? He slept, he ate, he walked. Here's what I've observed and even have experienced: When people go through an emotional drought, they often begin to ignore the basics of self-care. They get down and discouraged, maybe even depressed, so they stay up all night, watching TV, playing video games, surfing the web, or scrolling through Facebook. They become sedentary. They stay in the house all day – separating themselves from others. AND... They DON'T eat well – that could mean that... They often eat everything in sight, or they don't eat in a healthy fashion. That is, they don't eat what they should. I'm rather sure that under most circumstances just about every health professional will tell you that these three things make a huge difference in your emotional well-being AND your physical well-being – SLEEPING, EATING and MOVING (walking). Anytime I find myself struggling emotionally, or I'm counseling someone who is dealing with discouragement, this is usually the first area of consideration: Are you taking care of yourself PHYSICALLY? This may not sound all that spiritual, but it certainly is BIBLICAL. God expects us to take care of ourselves. That's why Paul said... *“Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God?”* (1 Corinthians 6:19). Our physical body is the tabernacle of the Spirit. We don't live the Christian life as disembodied spirits. What you do with your PHYSICAL self affects you emotionally AND spiritually. This is why God tells us to RAISE OUR HANDS IN WORSHIP, because when you raise your hands in praise, the attitude of your heart is more likely to follow. This is why God tells us to BOW OUR KNEES IN SURRENDER TO HIM, because when you kneel before Him physically, your heart is more likely to follow. This is why we sometimes STAND FOR THE READING OF GOD'S WORD, because when you physically demonstrate respect for His Word, your heart is more likely to follow. Hear me – What we do PHYSICALLY affects us emotionally and spiritually. Therefore, we need to make sure that we're tending to the basics of our PHYSICAL needs. Yes, we can take that to an extreme. We can take such care of the physical man that we ignore the spirit man. I'm encouraging balance here. My point is that IF YOU DON'T TAKE CARE OF YOUR PHYSICAL MAN, it will likely show in YOUR SPIRITUAL MAN. This means that everyone here – especially those who are struggling emotionally – should put these items on their daily TO-DO list: (It's certainly okay to consult with your physician. There will likely be times when you curtail your physical activity to recover. Just about every time I've had surgery, my doctor gave me some restrictions – what I could lift, keep my feet elevated, nothing strenuous – but during that time it was especially important that I take good nourishment and get good rest.) SO... **1. Get enough sleep.** (Preferably NOT Sunday morning at 9 or 11 AM.) 7 – 8 hours if you can. You may discover that when you get plenty of sleep, you become less irritable, and situations become less discouraging. **2. Eat healthy throughout the day.** For anyone who is discouraged, I would recommend a moratorium on sugar. **3. Move around as much as possible.** In other words, take a walk. Get off the couch.

Don't sit at a desk without getting up at regular intervals. I'm not only speaking from experience, there's plenty of science to back this up: the cumulative effect of doing these three things every day will help you feel better. I'm saying that the FIRST step in getting unstuck emotionally is to take care of yourself physically. No matter where you fall on the fitness spectrum, we all have room to improve in this area. So, challenge yourself to take this first step this week. TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF. Here's the second step toward getting unstuck emotionally.

**2. REACH OUT TO OTHERS.** When we're in the midst of an emotional tailspin, we tend to NOT take good care of ourselves, and we also tend to overlook the needs of others. Maybe you can relate to this: Someone comes to you with a need, and your first response – whether you said it or not – is to think: “Hey, I've got my own problems. I don't have the time or energy to fix your life.” There's something about emotional turmoil that causes us to become self-absorbed and self-focused. So usually when we're not taking good care of ourselves, we don't want to be bothered with the needs of others either. I can't tell you the number of times in ministry that someone has said to me, “Pastor, I'm going through some stuff right now, and it's really got me down, so I can't serve in this area of ministry until my situation changes.” For every *one* time that this may be a valid reason for pulling back in ministry efforts, there are *ninety-nine* times when it's just a self-absorbed excuse. A certain man was going through quite a struggle, both within and without. He's without a car. He's without a permanent job; he's doing part-time day labor. AND... He's without a home; he lives in a motel. Externally his life is a mess; internally his emotions are getting the best of him. One night he walked from his motel to the convenience store to buy some food – not the best place to do your grocery shopping, but his only option within walking distance. As he got to the door, a woman approached him. She was stranded and wanted to know if he could buy her some gas. If you live in a big city, you get this a lot, so he just brushed her off, thinking, “I've got problems of my own.” This gentleman, who is a believer, doesn't understand why God has allowed these things to happen. In fact, this is the emotional challenge he faces every day: he feels like God has abandoned him. But as he entered that store, he began to consider the possibility that maybe this woman wasn't playing a con after all, that maybe she really was in need, and he COULD do something about it. So, he went back outside to talk to her, to see if he could, in fact, help. She was about 100 miles from home, so he agreed to buy her enough gas to get her at last that far. She said she had been sleeping in her truck the last couple of days and hadn't been able to eat, so he bought her a sandwich, and sent her on her way. That left him with \$4 for groceries. He bought what he could and walked back to his room. He later said, “My financial situation wasn't any better. In fact, it was worse. But that night I *felt* better – because I realized that for a few minutes I took my eyes off myself and ministered to someone else.” Now, from what I understand, this gentleman's story isn't quite complete, but his situation is getting better. More importantly, *he's* getting better. He's more emotionally resilient than he has been in quite some time. When God started speaking to Elijah in that cave on Mount Sinai, do you know what he told him to do? **1. Go out and minister to others.** Anoint Hazael to be king of Aram (vs. 15). Anoint Jehu to be king of Israel (vs. 16). And... Anoint Elisha to be your protégé and your successor. In other words: Elijah, you may be down in the dumps today, but you're still my prophet. You still have responsibility and purpose. You may feel like you're alone and forgotten, BUT YOU'RE NOT. You may feel like you have no future, BUT YOU DO. So, put your gifts to work. Be the prophet you were called to be. Minister in my name. When you're stuck emotionally, the temptation is to pull back and do less, to focus exclusively on you and your pitiful world. That's the temptation. Resist it. It's the devil's work to get you to become weary in your well doing. He wants you to stop what you are called to do. In your trouble DON'T let the enemy have his way. Don't stop doing what would glorify God. Do you want to get unstuck emotionally? Find a way every day to reach out to someone. *“God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another”* (1 Peter 4:10). Take care of yourself physically. Reach out to others in service. And... Here's the third step to getting control of your emotional situation.

**3. CONTINUE TO SEEK THE PRESENCE OF GOD.** In that cave on Mount Sinai, Elijah poured out his heart to God. There was some self-pity to be found in his words, to be sure, BUT... He was in pursuit of a solution. BTW

– When is a good time to pray? Elijah is praying when he feels sorry for himself – is that a good time to pray? When you are angry – is that a good time? When you're discouraged? When you feel great? When you feel terrible? THERE IS NO BAD TIME TO PRAY! There are some prayers you shouldn't pray, BUT... There is no such thing as a BAD TIME to pray. God came to Elijah that day, saying, in effect, "Elijah, stand before me. You're about to experience My presence." 1 Kings 19:11-12 (NIV) – <sup>11</sup> *"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, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. <sup>12</sup> After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper."* A MIGHTY WIND then swept through the mountain, but God was not in the wind. And... Then an EARTHQUAKE came and shook the foundations, but God was not in the earthquake. And... Then a FIRE blazed on the mountainside, but God was not in the fire, either. AND THEN... Elijah heard the voice of the Lord, whispering to him in A STILL SMALL VOICE. He listened. He understood. He obeyed. We often wait for the earthquake or the blast of wind or the fire to come along and change our circumstances – but God wants, FIRST, to change us from the inside out. **Before He can change your circumstances, He wants to change YOU**, and that ALWAYS involves moving in the direction of a deeper, more intimate relationship with Jesus Christ. If your feelings aren't where they need to be or your emotions are messed up or out of control, then COME TO JESUS, and lay your burdens at the cross. Let Him speak to you in His gentle, soul-changing, still small voice. Make this a daily priority: Spend time in His presence, in His Word, sharing your heart with Him, listening for His voice, asking for His help, drawing closer to Him. Don't wait until you feel good to seek God's face. Seek Him today and keep seeking Him until you experience the fullness of His presence and His power. The prophet Isaiah said... *"But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint"* (Isaiah 40:31, KJV). This is the kind of emotional turn-around that God promises for His people – if we will only do it.

**CONCLUSION.** When you get trapped in emotional bondage, your mind begins to play tricks on you, your heart begins to deceive you, your perspective gets distorted, your priorities get confused, and the pattern gets worse and worse, because we try to fix the problem the wrong way. We've been conditioned to think: When my life becomes good, I'll feel good, and then I'll do good. But THAT'S the WRONG sequence and approach. This is how it works. **When you DO good, you begin to FEEL good, and your life BECOMES good.** You may have always believed that there's nothing you can do about the way you feel ... but there IS something you can do. It starts with obedience. You put your feelings aside long enough to take some steps in God's direction. Millard Fuller, the founder of *Habitat for Humanity*, once said: "It's easier to act your way into a new way of thinking than to think your way into a new way of acting." The same goes for our feelings. When you DO good – taking care of yourself physically, reaching out to others in service, seeking God's presence – when you DO good, you begin to FEEL good, and your life BECOMES good. I said earlier that this is not a snap-your-finger process. It's a day-by-day process, but... Here's the result: It won't be long until you're running and not getting weary. It won't be long until you're walking and not feeling faint. It won't be long until you find yourself soaring again with the eagles.