

Have you ever in your life felt like a squeezed lemon? All the juices of life gone, squeezed by trouble and trials, squeezed by sorrow and grief, squeezed by tension and confusion? And did you feel at that particular point as though you were nothing but a limp rind?

That can happen to Christians, you know, just as well as to other people. We don't come into the world carrying a card that has written on it, “Dear world, take it easy on Bruce, signed, God.”

Feeling like a squeezed lemon is not rare in our world today. Desperate-Dejected-Discouraged?

Well, some kind of feeling like this must have come over the prophet Elijah. And surprisingly enough, it happened to Elijah immediately after he had scored the greatest victory of his career.

You remember the story. It's in the passage just before our Scripture Lesson. King Ahab of Israel and his Canannite wife, Jezebel, have gotten the people of Israel to worship Baal and Ashteroth instead of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Elijah alone stands up against them and challenges the pagan priests of Baal to a contest on Mount Carmel. And when the dust settles, Elijah is left standing alone – dead priests all around him.

But when Jezebel hears the news that her own personal priests have been defeated, destroyed; she sends a message to Elijah – that she will make him like one of her priests – even deader!

And Elijah – great man of God, in whose presence we would feel like spiritual pygmies – this Elijah is afraid of Queen Jezebel, and he heads for the hills, as fast as his sandals can take him!

He goes south, and after a day's journey into the desert, he collapses under a broom tree. And there, spent, drained, squeezed like a lemon, he asks God to let him die: “It is enough; O Lord, I'm ready to join my ancestors in the grave.”

Now, it's here at this point that most of us would want to ask, “Where is his faith? Didn't Elijah believe that the God who destroyed that drenched sacrifice to Baal could handle a single wild woman like Jezebel? Where is Elijah's faith?”

But you see, there's really nothing wrong with Elijah's faith. He turns to the Lord in his desperation, his dejection, discouragement.

It's not his faith that is faltering; it's his spirits. He is simply exhausted. Emotionally drained. Fatigue. Emotional fatigue.

Not the kind of fatigue you feel after a day of hard work on the farm, but the kind of fatigue that Elijah felt after facing the most critical crises of his life. Squeezed like a lemon.

Now let's see how God deals with Elijah, and perhaps how in our own dejection and discouragement, God deals with you and me.

First of all, Elijah sleeps. Bone-weary under that broom tree. And an angel of the Lord comes and ministers to him.

The angel bakes biscuits on a hot stone and fills a jar with water and wakes up Elijah and makes him eat and drink.

And immediately Elijah falls back to sleep. He must have really needed it.

Sleep and good food. Pretty basic, yet that may be exactly what a squeezed lemon needs to begin with. Sleep and food.

In other words, rest. Being good to yourself for a change. Time out.

Just saying ‘no’ to some of the demands and pressures of everyday life for a while may do more to remove the discouragement, the dark clouds from over your life.

Remember, dry wells need time to fill up again.

But Elijah still feels the squeeze, and he heads farther south in the desert toward Mount Horeb, which we know as Mount Sinai; which, of course, is where God gave the Ten Commandments to Elijah’s ancestors.

Elijah felt the need for a place, not only secure from the threats of Jezebel, but a place also of spiritual significance.

A place where he could retreat, more than the physical rest he had received, a place where he could get in touch with his spiritual roots, in the words of Psalm 23: to have his soul restored.

Don’t take lightly those places of spiritual significance. They can mean a great deal to you along your journey in life, especially those times of squeezed lemon experiences.

Where were you when you first consciously knew Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior? Was it in a little church in your childhood...or at a youth conference somewhere out in the woods where God’s voice seemed to speak more clearly than anywhere else?

Maybe during all of the years with all your striving, competing, achieving, and struggling, some of the early dew of God’s morning has been burned off your life. Nothing will do you more good than to make a pilgrimage back to that holy place of your spiritual beginnings.

Many years ago, I had the wonderful opportunity to teach an Adult Vacation Bible School class at my grandparents’ church in a little town in Louisiana.

It was the church in which I was baptized and spent the first five years of my life; and because we never lived too far away from there, it was a second church home for us.

It was good to be there, with family and old friends.

But the most special time I had was when I had a few moments alone to sit in the sanctuary – in the pew where I had always sat when we were there – my grandfather on my left, parents on my right, a row of cousins and aunts and uncles in the pew front of us and the pew behind us, my grandmother and a couple of aunts in the choir, the stained-glass window of Jesus the Good Shepherd behind them.

When God did call me into the ministry, I was absolutely certain God was speaking, because I had heard God so many times before in that little church.

To sit there again, there was a sense of affirmation; an undergirding of that confident decision for God.

When difficulties hang like a cloud over your soul, get in touch with your spiritual roots, wherever, however they’ve been planted.

But Elijah’s problem is still with him, and so Elijah, the squeezed lemon, goes and hides in a cave on Mount Horeb.

The cave can be any number of things; caves where we go and hide ourselves away from the world: caves of alcohol or drugs; caves of silence; caves of busying ourselves at work.

We all have our own caves; remember, as a kid, if you hid under the blanket, nothing could get you.

But whatever it is, the trip to the cave always represents a desperate craving for relief from coping...from coping with that squeezed lemon feeling.

And so here is the prophet Elijah, great man of God, hiding in a cave: brooding, confused, drained, dejected, discouraged, a squeezed lemon.

To me, this is one of the most profound passages in all of Scripture; because, do you see, no matter how discouraged we might be; no matter how deep our desperation; no matter how distant our separation and isolation; no matter how deep we go into our cave...

We are never out of the range of God's voice. Never. Never out of the range of God's voice.

At this point in the story, God comes to Elijah, and he asks, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

It's one of those questions from God that strikes at the heart of our human condition by revealing the heart of the divine.

"What are you doing here, Elijah?" It's an open-ended question, as though God is inviting Elijah to dump all of his feelings on him.

It's all right to do that. It's all right to tell God how you feel about him or how you feel about your life or about your situation. God can take it. God knows it anyway. God won't wilt or desert you.

And if you're feeling that God isn't treating you right, that God isn't fair with you, or that God has done you wrong, then let God know it.

Because until you let those feelings out, you're never going to get beyond those feelings. And this is exactly what Elijah does. He lets God have it.

Listen again, verse 10 in "The Message": "I have been working my heart out for God. Everyone else has deserted you but me. And now they're trying to kill me. That's not right. It's not fair. Where's the justice? Where's the love?"

And what is God's reply? First, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord." In other words, "Do something, but get out of your cave."

The word of the Lord which comes to us when we are in that cave, no matter what that cave might be, is always the same, "What are you doing here? Get up. Don't settle down in that cave. Don't let the cave become a habit or an addiction or a way of life. Don't stay in that cave. Get up and get out!"

Then God's second reply happens; it happens. Elijah looks up and he sees a great and fierce storm ripping through the canyons of Mount Horeb.

The earthquakes split the rocks; lightning flashes, thunder crashes, and through it all, the Lord is saying to Elijah, "Look up, Elijah. Who do you think is the author of these awesome forces of nature? Who do you think sent that fire that consumed that drenched sacrifice to Baal?"

"Look up, Elijah. Take your eyes off yourself. Take your eyes off your own moods, your own moaning and groaning, your own self-pity. Look up to God!"

And then a silence. And in the midst of that silence, a still small voice. And it says again, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

The God who said to Elijah, "Get up," and then said in the storm, "Look up," now says, finally, "Go back. Get on with your work. I have things I need you to do. And people to be with – you're not alone. Go back, Elijah."

It's not easy; God doesn't promise that.

Yes, we get squeezed, but even so – God's promise is grace sufficient for the task: To give us courage out of fear; love out of loneliness, to help us handle our troubles or learn to live with them when they can't be handled – to make each day a miracle of grace for us squeezed lemons.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.