

*The Moment We Give Up*

1 Kings 19:4-8

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The summer Olympics end today. All the medals have been handed out and all we are doing is waiting for the closing ceremonies tonight. I love the Olympics as much as the next person, and I happily spend two weeks of my summer watching the world's best athletes compete. Regardless, there is a dark side to the Olympics that the athletes may be unaware of—a side to the Olympics that only us viewers experience. Every two years during the Olympics all over the world, ordinary people watch super-humans performing amazing feats, and we ask ourselves, “What have I been doing with my life?” Personally, I become paralyzed by the thought that I am a year and a half older than Michael Phelps. I'm at the beginning of my career and he just entered retirement. I have pangs of regret when I wonder which sport I quit as a child could have propelled me towards a gold medal. Maybe I should have stuck with basketball past 6<sup>th</sup> grade. I've begun plotting which obscure sport will secure my spot in the Rio Olympics in 2016: trampoline? Badminton?

When I watch the Olympics, I'm humbled by the accomplishments of the world's elite athletes, but there is also a part of myself that is disappointed I haven't completed anything so monumental, and I'm not likely to in my lifetime. I know I'm not the only one who has experienced the Olympic Life Crisis. You don't have to admit it publicly. There's nothing to be ashamed of. It's a real thing. The closing ceremonies will turn my disappointment into short-lived determination to get to Rio in 2016, but what really soothes my soul after an intensive Olympic Life Crisis is a story about a quitter. Because there is nothing like a good quitter to remind me that it's okay that I'm probably not the next Gabby Douglas. It is okay to be average, and it is okay to quit.

Elijah was a quitter. I like that about him. Elijah was a prophet whose job was to overthrow the people who were worshipping false Gods. He put everything he had into defeating his opponents—the

word used to describe him is zealous--and he was successful. He defeated them. Right when he was about to celebrate this accomplishment, Queen Jezebel, the leader of his opponents, announced that because he killed her men, she would kill him. She was powerful, she was strong, and she was determined. Elijah was scared out of his mind. He had done everything he was supposed to do, but that wasn't enough, because he was still going to be silenced by Jezebel. His mission was to completely defeat his enemy, but instead of doing that, he quit. He put his tail between his legs, and he ran away. He went into the wilderness where we meet him in our passage from today, declaring that God should end his life because it is going to be ended for him anyway. He felt like he didn't deserve to live. He came face to face with terror, and he quit. He was no Michael Phelps.

Have you ever heard of the phrase a quitter never wins and a winner never quits? Apparently God hasn't. Because when Elijah quit, he has one of his most profound experiences of God. When Elijah was self-defeated and moping in the wilderness, God's messenger appears and tells him to take a break, drink some water, so that he can continue to live. God says, "Get up and eat or else the journey will be too hard for you." The way God cares for Elijah lets him, and us, know that quitting is okay in that moment, and that with God's nurturing, Elijah would be ready to carry on with his life and face his enemies. Queen Jezebel did not kill him, after all.

This is a powerful lesson, one that we constantly learn over and over again. So often in our world, we hear that we are never supposed to quit. Try, try again. Don't give up so easily. Persistence pays off. What this story reminds us is that not only is giving up okay, but there are moments when it can save your life. If Elijah had continued forward without listening to his gut instinct to run away, he surely would have died. Instead, he listened to what he needed, and he took a break. He thought it was the cowardly thing to do, he thought he was doomed, but God reminded him that giving up is sometimes the best option. Stepping back and regrouping can give you more courage than you previously had, and it can give you the rest and perspective you need to succeed. It worked for Elijah, and it works for us.

At work, in our volunteer commitments, in our families, and in our relationships, there is always someone to tell you what you should be doing. What goals you should set, what projects you should be working on, what you should be doing and how you should be doing it. Our world is full of advice givers and well-meaning encouragers. And sometimes, with all these people, our own voices get shut out. We become so worried about succeeding for them, that we forget why we are doing it or what we want. We might become so consumed by someone else's deadline that we push ourselves beyond a healthy place. We might become so wrapped up in what someone else wants, that we lose sight of ourselves. Does this sound familiar? Sometimes, this is the moment when God is quietly saying, "It's okay to give up on this thing. It's okay to let go. It's okay if it's too scary to face right now." When we are at our lowest, whiniest, and most miserable, God is still speaking.

When we let go of what we think we are supposed to be doing, and we do what is best for our own safety—whether that be physical, mental, or emotional safety, God will still be there. Our creator is not the one who demands excellence from us in all areas or require great bravery in the face of immediate danger. Our God understands that we each have different limits, we are fallible, and quitting is part of humanity. When we recognize that we are at our end point, what may feel like a weakness becomes a powerful act. It becomes an entry point to living in a new way, listening for God's words, and moving into whatever we are called to next.

In Jeffrey Eugenides novel, *The Marriage Plot*, one of the characters, Mitchell, takes a pilgrimage to India to work at Mother Theresa's "Home For The Destitute and Dying." He volunteers his time to give people medicine and massage their heads, but he feels like he isn't working hard enough because other volunteers would do the messier jobs like bathing people and changing their bandages. Mitchell feels an internal pressure to be more charitable and more giving. After three weeks of him failing to do "more authentic" greatness in the name of Christ, someone asks him to help bathe a man whose condition, in Mitchell's perspective, is gross. He helps with the bathing, and immediately after, he walks out of the Home for the Destitute and Dying, and never returns. He realizes that as much

as he longed to be able to do that kind of work, he could not personally handle it. So, he quits. He feels bad about this, but it is in the quitting that Mitchell is able to be true to himself and not to the person he thinks he is supposed to be according to other Christians or the pressuring voice inside his own head. When he quits, he becomes a much stronger person. He had been hanging out with a very unsavory character, and he is finally able to free himself from his influence, as well as tell him off in a way that was much deserved. Instead of trying and failing to do what he thinks he *ought* to do, Mitchell embraces who he is, for better or for worse. He finds God not through punishing himself, but by owning his weaknesses, and his strengths, and finally accepting that God loves him just the same.

For Mitchell, and for Elijah, their hardest critic wasn't God, it was themselves. Giving up can be the most painful thing we do in our lives. It doesn't really matter whether it is a huge life changing moment or a tiny one that only we witness. We have been taught our whole lives, in so many ways, that quitters are losers. Who wants to be a loser. The power of Elijah's story is that he gives up, and he still hasn't lost. He thinks he has, but God is still there, championing him, and strengthening him for the next battle.

The moment we give up, we open ourselves up to the opportunity to experience God's grace. Grace is knowing that whoever we are, in this moment, and in every moment, we will be loved fully and completely. It doesn't matter if you are a success or a failure. If you are a sinner or a saint. If you are full of tenacity or trembling in fear. God loves you, just the way you are. Elijah taught us that giving up is not the end, it's the beginning. Giving up can be the despair we make it to be, but it doesn't have to. We can choose a different way of looking at giving up, a way that makes room for God and makes space for a life that is full of lots of moments of giving up, and a lot more moments of success.