

A Study of the Life of Elijah;

A Man Like Us.

Sermon # 8

“Depressed and On the Run”

1 Kings 19:1-18

The story ends with Ahab heading back to Jezreel to bring the bad news to Jezebel. But Elijah was empowered by the Lord so that he outran Ahab's chariot. When Ahab returned to the palace he filled his wife Jezebel in on all that had happened at Mt. Carmel (19:1). Not only had Elijah been able to call fire down on Mt. Carmel but he led the people to kill all the prophets of Baal. Then Elijah had prayed until rains came and Elijah even out ran his chariot to Jezreel. This is a sad commentary on the life of the king of Israel. After all that he had witnessed at Mt. Carmel he should have called for the wholehearted return to the worship of Jehovah. But all that he did was relate the day's happenings to Jezebel.

Not only was Jezebel not impressed; she was livid with anger. Chapter nineteen, verse two says, that Jezebel sent a message to Elijah saying, "... So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time." In effect she says, "Set your watch, Old Man, because by this time tomorrow you are one dead man!" One has to wonder if it was how the events were portrayed by Ahab that stirred Jezebel or whether it was the fear of Jezebel's anger that caused Ahab to report the events as he did.

Jezebel's message had a profound and very unexpected effect for in verse three we read, "And when he saw that, he arose and ran for his life, and went to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there" Notice it says "he saw" not "he heard" Elijah was so convinced of the validity of Jezebel's threat that it was as if actually saw it happening. So he started running headed south and west and he did not stop until he was far out of the land of promise back down to Mount Horeb, which is another name for Mount Sinai.

Though we are surprised at Elijah's reaction and his subsequent depression perhaps we shouldn't be; we all understand that depression is a major problem even to the present day. Every year in America 9.5% of all adults are diagnosed with some degree of clinical depression. Experts tell us that one out of every four women will suffer from clinical depression at some point and one out of every ten men. Researchers attribute that difference in numbers to the fact that men are far less likely to admit their problems and far less likely to seek help.

Symptoms include persistent sadness, feelings of hopelessness, loss of energy, difficulty concentrating, sleeplessness, irritability, and sometimes it may lead to thoughts of suicide. Researchers tell us that depression seems to be spread across all sectors of society. No one is exempt and it's not a matter of I.Q., age or social class.

Some of the greatest people in history have struggled with feelings of depression. Who said this?

“I am now the most miserable man living. If what I feel were distributed to the whole human family, there would not be one cheerful soul on earth. To remain as I am is impossible. I must die to be better.” Those are the words of the 16th President of the United States, Abraham Lincoln.

I don't know that I have ever considered it before but there is more at stake than just personal failure when Elijah ran. When Elijah ran away any real hope for national revival (return to the worship of Jehovah) went with him. If the man who had prayed down fire and rain did not have the courage to stand up to the pagan queen, Jezebel, then it is hardly likely that anyone else will either.

And why did Elijah leave his servant at Beersheba and go on alone? I believe it was because he intended to quit the ministry. He was not planning on returning to take up his ministry responsibilities. Elijah is so stressed out that he has given up on the belief that he can make a difference.

Why did Elijah run away?

1. Elijah was not thinking rationally or realistically.
2. Elijah separated himself from those who could strengthen him.

It is interesting how human nature works. When we get discouraged, one of the first things that tend to do, is withdraw from human contact. We tend to withdraw to ourselves, and that is often the worst thing we can do!

3. Elijah's vulnerability came on the heels of a great spiritual victory.

Many people consider Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the famous London pastor of the late 1800s, to be the greatest preacher since the Apostle Paul. Yet Spurgeon openly admitted that he often struggled with depression. His book “Lectures to My Students” contains an entire chapter dealing with the subject of depression, called The Minister's Fainting Fits, In it Spurgeon wrote, “Fits of depression come over the most of us. Usually cheerful as we may be, we must at intervals be cast down. The strong are not always vigorous, the wise not always ready, the brave not always courageous, and the joyous not always happy.”

He goes on to say many helpful things in the chapter, but one point seems especially relevant. In giving a list of the times when we are most prone to depression, this is where he begins: “First among them I must mention the hour of great success. When at last a long-cherished desire is fulfilled, when God has been glorified greatly by our means, and a great triumph achieved, then we are apt to faint. It might be imagined that amid special favors our

soul would soar to heights of ecstasy, and rejoice with joy unspeakable, but it is generally the reverse. The; Lord seldom exposes his warriors to the perils of exultation over victory; he knows that few of them can endure such a test, and therefore dashes their cup with bitterness.”

He offers Elijah as proof of this point and concludes that in some measure, depression and discouragement after a great victory are part of the gracious discipline of God's mercy lest we become proud and puffed up at our own accomplishments.

4. Elijah is exhausted physically and emotionally.

5. Elijah got lost in self-pity. Verse four says, “But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he prayed that he might die, and said, “It is enough! Now, LORD, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers!”

Elijah’s request for God to take his life does not make much sense if you think about it. He is here in the wilderness because Jezebel had threatened his life, if he wanted to die all he had to do was stay put and Jezebel would have been more than happy to help him out.

“Most of us have our ‘desert days’ of despair. There are times when we forget the faithfulness of our Lord. God seems to become remote and far removed from our struggles. Life seems a relentless, remorseless erosion of our stamina and strength in the struggle to carry on. There seems so much more pain than pleasure in the pattern of our days. Forgetting the unremitting faithfulness of God to us in the past, we focus only on the futility and frustrations of the present. We can see no hope or cheering prospect for the future.” [W. Philip Keller. *Power: The Challenge of Elijah*. U.K.: Bridge Pub., 1984) p. 113]

Self-pity is the enemy of spiritual growth. As long as you are feeling sorry for yourselves you cannot get better. As long as you blame others, you cannot get better. As long as you try to throw off your problems on someone else, you cannot get better. As long as you think, “I alone am left, Lord, I am the only one who is faithful!” As long as you talk like that, you cannot get better.

Notice how God deals with Elijah’s depression.

1. God allowed Elijah time to rest and receive refreshment. (5-8)

“Then as he lay and slept under a broom tree, suddenly an angel touched him, and said to him, “Arise and eat.” (6) Then he looked, and there by his head was a cake baked on coals, and a jar of water. So he ate and drank, and lay down again. (7) And the angel of the LORD came back the second time, and touched him, and said, “Arise and eat, because the journey is too great for you.” (8) So he arose, and ate and drank; and he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights as far as Horeb, the mountain of God.

The principle here is very simple and I will not spend a lot of time here. But to overcome stress we need to rest our bodies. Sometimes the most spiritual thing we can do is not take on another project but kick back and rest. Elijah had spend a great deal of energy fighting for God and now he is physically and emotionally spent. What God did was provide for his physical needs, he provided food and allowed Elijah to get much needed rest. God did not even begin to deal with Elijah's depression or wrong thinking until he was rested and refreshed.

2. God confronted Elijah with truth. (vv. 9-18)

Upon arriving on the mountain, Elijah took up residence in a cave. (perhaps the same cave where Moses was covered by God's hand in Ex 33:22). Now God began to deal with his three-fold need.

- He needed to face his fears.(vv. 9-10)

In verse nine God asks Elijah the question, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" It was not that the Lord did not know, this question was not for God's benefit, but for Elijah's. The question is really two-fold, First, Elijah what are doing? Obviously Elijah is self imposed isolation, brooding and indulging in self pity. The second question, "What are you doing here? Here is not the place I command for you. Here is not the place of blessing.

Elijah responds in verse ten by saying, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life." I want you to note that Elijah completely missed the point. God asked a present tense question, What are you doing here? Elijah answered with a past tense response. Everything that Elijah spoke about was in the past. Elijah did have a tremendous past, but the question is, What are you doing now? A great past will not suffice for the present. We cannot live in a past tense faith. The church can abide a host of use-to-wasers, people who talk about all the things they use to do for God.

- He needed a fresh vision of God. (vv. 11-14)

God arranged an enormous display of his power for an audience of one, Elijah. In verse eleven God speaks to Elijah and says, "Then He said, "Go out, and stand on the mountain before the LORD." And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore into the mountains and broke the rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake (12) and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. (13) So it was, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave. Suddenly a voice came to him, and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (14) And he said, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God of hosts; because the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life."

Elijah is told that the Lord is going to pass by, so he stood in the mouth of the cave and looked for signs of the Lord's passing. First, there came a hurricane force wind so powerful that it splintered the very rocks. As soon as the wind died down, a mighty earthquake shook the mountain with its force. No sooner had the dust settled from the earth quake than a firestorm descended out of the blue sky consuming everything in its path. In each of this powerful events Elijah had looked for signs that the Lord was in them, yet he was in none of them. And then he heard a still small voice – a whisper of God.

Sometimes in the midst of the busyness of life with its stress and burdens and pressures we lose our focus. What we desperately need is to refocus on God. Psalm 46:10 says "Be still and know that I am God." We must learn as Elijah did to look for God in the small things. If we pay attention we will begin to see God in our everyday life, in a phone call of encouragement, or an unexpected kindness or a card in the mail or an answered prayer. God always speaks loudly enough for the willing ear to hear.

- He needed a fresh Commission. (vv. 15-18)

"Then the LORD said to him: "Go, return on your way to the Wilderness of Damascus; and when you arrive, anoint Hazael as king over Syria. (16) Also you shall anoint Jehu the son of Nimshi as king over Israel. And Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel Meholah you shall anoint as prophet in your place. (17) It shall be that whoever escapes the sword of Hazael, Jehu will kill; and whoever escapes the sword of Jehu, Elisha will kill. (18) Yet I have reserved seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

The key here is found in verse fifteen where Elijah is told, "...Go, return on your way..." This is God telling Elijah, "OK, time is up it's time to get back to the work I have called you to." Elijah returned to service much better than when he arrived; his spirits were lifted, his vision was cleared and his commission was renewed. When we turn our attention away from ourselves, to serving others our problems and difficulties will seem less overwhelming. Not only did God send Elijah back to continue the job he already had He gave him a new job of being a mentor to the young man who would one day take his place. If want to reduce your stress and increase your fulfillment find someone you can pour your life into.

Conclusion

We need to realize that we are not in a position to estimate our own effectiveness. When we think we have won, don't be so sure. When you think you have failed, let God render the final verdict.

It is not a sin to be discouraged. It is not a sin to be depressed. It's what you do when you are discouraged, depressed and feeling hopeless that matters. Don't fight the battle alone. Get help. And remember; God is still there. There is no pit so deep or so dark that the love of God is

not deeper still. If you are discouraged, be encouraged, God loves you and He has not forgotten you.