

## **“Life In The Fast Lane?”**

*1 Kings 19*

### **Contemporary Contact**

This morning we are going to explore a part of the Bible that is not very familiar territory for many—the book of kings. Here we find many layers of ancient history, and references to people like “Jeroboam son of Nebat” that seldom if ever come up in a Bible study (thank goodness!). And if you were to go looking for some good practical devotional reading to enrich your spiritual life or to gain insight into life’s problems the book of kings is probably not the first place you’d go looking (probably not even the last!). And so without realizing it you would be missing out on some of the greatest and most practical stories ever told.

Fortunately, even as a kid, some of my favorite Bible stories were from the book of kings. The stories of the great miracle working prophet Elijah so impacted me when I was young that I considered Elijah one of my heroes, right up there with my other childhood hero, Bobby Orr! If Elijah had been available in a trading card, I would have spared no effort to get it.

But while I remember being told the stories about Elijah’s great miracles, I don’t recall hearing anything about the dark episode in Elijah’s life, the one where we see the prophet in despair asking for God to put him out of his misery by ending his life. Even in my later years the story never seemed to get featured in any sermons I heard or Bible studies I was in. It wasn’t until I found myself terribly out of rhythm, off beat and wallowing in the slough of depression that I discovered this much needed and very practical story of God’s off-beat prophet who needed to be re-called so he could be restored once again to sacred rhythm of God’s will for his life.

### **Biblical Contact**

The prophet Elijah lived in a time in Israel’s history that was spiritually dark enough to make any righteous minded person depressed [SLIDE] (idol worship,

greed<sup>1Kgs16:34</sup>, wasteful luxury<sup>1Kgs22:39</sup> alongside crushing poverty<sup>1</sup>, injustice<sup>1Kgs21</sup>). A world very different from ours, NOT! (explain the “INJUSTICE” picture) The evil Israelite King Ahab had rejected his God-given task of leading and guiding the people in the worship and ways of God. Instead, he had married the queen of evil herself (Cruella Deville) Jezebel, and “*did more **evil** in the eyes of the LORD than any [king] before him*” (1 Kgs 16:30; cf. 21<sup>25-26</sup>). Elijah was one of the God appointed people whose job it was to courageously proclaim God’s Word, to stand against the tide of evil and promote the cause of good. 1 Kings 18 tells the story of how Elijah scored the biggest victory of his prophetic career in a dramatic showdown against the prophets of Baal (Baal = the storm-god **SLIDE** pictured with a thunderbolt in his hand). With King Ahab in the box seating, the LORD struck out the 450 prophets on the Baal team and vindicated his lone prophet Elijah with a dramatic fire from heaven home run. All the people watching from the sidelines that day fell down in worship proclaiming “the LORD, **He is God**, the LORD, **He is God**”.

Escorted by Elijah on foot, Ahab had rushed home in his chariot to tell his wife the news. Talk about life in the fast lane. But Elijah’s victory parade came to a grinding halt when the news of the victory was met by a less than enthusiastic response from Ahab’s wife Jezebel.<sup>2</sup> **Read 1 Kings 19:1-18 [MAP] [BLANK]** Rather than admit defeat, Queen Jezebel vowed revenge and threatened Elijah with an untimely death (19<sup>2</sup>). Elijah saw that despite miraculous “proof” of who the real and living God is, nothing was going to change in Israel as long as Cruella Deville was on the throne. Elijah did not run because he was *afraid* of dying (alternate reading), but because he was broken and did not want to die *at her hand*—which would have made it look to all that Baal had won. If God was finished with Elijah, then let God finish him off himself.

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<sup>1</sup> Americans waste 40% of their food. See Jonathan Bloom, *American Wasteland* and stats at <http://grist.org/sustainable-food/2011-03-20-ask-umbra-on-food-waste-and-what-to-do-about-it/>

<sup>2</sup> As Bruce Waltke notes, Jezebel (“not a prince”) is a parody on her name Abizebel (“my divine father is a prince”). *Zebe!* “prince” is an appellation for Baal, who is called *zbl b”l ars* (“prince, lord of the land”). *An OT Theology*, p. 716 n.23.

The Bible always gives us a realistic picture of life doesn't it! And the reality is that even spiritual giants like Elijah are not immune to bouts of darkness and despair. Indeed such prominent Christian leaders as Martin Luther, John Wesley and C.H. Spurgeon suffered from frequent and severe bouts of depression. As Spurgeon said, *"The strong are not always vigorous, the wise not always ready, the brave not always courageous, and the joyous not always happy."* *"Knowing by most painful experience what deep depression of spirit means,"* Spurgeon shared his own struggle with depression, having *"being visited"* by it at *"seasons"* that he said, were *"by no means few or far between"*. He spoke about it from the scriptures and from his own experience to his students so that *"younger men might not fancy that some strange thing had happened to them when they became for a season possessed by melancholy; and that sadder men might know that one upon whom the sun has shone right joyously did not always walk in the light."*

What causes depression & despair? As we see here in Elijah's experience and in general, there are three common causes: physical, psychological/mental, and spiritual.

### **1) PHYSICAL CAUSES** - For Elijah, there were likely physical causes at work.

As clinical psychologist Dr. Archibald Hart notes,

*"Whenever the body has experienced a period of high adrenalin demand, such as coping with an emergency, public speaking, or meeting a deadline, the adrenal system becomes exhausted and switches off when the demand is over...It is the body's way of demanding rest; it turns you off to all interests and saps you of energy so that you are forced into a period of recovery."*<sup>3</sup>

Elijah has just come off a period of high adrenalin demand both physically, emotionally and spiritually and now showed evidence of a lack of energy, a lack of appetite, a sense of hopelessness and self-pity. Elijah was so depressed that he was unmoved by angelic visitors and openly contemplated death in his visit with God.

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Collins, Christian Counselling, p. 107.

What I find interesting in God's response to Elijah is that he begins by addressing the physical needs of servant ("Get up and **eat**"—v.5,7). Some good nights of sleep and a regular healthy diet were the "manna" God gave to put Elijah on his road to recovery. Sometimes we need friends and our family physician to be God's ministering servants to us in our time of need by coming along side us, and helping us get back on track with the bare necessities of life (eating, sleeping, exercising), and the rehabilitating powers of care & prayer.

**2) PSYCHOLOGICAL CAUSES** – In addition to physical factors, Elijah also experienced psychological ones as well. It is well known that significant and persistent stress stimulates depression, especially when these stresses make us feel threatened or when they involve a loss.<sup>4</sup> The threat on Elijah's life came when he was physically exhausted. Add to this his keen expectation of a spiritual revival and how utterly this dream was crushed (by Jezebel's response) and we can see why Elijah found himself in the powerful grip discouragement.

We read in v.3 that Elijah's immediate reaction was to put as much distance between himself and Jezebel by traveling to the southernmost town of Beersheba and then into the desert. The desert was not only an escape from people, it was the natural place to go to have a retreat with God (cf. Jesus). Indeed, after having his physical needs met in natural and supernatural ways he goes all the way to the sacred site of Mt. Horeb where God had met with Moses & the Israelites for a year following their Exodus from Egypt (Ex. 19<sup>1</sup> – Num. 10<sup>11</sup>).

### **God's Counselling Session**

**PART #1 = (a) God's Question, (b) Elijah's Response, (c) God's Response**

**PART #2 = (a) GQ = same            (b) ER = same            (c) GR = 2<sup>nd</sup> point**

**#1 – (a)** God begins with a question that is both a *challenge* to Elijah's thinking and an *invitation* for Elijah to share openly and honestly with him. **(b)** God listened to Elijah's response and proceeded to challenge his distorted and

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<sup>4</sup> Collins, p. 108.

destructive thinking. The LORD began with a God-sized object lesson. The storm, earthquake and fire are all characteristic of divine judgement and seem to represent the ways that Elijah wanted God to work in this situation. But just because God wasn't doing *what* Elijah thought he should, *when & how* Elijah thought it should be, didn't mean God wasn't at work. **N.B.** the line in an old hymn that says, "Teach us to know Your always among us, *Quietly sov'reign* – Lord of our now."

The darkness and self-pity in Elijah's response is more a picture of his *perception* of reality than of reality itself. As one person put it, "Despair is always colour-blind; it can only see the dark tints."

- **Peanuts CARTOON** first frame = "*The Psychiatrist is in...*"

Elijah was temporarily blind to the whisper-like way hundred prophets of the LORD had been secretly protected and supported by one of the courageous believer's in Ahab's inner circle<sup>ch.18</sup>. Elijah had forgotten his most recent and miraculous experiences of God's loving care (fed by ravens & a widow from Jezebel's homeland!).<sup>5</sup>

**Recent email from a friend** - "I was distracted (as always) yesterday evening, when I overheard my [son] telling [my wife]; "[James] said he hates his life", and he said "I am everything He has". I interrupted what I was doing and I asked my son about his friend. I was thinking: "What circumstance could a boy be in to say that a friend is all he has?"

My son told me his friend's parents are getting divorced, and the boy is having a hard time. Well, I did not know this was happening, but my son with his Lego and Bionicle wisdom is taking his friend to [the club program at the church] every Thursday night, and he talks to him (via ipod) every day before bed time.

I don't think my son realizes He is an instrument for big, big hands. I thought you would like to know God is at work in little hands. - Carlos

**Part #2 - (a) God's question = same, (b) Elijah's response = same, (c)**

**God's Response = additional elements...** Elijah needed his faith restored: his faith in God, God's faith & purpose for his life, and Elijah's faith in others as

<sup>5</sup> An observation I gleaned from Bruce Waltke, An OT Theology, p. 717.

God's instruments in a much **BIGGER** plan to change the world. This experience in the wilderness addressed all three.

- 1) God was still there, as powerful and caring as ever. His character had not changed. Elijah could still trust Him.
- 2) Elijah could believe his life was worth living because he was still important to God. After all, God had just cared for him, restored him, and laid out a new assignment—an unlikely team—that would root out the evil King & Queen once and for all. “The wheels of God’s justice...”
- 3) Elijah’s faith in others was also renewed when God reminded him that he was not alone in the battle. God had a whole team of people that he wanted Elijah to anoint (“Better Together”) who would carry on and complete his work of judging evil and restoring good. Re-called to more of a team ministry & the place to start was to anoint his friend Elisha and a band of 7000 believers would carry on and complete the ministry that Elijah had worked so zealously to establish.

### **Life Lessons**

Perhaps you or someone you know is caught in what feels like the grip of discouragement and despair. It is helpful to know that such experiences are neither unique, nor hopeless. Elijah’s experience provides evidence that God is in the business of replenishing his servants body, mind and soul.

Some Life Lessons: **[SLIDE]**

- 1) **God is Faithful** – *so trust his time and way*
- 2) **God works in BIG and small Ways** – *so keep your eyes and ears open*

*“These infirmities may be no detriment to a man’s career of special usefulness. They may even have been imposed upon him by divine wisdom as necessary qualification for his peculiar course of service.”* (Charles Spurgeon)

- 3) **You are not alone** – *so rely on God & others* (“Better Together”)

- a) Attend to the bare necessities of life – regular eating, sleeping and exercise are God-given means for our health. (His “manna” takes many forms)
- b) Talk and listen to others (people & God) – Elijah not only needed physical rest and refreshment, he needed God to challenge his perspective (defective cloud CARTOON). He needed God to help him see that his perspective on reality was darker than reality itself. We may feel hopeless but that is far different than actually being hopeless.

- *“I also learned that there is often a difference between how things are and how I perceive them to be.”<sup>6</sup>*

Surprisingly only about 1/3 of those seriously depressed will actually seek treatment. Some don't know they can be helped. Some don't think they need it. Some are afraid to admit they need help because of what others will think. Some are told by their pastor or Christian friends that they should just pray harder or try to find the sin that is causing the depression. Help is available.

- Support group (“Living Room”)
- “Wounded healers” - that is, people in our own congregation who have experienced depression and are willing to come along side you.
- Connect (or re-connect with God) like Elijah did in his retreat with him to his spiritual roots.

## Pray

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<sup>6</sup> Marja Bergen, Riding the Roller Coaster: Living With Mood Disorders, p. 43.