

Depressed Saints

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St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania

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1 Kings 19:9-18

At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking 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; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." Then the Lord said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

For over three years Elijah, the greatest of the prophets, lived as a wanted man, in a drought-stricken land, even living for a while by a brook, receiving his food from ravens. Courageously he preached against the evil ways of the Baal worshipping king and queen of Israel, Ahab and Jezebel, and his ministry eventually led him to a showdown with the priests of Baal on Mt. Carmel. It was Elijah against hundreds of the pagan priests, yet he would prevail as fire from heaven consumed his offering,

proving that the Lord was God. The fickle crowds now turned against the priests of Baal and they were killed in large numbers. It was a great day of triumph for the Lord, and in a short while the rains would come, clearly demonstrating the Lord's favor with this great prophet and the people's rejection of Baal. On that great day Queen Jezebel declared in her wrath that she would find Elijah and kill him, and upon hearing this threat Elijah fled to the wilderness in fear and soon fell into a deep depression.

What happened? After years of gritty and courageous proclamation of the truth in a dangerous and hostile land, the bold prophet suddenly melted into a severe depression! Its onset was most unexpected and the reader is left struggling to understand just how this could happen. We know that depression strikes millions, and we know that believers are not immune to this affliction, but watching the greatest of the prophets be so suddenly reduced to a listless and angry shell is difficult to comprehend. What are we to make of this depressed saint? We are gown-ups and have some understanding of depression. It is a formidable foe. Depression is not easily defeated, but we are not unfamiliar with its ways, and how we can respond. As strange as Elijah's bout with depression may first appear, it is actually a textbook case which tells us a great deal about this mental affliction. Before Freud and the great psychologists of our modern era there was God's Word, and the Bible tells us so much about this illness. We also can delight to see God's response. Insights and encouragements abound in the chapter and we are wise to pay careful attention.

The great mystery which confronts us in the account of Elijah is the sudden and unexpected plunge into fear and sadness. Up to that very moment it appeared that he was winning a grand battle as the Baal worship which had taken over the Northern Kingdom of Israel was dealt a devastating blow. Elijah *was* winning a grand battle, and it was the magnitude of this victory which contributed to his fall into darkness. For nearly four years he has lived a life of courage in the face of all kinds of threats. Now the long-anticipated victory had come, and it was from the vantage point of that victory that Elijah saw a frightening vision. It was in that moment and upon hearing of yet another death threat from Jezebel that Elijah realized that a great battle had been won, but a much greater war still raged on! Exhaustion set in and Elijah wondered if this long and dangerous conflict would ever be won.

I often think of the stress which a soldier experiences in war time. It is a terrible thing to face combat and to experience the death of fellow soldiers, allies and enemy, on the field of battle, but I am convinced that this is only the beginning of the soldier's challenge. At battle's end there is the relief of knowing that death and injury have been escaped, but then there comes the next morning and the knowledge that there is yet another battle to face! It is said that the great World War One flying ace Manfred von Richthofen, the "Red Baron" began to lose his nerve toward war's end, for though he downed countless enemy planes with great skill, he became convinced that one day his luck would run out. And it did. I had an uncle who fought the Japanese in the

Pacific throughout the whole duration of the war. He spoke very little of his experience, but did once confide to his son that as the war wore on, he became convinced that he would never again see his home. We can bear up against a great amount of danger and opposition, but there comes a day when we are convinced that the odds are against us and that we are bound to stumble. This is not a matter of a sick mind not seeing clearly, but of a very rational mind doing the math! Elijah had stood firmly against strong opposition for years, and then one day, realizing the ongoing duration and difficulty of the war, his spirit broke.

He was suddenly overtaken by complete exhaustion. The song is sung of the bear going over the mountain, and we all know what he saw when he went over that mountain—yet another mountain! And it is at that peak of exertion and triumph, when the mountain is scaled when we are often least able to handle the discouragement of it all. Elijah's spirit weakened and panic took over in a big hurry. In earlier years when a celebrity was hospitalized for depression the official news release was usually couched in terms of this person being "treated for exhaustion." In an age of less acceptance of mental illnesses this seemed a kinder way to explain the problem, but there is also much truth to calling depression a kind of exhaustion, for it is often a sudden and devastating loss of emotional energy.

When I first encountered the story of Elijah's breakdown, I found it bizarre and unreal, but life has since taught me otherwise. I have since met people who were stricken at a peak time in their life just after a great accomplishment or milestone, where much by surprise, they had become depleted and were not able to handle the ongoing life challenges that met them after their great moment of triumph. 1 Kings 19 reads like a textbook case of depression and I encourage all of you to look at the whole chapter. There is so much here which we can hardly cover in one brief message.

Blindsided by this attack of fear and sadness, Elijah fled into the wilderness, and eventually hiked to Mt. Sinai. God called upon the prophet, and the exchange between the two was not pleasant. It began with God's gracious question: *What are you doing here, Elijah?* God then received an earful from this disgruntled servant of God. *I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.* Elijah had become keenly aware of the ongoing troubles and dangers which he faced, but note also the sense of betrayal which he voiced! He begins his complaint with a strong assertion about himself. *I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts.* Elijah reminded God that he had fought as boldly and persistently as he could against God's enemies, and yet unrighteousness and disobedience were still prevalent in Israel. Elijah felt betrayed by God! He had done all that he could, yet Israel remained a broken nation. After some time, the Lord asked Elijah the same question again, and his answer was the same. Elijah was angry and convinced that God had let him down!

This is an ugly display of emotion which we hate to see and hear, but truth be told, we have all been there. Have you ever heard yourself saying, or perhaps thinking, “After all I’ve done for you....” We are especially vulnerable to anger and a sense of betrayal when we have worked hard to be kind and to do God’s will. We expect to see blessings returned, and to see Kingdom work result in visible advances of Christ’s Kingdom, but such is often not the case. As Christians we have many spiritual resources to strengthen us in our walk, but as believers we also make ourselves vulnerable to sadness. The world can wear a callous shell and feel little sadness for the tragedies and hurts which surround us in this world. The world may feel no obligation to help those in need, but the believer feels very differently. And as we feel deeply for the hurting world, and as we serve every way which we can, only to have many of those kindnesses rejected, we can be especially vulnerable to disappointment and sadness. We may even feel resentment toward God for placing us in an apparently impossible situation. We may end up like Elijah.

God’s conversation with Elijah was not pleasant, as is often the case with depression, but God was not about to be turned away by his disgruntlement. God is not afraid of an ugly discussion, and when our hearts are full of resentment and other unpleasant emotions we need not fear for God’s sensitive ears. God cares and wants to know what is on our hearts. Elijah’s anguished words were just the beginning of a long healing dialogue with God. What’s on your heart? Is it something you would rather not present to God? Don’t be afraid. As you well know I am a proponent of keeping a diary or journal, for I have found this a healthy way for one to express all the emotions of the heart. Holding in the ugly and toxic ones is of no help!

Elijah ran away from the situation in Israel, but it soon became clear that he was actually running toward a pathway of hope and life which God was preparing. The treatment began with rest and refreshment. The earlier verses of the chapter tell of him fleeing to the wilderness and sleeping under a broom tree. He slept much as he was exhausted and awoke to a meal prepared by an angel. Having eaten he fell asleep again and once more was awakened to a freshly prepared meal. Plenty of rest and good food are important. From there Elijah began a forty-day pilgrimage to Mt. Sinai where today’s scripture takes place. Note that six or seven weeks have passed, yet Elijah still speaks as an angry man who wishes he was dead. One would be tempted to say that God’s therapies were not working! Truth be told, depression can take time.

As Elijah became rested God was able to speak to him and to reveal his power and plan for Elijah. In today’s passage we hear the famous account of God’s revealing Himself to Elijah, first in wind and storm, then in earthquake, then in fire, and finally in the silence. From what Elijah spoke it appeared that he was not ready to hear more from God, but God knew that the time had come and so He addressed the prophet. Having revealed His power to Elijah he told him of his plan, and of Elijah’s part in that plan. Two kings, one of Israel and one of Syria, were to be anointed, and Elijah was

given the assignment. These new leaders were to take vengeance upon the unrighteous leaders of Elijah's day. God was not unaware or uninvolved in the world's doings! The prophet was also to have a companion and disciple as Elisha was to be anointed as Elijah's companion. Elisha would prove to be a tremendous joy and blessing to Elijah and his ministry as this newly called prophet would go on to do even greater works than Elijah! God had a plan. In times of deep sadness life feels haphazard and pointless, but God was making it abundantly clear to Elijah that there was truly a great plan unfolding.

And finally came the great assurance that Elijah was not alone! We know the anguish of being alone, and this miserable virus has greatly accentuated that sad feeling in our lives. Elijah was convinced that he was the only one fighting for the Lord's honor, but God joyfully contradicted that belief. *Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.* Elijah was not alone, and no matter how the world may make us feel, neither are we! How blessed we are to have the full scriptures to remind us daily that God has a mighty plan and countless believers all around us. Let us hang on to this glad truth as the world would try to drag us down.

In God's words to Elijah we also find a familiar treatment for depression: having a plan of action. "Action plan" has become a cliché in our world and many like to call whatever plan that they have an *action* plan, as this sounds bold and dynamic. God is presenting a truly action-oriented plan as action is a necessary antidote to depression. I suppose that we have all learned this trick over the years. When feeling low, we think of some task which we have been avoiding and then do it. Along with the dual benefit of accomplishing an overdue task and now feeling unburdened from that worry, we also put ourselves in motion. We are blessed in both body and spirit, and depression no longer has the only word.

Depression is a significant foe, the believer is by no means immune to the affliction, and there are times when we are challenged by a depression that a simple action plan will not eliminate. But there is help. And there is our loving God who calls us, no matter how foul our mood, and asks from a heart of caring, *What are you doing?* Let us then join the discussion with the Almighty and walk God's path of healing for depressed saints.