

Succession | Good News from Bad Kings

“What Are You Doing Here?”

1st Kings 19.1-18

11.19.23

Now Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. ² Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me and even more, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time." ³ And he was afraid and arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. ⁴ But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree; and he requested for himself that he might die, and said, "It is enough; now, O LORD, take my life, for I am not better than my fathers." ⁵ He lay down and slept under a juniper tree; and behold, there was an angel touching him, and he said to him, "Arise, eat." ⁶ Then he looked and behold, there was at his head a bread cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. So he ate and drank and lay down again. ⁷ The angel of the LORD came again a second time and touched him and said, "Arise, eat, because the journey is too great for you." ⁸ So he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mountain of God.

⁹ Then he came there to a cave and lodged there; and behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and He said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁰ He said, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away."

¹¹ So He said, "Go forth and stand on the mountain before the LORD." And behold, the LORD was passing by! And a great and strong wind was rending the mountains and breaking in pieces the rocks 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 After the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of a gentle blowing. ¹³ When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave. And behold, a voice came to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁴ Then he said, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away."

¹⁵ The LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus, and when you have arrived, you shall anoint Hazael king over Aram; ¹⁶ and Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint king over Israel; and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint as prophet in your place. ¹⁷ "It shall come about, the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall put to death. ¹⁸ "Yet I will leave 7,000 in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal and every mouth that has not kissed him."

We've been looking at *The Book of Kings* and the period of Israel's history called *the Divided Kingdom*. Here at the end of "Vol.1," this mysterious figure, Elijah, the prototype of a prophet. As Moses represents the Law, so Elijah is the epitomizes the Prophets. You may remember, both Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration. He's evidently very significant.

This passage presents a very stark contrast to last week's. If you were with us, you'll remember Elijah the spokesman of Israel's God standing alone, standing boldly against the prophets of Baal. And in one of the most thrilling episodes in the whole Bible, God vindicated Himself and His servant Elijah. God exposed this evil religion, and the people respond, "*Yahweh, He is God! Yahweh He is God!*"

And it's all very spectacular... and amazing and Israel's God shows Himself to be Ruler of all nature and all humanity. The Baals – these bull statues – do not rule the rain, the crops, and the wars; they're just a figment of men's imaginations and impotent idols.

Elijah is now a national hero... at the top of his game. And then... the mighty man of God experiences a steep dive into deep dread, depression and discouragement.

Right after this soaring High Point, we get one of the most vivid pictures of emotional breakdown AND how God deals with it. That's what we want to explore today:

- 1) a description of depression, burn-out and despair**
- 2) how God treats this condition in his children**

First, the description of this "*dark night of the soul*" (St. John of the Cross): the causes, complexities and consequences (symptoms).

When it comes to the causes of depression, we tend to assume that it comes in response to failure and loss. But this depression comes on the heels of mega-success! Elijah was now a national celebrity. It's time to celebrate not to crash, but he does crash.

We've all heard of celebrities and the rich famous and powerful falling into deep despair. I recently learned that Dwayne "the Rock" Johnson suffers from depression. So, when we look for causes, they're not so easy to pin down. And religious people are often quick to find the cause in a moral failure or sin. "If a person's down, it must be due to some hidden moral flaw or sin." (Book of Job)

And that CAN be the case (Psa 38) But here, Elijah has just been amazingly bold, obedient and faithful. So, this passage actually stands with the rest of the Bible in correcting both the secular simplistic view that says depression comes from losing your job or being mistreated. AND the Bible corrects the moral-religious simplistic view that says depression happens when people sin.

In reality, the causes of burnout or despair are more complex than we often think. Sometimes, it's the sick or sinful and other times the winners, the kind and moral fall into depression. There's usually NOT one specific cause, but most often a complex of roots under what we call depression, deep discouragement or burnout.

For instance, here, there's a physical component. Elijah is apparently physically exhausted and hungry. His body is rundown. Sometimes there's a medical, bodily reason for depression and a doctor can help. AND religious people like Scientologists and Christians may have hang-ups and attach stigmas to the possibility of chemical imbalance or using medication. (Think: Tom Cruise vs. Brooke Shields).

There CAN be a demonic factor in deep discouragement.

Also, there's a circumstantial connection here, and this too is often the case. For one thing, Elijah's life is threatened by the powerful Jezebel and it's not simply fear for his life but fear that his whole ministry and the showdown (as we saw last week) were all for nothing. Is Jezebel going to undo it all? The miracle didn't convince her.

So, the experience of riding this towering emotional wave of success, then, so rapidly facing the prospect of his work unraveling, was a rollercoaster. The emotional "g-force" of such intense highs and lows made Elijah sick.

Next, notice in Elijah, this model of all prophets, the great man of God, notice some of the SYMPTOMS. First, an exaggerated sense of failure and of personal importance. It's repeated in verses 10 and 14, *"I have been very zealous for the Lord God of Hosts... And I alone am left, and they seek my life to take it away"*.

There's a deep pessimism here: *"I alone..."*. Given his recent adventures and what he's seen God do already, his gloom is unwarranted and actually irrational. AND his situation AND fatigue AND emotions AND irrationality lead to another common symptom: flight.

He's run away, far away. Just how far has he run? He has gone from the northern part of the Northern Kingdom to the southern border of the Southern Kingdom! He's DONE with it – he quits! He's tired of being a prophet. He wants, now, to be a hermit – he goes to Beersheba (v. 3) and then deep into the desert (v. 4) – that's big escapism. And THEN he begins to think about that ultimate escape called death. He wants to die – (v.4) *"Now, O Lord, take my life! For I am a failure just like the prophets before me."*

And this is, of course, very close to the ordeal of that other famous, runaway, suicidal prophet, Jonah. Jonah ran away from God and from God's calling and then repeatedly and seriously considers that ultimate escape, *"I want to die!"*

So, a few initial take-aways: since burn-out and deep discouragement involve the whole human complex, let's avoid simplistic one-size-fits-all solutions.

There are often common symptoms, and they may be addressed BUT there's nothing simple about all of this. In my own experience, I've grown wary of advice that begins with a four-letter word (I'll spell it): "J-U-S-T" "Just exercise. Just look on the bright side... Just count your blessings. Just memorize these, Scriptures. Just try Melatonin...Just take Prozac ... Just take a vacation..." A multifaceted problem calls for a multipronged solution.

Elijah, Jonah, the Psalmists (the Psalms are full of depression!), many characters in the Bible and in church history right up to our own day: real, devout people have faced brutal forms of depression and deep discouragement. I think of Martin Luther, William Cowper, Charles Spurgeon. Many godly people have faced such despair that they wanted to die. There's nothing simple about that.

So, how does God treat despair in his children?

Well, again, WE usually cope with despair by either fight or flight. We battle it, manage it, deny it, blame-shift. OR we try to forget about it and “just soldier on” and again, there may be something IN these practical approaches but remember Jeremiah’s words about the false prophets: *“They heal the brokenness of My people superficially, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ But there is no peace.”* (6.14)

The truth is despair or depression is like an alarm bell that goes off in our souls. It serves to awaken us to the fact that we don’t know what we need. Our superficial solutions are NOT getting to the root.

Elijah is apparently... taking matters into his own hands. In a sense, he’s playing God and isn’t that how we got into this whole mess? The prophets of Baal were trying to manipulate the gods, trying to play God. And now God’s prophet like Jonah is playing God AS IF HE KNOWS BEST.

But, in both cases, Jonah AND Elijah – God goes after His lost sheep. He doesn’t ignore the symptoms and all the contributing factors. God gives the exhausted man food and sleep and physical touch (v. 7) and verbal encouragement. These are all good things and they’re often a part of the solution. God doesn’t say, *“I’m in charge of your spirit and that’s all that matters to Me.”* No. He made us; He knows our complex structure (Ps 139, 103.14) He tends to the whole person.

And He apparently moves Elijah to a long journey (notice “40 days” depending on bread God provided – a mini-Exodus). It’s as if Elijah needs a NEW ENCOUNTER with God, a face-to-face sit-down! He bypasses the Temple and goes all the way back to Mt. Sinai (*“Horeb – the Mountain of God”* v. 8).

Elijah is a new Moses. As Moses ushered in the Law, Elijah will usher in the “age of the prophets.”

After God cares for His child’s body, emotions, hunger and needs, God patiently uses talk therapy with Elijah (as He did with Jonah 4.4, 9ff). God speaks as Wonderful Counselor. He asks His beloved child a question and then repeats it. Did you see it? “What are you doing here Elijah?”

You see: in despair we become raw in our souls; it’s like the shell comes off and we’re exposed and vulnerable and God inquires of our raw hearts.

Elijah has come to the *“mountain of God”* – evidently looking to MEET God! Mount Sinai is where Moses met God. Perhaps this is the famous “cleft in the rock” (Ex 33.22). Elijah is perhaps thinking, *“this is WHERE I will meet God; this is WHAT I need!”* And God does meet him there and asks, *“What are you doing here, Elijah?”*

And the prophet responds with this self-pitying, myopic answer, *“I have been zealous, and I alone am left”*.

Elijah doesn’t see it but he’s actually saying, “Lord, in case You haven’t noticed: Your organization is crumbling! Your mission is wrecked. I WAS THE ONLY ONE defending you and I failed. And now, all is lost! Lord, don’t you care (Luke 10.40!); don’t You SEE – You’re losing the battle! I’m no better than my fathers

(v.4) – a long line of failed prophets and failed people – WE ALL FAILED YOU! And now ALL is lost. Do something!”

So God passes by Elijah – first in a storm that ripped the mountain... but God wasn't IN this power display... and then another and another violent upheaval – an earthquake and a fire... BUT God wasn't IN these disasters.

But finally, God comes in a SOUND of a gentle, blowing wind. He knows this is the Wind and the Voice of God so he covers his face. That sound allured the prophet out of isolation and he stands at the entrance of the cave as if he's being born – *“the voice of the LORD makes the deer to calve”* (Ps 29.9) – and once again in the gentle breeze, he hears that haunting question, *“What are you doing here, Elijah?”*

And God adds as if to say, *“leave the cave and look out into the valley and watch this”* – but notice – Elijah apparently stays put like a baby trying to stay in the womb and he answers that question in the same exact way.

But now, in the stillness of God's presence, God recommissions His man and assures him that this was never Elijah's battle to win or lose. It was always God's mission and God's victory was certain. In that stillness, the Lord says, *“Come now, child. Come away with Me; once more into the breach, back into the fray but know that THIS is My fray, My Battle, My mission. And know that my stillness will prevail: the battle belongs to the Lord. (1st Sam 17.47) I am pleased to USE you, but I will never NEED you.”*

And the passage closes with God, opening His playbook to the prophet and assuring Elijah that there's a “second string”, Hazael, and there's a third string, Jehu, and there's a fourth string, Elisha and... Oh... by the way, Elijah – there are 7000 strings behind them. You're NOT alone; this is NOT your battle to lose. This is My battle to win.”

The age of the prophets will tell God's people more clearly than ever that the judgment of the Law – the thunder, the earthquakes and FIRE of Sinai will be answered by the still small voice of mercy, of grace, of salvation. Mercy will triumph over judgment (James 2.13). The great and terrible “Day of the LORD” when fire falls to earth and consumes all the sins of ALL GOD'S PEOPLE from all generations will come in such a quiet, unexpected way that many will miss it. Judgment will fall on a lone condemned Criminal hanging on a Roman cross.

The Voice of the Lord that spoke everything into existence, the voice of the LORD that breaks the cedars; yes... breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon and hews out flames of fire. The voice of the LORD that shakes the wilderness of Kadesh is also the still small Voice that makes the deer to calve (Ps 29).

Jesus Christ – IS that still small Voice, the Word of God, the Word of forgiveness that brings Birth, Life and Renewal and Mission.

The day of wind and earthquake, of fire and judgment will come... but NOW is the Day of the Promise, the Day of Salvation and the Day of the Still Small Voice offering us forgiveness, life and real purpose. I urge you to listen to this Voice of God that IS Jesus Christ. Trust Him.

You know, we all tend toward discouragement (even Dwayne Johnson!). We have different proclivities and constitutions. Some, more melancholic. Some more sanguine (cheery) but despair strikes everyone to varying degrees. We all need someone to tell us it's gonna be ok.

The Christian God is that One we need. He knows about despair, He actually endured rejection and cosmic despondency in the person of Jesus Christ as He hung to death on the Cross. And this God is able to use despair in our lives to open us. Come out of your cave and look at the Cross of Jesus Christ, the stillness that says, "It is finished." The Battle Belongs to the Lord – death leads to resurrection if we only believe.

Q U O T E S

I found that, with depression, one of the most important things you could realize is that you're not alone... You're not the first to go through it; you're not going to be the last to go through it. And oftentimes—it happens—you just feel like you're alone. You feel like it's only you. You're in your bubble. And I wish I had someone at that time who could just pull me aside and [say], 'Hey, it's gonna be OK. It'll be OK.' So, I wish I knew that.

- Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, interview on YouTube (Nov. 12, 2015)

It comes as a surprise to some that Charles Spurgeon had a lifelong battle with depression... It shouldn't be a surprise, of course: being full of life in a fallen world must mean distress, and Spurgeon's life was indeed full of physical and mental pain.

For him, cigars were an acceptable and agreeable means of relaxation when life was otherwise overwhelming. "I have felt grateful to God," he wrote to the *Daily Telegraph*, when "I have found intense pain relieved, a weary brain soothed, and calm, refreshing sleep obtained by a cigar."

As well as recommending such physical palliatives for the mental sufferer, Spurgeon urged patient carefulness in making any assessment of the situation. He knew how quick we are to assume, when set back and depressed, that grace has left us, or that we have become pointless. In such times, instead of seeking a definite understanding of the "what" and the "why" of our situation, we should simply hold fast to God's promises. Having at all times an objective truth that does not depend on our ability to *feel* their truth, the promises of God are like a light that cannot be overcome by our darkness.

– Michael Reeves, "Did You Know That Charles Spurgeon Struggled with Depression?" (Crossway Publishers online articles, February 24, 2018)