

# How to Handle Depression

By David H. Roper

*SERIES: ELIJAH*

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Chapter 19 of 1 Kings is in marked contrast to chapter 18. In chapter 18, Elijah is a winner; in chapter 19 he is a loser. In chapter 18, Elijah faces the priests of Baal, and the Lord is victorious; in chapter 19, less than one day later, when issued a challenge by Jezebel, he runs for his life. Let's review this passage in order to understand what has happened to Elijah and how God responds to his situation. First, let's look at Elijah. Verses 1 and 2 tell us why he flees:

**Now Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. 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."**

This was no idle threat. Elijah knew that Jezebel could make true her word. We know from Canaanite literature that the goddesses the Canaanites worshipped were of the most vicious and violent character imaginable. The goddesses even outstripped the gods of that time in their sheer violence. Jezebel was a Canaanite, a Phoenician, and reflected much of the character of the goddesses that she worshipped. There is one very chilling account in Canaanite literature of Anat, the consort of Baal, who wades into battle with Baal's warriors. There is a very vivid description of the carnage that follows, and how she washes her hands in their blood after the battle. This is what the goddesses that the Canaanites worshipped were like, and Jezebel reflected that violence. She was a very cruel and vicious person. Elijah knew that she would kill him if she could lay hands on him, so he took to his heels and ran for his life (verses 3-8):

**And he was afraid and arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. [Beersheba is about eighty miles from Jezreel. We don't know how long it took him to reach Beersheba, but he was running the entire way.] 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." And he lay down and slept under a juniper tree; and behold, there was an angel touching him, and he said to him, "Arise, eat." 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. And 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." 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.**

Horeb is Mount Sinai--the two terms are equivalent--and was another two hundred miles south of Beersheba. It wouldn't take forty days and forty nights to go to Horeb, which is only about a four or five day journey. So it appears that Elijah wandered for that forty-day period before he came to Sinai, much as the nation of Israel wandered in the wilderness after the revelation given to Moses at Mount Sinai.

In verse 9, it says he came to "a cave." Literally, the Hebrew text says he came to "the cave." The writer of this account has a specific cave in mind. We know of only one cave at Mount Sinai, and that is the cave where the Lord revealed himself to Moses. After the children of Israel built the golden calf, the Lord revealed to Moses that he wanted to destroy them. Moses interceded on their behalf, and they were spared. As a result of that experience, Moses entered into a period of depression and a feeling of worthlessness, and the Lord took him to this cave on Mount Sinai and revealed his glory to him there. This was at Moses' request, for he asked the Lord to reveal

himself to him. The Lord told him that he couldn't reveal his full glory to him; he would see only his back--that is, he would see only some aspect of his character. He placed Moses in the cleft of the rock, the deep cave that is described here, and revealed to Moses his glory. What Moses learned, specifically, in this cave was something of the lovingkindness, the mercy, and the grace of our Lord. It is this cave that the writer of 1 Kings has in mind. The Lord led Elijah to this place, rich in association for Elijah and the people of God, and it was there that God revealed his glory to Elijah (verses 9-15):

**Then he came there to the 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?"** [Why aren't you in the center of things? Why aren't you in the fracas? Why are you here?] **And he said, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant, torn down Thine altars and killed Thy prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away."** [He is depressed. Who of us cannot identify with Elijah at this time?] **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. And after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of gentle blowing.** [Actually, a voice, a very small whisper, a very quiet sound.] **And it came about when Elijah heard it, that 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?" Then he said, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant, torn down Thine altars and killed Thy prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away."**

**And 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..."**

Hazael was the servant to the king of Syria, Ben-hadad. We know both from the book of 2 Kings and from secular history that Hazael did overthrow his master, Ben-hadad, and became king of Syria. In the inscriptions of that period, he is called "a son of nobody" because he did not have a royal background. He had no royal right to the throne. And yet, as a result of this anointing, he did overthrow the royal house of Ben-hadad and become the king of Syria.

**"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."**

(1 Kings 19:16)

The king of Israel at this time was Ahab, who, along with his wicked wife Jezebel, ruled over the northern kingdom. He was replaced by his son, and the son of his son was slain by Jehu. As a result of this anointing, a new dynasty was established over the northern kingdom--the dynasty of Jehu, who was the son of Nimshi.

Elisha was Elijah's replacement as prophet in the northern kingdom. Interestingly enough, it was not Elijah who carried out the anointing of these kings. He only anointed Elisha, and Elisha, in turn, anointed Jehu, and one of Elisha's disciples anointed Hazael. But in terms of this particular record of the promise given to Elijah, it was Elijah who was responsible for these anointings. Verses 17-18 further describe God's plan:

**"And 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. 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."**

This is a description of the reformation of faith that will occur as a result of Elijah's ministry. God will deal in judgment, and those who were obedient to the Lord will be revealed as faithful followers. The Lord will judge

those who rejected the truth. And Elijah will be the one who will carry out this ministry.

The thing that strikes me about this chapter is the description of Elijah's depression. It shows all the classic symptoms of depression. He feels isolated. He not only feels that he is alone, but he actually removes himself from society and withdraws into the wilderness. This is frequently a characteristic of people who are in a melancholic, depressed state. He feels sorry for himself; he is filled with self-pity. He feels he is worthless, of no value, of no importance. He even becomes suicidal and expresses his desire to perish. He says, "I am not better than my fathers." He is feeling a complete sense of worthlessness and dejection, depression, self-pity. We all can identify; we have all been there.

But the Lord does not want Elijah to remain in this depression. That is the point of the twice-uttered statement, Elijah, what are you doing here? It is not just Elijah's geographical location that God is getting at, it is his emotional state. God wants to deliver him from that. As we look at this passage now we will discover the steps the Lord uses to deliver Elijah from his deep gloom and depression.

I am sure you have been following the tragic story of Freddy Prinze, the actor who committed suicide. In my own mind, his story simply underscored what is going on all around us. A great deal was said about Freddy Prinze in the press because he was so prominent, but this same thing occurs all around us. Perhaps it is occurring right here. Some of you may be deeply, deeply depressed. Well, the Lord has a word for you in this story about Elijah. He wants to lead you out of that depression.

There are two things, I think, that contributed to Elijah's depression. The first and most obvious thing was a physical factor. Elijah had spent a long and exhausting day at Mount Carmel. He had not eaten, as far as we know. He gave Ahab the opportunity to catch a bite to eat before they ran to Jezreel, but Elijah had not eaten. He had not slept, and his body had been thoroughly "adrenalized" in the contest with the priests of Baal. Then, on the strength of that experience, he ran beside Ahab's chariot from Carmel to Jezreel, about 8 to 10 miles. The man was exhausted! He was fatigued!

Very often depression can be traced back to a physical problem of that nature--an inadequate diet, or lack of sleep. So sometimes the most spiritual thing you can do when you are depressed is to go to bed and get 8 or 10 hours of sleep. I find that often works wonders. That is precisely what the Lord does for Elijah. He lets him rest--particularly after that long run from Jezreel to Beersheba. He was running in sheer panic, and his emotions carried him that far. His servant evidently gave out in Beersheba, so Elijah left the young man there and went by himself about a day's journey into the wilderness. There the Lord gave him a chance to catch some sleep and fed him adequately and prepared him for further instructions.

The second thing that I see at the basis of Elijah's depression is a spiritual or emotional factor. Elijah was disappointed. If I can read between the lines a little bit, I think I can help us to understand what was going through Elijah's mind as he ran from Carmel to Jezreel. The priests of Baal had been defeated and slain; Ahab had repented and evidently converted, and now worshipped the Lord. Elijah, as he ran beside Ahab's chariot, was making himself a servant to Ahab. That is what is behind that particular symbol. He was there to serve him. I am sure he was thinking that he would minister in Ahab's court. He would have Bible study classes for Ahab and his court and would carry on a great ministry of counseling and teaching there. He would be right in the thick of a reformation that would break out in Jezreel and extend all over the northern kingdom. He could, in his mind, imagine streams of pilgrims going back to Jerusalem to worship. Elijah had it all worked out in his mind--but none of it worked out. When he got to Jezreel, Jezebel got on his case, and he had to run for his life. He is a disappointed man. Things did not work out as he thought they should.

Almost invariably, disappointment is the factor that produces despair and melancholy and depression. We have high expectations of ourselves, and if we don't measure up, we become disappointed. If we fail, we feel badly about ourselves. Our feelings of worth disappear; we begin to devalue ourselves, and then we start feeling sorry for ourselves. Self-pity always leads us into depression. Or, we have high expectations of others and we expect them to respond to us in a particular way. When they fail, we feel a sense of worthlessness, and we become just as

Elijah became: self-pitying, suicidal, self-righteous ("I, only I, am left!"), isolated and withdrawn, and we sink into deep, deep despair.

Now, the question is, how do we come out of this depression? I am sure that in times of depression you have had people try to cheer you up by telling you all the things that you do well and trying to build your sense of worth by expressing appreciation or praise for you. My experience is that that never works! It doesn't do a thing for the person. There has to be another way, and it is this way that is revealed in the approach the Lord takes with Elijah. But, before we look at the Lord's deliverance of Elijah, there are two or three things that I want you to observe because I think they are encouraging.

The first principle is that everybody collapses, sooner or later. There are no supermen in God's family. No one is made out of "super dust," to use Jack Crabtree's expression. Even a man of the stature of Elijah failed, and failed miserably. We sometimes forget that is true. There is a philosophy of sport that says, "Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing." I suppose that if you are going into an athletic contest, that mindset is a good approach. But if we apply that philosophy to our Christ-life, it is very unrealistic and destructive because we don't always appear to win. We lose. We fail. We look weak, and appear inadequate, and look like we are less than men. It happens to all of us; it happened to Elijah. Even the Lord became discouraged. The Bible says that in the garden [of Gethsemane], as he was praying, he began to be very heavy. The term actually means "to be away from home." He began to feel homesick. All of you have felt the sense of heaviness that comes from being homesick. A sort of anxiety and dread and despair grips you. That is what the Lord experienced. He experienced it, but he did not give way to it

So we should not be surprised when we are tempted to be discouraged and despairing. We don't have to give way to it. But if we do give way to it, we need to understand that even there the Scriptures make room for us, because the Bible is very realistic in its expectations for us. For instance, 1 John 2 says, "I write these things to you that you might not sin." And that is true. We don't have to sin. But John goes right on to say, "And when you do sin, you have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous one." The Bible does set before us the standard of God himself. We are to be God-like. But the Lord knows our makeup. He knows we are weak. He understands our failures, and he is not put off by them. He doesn't reject us when we fail--he understands. And, therefore, we ought not to be despairing when we fail.

The second principle is that a collapse of this nature often comes right on the heels of great conquest. It is when we are flushed with victory that we are often most prone to fall into discouragement and despair. What happens is that often, without realizing it, there is a subtle transference of our dependence on God to ourselves. Particularly after some great victory, we start to feel that we have really had a hand in it, after all, and we begin to trust our ability to work things out. Satan begins to exploit that weakness, and we fail--we fail miserably. We fail with a flourish!

Perhaps the best illustration of this in the Old Testament is the story of the Israelites' defeat at Ai. It occurred right after the victory at Jericho. Joshua and the people had destroyed Jericho. That was their first contact with the Canaanites, and they had been victorious. They marched away from Jericho and went up into the highland and launched an attack against Ai. Having previously spied out that little mound, they found no walls (archaeologists have found no evidence of walls there during Joshua's time), for the people there were a group of Canaanite squatters in tents. The Israelites said, "let's not worry all the people--let's just send two or three thousand to fight them." And they were disastrously defeated. They didn't realize there was a problem back in the camp. Had they depended on the Lord, he would have revealed that problem, but they felt that they were competent, and they failed. It says, "And the heart of the people turned to water" (Joshua 7:5). They became terribly depressed and discouraged. So times of victory are times when we ought to be especially alert. Paul says, "When you stand' take heed lest you fall" (1 Corinthians 10:12).

The third thing I would say, and I think this is the most important, is that despite Elijah's failure, the Lord loves him and takes steps to deliver him. That is always the Lord's response to our failure. He takes whatever measures are necessary to restore us to a place of fruitfulness and blessing.

In Scribe School, we have been looking at some of the "servant songs," in the book of Isaiah. These are descriptions of the ministry of the servant. They first seem to refer to Isaiah, then to the believing remnant in Israel, and ultimately to the Lord himself. In one of the servant songs (see Isaiah 49), the Lord promises the servant that he will be like a sword in the Lord's mouth. The servant responds by saying, "Ah, Lord, I have failed! My strength is given for nothing." That is, "I don't seem to have that kind of ministry." He evidently had been teaching a study and everybody went to sleep. Nobody seemed to respond, and he says, "I have failed! I have failed terribly!" And the Lord said, "Is it too little a thing that you should be a servant to my nation, to Israel? I will make you a light to the nations." God is not cutting him back, he is not trimming him back to a more manageable ministry; he is saying, "I'm going to give you more to do."

That is the Lord's response to our failure. When we fail he doesn't say, "Well, let's tailor-make a smaller ministry; that seems to be all that you are qualified to do." No, he says, "let's do something even greater than you did before." We say, "Lord, I have failed." He says, "That doesn't matter. I have a bigger thing for you to do." So, if this has been a week of failure for you, you should know that you have not been disqualified; God has a greater thing for you this week. He hasn't turned away from you. His desire is to provide everything that you need to face whatever demands are laid upon you this week

Finally, let's look at how the Lord leads Elijah out of his despair. I have already mentioned that he takes care of his physical needs, and often that is the starting place. Those need to be taken care of before you can move on to the next step. But it is God's ultimate desire to take us on to a spiritual solution, that is, to meet the deepest emotional and spiritual needs that we have.

So God takes Elijah to Mount Sinai, because Sinai is the place of revelation. It was rich in associations for Elijah and for God's people. That is where God revealed himself to Moses, and that is where he would reveal himself to Elijah. He hides Elijah in the rock. Actually, Elijah hid himself in the rock first, and then the Lord drew him out. God asks him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" His concern is not for Elijah's geographical location so much as his emotional state. "What are you doing here, Elijah, under this pile?" I once heard Howard Hendricks ask a man how he was. The man said, "I'm doing all right, under the circumstances." Dr. Hendricks said, "Well, what are you doing under there?" That is what the Lord is saying to Elijah. "What are you doing here? You ought to be in the thick of things. You ought to be back at Jezreel, up to your ears in ministry there. Why are you under this pile, Elijah?"

In order to draw Elijah out, the Lord begins to reveal to Elijah who he is--not who Elijah is, but who the Lord is. That is always the Lord's way. If we have problems with our own self-worth, he doesn't try to build our worth by telling us who we are. That does no good. What he wants to do is transfer our preoccupation from ourselves to him. Unfortunately, verse 3 of chapter 19 is mistranslated in the New American Standard. It says that Elijah "was afraid" and arose and ran for his life. But the side note reads, "And he saw...." That is really what the text says. He saw. And that was the problem--it was what Elijah saw. Elijah saw Jezebel. He saw his circumstances. He saw his own inadequacy and he ran from that. The Lord wants to transfer Elijah's vision from Elijah, and his preoccupation with himself, onto the Lord, and who the Lord is. He can only do that by revealing himself at the place of revelation, which, for Elijah, was Mount Sinai, or Mount Horeb. For us, it is the Word of God. Verse 11 says that the Lord "passed by." There are only two places in the Old Testament where the Lord passes by. One is in the Exodus 33 passage, when he passed by Moses when he was in the cleft of the rock, and this is the other.

**And a great and strong wind was rending the mountain and breaking in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire [or lightning], but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of gentle blowing.**

Now, sometimes the Lord does reveal himself in earthquake and fire and noise and thunder, and very obvious displays of power. He had, at Mount Carmel. But that is not normally the way he works. Normally, he operates through very quiet, unnoticed, imperceptible ways, through the quiet ministry of men and women who are committed to Jesus Christ as Lord. You see, Elijah's problem was that he thought God always operated in thunder and in lightning and in power. He was expecting these obvious displays. I think he thought that God would hit

Jezebel with a lightning bolt when she fired off that threatening message to him. But that didn't happen. And so, Elijah became disappointed because he didn't get his way. Things didn't go as he thought they should. He didn't realize how God works.

We don't always see God at work. He does things in very quiet ways, and works in lives that we may never know about. Because Elijah didn't see God act as he thought God should act, he became despondent. God wants Elijah to see how he does act. He wants Elijah to get his eyes off of himself and his own expectations, and put his eyes on the Lord. He wants Elijah to see that he is going to continue to work through his life, but it will be in ways that are not obvious. Elijah is to appoint another man, Elisha, to be his successor. That man would set in motion the forces that eventually would topple Ahab and Jezebel from the throne and bring in the Syrians as the rod of God, to discipline God's people.

Elijah's ministry from this point on would be a very quiet, behind-the-scenes ministry. It wouldn't be obvious, but it would be powerful. And the reformation and purification of God's people that Elijah was looking for would be accomplished through the gentle and quiet blowing of the wind of God through Elijah's life. That is what Elijah needed to see. He needed to see who the Lord was, and what the Lord would do. And that is what we need to see. The secret to overcoming depression is to get your eyes off yourself and onto the Lord, as he is revealed in his Word.

Now, in balance to this, I want to point out that I am not saying that a verse of Scripture a day will keep depression away. This is not a magic book. Some people read the Bible like other people rub Buddha's tummy. That is not the way you use the Bible. This is God's Word. It is infallible, inspired, authoritative. I have no doubt about that. But it does you no good unless you are willing to submit to it. Just to read the Bible as a sort of talisman does nothing. But if we read it to see God, and we subject ourselves to him, then it works. It begins to change us. Our responsibility is to turn away from ourselves and our self-pity and our preoccupation with ourselves, and focus our attention on the Lord, as we see him revealed in his Word. And we can do it. Satan's biggest lie is that you are trapped, that you are tyrannized by your thoughts and cannot turn away from yourself, you have to be self-pitying. That is the lie that Jesus died to free us from. We are not in bondage to our feelings and our thoughts. We are not tyrannized by our moods. We can turn away from ourselves and fix our eyes on the Lord. We can! But we have to choose. It is our choice.

In the book of Isaiah, there is another servant song in chapter 50. In this passage, the servant has the same problem as Elijah. He is called upon to minister to God's people and he feels his own inadequacy, his lack of ability to handle that assignment. He states, at the very outset, that "the Lord has given me the tongue of one who is taught, that I may know how to speak a word to a weary person (to spring to the aid of one who is weary)." He describes how the Lord has opened his ears to hear as he has been taught the word and he has responded to it. Now he is able to minister to others. But, in so doing, they reject him, they don't listen. They ridicule him. He begins to experience what Elijah did. But he counters it by the statement, "I gave my back to the smiter, I offered my face to those who pluck out the beard; I don't cover my face from those who humiliate me and who spit at me. For the Lord helps me, therefore, I am not ashamed; therefore I have set my face like a flint; therefore I am not disappointed."

In this song, Isaiah is doing what the Lord is leading Elijah to do. He is getting his eyes off of himself, and he is centering himself upon the Lord, who is able to give help. And the result, he says, is that he is not disappointed. The Lord lifts him out of his gloom and his depression and his moodiness, and he is able to set his face like a flint, and carry out to the fullest extent the ministry that God has given to him.

God will do the same thing for us. If you are here in a dark mood, if you got up this morning terribly depressed and discouraged, feeling your own weakness and sensing your inadequacy, it is the Lord who will help you. He is able to deliver you from that mood, if you choose to see him instead of yourself. David says in Psalm 42, "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?" He is actually carrying on a dialogue with his own soul, his emotions. "Why are you depressed? Hope in God, for I shall yet trust him who is my salvation, and the health of my countenance." So if you are depressed and discouraged this morning, it is the Lord who is the

source of your help. Look at him, as he is revealed in the Word. It may take some time for your emotions to catch up, but the Lord will deliver you and give you again the fruitful, effective ministry that your heart longs for.

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