

“Defeating Discouragement and Depression In Life and Ministry: Lessons learned from the life and ministry of Elijah”

Dr. Joel Tetreau,

Senior Pastor, *Southeast Valley Baptist Church* (Gilbert, AZ)

Western Regional Coordinator, *Institute of Biblical Leadership* (Lake Lure, NC)

Over the decades of pastoral ministry, I have noticed an alarming rate of the Lord’s servants suffering from major discouragement and depression. What has been especially difficult and alarming is the number of presentations I have listened to that seem to indicate that this discouragement comes to those who are in some way, “weak” and “sinful.” Often times the listener goes away with the sense that if only I were “more holy,” or perhaps “more disciplined” I would be able to “break free” from these feelings of discouragement.

You will remember that in 1 Kings, chapter 18, Elijah experiences a great victory on Mount Carmel. After this victory, including the execution of the prophets of Baal, God sends rain and helps Elijah win a “foot race,” against the chariot of Ahab to Jezreel. I believe it would be obvious to say that Elijah has a full day in chapter 18. It also seems clear from the text, that Elijah was experiencing victory in life and ministry. However, when you come to the next chapter (chp 19) you will notice a major change in demeanor. Our victorious, triumphant Elijah becomes fearful, depressed, and despondent. Wow, what a change! The reason I mention this portion of the OT is because it is very instructive for God’s servants today. I believe you will notice some very interesting parallels as to the cause and then solution of this type of ministry and life depression. Notice what I believe to be contributing factors to Elijah’s depression.

#1 – Faces A Time of Transition_____ From what we can determine here in this portion of 1 Kings, Elijah is going to be transitioning into a new phase of prophetic ministry, namely that of “mentoring” the next major spiritual leader, Elisha. This marks the beginning of the end of Elijah’s ministry. Counselors (both “Biblical” and “Secular”) will tell you that people are most susceptible to discouragement when they find themselves in the middle of a “life-transition.” I believe that this is no different for the Lord’s servants.

#2 – Failed Expectations_____ It seems very apparent from these chapters that Elijah expected Israel to turn back to Jehovah. Not only does that not happen but also the queen is after his “neck!” This again rings true with those involved in day to day life and ministry. How common it is for a pastor to feel like a failure on Monday morning, a Christian School teacher to feel unloved because they struggle with not getting a raise in salary when others in the ministry structure do! A Bible Camp Director when out of a dozen supporting churches, he can only muster up 3 to help during “clean up week!” You get the picture. These types of “failed expectations” can easily propel us into self-pity and discouragement.

#3 – Physical Exhaustion_____ Let’s not forget Elijah’s journey here. Remember it all began on Mount Carmel. After his victory, he runs all the way to “the entrance of Jezreel.” After getting word that the queen is out to get him, he continues his journey all the way to Beer-sheba where he drops off his servant and then runs 15 more miles (a day’s journey) into the middle of the Negev desert, finds a tree and essentially collapses. When you add it all up, that’s more than 80 miles! We think that was all in about a day and a half! Well, how would you feel after running over 3 marathons in a short period of time! The text seems to describe this journey as anything but “calm.” Very clearly, he is running for his life. Very clearly, God’s servant is physically tired.

#4 – Spiritual Exhaustion_____ Without a doubt, “ministry” takes something out of you. Anyone who has tried to counsel or help others in time of crisis knows that “ministry burns energy.” As you think of Elijah here, let’s not forget that he had spent the entire previous day doing battle – not just expending physical energy; he was involved in spiritual battle! All ministry, if it is God-honoring, will be involved in this type of “spiritual warfare.” Paul does not stutter when he proclaims in Ephesians 6:12, *“For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against powers, against the rulers of the*

darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.” When you give of yourself in ministry there is a spiritual and I believe emotional drain that takes place.

#5 – Isolated Himself_____ When you come down to 1 Kings 19:4, the prophet here is all alone. You will remember that back in Beer-sheba, Elijah drops his servant off. Elijah is all alone. We really don’t need to be surprised that Elijah actually thinks that he’s all that’s left for Jehovah. That is a normal feeling when you’ve isolated yourself from everyone else! God was good later in the text to remind Elijah that, “no son, you’re not alone, I have another 7,000 in Israel who have not bowed to Baal.

#6 – Overtaken by Fear_____ When we look at all of these other contributing factors to Elijah’s “burn-out,” it should not surprise us that God’s servant is taken over with fear. This is the same guy who in faith, takes on 450 prophets of Baal (chp 18), is fed at the brook Cherith (chp 17) and then later that same chapter tells the widow at Zarephath to, “Fear not” concerning enough food for himself, her and her son. The point here is this, Elijah was no spiritual wimp. He has seen first hand God’s supernatural hand of deliverance. I only mention this to point out that “panic,” and “depression” are not only characteristic only of the “unspiritual.” It often attacks believer’s who for years have faithfully and selflessly served the Lord. Many of God’s choicest servants both in scripture and throughout history have wrestled with this.

Well, What’s the answer? Notice with me that God helps Elijah in this time of depression by focusing on several issues. First, God allows Elijah to have victory over depression from the physical sphere. Then the spiritual sphere. And last, the relational sphere.

A. Attacking depression from the _____ Physical Sphere _____ . Vv. 5-8

1. ___Healthy Sleep_____
2. ___Healthy Eating_____
3. ___Healthy Drinking_____
4. ___Healthy Life Balance_____

B. Attacking depression from the _____ Spiritual Sphere _____ . Vv. 9-18

1. ___Spends Time in Prayer_____
2. ___Listening to the Word of God_____

C. Attacking depression from the _____ Sphere of Relationships _____ .

1. _____
2. _____

By way of conclusion, when you’re tired and feel like Elijah in 1 Kings 19, remember the words of Elisha (to his fearful servant in Dothan) in 2 Kings 6, *“Fear not; for they who are with us are more than they who are with them.”* Praise God we serve a Lord who says, *“I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee (Heb 13:5).”*