

UNDER A JUNIPER TREE
1 Kings 19
see H. Stephen Shoemaker, “Elijah the Prophet,” *GodStories*

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First Baptist Church
Amarillo, Texas
July 11, 2021

We come to our second sermon in our three-part sermon series on Elijah. In our first sermon, Elijah the prophet pounced onto the scene, pounced onto Ahab like a cat pouncing on a mouse. He came from nowhere – he was swift – and he said, “There will be neither dew nor rain until I give the command.”

He himself retreated to the brook Kerith, and the birds brought him bread and meat, both morning and evening. He had seen the provision of God. Also, he’d seen the miraculous work of God in the life of the widow who housed him and protected him and fed him.

Because of her faith, God gave her an unceasing supply of oil and flour when she was at the end of the barrel. In fact, she had experienced no less than the resurrection power of God. When the widow’s son grew ill and died, Elijah had called out three times: Lord, let life return. Lord, let life return. Lord, let life return. And the child was, literally, resurrected.

Also, he had experienced the power of God on Mount Carmel — one of the greatest acts of God in the Old Testament. More than 450 prophets of Baal against the one prophet of God – Elijah. Two altars built – one to Baal and one to Yahweh. The bulls prepared and laid upon the altars. The wood carefully in place. The 450 prophets of Baal, hour after hour, called upon their God, even torturing themselves to get his attention, trying to light the fire by the power of Baal, the god of fertility. But there is no fire. They dance and they prance – they’re in full motion, but there is no motion of fire.

Then Elijah adds water to the wood to make sure everybody understands that when God acts, God acts by unstoppable power. He prays. Fire falls down from heaven and burns the bull, the wood, the stones, and laps up the water. The people shout out in unison: Yahweh is God. Yahweh is God.

Remembering Moses’ commandment that false prophets are to perish, he shouts to the people of ancient Israel – now gathered and energized by their common proclamation of the Lordship of Yahweh – “Seize the prophets of Baal and kill all 450 of them.”

Then, after no rain for three and one-half years, the ground cracked and parched – now, according to God’s promise, the drought ends. It starts with a cloud, no bigger than a man’s hand, rising up out of the sea. Then there is the sweet, heavy rain. Elijah ran ahead of Ahab’s chariots – 17 miles he ran – outrunning the horses all the way back to Jezreel. After seeing God work like that, you could have run the race, too.

Isn't it glorious to follow God when He acts so openly, plainly, and faithfully on our behalf?

But what if God is silent? What if there is no powerful, merciful, gracious intervention from God? What if the flour and oil do run out? What if the ravens don't come? What if no fire blazes down from heaven? Then what?

Congregation, the second sermon could not be more different from the first. We have gone with Elijah to Mount Carmel where God acted in such a visible way that we feel anyone would be a fool not to believe in God. People, in unison, shouted the Lordship of Yahweh. Now we go with this same prophet to Mount Horeb, where God is silent, and we wonder if anyone but a fool could believe in God.

Jezebel, that idol-worshipping wife of Ahab, got word of what Elijah had done to her prophets. "You tell Elijah that if I don't make him as dead as those prophets of mine, may the gods do worse to me. I'll have the job done in twenty-four hours" (19:2). He is frightened. He runs --- runs for his life -- all the way to Beersheba. He leaves his servant, abandons his ministry, and runs.

Trembling with fear, sick with despair, overcome by self-pity, Elijah sat down under the juniper tree (19:4). "I've had it, Lord. It's enough. Go ahead and take my life. Let's end it all right now. I'm the only one who's left who really serves you."

Have you ever been under the juniper tree with Elijah, when you're so sad you don't think you'll ever be happy again? When depression is ravaging your mind, your spirit, and your body? When you have despair and a sense of hopelessness, of failure, shame, self-doubt.

Sometimes the lowest lows come after the highest highs. Fire from heaven is often followed by fear from hell. And Horeb awaits us after Mt. Carmel.

In the book *Reclaiming the Fire*, Steven Berglass suggests one of the major causes of emotional collapse among successful workers is encore anxiety. He describes this as the ongoing fear that you won't be able to repeat or sustain earlier achievement.

We, like Elijah, sometimes have our downest days after our greatest days. It's after our Mount Carmel experience that we find ourselves at Mount Horeb. "After the baby is born." "After the move is made." "After the dissertation is written." "After the wedding is celebrated." With every wave of success it seems like there is an undertow of depression.

There is no high higher than the high of walking on the moon. In fact, Buzz Aldrin, the astronaut who walked on the moon, discovered there is not much left in life to do after you've already zoomed to the zenith. In his autobiographies *Return to Earth* and *Magnificent Desolation*, we have accounts of his struggles with clinical depression and alcoholism in the years following his NASA career. For Buzz Aldrin, going from the moon to the mundane was just too much.

When depression sets in, we have sleep loss, chronic exhaustion, a feeling of hopelessness, acute anxiety about being overwhelmed. We feel washed up, burned out, hopeless and helpless. We exhibit poor concentration, general irritability, unprovoked anger, resentment toward others, an

inability to sleep, and an increased or decreased appetite. And our emotional and physical health is at risk.

Psychologist E. Carol Webster, who deals with success stress, says we experience depression from reaching the top and then feeling that there is nowhere else to go. (<http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1995-05-21>)

Let's look at the symptoms of the depression that Elijah is experiencing.

1. First of all, he had a depreciation of his self-worth (19:4).

Look at chapter 19, verse 4. "I'm worthless," he seems to be saying. "I am no better than my ancestors."

Once, I buried a 31-year-old computer genius. He had been valedictorian of his high school, made perfect A's in college, graduating summa cum laude. When he took calculus, he refused to memorize the formulas because he said he would forget the formulas and he really wanted to understand how calculus worked in its most philosophical form. As a child, he had locked himself in his room to memorize the dictionary. And yet I buried him at age 31 – one who had already been to the top – because he had no idea of his worth and his value in the eyes of his parents or in the eyes of his God. He felt helpless and worthless.

2. Secondly, not only does he have a depreciation of his self-worth, he is depreciating the value of his work (19:10).

Look at verse 10 in chapter 19. He seems to be saying, "All my work is in vain. I'm a prophet. I've been trying to tell these people to obey the covenant, to worship you. But instead, they have broken down the altars. They have walked all over the covenant. They don't obey. They have rejected everything. And because they have rejected God, they have rejected me."

In those moments of depression, we begin to think that nothing we do makes a difference. We punch the clock. We put in our hours. But it doesn't make a difference. Everything we do in the church, the community and our home, all seems to be for naught.

3. The third thing we see in Elijah is that he overestimates the severity of his problem, another indication of depression.

In 18:22 he says, "I'm the only one left, the only prophet of God." In verse 19:10b, he says, "I am the only one left." In 14b he says, "I am the only one left."

Now Elijah does have problems. When a crazy queen and an evil king are trying to kill you, you have some very real problems. But can't he see that surely the God who destroyed 450 prophets of Baal in chapter 18 can defeat Jezebel in chapter 19? Surely the prophet who has seen God literally resurrect the dead is not fearful of death, is he? But under the duress of the moment, Elijah exaggerated his problem to the point that he felt he was the only worshiper of God left. Later, in verse 18, God will tell him there are 7000 people left who have not bowed their knee to Baal. In

other words, Elijah, you do have some problems but you have overstated them. You aren't the only one left alone. Sometimes it seems, in the quietness of the night, that our problems begin to grow larger than life. You toss and turn in your bed of anxiety, depression, and stress, only to awaken and realize that the problems are not nearly as bad as they seemed in the darkness of the night.

You've been there. You've joined Elijah under the juniper tree.

4. A fourth symptom of the depression caused by the stress in his life is a loss of vision.

Look at 4b in chapter 19. My dreams and visions, he is saying, of making the difference, of being a great spokesman for you, God, are no good. I'm no better than anyone before me. He has lost his sense of vision which drove and compelled him to serve God.

Some of you, this morning, are right there. You join Elijah in sadness, in depression, in anxiety, in futility – right underneath that juniper tree.

What happens next to Elijah, as he sits under that tree, is an intervention, a quiet intervention of grace.

Steps to solve the prophet's problem.

I. He has some sleep (19:5-8).

That's a great thing to do when your body is stressed. He had spent all his physical, mental, and emotional energy fighting for God. And having expended so much energy, having experienced so much stress in dealing with Ahab and the prophets of Baal, even in the midst of victory he was physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually drained – not ready to face the wicked Jezebel.

Sleep is a remarkable gift of God. The psalmist said God gives sleep to His beloved.

As he slept, someone – who was it? An angel, the text indicates – came and woke him and said, "Eat." He looked up and saw a biscuit and some water. He ate and regained his strength. God sent a messenger in the bleak, southern wilderness to wake his prophet and to feed him. Sometimes grace enters in the common, lowly act of everyday care – the quiet intervention of God. Sometimes when we are at our lowest, what comes to turn the tide is something small and simple – a call or letter, a visit from a friend, a conversation over a cup of coffee, a good night's sleep, a dream of hope. God comes in these ways.

Revived by sleep and food, Elijah travels further south to Mount Horeb, which is really Mount Sinai, the holy mountain of God, where, in the midst of wind, earthquake and fire God had given Moses the Ten Commandments and revealed His holy presence. Elijah travels to this sacred place as we travel to our sacred places – hoping that God, who acted in the past, will come again in our lives. We're hoping that what we felt before, we will feel again. We come with desperate instinct, hoping against hope that God, who has saved us in the past will save us again.

Things that helped Elijah with his stress – number one, he took time off to rest.

II. He talks out his frustrations with God (19:13).

We see in the cave that he feels sorry for himself. God asked him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Then again in verse 13, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Have you ever noticed that God has a way of asking questions for which He already knows the answers? He asked Adam, “Adam, where are you?” God knew where Adam was. He asked Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” He knew where Abel was – dead. He asked Moses, “What’s that in your hand?” God knew that Moses had a staff in his hand. And here He asks Elijah, “What are you doing here?” God knew what Elijah was doing there. He had helped him get there, with the guidance and care of the angel.

If God knew the answer, why did He ask the question? He did it so Elijah could vent his frustrations. Then God listened as Elijah poured out his feelings of anger, bitterness, and self-pity.

God lets him talk. “I’ve been zealous for the Lord” (v. 10). “I’ve given it all I’ve got,” he says again in verse 14. “I’m the only one left. Now they are coming to take my life, Lord.”

We all have these feelings at some time or another, and until we rid ourselves of those feelings, they will poison us emotionally. There are health giving emotions like love, faith, and hope. But there are also destructive emotions like anger, fear, worry, bitterness, hatred, jealousy, and self-pity – the slow killers of humanity.

A dean at the University of Oregon Medical School said, “More good is done between two friends at ten o’clock in the morning over a cup of coffee than in the doctor’s office all day long.”

Somebody we can talk to, somebody we can pour our heart out to, someone with whom we don’t need to guard our emotions or guard our statements, somebody in the midst of whom we can be ourselves – ourselves at the moment of depression.

III. Elijah needed to get life back into perspective.

Elijah felt that God had turned His back on him. He reasoned that he had done his best to serve the Lord, but what did it get him. Nothing. “Now I’m alone. It’s me against the world.”

Depression has a way of making us feel that way. We feel like the whole world is revolving around us, and we find ourselves paying more attention to the negative than the positive, focusing on the immediate rather than the long-term consequences of behavior. Ultimately, all depression comes back to some distorted view of life. Elijah needed to know that God was still there and that others, too, had not bowed down to Baal.

Elijah climbed the formidable mountain and lodged in a cave. God came near and asked Elijah, “What are you doing here?” Elijah responded with his pity party and God said, “Go stand on the mountain before Yahweh.” What happened next is one of the holy moments of sacred history. As

Stephen Shoemaker has said, “We bow before its mystery. In the stark simplicity of the Hebrew language, here is what happened:

And there was a mighty wind,
Not in the wind was Yahweh.

And after the wind, an earthquake,
Not in the earthquake was Yahweh.

And after the earthquake, fire,
Yahweh was not in the fire.

And after the fire
The sound of crushed silence.

A silence that was at the same time empty and full, an utmost silence that was at the same time the opposite of what was expected and more than was expected, a deafening quiet.

There Elijah was, hoping for God to reveal Himself as before. Would it be the wind, like the wind that parted the Red Sea and rescued the Hebrew people from Pharaoh’s army? The wind came, and God was not in the wind. Would it be the earthquake, like the earthquake that shook this very mountain when God gave Moses the Ten Words, the Ten Commandments? The earthquake came and went. God was not there. Would it be in the fire, like Elijah himself had seen come from heaven on Mount Carmel? But the fire came, and God was not in the fire. All the expected ways of the revelation of God came and went, and God was not there.

Then there was silence. And Elijah covered his face with his robe. For in the silence, God.

It was a waiting on the Lord. Scripture tells us, over and over, Wait on the Lord through injury and illness, through sadness and despair, through tragedy and triumph. Wait on the Lord. Wait through the emptiness of the soul and dryness of religion, through silent years, wait as long as it takes, for God will be there.

You see, Elijah thought he was more important than he really was. He thought everything depended on him (there were 7,000 prophets). We too, especially sometimes ministers, are guilty of taking ourselves way too seriously. Listen, if God’s work depends solely on me, God is in big trouble.

None of us is indispensable. The workmen die, but the work goes on.

There is another way that helped Elijah get out of depression.

IV. He went back to work.

God gave him the twin graces of recommissioning and reassurance. First, there was the grace of a new call. God gave Elijah something to do. Something to do is sometimes itself a grace. Reenter

the arena and anoint two future kings, Hazael and Jehu. Then he called him to anoint his own successor as prophet, Elisha.

Psychiatrist Dr. Karl Menninger was once asked by a Tucson, Arizona, newspaper reporter what he would do if he felt he was headed for a nervous breakdown. He said, "I would go to my front door, turn the knob, go out, cross the tracks, and find someone who needs me."

In depression, the worst thing we can do is sit around in isolation, get all wrapped up in ourselves, to have our own pity party too long. We've got to get up, go out, get back in the mainstream of life and get back serving God's people, God's church, and His Kingdom. By helping others, we help ourselves.

There are some of you here today – maybe you're coming off a victory just like Elijah's Mount Carmel victory. Maybe you're sitting with him under the juniper tree. You've got a distorted view of reality. You think you're the only one left, that you're all alone in what you're doing. You think the job is too big, the enemy too formidable, and you're scared of the Jezebel in your life. To you who hurt, to you who are weary, to you who are seeing life today through the glasses of grey, the word of God comes. Take rest. Express your problems to God, to a friend. Wait upon the Lord to bring the fresh, gentle wind of His presence. Then get up, go back and serve others. Stop thinking about yourself.

Thank you, O God, for using even people like Elijah, even people like us, to do your will. If your choicest men and women of the Scripture have the same discouragements we do, we know you can use us. If a pouting prophet can call down fire from heaven, we can too.