

In our [first lesson](#) we studied the contest between Elijah and the worshippers of Baal, and witnessed one of the crowning moments of his life. After he has embarrassed and defeated the prophets of Baal in spectacular fashion, he orders them all slaughtered. He then tells Ahab he hears approaching rain, and tells him to go get something to eat. Miraculously, God produces a heavy rainstorm out of a previously clear sky, and Elijah outran Ahab's chariot to Jezreel.

Now if any of us had experienced this kind of miraculous intervention from God, don't you think we would be so impressed and convinced of His power that we would never again question the provision and protection of God? That's what we like to think. **The truth is, we're just like Elijah** (James 5:17-18)! Even though miracles take place in our life and God does significant things through us, we are still subject to discouragement, distress and depression. We too can fall and fail.

As we come to 1 Kings 19, we see this played out in Elijah's life. We have seen the up side of his life; now we see the other side of his walk with God. "...the other side of his character (is) altogether more human, frail and fallible."—*New Bible Commentary*

The Down Side of Elijah's Life

What a contrast!

1 Kings 19:1] *Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword.* 2] *So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, "May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them.* 3] *Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there,* 4] *while he himself went a day's journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, LORD,* "

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he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors."

Review with me again what had just happened to Elijah:

- He had seen God's fire consume a sacrifice covered with water.
- His success caused the Israelites and their king to know there is one true God.
- After seeing God answer his prayer for rain, the Spirit enabled him to outrun a chariot.

Because of a threat from Jezebel, however, he ran to the desert south of Beersheba, not merely outside Israel, but beyond the southern border of Judah. **How sad!** Elijah's joy was turned to fear, and he ran for his life. Leaving his servant at Beersheba, he walked another day into the desert.

This scene brings up a number of questions:

Why did Elijah become discouraged and run? (vv 3-4)

After confronting 451 of his enemies, King Ahab, and the 450 prophets of Baal, why would he turn and run at a single *death threat*? Instead of persisting in prayer, as he had done for rain (1 Kings 18:41-45), why did he flee?

Let's explore a number of answers and/or guesses.

- **He was worn out and thus wasn't thinking clearly**, therefore he was fearful. This wasn't an idle threat from Jezebel, yet judging by God's previous protection of Elijah, she was incapable of ending the prophet's life. Why was it so devastating? It is possible he was worn out and that drastically affected his thinking.

- **He needed a debriefing with God after the victory**, time to adjust his perspective and

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remind himself of who he was.

After victories, all believers are subject to discouragement. **Why?** We are not as cautious at that point. We are spent emotionally and physically. We think so much about the victory, that we sometimes forget the Lord of the victory.

What do we need at times of great victory?

We need time after a victory (or even defeat) to communicate with God:

- To give Him glory and praise (or a time of repentance if defeated);
- To rehearse the events;
- To recall His wisdom and strength and thank Him for that.

.We also need to pray that those affected by the victory or defeat will continue to walk with the Lord.

For instance, this would have been a time for Elijah to pray that the people of Israel would take this contest seriously, and that they would follow up on their words and worship the only true God.

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Example: Matt. 14:22-24. After a day of miracles and teaching, Jesus spent the night in prayer and debriefing with His Father.

- We need regular and extended times of retreat and reflection.
- We need our inner journey to shape and direct our outer journey.
- We need ways to vent our stress and emotions through exercise.

Why else was Elijah discouraged? I'm still guessing, but notice he was alone.

- **He separated himself from the strength of a good relationship** (19:3-4; his servant). He was now alone in the middle of a desert, with no support system for the good and bad times.

During distress, depression, or discouragement we often isolate ourselves, avoiding the people who could help us and minister to us most, including our close friends. *[Sidelight: We are vulnerable at this time. Though we want distance from people, if we do receive interest from a member of the opposite sex, we may become attracted in an illicit way.]*

- **His expectations for himself and others were not fully met.** In particular, his expectations for Jezebel went unfulfilled. She did not repent, and did not relent in her opposition to him. He may have thought he was responsible, rather than leaving the results to God.

- **He was burned out and depressed.** What are the symptoms?

Your body begins to reject new information. You don't hear a lot of what is said to you, and you don't remember much of what you hear. You are overloaded.

Loss of options. Your mental horizon closes in; you have trouble seeing alternative courses of action.

Regression. Stress overload can make you act childish, breaking things or “hiding your head” as you may have done as a frustrated or frightened child.

Inability to change harmful patterns. When under stress, you may find it too complicated to

say no to additional demands. It's easier to just heap on more commitments.

Fatigue. When under excessive stress, your body craves more rest and sleep than usual. Give in and rest.

Depression. This is usually related to change, or loss of someone or something close without taking time to grieve over your loss. Stress can precipitate depression, as can anger.

Physical illness. Stress upsets your whole glandular system, raises blood pressure, keeps body systems in a flight/fight state of tension. This constant state of ferment makes you vulnerable to everything from colds and muscular aches to ulcers, heart disease and strokes.

Obviously, it is impossible to get a clear picture of what was transpiring in Elijah's mind and emotions, but he seemed to be experiencing a number of the above symptoms. Most people who burn out today don't experience all the symptoms at once, but if the burnout or discouragement progresses, most of the above will likely be experienced.

Bill Hybels, pastor of one of America's largest churches, might say

- **He didn't "read his gauges."** Bill Hybels developed this test for himself:

How am I doing spiritually? "To keep my spiritual gauge where it needs to be, I have committed myself to spiritual disciplines: journaling, fasting, solitude, sacrifice, study, etc."

How am I doing physically? "I know that if I push my body too hard over time, I will experience a physical breakdown or psychosomatic complications associated with high stress. If I don't exercise, eat properly and rest, I will offer the Lord only about 2/3 the energy I have the potential of giving. The Holy Spirit tugs at me to be wholly available—mind, soul and body—for the work to which He has called me. Consequently, I have committed myself to the physical disciplines of running, weight lifting, medical checkups and watching closely what I eat."

How am I doing emotionally? "When my crisis hit I didn't realize my reservoir was depleted until

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I: a) began to feel vulnerable morally, b) found myself getting short and testy with people, and c) felt a desire to get out of God's work. Suddenly I knew the tank was nearly dry. Replenishing emotional strength takes time, usually more time than it took to drain. It's like recharging a battery. A slow, consistent charge is the best way to bring a battery back to full power. Likewise, to properly recuperate from emotionally draining activities takes time"—(See "Reading Your Gauges," Bill Hybels, *Leadership*, 1991.)

What was the result? Besides the symptoms of burnout, we see here a number of specific results in Elijah's life.

- **He despaired of life.** v. 4b *"Take my life..."* This is not unusual for people who are discouraged, depressed and burned out. Jonah expressed this in Jonah 4:1-3, and no less than Paul in 2 Cor. 1:8-9— *"We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. 9] Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death..."*

What caused this despair? The request to take his life (v. 4), coupled with the complaint "they are trying to kill me (v. 10)," may have come from anger and resentment. It's possible he resented that others had abandoned God, or that they had not treated him properly. He may even have been angry at God that things had not turned out as he thought they should.

People who are depressed often discover to their surprise that they are angry. Sometimes they are asked to write an imaginary letter to someone who has hurt them. While they cannot bring themselves to admit they are mad at someone, they are shocked at the emotions and words that come out. However, they usually feel better after expressing them.

Principle: Frozen rage is often the deeper cause of depression.

- **He exaggerated his condition.** v. 4 *"...I'm no better than my ancestors."* Here Elijah was focusing on the negative. If he was comparing himself with the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, He was certainly doing much better than them. If he was talking about his contemporaries who had entered into Baal worship, his walk with God certainly was much better. What Elijah was thinking we obviously can't know for sure, but we can see the result. Once we begin to exaggerate our condition and focus on the negative, the next result is not far behind.

- **He entered into self-pity and got down on himself.** v. 4c—*"I have had enough, LORD," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors."*

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As he focused on and saw only what was negative, his only option seemed to be:

"Lord, take my life.

"

Notice, He emphasized

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throughout his responses.

- **He even had some feelings of paranoia.** Elijah said, "*now **they** are trying to kill me too*" —v. 14. Imagining that one death threat from Jezebel had turned into a national crusade to kill him, he was beginning to think everyone was after him!

So here's our prophet. He's come a long way—from the top of Carmel to the desert of despair. He represents a lot of people who may not even know why they feel like they do, but just don't want to go on with life.

Is there hope?

What did God do? He ministered to Elijah in a very specific way. It was ministry designed for the person and his condition, ministry tailor-made for Elijah. Observing what God does here, we can see a solution to some of our own discouragement, as well as how to minister to those who are down, discouraged, or depressed.

These observations will also give us a personal view of God's love and ministry. Some people paint the God of the Old Testament as being distant and uncompassionate, but this account renders that view inaccurate.

God gave Elijah:

Rest and a meal (angel food cake). v. 5b—*All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat."*

First, the Lord took care of the physical needs of this dispirited and discouraged prophet's life.

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In distress, we must often first acknowledge our physical lives, not just the spirit. The body gives signals of distress just like the spirit does. People wear out and burn out, not because they've done too little but because they've done too much, or have just gotten exhausted doing God's will.

Tiredness is not a sin. Elijah helps us see our need in stress and testing situations. Sometimes we simply need to rest and relax **without guilt**. Sometimes we need a meal, nutrition designed for the condition. It might be a diet, a change of eating habits, or a leisurely meal with a significant other (John 21:9-25).

Elijah's story also reveals that small things can be the solutions to our needs. Don't despise or miss God's small provision.

Look in Scripture at the small provisions God gave His people.

- A staff in the hand of Moses (Ex. 4:2)
- A jawbone used by Samson (Judg.15:15)
- Five smooth stones used by David (1 Sam. 17:40)
- A handful of flour & a little oil used by Elijah (1 Kings 17:12)
- A cloud the size of a man's hand (1 Kings 18:44)
- The mustard seed (Matt. 13:3-9).
- Five barley loaves used by Jesus (Jn. 6:9)

They were all small, but significant provisions. So in a time of distress, don't miss the common provisions: rest, food, diversion, a book, a hug, a night of music, an invitation to dinner, a walk, a sunset, flowers, a hike, trees and water, etc. Note: Trees and water can be especially therapeutic to a weary person. If you are ministering to a distressed person, recognize that the offer of something simple may be all he needs. Remember also that the Lord met Elijah at his point of need, not where he should have been.

Next the Lord gave Elijah:

Another meal, with encouragement and empathy. v. 7—*The angel of the LORD came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you."* To some it doesn't sound very spiritual, but God thought good nutrition a necessary part of Elijah's recovery program. Sleep had been an essential part of the care as well, but here God imposed limits by waking him.

Have you noticed how often the discouraged and distressed retreat into **sleep**? That's okay! If your body craves sleep and you are not using it to escape, then sleep. It is one of God's natural

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and powerful ways of bringing healing and recovery to your body. Life may be requiring more than the body can deliver. Enjoy rest and sleep; many people today are sleep-deprived!

If, however, you're sleeping because you hope the problem will go away, that is just another form of escape (like running into the desert), and **God puts limits on escape**. His instruction to Elijah is very revealing:

"Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you"
—v. 7.

This is what a friend does: **"Come on, you need this; the situation is too hard for you."** Empathy and encouragement are at work here, when we can't think right. By the way, acknowledgment of a person's load or problem is always appropriate.

The results of God's care for Elijah thus far are significant. vv. 8-9—*So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God.*

The food must have been powerful. He traveled 40 days and 40 nights after he ate it! This treatment got him going again, but he wasn't cured yet.

9] *There he went into a cave and spent the night. And the word of the LORD came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?"* This gave him new perspective, a sense that someone cared for him and knew what was going on with him.

Note: This is a special mountain; it is where God commissioned Moses (Ex. 3) and later appeared in smoke, fire and thunder to give Israel the 10 Commandments (Ex. 19-20).

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What else did God provide for Elijah?

Wise communication—vv. 9b-17.

9] There he went into a cave and spent the night. And the word of the LORD came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 10] He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too." 11] The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake 12] After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.

13] When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 14] He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too." 15] The LORD said to him, "Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. 16] Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. 17] Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu.

God's wisdom is so obvious in these verses. He didn't come to Elijah with a statement, or with condemnation.

question

He came to him with a

(13b). We can

learn a lot from this approach. It is easy to sermonize, to make generalizations about why we think someone is going through a problem, based on what we believe the situation is. The Lord didn't give a pat answer, but asked a question that allowed Elijah to express himself and his feelings. In fact, God allowed Elijah

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opportunities to open up and state how he felt (vv. 4,10,14). Talking is one of the best healing agents for a distressed/depressed person. People need to express their feelings, even if those feelings aren't right. Sometimes

only

when we give voice to our feelings do we see them realistically. Afterwards, it may take an extended period of time for these feelings to come to the surface and dissipate.

Elijah's response to God's question illustrates this insatiable need to talk. v. 10—*He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."*

Let's examine the truth or fiction of each of the things Elijah said:

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"I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty."

"The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars and put your prophets to death with the sword." and . True to a point, but what about Mt. Carmel? There had just been a contest and God's prophet had won, killing Baal's with a sword. Elijah's emotions and facts hadn't caught up to the present.

"I am the only one left..." . Obadiah had hidden 100 of the Lord's prophets in two caves and supplied them with food and water, and Elijah knew it. I Kings 18:3-4,13-14.

"Now they are trying to kill me too." . Jezebel is after him.

This demonstrates the importance of getting these statements out of the heart and verbalized. It may help to pinpoint the solution, or at least the incorrect thinking.

The Lord then gave Elijah

A view of Himself. v. 11—*The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake.*

Here is the crux of the solution: to have a view of God in His majesty and His holiness, and to be in the presence of God. Elijah had walked with God and seen the miraculous display of His power, but because of his discouragement, depression, and incorrect thinking, lost the consciousness God's presence. God then said, in essence, "Elijah, come into my presence. I'm going to pass by."

Then God revealed Himself to Elijah (v. 11b). What view did God want Elijah to see?

Wind? "This must be God..." No. **Earthquake?** "This must be God..." No. **Fire?** "This has to be God now..." No.

A gentle whisper

was the display Elijah needed to see and hear. The expression in Hebrew could be rendered, "a brief sound of silence." God passed by in the silence that followed the storm.

It is important to see this scene as tailor-made for Elijah, because God will not always show

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Himself this way. Sometimes God has to come to His people by earthquake, fire, or wind, because of their disobedience. For example, the children of Israel needed a mountain that shook and had fire because of their propensity to go away from God. On the other hand, sometimes fire and quakes come because God is doing something new; e.g., Acts.

Here was a prophet, however, who was following after His God, so God came in a way suited for him. He came in a whisper, a gentle voice (a brief sound of silence).

In ministry for the Lord, we must not try to represent God in judgment and terror to others. He will do that if He chooses to.

Reminder: God is not always at work in ways which are visible and dramatic, for He may choose to quietly, even silently work among us to do His will.

Elijah responded to the gentle whisper in an appropriate fashion. v. 13a—*When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.* No one had seen God and lived, so he walked to the mouth of the cave with his face covered (see Ex. 33-34).

Again, the voice didn't make a statement, but asked the same gentle question. v. 13b—*"Then a voice said to him (in a whisper), 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'"* Elijah's response was characteristic of him. v. 14—*He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."*

It was essentially the same response as before, so God had given him an opportunity to express his feelings again.

God offered His prophet one more thing:

An action plan. *"Go back the way you came..."—vv. 15-18. 15] The LORD said to him, "Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael*

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king over Aram. 16] Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. 17] Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. 18] Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him.”

God took a few steps here to restore Elijah to service; this is a model of how He restores us as well.

First, God answered questions and exposed the lies and half-truths (vv. 15-18).

Elijah :

Elijah :	<i>The Is your as</i>	God :	I have by people and death with the sword whose knees have not
Elijah :	<i>I am th</i>	God :	I have seven thousand; Hazael, Jehu and Elisha (Obadiah).
Elijah :	<i>Now th</i>	God :	Jehu, Hazael, and Elisha will fight for Me and you and be with you.

Second, God helped Elijah to see some workable steps. Implied here are a number of things we might do for ourselves and for others:

Continue in relationship and communication with Me. In essence, God is saying:

- Remember My provisions: food, empathy, and the strength I have given you.
- Remember what you've seen and heard: fire, quakes, wind and a gentle whisper.
- Remember My questions.
- Remember My voice.
- Remember to debrief with Me after major victories and defeats.

Go back the way you came, but do things differently this time.

- If you are fleeing, return (be obedient).
- If you are retreating from God's will, go back the way you came into obedience (repent).
- If you are weary, get rested and restored.

Face your fear:

- with a view of Me fresh in your mind;
- with My provision in mind;
- with the knowledge of My presence and love in mind.

Together we will face the situation (fear) in My strength.

Take on tasks in keeping with your gifts, temperament and ministry passion. “Work smarter and lighter.”

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- Take on a series of things you are capable of handling, e.g., anointing two new kings and a new prophet (vv. 15-16).
- Don't rush back into situations involving major stress.
- Take on lighter tasks that can rebuild your confidence, and allow your body and emotions to recover.
- Learn to check your spiritual, physical, and emotional gauges.
- Focus on fewer things; set goals for yourself and your ministry.

Finally:

Be a partner. Establish supportive relationships with those I have given you: Hazael, Jehu, and Elisha.

- Each will have something to offer.
- Elisha will be a significant friend, partner and servant.
- You need not say, "I am the only one left..."

I don't want you to be alone.

CONCLUSION

In summary, what do we need to learn from Elijah?

The prevention of discouragement and burnout

Here's what will help:

- Fresh spiritual disciplines. Keep your devotional life creative.
- Time off for rest and restoration—a Sabbath day
- A support network. Nurture supportive relationships.
- Enriched home life
- Dedicating your body to God and taking care of it for Him (e.g., get regular exercise, eat right, and get the sleep you need).
- Periodic reflection on where you have been; needs; stress, and how you are coping. Have a debriefing with God after all major events and crises in your life. Check your spiritual, physical

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and emotional gauges.

- Focusing on fewer things. Set goals for yourself and your ministry.

The caution: When God provides, we sometimes rejoice in the gift and forget the Giver. Don't forget Him in your rejoicing.

- Revel in His love for you.
 - Enjoy His presence.
 - Acknowledge that whatever you have comes from Him.
 - Continue to walk with Him. He wants to keep whispering to you the questions you need to answer.
 - Let's not forget the lesson of the desert, or we will repeat the same mistakes over and over.
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Application Questions

1. Elijah's zeal for the Lord's work had risen to a high point just prior to his trip into the desert. Why is it that we are vulnerable after major victories in our lives? Why is it often difficult to hear God's voice when we are busy and successful in Christian service?

2. What do you think happened to the prophet's bold and courageous faith? What is it that assaults our faith? When and where are you the most vulnerable to an attack on your faith?

3. Consider what you would do in this situation. Your pastor, who you know well, is being treated for a bleeding ulcer. He is a prominent Christian leader in your area, and many of your friends have become Christians through his ministry. You notice that his personality suddenly changes. No longer bubbly, he often speaks sharply to people with no apparent reason, and seems to be depressed and forgetful.