

ELIJAH: A PASSION FOR GOD

V. God's Prescription for Depression

2-23-03

I Kings 19:1-18

INTRODUCTION

Statistics indicate that at any given time, about 10% of our American population is depressed. Sometimes it is called the "common cold" of emotional disturbances because of its universal nature. And, generally it is not *all* that serious, we just get over it. That is not to belittle it, for it can get very serious and many suicides are a result of depression. Yet, most of us are depressed at times, so it is good to understand what is involved and some helpful ways out.

In case you don't know what depression is (and one survey showed almost 20% of Americans say they are *never* depressed) or in case you don't recognize your depression, here are some of the symptoms:

- Feelings of hopelessness, despair, sadness, apathy;
- Move toward deadness, loss of interest in environment, hobbies, sex and things you used to enjoy;
- Withdrawal from others, being oversensitive to what people say;
- Loss of perspective on life, everything feels overwhelming.

It is important to realize, once a person starts becoming depressed, he usually behaves in a way to reinforce the depression. So, suppose you feel depressed over some little rejection by someone, then you withdraw, nurse the wound and brood— all of which magnifies the depression. Then your emotional withdrawal and negativism picks up on more rejection, etc. It becomes a vicious cycle that's hard to get out of. Or another scenario, you're depressed about an over-whelming amount you have to get done. You feel so bad, so hopeless, you don't even begin. Then, of course, things pile on even deeper and you get to be in even worse shape. So remember, depression causes us to behave in a way to reinforce the depression.

Now, before we begin, I want to make it clear that I'm not against medication for depression. And indeed, some severe conditions certainly require it as well as conditions like bi-polar disorder. So don't take away from this the idea that anti-depressants or other medications are bad.

Our Scripture today is a remarkable case study in depression and its healing. Sometimes this will be alongside medication. It also models the compassionate, skillful healing process used by The Great Physician. It is a process that applies to any debilitating emotional or physical need. So, even if depression is not your problem now, pay attention to the way Elijah's healing comes. Whatever your need, the Great Physician wants to be your healer, and many of the principles here are applicable.

Before we read our Scripture in I Kings 19:1-18, remember the context. This follows the great showdown on Mt. Carmel in the contest with 850 prophets of Baal and Asherah. The Lord God of Israel proves He is God by supernaturally consuming the sacrifice. Then in response to Elijah's great prayer of faith we looked at last Sunday, the 3 ½ year drought is ended with the coming of rain on the land. Now, as we begin reading, (if we were on T.V.) there would be heavy, ominous background music beginning....

ON THE RUN

What an amazing change for Elijah! For 3 years, he's known God's supernatural care and provision. He's been fed by ravens, then by a widow who's last bit of meal and oil supernaturally continued for a couple of years. He saw the widow's dead son raised to life through his prayer. He stood tall and fearlessly confronted 850 prophets of Baal and Ahab on Mt. Carmel. He won a decisive victory for the Lord. The rain has begun. Elijah supernaturally empowered, made a marathon run of 20 mi. from Mt. Carmel to Jezreel, the capitol city, out-running King Ahab in his royal chariot. Now, at this threat from Queen Jezebel, he panics and runs for his life. Of course, we might think, if the messenger from Jezebel could find Elijah, so could her hit man if she really was going to kill him. But, I'm sure she feared him and the people, so hoped the threat would intimidate him and silence him. And, it works better than she could have hoped. Elijah runs like a scared rabbit about 100 mi. south to Beersheba before his first stop under a broom tree in the desert. And, we read:

He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, LORD," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." (1 Kings 19:4)

Is this man depressed? Then, after regaining some strength, travels another 250 mi. to Mt. Horeb (Sinai).

Note the symptoms of depression here:

- Life is too much, he's overwhelmed. At a hint of trouble, he runs, tries to get away.
- Life isn't worth living, and he prays that he might die.
- He leaves his servant behind in Beersheba and isolates himself from human contact in the desert.
- There is apathy. He seems totally unimpressed by angel visitations. Sort of like, "Big deal, I'm going to die anyway. I'll see lots of angels."
- When he gets to Mt. Sinai, in his dialogue with God, you pick-up self-pity and anger and easily imagine a whine in his voice

What has happened to cast Elijah down from the heights of Mt. Carmel to the depths of despair? Psychologists list a number of possible causes for depression and most are represented here in some form:

- Emotional and/ or physical exhaustion
- Anger
- Some kind of loss
- An attack from the Powers of Darkness.

Elijah, is a good case study for most of these.

CAUSES OF DEPRESSION

Emotional and/ or Physical Exhaustion

There was an intense battle on Mt. Carmel, followed by exhausting prayer. The contest on Carmel was emotionally intense. Talk about adrenaline! When "adrenaline loaded" activities end, our bodies rebound and need rest. Plus, he may have spent the night in prayer for rain. Then, that physically taxing run of 20 mi. Now, when it's over, it feels like a let-down. For that reason, Dr. Archibald Hart, a Christian psychiatrist refers to depression as "a healing emotion." It causes us to withdraw and get needed rest. Elijah is running on empty emotional and physical reserves.

Our son Kris while in college worked for Bob, who has a home cleaning service in Seattle. He continues to work for him summers. Kris told us of a marvelous practical joke Bob played on his neighbor. Bob's neighbor bought a compact car for better mileage, a little Yugo. The neighbor was so excited about the projected mileage and the amount he'd save on gas, Bob decided to have a little fun. A couple of times a week, he'd sneak over at night and pour a few gallons of gas in the car's tank. The new car owner was soon bubbling with enthusiasm over his spectacular mileage. He was telling Bob and his friends at work, "I almost never have to put gas in it! I know it's hard to believe, the sticker said 35-40 mpg. but I'm getting 60-70 mpg. Everyone of course is thinking, this guy's a little past it or doesn't know how to figure mileage. This went on for several weeks before Bob revealed the secret of his mileage! Some of us wouldn't mind a neighbor like that, right? Especially with the price of gas now.

Elijah seems to have forgotten where his supply of emotional and physical energy came from. Instead of letting the Lord fill his tank and renew him, he suddenly panics, goes out on his own, running as hard as he can.

Anger

Anger when repressed turns inward in depression. Much depression is due to swallowed anger. This may be difficult to identify since we often deny our anger. We say, "I'm not angry...just a little upset maybe." As Christians, we sometimes are given the impression that all anger is wrong and sinful. That is not the case. Anger is a legitimate feeling. It is what we do with our anger that can easily constitute sin. Paul admonishes us in Eph 4:26,

"Be angry, and do not sin": do not let the sun go down on your wrath...

Yes, we can be angry and still be Christians. But, don't let it motivate sinful behavior or don't stuff it down inside. Here sometimes the church has done us a disservice in not making a distinction between anger and sinful behavior. I grew up with the idea that all anger was sinful, and so I tried not to let myself feel anger. In so doing, I made way for depression.

Anger is a legitimate emotion and reaction to something that threatens us. It can be a threat to your physical well-being or your emotional well-being. It can be something unfair, a put-down, or other threats to your sense of worth. Being let-down or betrayed by someone can cause anger. Sometimes that anger festers in self-pity. Other times the anger can be directed toward others, ourselves, or God. Don't you detect some anger and self-pity here in Elijah's response to God in verse 10?

"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.

Maybe a free translation could read:

"I've been working hard for you Lord, and I'm having to do it all by myself...no one is helping me. And the only thanks I get are threats on my life. That witch Jezebel! Why haven't you done something about her, Lord? I'm the only one left. It looks like I have to do *everything* around here."

Do you ever feel that way? Why is Elijah so angry? Here are a few possibilities:

- Wouldn't he be angry at Ahab's lack of repentance, Queen Jezebel's arrogance, and the

people's fickleness?

- His life was threatened by Jezebel. He is feeling vulnerable and wondering what's next.
- Maybe he felt the showdown on Mt. Carmel should have done more, that revival would sweep through the land. Instead it feels like more of the same with Queen Jezebel still in control, threatening him and defying God. Between the lines, Elijah seems to be saying, "God, you ought to be **doing** more here!"
- Surely he is angry at the persistence and cockiness of evil.
- What had 3 ½ yrs. of drought and the Mt. Carmel victory really accomplished?

Loss

A sense of loss is also here to be factored in. Any loss needs to be grieved and felt in order to be healed. Of course, loss often contains an element of anger because most losses aren't fair in our minds. But remember, the loss of things and people important to us can cause depression. We *must grieve* every significant loss, or it will wreck havoc in our emotional lives. Elijah here mentions all the Lord's prophets put to death by the sword. Is he feeling that loss, grieving for that? I'm sure he lost many friends in Jezebel's reign of terror.

And, I wonder if there is something else here because of the way God responds. Maybe Elijah is suffering a loss of meaning and a sense of purpose. In a strange way, success can produce that. Maybe Elijah's last 3 years have been oriented toward this moment on Mt. Carmel. He was God's center piece in the action. The drought began with Elijah declaring to Ahab there would be no rain for next few years except at his word. Now it all ends. What now?

We all have a need to be needed. Often doing a good job means working yourself out of a job. Parents who do a good job with their children, when the nest empties often struggle with not feeling needed. Sometimes those whose lives have revolved around giving care to a loved one through a disabling and/ or terminal illness have had their roles defined by that for so long, they find it difficult to adjust to a new role after that loss. A sense of meaning and purpose is essential to all of us.

Spiritual

The spiritual element is not hard for us to imagine in Elijah's depression. Elijah has been doing battle with the forces of darkness in Israel. They turned them from worshipping Jehovah to consorting with temple prostitutes and even sacrificing their children on Baal's altar. The devil likes to get us down, and depression makes us very vulnerable to all kinds of sin. Can there be any question the devil is delighted and encouraging Elijah's suicidal thoughts?

RESTORED BY GOD

Let's see now how God goes about healing the roots of Elijah's depression. There is no hint of condemnation for his turning tail and running. God understands what's going on, and moves to restore Elijah.

First, Elijah needs rest and food to restore his exhausted, depleted physical body. God lets him sleep. Then an angel comes to awaken him and feed him. Then more sleep and more food. Elijah then, journeys 40 days and 40 nights to Mt. Sinai (a journey of 250 mi. across the desert),

returning to the roots of Israel's faith where the law, the ten commandments were first given. The 40 days and nights recall the time Moses had been on Mt. Sinai to receive law. And, later, when Jesus came, he fasted and prayed in the desert for 40 days and nights.

Then, after Elijah reaches Mt. Sinai and holes up in a cave, God begins his therapy session. He begins with a question: *"What are you doing here, Elijah?"* This gives Elijah a chance to identify what's going on and express his anger:

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.

That's an important step for us in depression— expressing ourselves honestly, what we feel. This is a well-rehearsed response, for when God repeats the question later, the answer is verbatim. You can imagine Elijah going over and over these lines in his anger as he travels those 40 days and nights across the desert. Isn't that what we often do in our anger, make our case again and again in our thoughts, justifying our feelings? We need to feel free to express our true feelings to God. He can handle our negative feelings. Consider the Psalms with their various complaints, despair and even anger expressed. We may need to use some of these Psalms to get in touch with our feelings. Expressing our feelings to another person is often a tool God wants to use too.

Then, God gives this powerful parable in awesome proportions in nature. It begins with a command, get out of the cave, go,

"Stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by."

That's not a bad beginning in dealing with depression. "Get out of your cave! Stop the negative, self-pitying thoughts. Get out where your perspective can be restored. Move toward the presence of the Lord— on the mountain, in the church." 1 Kings 19:11-12

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. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.

The message is not difficult to interpret. God is saying, "Elijah, you think I'm only in the great, momentous signs and wonders. You think people will be swept into my kingdom with an irresistible wind, or a moral earthquake, or a baptism of fire. I have been working and am working still." As proof, God mentions Elijah's not alone, but there are 7000 who have remained faithful to God through it all. The still small voice asks him same question again,

"What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Elijah's answer is still the same, those well-rehearsed lines of anger and self-pity. The cure needs more than a spectacular revelation of God's ways. Correcting misconceptions and setting us straight on the truth seldom cures depression. You see, Elijah needs to feel worthwhile, useful again. So, God completes the cure with a new commission.

God says, *"Go back the way you came."* Go back to where you got off track and get started again. Elijah ended up at Mt. Sinai perhaps as a kind of personal pilgrimage back to the roots of Israel. Back to the place where Israel was given an identity as "the people of God." Probably he was introspective, trying to figure things out, wondering about his own ministry. God is saying, get

back in mainstream. Forget all your musings about why and what. There are times for retreats and reflection on our pasts, but not when we're depressed. We'll simply sink deeper in the mire.

Then, God gives some hints of His plans. The variety of instruments He lists is beyond the wildest imagination. Go anoint Hazael, king of Syria, an enemy, a heathen. Then, anoint the next king of Israel, Jehu, a rude, reckless captain in the army. And, anoint a successor to you, a gentle, quiet farmer named Elisha. It is years before all this is played out on the stage of history. But God is letting Elijah know that He still has work for Elijah. He's not all washed-up. And, God is still in control of history.

CONCLUSION

How can you help but fall in love with this Physician of the Soul as He responds to all the roots of depression?

- He provides for the physical needs of nutrition and rest.
- To the anger, a revelation that lets him know God is doing a lot more than he ever imagined, in ways he couldn't guess.
- To the loss of self-esteem in his running from Jezebel, God is saying, "I love you Elijah. You cannot escape me. I'll pursue you to the backside of the desert, or to the ends of the earth."
- To the spiritual need, the guilt over failure— there is no note of condemnation, only grace making a way back for Elijah.
- To the threat of not having a cause or meaning after a spectacular success, God gives a new commission.

We all can identify with Elijah. We know what it is to be discouraged and depressed. We've all felt alone, and disappointed, even let down by God. We've run from responsibility, given into our fears, abandoning God's cause at the critical moment. Certainly we've felt like giving up, and maybe even have given up in the face of the persistence of evil and its boldness.

Don't panic at your depression. Don't miss sight of the fact this was a source of great revelation to Elijah. Despite the fear we all have of these black holes in our worlds that can seem to suck us into quagmires of doubt and despair. It can be a necessary time for healing. Important revelations from God are available to us even there.

God is still at work in our world: quietly, gently, but we'd be amazed if only we could see. And, of course, in God's sending Jesus we see this at its best. Scarcely a ripple was felt in the major affairs of the Roman Empire. Certainly it was no wind, earthquake or fire. But, what a work He is doing!

Don't quit or give up hope. More is going on than you dream.