

When I'm Despairing

I felt called to pastor when I was in my early 30's. In the first church, I poured hard work and long hours into reviving life in this small church where malaise seemed to have settled in over time. As I helped those around me to reboot their spiritual walk with Christ, **I** spiraled down. As I encouraged the church in their doldrums, discouragement and depression, **I** climbed into the rabbit hole with them. I battled not to become jaded.

Where do you go when you feel stale, cynical, and in despair?

At that time, I stumbled across 1 Kings 19...although now I know I was led by the loving hand of the Spirit of wisdom and revelation. In that little church, Elijah's journey out of despair and depression became mine.

God's people at that time had again chased after other so-called gods. The dramatic Elijah-story opens with our hero bursting onto the scene in King Ahab's palace. We know *nothing* about Elijah's background. So he becomes for us any man or woman...even **you** (see the comments in James 5:17-18). He predicts a three year drought, which quickly comes to pass (1 Kings 17:1). Although the famine caused by the drought was severe, God directed Elijah, leading him both to sustenance and to service as he "*did according to the word of the Lord.*" After three years, the word of the Lord again came to Elijah, instructing him to seek out the evil King Ahab because God was about to send rain (1 Kings 18:1). What servant heart!

Elijah commands Ahab to gather all Israel and his false religious prophets to Mount Carmel to give his cult a home court advantage on the site of their religion (18:16f). Elijah calls them out. "*Don't hesitate between two. The God who answers by fire, He is God.*" The prophets of Baal launches the showdown. No one could say these false prophets lacked intensity, from morning until evening (1 Kings 18:25-29).

Elijah then stepped up to the plate and repaired the neglected alter with twelve stones representing all twelve tribes. He then arranged the wood and ox, pouring four pitchers with water on the wood, once, twice, and twice more, to remove any vestige of human merit. Elijah prayed that the God of Israel would answer His servant so "*the people would know God is turning their hearts back*" (18:30-39). Difficulties if we strip them to the core are always about this, to know God better. God yearns to recalibrate our spiritual inner compass so it more accurately points to Him. God uses difficult people and bad circumstances to "*cause all things to work together for good*" for His people (Romans 8:28).

After the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the sacrifice, Elijah killed the 450 prophets of Baal. He then confidently waited for the rains and outran the chariots twelve miles back to King Ahab's palace (18:40-46). Now, that's what I call a **great** day of ministry! Yet when Queen Jezebel said she would kill Elijah,

he turned tail and ran, hiding out in the desert under a juniper tree, asking to die, fully depressed.

How do we “*bounce well*” from such a deep bout of depression?

Physical Foundation: *Tend to our legitimate physical needs* (19:5-8): The angel of the Lord comes two times, touches Elijah, feeds and hydrates him. When we get discouraged, first take a close look at our physical regiment because God fashioned us with a physical body. How are your sleep and eating habits? Are you burning the candle at both ends? Are you drinking enough water, or more coffee, soft drinks or energy drinks? What about your exercise? Yes, this is a spiritual problem, but bodily exercise does profit (1 Timothy 4:8). Don't violate God's natural laws.

First, stretch your understanding of God (19:9-12, **faith**). All problems are essentially a theological problem (theo = God). Big God, small problems. Small God, big problems. Is your God-concept large enough to handle your life-sized problems? God first tests Elijah with a question to see if he is still stewing in self-pity. Unchecked self-pity will bring despair. Then God meets Elijah where he now is, *still in the midst of despair*, and first stretches His God-concept. Elijah, the fiery prophet, would have understood God as a great wind, earthquake, or fire. God was not in these. Instead, God came to Elijah as a gentle wisp of wind, just enough to bring a soft sound to his ear. God busts the small box that limits His view of this God of both power and gentleness. Deepen our **faith**.

Second, answer God's call to serve others (19:13b-16, **love**). Again God tests His prophet by asking a question. Elijah is still stuck in the muck of self-focused despair. Give Elijah kudos though! He was authentic and honest with God about what he thought and felt, that is, alone, abandoned, forsaken. God invites us to come just as we are with our authentic emotions, even if they are inaccurate, distorted by self-absorbed focus. God never seeks the perfect person without a flaw (there are none, except for His precious Son, Jesus). He meets us where we are and simply looks for willingness to respond to His initiative. So God calls Elijah to **serve** by anointing Hazael and Jehu as kings, and to anoint Elisha in his place as prophet. Get out of your own head and go serve someone out of **love**.

Third, develop a long-range perspective on life (19:17-18, **hope**). God will punish the wicked! He is the great and sovereign King and deals faithfully with people in His timing (not ours). God will deal with His enemies with the three that Elijah anoints. And, by the way, God also had 7,000 others in Israel who had not bowed their knees. Lift our vision to the future. God normally works through a remnant, even looking for *one* to fill the gap. Persevere in **hope**.

Deal with the physical, as we deepen our **faith, love** and **hope**.

“*So he departed from there.*” God is looking for those living “*with one foot raised,*” ready obedience from the place we now find ourselves, emotionally, mentally and spiritually.

Did you notice how *simple* this is? Not *easy* for sure, yet *simple*. When we despair as Christians, we have lost perspective ...always! So get out of your own head. This dynamic, catalytic intersection of the *Both/And/And* of *faith*, *love* and *hope* recalibrates our inner spiritual compass and floods life back into us...in “God’s perfect timing.

PERSONAL RESPONSES:

- **Physical Foundation:** *Look away from* a self-indulgent or self-loathing focus to check your physical needs. How are you eating and hydrating? Are you getting enough proper rest and exercising daily to break a sweat?
- **First**, *look away from* your self-focus, **upward** in ***faith*** to expand your view of who God is and what He has promised, THE FIRST ESSENTIAL QUESTION (“*What is God like?*”). *So take time each day in God’s Word, the primary source of knowing Him better.*
- **Second**, *look away from* your self-focus, **outward** in ***love*** to give away the small bit you have so God is free to fill you to overflowing (Luke 6:38). *So serve others for **their** sake without expecting a return* (the third essential question, “*What’s my God-Assignments today?*”).
- **Third**, *look away from* your self-focus, **onward** in ***hope*** to persevere towards God’s intended end, which we cannot see without eyes of faith (2nd essential question, “*How does this God see and know me?*”). *So take time each day in prayer and enjoying His presence during the day.*

“Follow the light, not the darkness.” If you are in despair, are you ready to re-up, choosing to respond to God with all-in, wholehearted allegiance? If so, do it...*now*. If not, return again to “*Our Weighty Base*” and soak in God-Reality until He recaptures your life.