“Understanding Spiritual Depression”

1 Kings 19:1-8

If you have your Bible, turn with me to 1 Kings 19, where in just a minute we will read verses 1-8. Before we do, I think it is good for us to consider all that God has accomplished through Elijah’s life up to this point. Back in chapter 17, he appears on the scene like a flash of lightning and he boldly confronts King Ahab, telling him that there will be no rain in Israel because of his idolatry. From there, God led him to a place by the brook where He provided his needs by ravens. When the brook dried up, the Lord directed him to a widow in Zarephath whose jar of flour and jug of oil did not run dry but was miraculously supplied. Not only is Elijah a man of faith who trusts the Word of God, but he believes that God has all power, even to raise the dead. Which is what takes place with the widow’s son. Elijah is a man of tremendous zeal and courage when outnumbered, and that is evident in chapter 18 with the showdown on Mount Carmel. He is a man of prayer, not only praying that God withhold the rain, but that He would send the rain once again upon the land.

Suffice it to say that Elijah was among the greatest of the prophets, who would even later appear with Moses on the mountain of transfiguration in Matthew 17. And so when we consider all of that, we’d be right to surmise that Elijah is a spiritual giant. However, we must not forget that he is a man with a nature like ours. Though he is a man of God, he is still a man. And that means he is imperfect and prone to weakness, and his weakness is on display in this text to which we’ve now come. (Read)

I want to deal with a subject this morning that does not get a lot of pulpit time, but should, given the fact that so many people are dealing with it in our day. And I’m referring to the issue of discouragement and depression. It is a thing that we all

battle in one way or another, and some more so than others. Discouragement and depression are not the same thing, though depression often begins with feelings of discouragement. Depression is when life appears darkest with no light at the end of the tunnel. Discouragement is usually a temporary response to a difficult situation. But depression is a more persistent condition that can affect mood, energy, sleep, interest in life, and daily functioning—often for a prolonged period of time.

On the heels of a great spiritual victory, Elijah finds himself in deep despair. Having his life threatened by Jezebel, he began to see God in light of his circumstances rather than see his circumstances in the light of God. And when we do that, we allow discouragement to skew our outlook on life, and it can lead us to a dark place if we're not careful. Now, let me be quick to point out that the causes of depression are multiple. There are also factors at work in some types of depression such as genetics and mental illness. It is not as simple as giving someone a pat on the back and telling them to cheer up. Our humanity is made up of body, soul, and spirit. Which means there are complexities that we need to keep in mind when dealing with this complicated subject. Physically, there may be something going on that requires medical attention. And so for those who've had a clinical diagnosis, there is no shame in seeking medical help. When a person breaks their arm or is faced with a cancer diagnosis, we don't shame them because of their need for medical treatment. So why would we ever do that for the one who is experiencing something like a chemical imbalance, or the painful ordeal associated with illness of the mind?

The issue is when we approach it strictly from a physical and mental perspective. There is also more to humanity than our physicality. There is an immaterial component to our humanity, which is our soul. If we treat our humanity as if it is

nothing more than a physical body, we will come up short when it comes to addressing the root causes of much depression. The same is true if we ignore the physical side our of humanity and only try to address the immaterial part. For the longest time, the response to those who are in the throes of depression has been heartless or too simplistic. When the immaterial part of our humanity is hurting, it can affect the material part of our humanity. And vice versa. Which is why we see in this text that God ministers to His weary prophet in a way that helps him both physically and spiritually.

In chapter 19, Elijah is in the throes of spiritual depression. We might say that he has 'bottomed out' in his spiritual life. He's been on the top of the mountain, and now he's at the bottom of the valley. And I think a simple outline for these verses would be:

- A threatening pronouncement (v. 1-2)
- A fearful panic (v. 3)
- A clouded perspective (v. 4-6)
- A necessary provision (v. 7-8)

Beyond giving you a simple outline around which we can organize these verses, I want us to make some application for our lives when facing our own seasons of depression.

1—Spiritual highs are often followed by spiritual lows (19:1-2)

"Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, 'So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow."

There is a noticeable difference in the atmosphere and the tone of chapter 19 compared to the previous chapter. In chapter 18, Elijah has been on the mountain top. Literally. He has been contending for the truth against a majority, he has experienced the thrill of victory, and he has witnessed the Lord's power in sending both the fire and the rain. But in chapter 19, the winds shift and no longer would it seem that he has the wind at his back. Instead, he is met with a strong headwind. Verse 1 says, "Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets (of Baal) with the sword." What's interesting is that there is no mention of God here. Ahab doesn't say anything about the way that God had proven Himself by fire, or how He had answered Elijah's prayer for rain. Instead, Ahab comes to Jezreel and says to Jezebel, "Look at what Elijah did!" He is playing a game of 'pin the tail on the donkey' by blaming Elijah for the noticeable absence of Baal's prophets.

Psalm 10:4—"The wicked in his proud countenance does not seek God; God is in none of his thoughts."

Ahab is the classic example of a materialist. I mean he is not a committed worshiper of anything but himself. He is out for power and prosperity. Baal is a useful means to that end when it suits him, but so is God. Jezebel, on the other hand, is zealous for Baal. Remember that she is a Sidonian princess who comes from a family of hardcore worshipers of Baal. She's not the pragmatist that Ahab is, but she takes the news of the slaughter of Baal's prophets personally. And so she is out for blood as verse 2 says, "Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, 'So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." And Elijah runs in fear for his life. God had called him to stand before Ahab, which Elijah had done. He had stood courageously against the 450 prophets of Baal. But he runs out of fear from

Jezebel. Which means he runs from his calling, runs from his responsibility, and runs from the place God wanted him. That's a big difference from one chapter to the next, isn't it? And yet it illustrates how things can change in our life from one moment to the next. After the mountain top experience of victory, Elijah runs in fear. He finds himself in the valley of despair, and his focus changes as his fear overrules his faith at this point. The victory of faith gives way to the defeat of fear.

A.W. Pink—*"God suffers it to appear that the best of men are but men at best. No matter how richly gifted they may be, how eminent in God's service, how greatly honored and used of Him, let God's sustaining power be withdrawn from them for a moment and it will quickly be seen that they are earthen vessels. No man stands any longer than he is supported by Divine grace. The most experienced saint, if left to himself, is immediately seen to be as weak as water and as timid as a mouse."*

Our most vulnerable moments often come after some great victory. It often seems like the highest point and the lowest point are linked together. And we see this illustrated in the lives of men and women in the Bible. I think about Noah as an example. His obedience is seen in Genesis 6-8, but then in chapter 9 there is the episode of his drunkenness. Or the call of Abram in Genesis 12 where he is obedient to go to the land that God will show him. But once he is there he panics in a famine and goes down to Egypt out of fear. In Numbers 20, Moses strikes the rock instead of speaking to it like God had told him. And what about David, the man after God's own heart? 2 Samuel 10 records his victory on the battlefield, but the next chapter records his defeat with Bathsheba. Even the best of men are but men at best. It is this sense that the Bible presents us the raw and honest truth about ourselves.

What goes up will often come down. Discouragement and depression often follow a spiritual and emotional high. We reach a milestone, experience some exhilaration and the joy that comes with it. We can sustain that for only so long before our emotions have nowhere to go but back down. It is why we must not let our spiritual guard down.

Andrew Bonar—*"Let us be as watchful after the victory as before the battle."*

I can almost always guarantee that there will be some kind of spiritual attack in my life on the heels of a victory. Anita will tell you that I am the most prone to discouragement on Sunday night. After the spiritual high of a Sunday morning comes the spiritual low of a Monday. There are reasons for why that is, and being aware of it and prepared for when it comes is half the battle. It has been well said that battles always follow blessings, and trials always follow triumphs. Victory is always followed by adversity, highs are followed by lows, mountain heights are followed by valleys deep.

2—Reality doesn't always live up to expectation (19:3)

"Then he was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there."

Given the success of the previous chapter, you and I might expect Jezebel's threat to roll right off Elijah like water off a duck's back. No one who witnessed fire fall from heaven that day would doubt whether or not God was in Elijah's corner. And yet instead of meeting her threat with courage, Elijah falls apart. Look at the statement made in verse 3, "Then he was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life." He doesn't even look like the same man who stood against the 450 prophets of Baal. So that in a matter of hours, he goes from the heights of spiritual confidence to the depths of suicidal despair. What happened? What

shifted within him that would lead him to doubt God's power and protection in his life? We might well ask ourselves the same question.

I do think that there are some contributing factors that must be considered. I mean, this season of despair doesn't just come out of the blue. There are multiple streams feeding into it. What are they?

Intense pressure

For one, Elijah has been under immense pressure. He has faced down the opposition as one man against the majority. Not to mention the spiritual attack that is going on invisibly all around him. Such relentless spiritual pressure is bound to bring even the most mature believer to a breaking point. This was something that Paul understood. He wrote about his experience in:

2 Corinthians 1:8-9—"For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead."

Relational isolation

Something else that feeds Elijah's sense of despair is his relational isolation. Verse 3 says that when he comes to Beersheba, he left his servant there and went a full day's journey by himself into the wilderness. Something can be said for his isolation at this point. Over the course of the last three years in his life, he has had very little human contact. And now that he has left his servant behind, he deliberately cuts himself off from any godly companionship whatsoever.

As strong of a man that Elijah is, he is still a man. And God said that it is not good that man be alone. Of course, there is a time and place for us to be alone with God. But for the most part, humanity is wired for relationship. No believer can thrive without the communion of other believers. Yet one of the first things that we do when we find ourselves slipping into a place of despair is that we isolate ourselves from people. And that is often the worst thing we can do in the situation.

Iain Duguid—*"Depression is not only caused by the absence of community; it also perpetuates it."*

Physical exhaustion

Another contributing factor to Elijah's despair is his physical exhaustion, and I'll say more about that in a minute. He's been going wide open, full throttle for a prolonged period of time so that he is weary. Fatigue has set in. In chapter 18, after the events of Mount Carmel, we're told that King Ahab went up to eat and drink, but not Elijah. He spends time on the mountain in prayer, then he runs some 18 miles off to Jezreel. After that, he runs for his life some 90 miles down to Beersheba in the far south. And by the time he gets to Mount Horeb, he will have run nearly 300 miles in total! So to say the man is tired is certainly an understatement. The saying goes, "Fatigue makes cowards of us all."

Unmet expectations

Another contributing factor that we can't overlook is Elijah's unmet expectations. After all of the smoke cleared in the aftermath of the battle, Elijah no doubt went to Jezreel in the complete confidence that revival had come to Israel. After all that had transpired at Mount Carmel, surely now the nation would turn back to God, beginning with the king and his house. But that's not what happens at all.

Instead, the prophet is met with a threat on his life. And so he runs in fear for his life.

Reality doesn't aways live up to expectation. It's a lesson we all learn and re-learn. I'm old enough to remember the toy that used to be advertised on the box of cereal. Do you remember that? I would open the box and dig around until I finally laid my hands on the prize. Only to be disillusioned by it once I had it in my grasp. The picture on the box gave me an expectation that did not live up to reality. The same things happen to us as adults. We expect life to present us with one thing, only to find that the thing we hoped for does not materialize.

Proverbs 13:12—"Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life."

Eugene Peterson in the Message paraphrases it this way, "Unrelenting disappointment leaves you heartsick, but a sudden good break can turn life around." Reality then sets in and we find ourselves disillusioned. Have you ever been there before? I'm sure you have.

3—Exhaustion can cloud our perspective (19:4-5a)

"But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he asked that he might die, saying, 'It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers.' And he lay down and slept under a broom tree."

Having left his servant in Beersheba, Elijah goes a day's journey into the wilderness until he collapses under what verse 4 describes as a 'broom tree' which is really no more than a large shrub, barely enough shade for one person (see picture on the slide). It shows just how exhausted the prophet must have

been as he finds himself hitting a wall. You know what that means? When you come to the end of your reserves and are ready to tap out.

David Roper—*"Elijah is overadrenalized, overextended, and emotionally depleted, brooding over his feelings of inadequacy and apparent failure, [and] he collapsed into self-pity, withdrawal, and self-destructive thoughts."*

Underneath the broom tree and out of his sense of despair, verse 4 says that Elijah prays to die, saying, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers." He's overwhelmed by a sense of his own failure. He's saying, "I've had enough. I don't want to face another day. I don't want to see another person. Lord, You might as well go ahead and take my life." In his own mind, he is no better than his forefathers. They had failed to live up to the covenant terms that God had made with them, and now he sees himself as being no better than them. And yet who said that he ever had to be? It was a self-imposed game of comparison. He had established a self-imposed unrealistic standard, and then beat himself up when he didn't measure up. We've fallen into the same ditch at times in our lives.

Elijah had not only begun to focus on the circumstances, but notice he had begun to focus on himself. We will see this again in verse 10 where he says, "I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, thrown down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away." Have you ever had one of those days? Where you say, "I am the only one who cares about this thing, I am the only one who is doing anything around here." Like nobody else is doing anything, while you've been saddled with everything. And you sit down and throw a pity party for yourself, yet you're the only one in attendance.

When you have an 'I' problem, that is a dead giveaway that your perspective has become clouded. Elijah's perspective is clouded, and I think there are some reasons for why that is the case. We've considered a few already. But just think about all that he's dealt with:

- Falsehood; he's dealt with lies and misrepresentation of Ahab to Jezebel; it is a painful experience to be lied about
- Fear; the potential threat against his life sent him into a tailspin
- Failure; though he had stood courageously, it seemed to be a short-lived thing in Israel
- Friendlessness; he is all by himself under the broom tree, having left his servant in Beersheba
- Fatigue; he is mentally, physically, and spiritually tired

Never make a major decision in your life when you're tired. Never send an email when you're angry. Never respond to a situation in the fatigue of a moment. In those situations, I think the best thing you can do is to come apart for a while. Rest can help you regain a clear sense of perspective that is lost when you're weary and fatigued. We don't tend to think straight when we're tired. Verse 5 says that Elijah lay down and slept under a broom tree. He had to have been exhausted. And yet the fact that he is able to sleep is itself a gift from the Lord. The Bible says as much:

Psalm 127:1-2—"Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for He gives to His beloved sleep."

You are not the Energizer Bunny. You are not made to go 24/7. You and I are but frail, finite creatures in need of rest. We're always in a hurry in our generation, and if we are not careful, hurry can become a major obstacle to our physical and spiritual well-being. We forget that constant activity is not the same thing as meaningful productivity. There are times when the most productive thing you can do is take a nap (I'd prefer it not be right now, though I see some of you are already applying this point:-).

Charles Swindoll—*"There is an old Greek saying, 'You will break the bow if you keep it always bent.' In other words, if you're living under constant, relentless stress, you'll finally break under the pressure. You have to give yourself some time for rest and refreshment."*

Our lifestyle can contribute to the problem. Dr. Stephen Ilardi, a clinical psychologist and depression researcher, sums up the lifestyle problem in his book, *The Depression Cure.* Listen to what he writes:

"We were never designed for a sedentary, socially isolated, sleep-deprived, poorly nourished, indoor, frenetic pace of modern American life."

And another writer on the subject has said this:

Chris Hodges—*"Virtually all research on depression concludes that if we have no real social life and daily human connection to others, we're more likely to be depressed. Similarly, if we never get out of the house and away from the computer and experience the beauty of God's creation outdoors, we're more likely to feel depressed. If our diets are unhealthy and our minds are filled with the noise of a broken world, we're more likely to experience depression. If we just exist and never find any real meaning in our lives, depression almost always sets in." (Out of the Cave)*

He goes on to say:

"Our crazy schedules pack in way more than most healthy human beings would ever attempt in a given day. We're juggling home repairs and homework, leading board meetings and Bible studies, chauffeuring kids and elderly parents, all while trying to give 110% at work, 120% at home, and whatever might be left to church, other ministries, and nonprofits. To make matters worse, we often spend whatever free time or thin margin we have left on social media, ingesting new updates, opinions, and headlines every sixty seconds. We might give our physical bodies the chance to rest, but not our minds. Who can sustain such an imbalanced way of living? (The obvious answer is no one). An overwhelmed schedule produces an underwhelmed soul."

Jesus invites us to come to Him and find rest. He says:

Matthew 11:28-30—"Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light."

Of course, He's referring to more than physical rest. He's referring to the spiritual rest and peace that comes through trusting in Christ rather than attempting to sustain your life through personal effort. Spiritual rest is what a soul needs and craves, and Jesus says that rest is found only in being yoked up with Him.

4—God's grace is sufficient for our darkest moments (19:5b-8)

"And behold, an angel touched him and said to him, 'Arise and eat.' And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. And he ate and drank and lay down again. And the angel of the Lord

came a second time and touched him and said, 'Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you.' And he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God."

To better understand spiritual depression, you and I need to remember that our spiritual highs are often followed by spiritual lows. Keep in mind the fact that reality does not always live up to expectation. And exhaustion can cloud our perspective. But there is something else at work here in this situation, or better yet, there is 'Someone' else at work in the situation. Ahab, Jezebel, and Elijah are not the only players who are mentioned in this episode. God is also there, and not for a moment is Elijah ever beyond His tender, compassionate concern. Even at the lowest point of his life, Elijah makes the discovery that God is there too, and that in His infinite mercy, God meets him in his despair.

At the lowest point in his spiritual life, the Lord doesn't give Elijah a kick in the pants. There's no rebuke, no lecture, no punishment or retribution. Instead, God shows him grace. Notice verse 5 says the angel of the Lord 'touched him.' I find that to be very significant. Often in the Old Testament, 'the angel of the Lord' is a pre-incarnate appearance of the second Person of the triune God-head, none other than the Lord Jesus Himself. And what do we find Jesus doing for others in the New Testament? He touches them. There's just something about His touch in our deepest seasons of distress. I think Bill Gaither may have said it best:

Shackled by a heavy burden,
'Neath a load of guilt and shame;
Then the hand of Jesus touched me,
And now I am no longer the same!
He touched me, oh, He touched me,
And oh, the joy that floods my soul!

Something happened, and now I know,

He touched me, and made me whole!

Elijah is exhausted, and God gives him rest. His energy is depleted, and God bakes him a biscuit. Then verse 7 says the angel of the Lord came a second time and touched him and says to him, "Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you." For the frantic pace of his life, God gives him rest. For his hunger pains, God gives him something to eat. For his loneliness and despair, God gives him a touch. Paul later explained his own experience:

2 Corinthians 12:9—"But He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for your, for My power is made perfect in weakness."

All the other reasons being considered, I think there is still one more contributing factor to Elijah's despair in this text. It is problem that goes deeper than the others. Is he tired? Yes, and the remedy for that is rest. It he hungry? There is no doubt, and the remedy for that is food. Is he isolated? He is, and the remedy for that is companionship. But there is something else at work here in Elijah's life, and it has to do with the fact that for so long he had attempted to be Israel's savior while forgetting that he too is a man in need of a Savior. You can become disillusioned when others reject your efforts at their salvation, so much so that you lose sight of the fact that you need a Savior just as much as anyone.

Elijah is not the Savior of Israel any more than you are the Savior of your lost family member, or your struggling friend. At the very best you can be an instrument in His hands, but their salvation is His business. Give yourself to people. Be a friend to those in need. Serve them in Jesus' name. But don't try to be their Savior, because you can't be. There is a good percentage of you here this morning who are on the verge of burnout because you're trying to be the

Savior to someone. You can't save yourself. What makes you think you can save someone else? You need the Savior. Elijah needed the Savior. But in Jesus, we have the Savior! The psalmist said:

Psalm 120:1—"In my distress I called to the Lord, and He answered me."

Now, I don't know what's going on in your life right now. I know there must be times of discouragement in your life, because there are times of discouragement in my own. It may be that some of you know what it is to sit beneath your own 'broom tree.' You are exhausted, afraid, and unable to see what comes next. Or for others of you, it could be a loved one who battles depression. This passage does not tell us that Elijah's despair was imaginary. But it shows us a God who does see His weary servant, is right there with him in his darkest season, and gives him what he needs for the next step.

If you're under your own broom tree today, you do not have to pretend that you are fine. Bring your despair honestly to God. His strength is made perfect in your weakness, and it does not put you beyond the reach of His care. Your hope rests in the Lord who meets you there and will not abandon you. You may be under the tree, but let me tell you about One who hung on the tree for you! If you've never trusted Christ, your deepest need is to be reconciled to God. Our sin separates us from him, but Jesus came to save sinners. He died in our place and rose again, so that everyone who turns from sin and trusts in Him will receive forgiveness and new life. Jesus says, "Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Don't give up on life while under a broom tree. Do you hear me? God has a purpose for you. Each day your feet hit the floor is a sign that God is not finished with you. And so let's learn from the life of Elijah.