

How to Deal with Depression – Elijah’s Experience

1 Kings 19:1-9

Intro

Depression is one of the greatest problems today. It has been called the common cold of emotional illness. For many people, recognizing and admitting to feeling depressed carries a stigma, a kind of shame. People who are depressed have been looked upon as weak, incapable of handling what life has thrown at them or even perhaps too lazy to rise above their circumstances and “get on with life.” Particularly in Christian circles it seems people have heard the message that depression is a result of not praying enough, or having enough faith, or serving God enough. Some think that good Christians don’t get depressed. That’s not true because in the Bible we find some individuals who went through depression.

Many people suffer from this emotional illness. There are different types of depression and not all depressions are the same. For instance according to the DSM-IV (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual) there are at least 6 classifications:

- *Major Depression*: a profound and constant sense of hopelessness and despair.
- *Chronic Depression (Dysthymia)*: lose interest in daily activities, feel hopeless, lack productivity, and feel worthlessness and thoughts of death and suicide.
- *Bipolar Depression*: severe high & low moods; being happy then sad and angry.
- *Seasonal Depression*: it occurs each year at the same time; usually in the fall or winter months.
- *Psychotic Depression*: having hallucinations, seeing & hearing things; having delusions.
- *Postpartum Depression*: mix of physical, emotional & behavioral change after giving birth.

These forms of depression are serious and often need professional attention and care. We must also remember that some cases of depression are caused, at least in part, by genetic and physiological factors. This is why I strongly encourage anyone who thinks they may be depressed to see their doctor for a medical screening and interview to determine if this is the case in their situation. All the counselling in the world will not alleviate depression if it is caused by physiological factors.

But today I want to talk about depression in general terms. It often happens to people who on the average are healthy but may go through an episode of depression.

It happened to a biblical character who went through a time of depression. It can happen to believers who at times have difficulty in handling the issues in their lives and circumstances. The prophet Elijah was just such an example. He most likely suffered from Major Depression. Major depression is manifested by a combination of things that interfere with the ability to work, sleep, eat, and enjoy pleasurable activities. A Major Depression episode may occur only once but more commonly occurs several times in a lifetime. I believe this was the situation with Elijah.

Faulty Thinking

Elijah was so depressed that he wanted to die. Often bad circumstances that happens in our lives get us into emotional messes. It's because of faulty thinking. Our emotions are often affected by our thoughts. *"For as he thinks in his heart, so is he"* (Prov. 23:7 NKJV). If you think often in a negative way, you are going to feel sad and depressed.

Often your emotional state is caused by how you perceive and interpret your life. To free yourself from negative emotions you have to change the way you think. Romans 12:2 says, *"Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."* Your thinking and attitude needs to change. We find that Elijah too had to change the way he perceived things.

Elijah's Experience with Depression

We find the story of the prophet Elijah in 1 Kings 19. For 3 years he was God's prophet to the nation of Israel and many miracles happened through him. One individual who detested Elijah was a queen named Jezebel. She was wicked and despised Elijah because he spoke the truth of God.

PLAYING THE MENTAL GAMES

1. Dwell on the Facts & Not on Your Feelings

How did Elijah get depressed? Because he focused on 4 mental games that we all play when we get depressed. Let's look at 1 Kings 19:3-4, *"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 wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die."* What he said more or less was, "Lord, I've had enough. I can't put up with it anymore. I'm wasting my life. I just want to die."

What was his first mistake? It's the same mistake we make when we are depressed. We dwell on our feelings rather than the facts or the truth. Elijah allowed one incident to frighten him into depression. He felt like a failure, and because he felt like a failure he assumed he was a failure.

Psychologists call it "Emotional Reasoning" or "Cognitive Distortions." Emotional reasoning is a cognitive process by which a person concludes that his/her emotional reaction proves something is true, regardless of the observed evidence. Emotional reasoning is destructive. It is the "I feel it, so it must be true" idea.

Many people who are musicians, actors, athletes, and leaders often after a performance feel that they failed or flopped. And it's the same with people who have worked or done something and then feel they failed. You need to learn to not focus on those feelings because feelings aren't always true. Often they are not facts and they are highly unreliable.

Sometimes when we make a mistake in one area, we tend to feel as if we are total failures. That's destructive thinking and it's a misconception. As the saying goes, "It is human to err," so we are entitled to make mistakes sometimes and we can fail in some areas without being a failure.

Most counselors believe that getting your feelings out in the open is healthy. So talk them out. But that's not the complete solution because feelings are unreliable. Scripture doesn't tell us to just get in touch with our feelings but to get in touch with the truth, because the truth sets you free. What is the truth about me? Well, for a believer it's who I am in Christ. In Christ I am loved and highly valued by Him. In Him I am not a failure, I am more than a conqueror.

2. Stop the Comparison Game

The second error that Elijah made was comparing himself with others. In his prayer he says, *"I have had enough, LORD," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors"* (1 Kings 19:4).

Another cause of depression is when we start comparing ourselves with other people. It's like this, "If I could be like so and so I would be happy." We should never compare ourselves with others because everyone is unique. Just be yourself. Be honest with yourself and be who God created you to be. When you compare yourself to another you fall in a trap. You tend to compare your weakness with other people's strengths not knowing that those people are also weak in areas where you may be strong. Sometimes we use the "should words"; like "I should be like that other person." "I should be able to accomplish the things the other person has done." "I should be able to have a handle on my life like so and so."

STOP NAGGING YOURSELF! Nagging yourself with self-condemnation or self-criticism doesn't work. It's not healthy. It's not conducive to a healthy self-concept and to self worth. Stop the comparison game. I like what David said in Psalm 139:14, *"I praise you because I am fearfully (awesomely) and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well."*

3. Don't Take False Blame

Another mistake that Elijah made was that he blamed himself for the negative things that happened in his life that were not his fault. In 1 Kings 19:10 he says, *"I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword..."* In other words he was saying, "I have worked hard all these years for your people, but they're still not close to you. I have tried so hard but they are still living the same way as before." Sometimes pastors feel like this!

In his time of depression Elijah blamed himself for failing to change his people and he took it personally. When we take false blame it causes depression too. If we take on a responsibility that God never intended us to have, it is a very heavy burden. Jesus said, *"For my yoke is easy and my burden is light"* (Matthew 11:30).

When you are often helping people you realize sooner or later that people do not always respond the way you would like them to. It could be your family, friends, or co-workers. Often people react in different ways and we can't assume responsibility for their responses.

Listen carefully. When you assume responsibility for other people's decisions, you take on a burden that will depress you. At times you may be able to influence someone but you can't control them. It's their decision and don't be depressed by something you can't control.

4. Don't Exaggerate the Negative

Another error that Elijah made was that he exaggerated the negative. Look with me at what Elijah says in 1 Kings 19:10, "*I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.*" The prophet had a little pity party. "Everyone is against me and I'm the only one left."

Actually, the truth was that not all the people were against him. Only one person was against him and Jezebel's threat wasn't a real threat. If Elijah really thought about his circumstance instead of listening to his feelings, he would have realized that Jezebel didn't dare kill him. She only sent a messenger with a death threat. If she had really intended to kill Elijah, she wouldn't have sent a messenger to warn him; but would have sent her hit man assassin!

Jezebel was too smart to have Elijah killed because she recognized his powerful influence over his people, the Israelites. If she had killed him he would have become a martyr and that would have increased his influence over the country. Also Jezebel was probably afraid of what God would do to her if she touched this powerful prophet of God. In her conniving way she wanted Elijah to look like a coward in front of the people. She wanted him to leave the area and stop him from performing more miracles. Elijah fell for her trap. He didn't stop to evaluate the threat and instead he fled scared. When we exaggerate the negative we get depressed. When you exaggerate your problem and blow it up out of proportion it will lead you to depression.

A side note; the truth and the reality was that Elijah was not the only person faithful to God as he felt he was. There were still 7,000 true believers who remained faithful (1 Kings 19:18). Elijah exaggerated the problem and sank into depression.

Don't exaggerate the negative. Renew your mind in God's word. One of my favourite ways of thinking about dealing with depression is found in 2 Corinthians 10:5, "*...we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.*" Depression is often associated with believing lies; what we think has a great impact on how we feel. If we believe and tell ourselves that we are worthless, life is hopeless, no one loves us, or nothing will ever get better, we are believing and living the lie.

Dr. Gary Smalley, (a Christian counselor) in one of his recent books *Change Your Heart, Change Your Life* does an excellent job of describing how applying God's truth to our distorted ways of thinking can change us dramatically. According to best-selling author Dr. Gary Smalley, nobody has to live by the destructive subtle lies or believe the distortions of truth this world holds out to us. There are steps, strategies, and beliefs people can bring to their lives to either totally transform them or quietly improve them-and it all starts with hiding God's Word in their hearts.

Hiding God's Word in his heart radically changed the life of Smalley himself, and he has seen it revolutionize the lives of people. It has helped people with issues of lust, materialism, selfishness, anger, stress, overeating, anxiety, depression and guilt, just to name a few.

Conclusion

The Four Areas in Dealing with Depression:

- 1) Dwell on the Facts not Your Feelings
- 2) Stop the Comparison Game
- 3) Don't Take False Blame
- 4) Don't Exaggerate the Negative

Next week I want to preach on: **APPLYING GOD'S REMEDY FOR DEPRESSION**. We are going to continue the story of Elijah and see how God helped him deal with his depression. Stay tuned to the same station and the same time next week!