



*To Know Christ . . .  
and to Make Him Known*

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### **How to Survive a Pity Party 1 Kings 19:1-18**

Have you ever had yourself a “pity party”?

You know what I’m talking about, don’t you? You’re depressed, you’re moping around, you’re feeling sorry for yourself, maybe “licking your wounds.” And you feel like singing that old children’s song:

Nobody loves me, everybody hates me,  
I’m gonna eat some worms!

Well, I’ve had my share of those times, and I expect you have too. I don’t know about you, but I can throw a pity party with the best of them! Just ask Jo Ann!

#### ***The reality of depression***

Whatever else a pity party may be, it’s primarily a misguided way to deal with *depression*. The real pity is that while we think that having a pity party will help us feel better, it really just feeds our depression, making us feel worse and even more miserable, not to mention those around us who have to put up with us!

Now psychiatric medicine has helped us understand that in some people, depression is caused by a chemical imbalance that can be corrected with medication. It’s an illness with a physiological cause. I have a couple of minister friends who struggle with this. As long as they stay on their medication, they do well. But if they decide they can do without it, it’s not long before they’re in a deep state of clinical depression all over again.

But for many people, depression results from either psychological, emotional, or spiritual factors, or some combination of these. Medical science is catching on to what the Hebrews and early Christians knew—that rather than being made up of three separate parts that don’t affect each other (spirit, soul, and body), a person is a “living soul,” a unified being with three distinct aspects of that being (spirit, soul, and body). And these distinct aspects impact each other tremendously for good or bad.

Now some folks think depression is something only “weak” people experience. Not so! When John Bunyan wrote about the “Slough of Despond” in his classic *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, he was no doubt speaking from experience about depression. Charles Haddon Spurgeon was arguably the greatest British Baptist preacher of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, preaching to thousands almost every Lord’s Day. He may still be the most published preacher in the world today. But he constantly wrestled with depression. Somewhere—I can’t recall where—I read that there were

Sunday mornings when Spurgeon's depression would overtake him so strongly that he would turn to one of his church's elders and say, "You have to preach this morning. I simply can't do it." Then he'd leave and go out into the country and visit some little church.

Indeed, depression has been the "thorn in the flesh" of many of the greatest saints.

### *Elijah's struggle*

This was certainly the case with Elijah, the prophet of the LORD. As we've been looking at his life and ministry over the past several weeks, we've seen that he was totally committed to the LORD, willing to obey God no matter what it cost him. We've seen him engaged in a titanic struggle to call Israel back from worshiping the Canaanite agricultural god Baal to worship the LORD, the true God. We've seen God's care for Elijah during the drought, how the LORD accomplished His will through him in the contest on Mount Carmel, and his fervent, expectant, faith-filled prayer for rain.

But in today's text, we see a very different side of Elijah. He's in the Slough of Despond, deeply depressed, having himself *a pity party*. James, the Lord's brother, knew what he was talking about when he said, **Elijah was a man with a nature like ours . . .** (James 5:17).<sup>1</sup>

After the showdown on Mount Carmel demonstrated beyond any shadow of doubt that the LORD was really God, Elijah executed the prophets of Baal. Then he prayed for rain, and God sent a huge rain. Ahab went and told his ardent Baal-worshiper wife Jezebel everything Elijah had done, including his execution of Baal's prophets. She sent word to Elijah, saying, **"So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time."**

So what does Elijah, this mighty prophet who has so fearlessly obeyed God and confronted Ahab and Baal and his prophets do? He gets scared and runs for his life! He goes about as far south in Judah as he could go, to Beersheba, then leaves his servant there and goes farther south a day's journey into the desert.

What a sad and stunning turn of events! This mighty prophet of the LORD, who just a few days before had seen God answer his prayer in such a mighty way, was now sitting under a broom tree in the desert, praying to die. **"It is enough! Now, LORD, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers."** A wise preacher once remarked that if Elijah had really meant this prayer, he could have stayed home and Jezebel would have been glad to oblige him!

What in the world brought all this on? Well, look at what was going on with Elijah. After he'd prayed for rain and knew God was about to answer, he had run ahead of Ahab's chariot seventeen miles, all the way from Carmel to Jezreel. Then he had traveled from Jezreel down into the desert south of Beersheba, probably another hundred miles or more. He was *physically exhausted!*

He was *emotionally exhausted*, too. Think how much the contest on Carmel had taken out of him emotionally. It's not unusual after a great victory to have an emotional letdown. Look at college basketball teams that score a huge upset or a hard-fought victory—often in their next games, they can hardly make a basket! We're made in such a way that we experience ebbs and flows, highs and lows. And often the higher the high, the lower the low!

Our text tells us that Elijah was afraid because of Jezebel's promise to kill him. He knew she was serious; she had already had a number of the LORD's prophets killed (1 Kings 18:13). Why should he be any different?

Don't you think Elijah had to be frustrated at this point? Here he had obeyed God with a costly obedience. And just when it looked like the victory was won, Jezebel seemed to come

back as strong as ever. He was probably frustrated over his perceived failure and rejection. In fact, he was beyond frustrated—he was *angry*—at Israel, at Ahab, at Jezebel, at himself, and probably at God.

So there he was, having himself a pity party!

When you think about, don't the same kinds of things contribute to our depression—physical and emotional exhaustion, fear, frustration, and unresolved anger?

Someone has observed that God gave us our emotions to feel with, and we can't help what we feel. What we can help is how we deal with those feelings. When we don't deal well with fear and frustration, when we leave our anger unresolved so that it festers like a sore, we end up under the broom tree with Elijah, having a pity party.

### *Surviving our pity parties*

Now here's the good news. *With God's help, Elijah survived his pity party.* And with God's help, we can survive ours too.

An old car commercial used to say that the best way to survive an accident is not to get in one. Understanding that exhaustion, fear, frustration, and unresolved anger often lead to a pity party can help us head it off. But sometimes we still succumb to these factors. What are we to do? *How can we survive our pity parties?*

Elijah's experience shows us. In tender compassion, God gently but firmly helped Elijah deal with his depression. God showed Elijah what he had to do.

Elijah was exhausted, and after he prayed to die, he fell asleep. After a while, an angel woke him up and told him to eat the fresh warm bread and drink the water he had provided. Elijah ate and drank, then went back to sleep. Then the angel of the LORD woke him a second time and told him to get up and eat, because he had a long journey ahead of him. So he ate and drank, and then started on a forty-day journey to Mount Horeb, the mountain of God—also known as Mount Sinai, where God had given the Law to Moses.

Elijah hadn't been taking care of himself in the midst of all this conflict with Ahab and Jezebel. God helped him change that, providing rest and nourishment. And it's the same with us. *We have to take care of ourselves physically, spiritually, and emotionally.* In Mark 6:31, when Jesus' disciples had returned from a mission and reported to Him, He told them, **“Come aside by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while.”** Based on the KJV's translation of this verse, Vance Havner used to say, “You have to come apart and rest, or just plain come apart!”

At Mount Horeb, God confronted Elijah and asked him, **“What are you doing here, Elijah?”** Elijah poured out his complaint to God:

**“I have been very jealous for the LORD God of hosts; because the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life.”**

The LORD told Elijah to go out of the cave and stand on the mountain in His presence, because He was about to pass by. Elijah went out. A great, powerful wind came, tearing the mountain apart and shattering the rocks, but the LORD was not in the wind. Then there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. Then there was a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And then there came **a still small voice.**

With all the commotion, Elijah had retreated into the cave, but now he came out again.

Again, God asked him what he was doing there. And again, Elijah poured out his complaint verbatim.

God was confronting Elijah at the point of his anger and frustration. He knew Elijah had to express his feelings honestly in order to deal with them head-on. Then the LORD helped Elijah refocus his distorted reality (depression does distort reality, you know, putting us in a tunnel-vision mode where all we can really focus on is our anger and hurt and frustration). God told him, “I’m not done with you, yet, Elijah. I still have some things for you to do . . . .” (paraphrased). He gave him several assignments—anoint Hazael to be king over Syria and Jehu to be king over Israel, and anoint Elisha to be his successor as the LORD’s prophet. He gave Elijah something to do for Him, something to direct his focus off of “poor little Elijah” to God’s purpose in the world!

And then God said, “By the way, Elijah, you’re not the only one left—I still have seven thousand in Israel who haven’t bowed to Baal” (paraphrased).

God confronts us as well, though maybe not in such a dramatic fashion. But the Psalms teach us that *He wants us to be open and honest with Him about our complaints and our feelings*. He can take it. When we’re honest with Him, *He helps us refocus our distorted reality*, shifting our focus from our poor pitiful selves to the kingdom of God and Christ’s mission in the world!

But the real evidence that we have *survived* a pity party is when *we move forward and obey God*. That’s what Elijah did. We don’t know if he *felt* any better. The text doesn’t say. What it does say, though, is that he started fulfilling the assignments God gave him, beginning with anointing Elisha by throwing his own cloak or mantle around Elisha’s shoulders.

I once read somewhere about a depressed woman who was in counseling. The wise counselor decided to try to help her refocus her reality by prescribing that she do something for others every day that week, whether she felt like it or not. It really helped her. She actually felt much better. But then she told her counselor, “You don’t expect me to do that *every* week, do you?”

*With God’s help, we can survive our pity parties we throw when things go wrong*. The key is in turning to the Lord, being honest with ourselves and Him, listening to Him, and obeying Him.

But you know, maybe the most amazing thing about all this is that *despite our pity parties, God still uses us!* He didn’t cast Elijah aside or put him on the shelf, and thanks be to God, He won’t us either! Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture taken from the New King James Version.