

## Great Questions Series

### *"What are you doing here, Elijah?"*

#### 1 Kings 19:9,13

Many years ago there was a young Mid-Western lawyer who experienced such chronic depression that for a while his friends kept all knives and razor blades away from him for fear that he might commit suicide. During this time he wrote these words, ***"I am now the most miserable man living. Whether I shall ever be better I cannot tell. I awfully forebode that I shall not."*** This same man afterward wrote, ***"I am the now the most miserable man living. If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would not be one cheerful face on earth. To remain as I am is impossible. I must die or be better."*** The man was **President Abraham Lincoln**.

**Martin Luther** fought with depression on and off through his entire life. In 1527 Luther wrote, *"For more than a week I was close to the gates of death and hell. I trembled in all my members. Christ was wholly lost...The content of the depressions was always the same, the loss of faith that God is good and that He is good to me."*

**Charles Spurgeon**, the famous London pastor, struggled so severely with depression that he was forced to be absent from his pulpit for two to three months a year. In 1866 he told his congregation of his struggle saying: *"I am the subject of depressions of spirit so fearful that I hope none of you ever get to such extremes of wretchedness as I go through."*

**Pastor Rick Warren**, author of "The Purpose Drive Life" and pastor of the 22,000 member Saddleback Church, struggled mightily with depression in the early years as pastor. So, much so that at one point he went out into the desert and wrestled with God over feelings of inadequacy and being overwhelmed as the pastor of a rapidly growing church.

His **son, Matthew** also struggled with depression most of his life and at age 27 took his own life in what Pastor Warren called a *"momentary wave of despair."*

It's estimated that 300 million people worldwide suffer from depression. It's the most widespread form of emotional illness and has been called, "the common cold of emotional disorder."

According to renowned psychiatrists, **Minirth and Meier**, the number one problem in America is depression. They say that as psychiatrists they see more people suffering from depression than from all other emotional problems put together.

Statistics say that each of us has a 1 in 10 chance of becoming severely depressed and ALL of us have our regular skirmishes with its milder form. That means that most of us, at some point in our lives, have struggled with some form of depression and at least 10 or likely more of us have struggled mightily with a debilitating form of depression. So, right up front, you need to know that you're certainly not alone in this struggle. Many of my very best friends over the years have struggled for long periods of time with deep depression.

You also need to know that depression is not a sin. Because Job certainly seemed to struggle with it often during his ordeal and God said that in all he said, he did not sin. Also, if you read through the psalms you can't help but sense that David often struggled with depression.

The key is what you do when you're in a state of depression that's the key for your future direction. This morning we're going to look at an episode in the life of Elijah where he went into a deep depression and how God responded to him to bring him out of his depression. And I believe there are some very important lessons to learn from this study of his life.

### Background:

Elijah was a prophet of God who served during the reign of Ahab. What you need to know about Ahab was that he was a very wicked king. Listen to God's assessment of him. **Read 1 Kings 16:29-33**

**1 Kings 16:29-30 (NIV)** *In the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah, Ahab son of Omri became king of Israel, and he reigned in Samaria over Israel twenty-two years. 30 Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him.*

**1 Kings 16:33 (NIV)** *Ahab also made an Asherah pole and did more to arouse the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than did all the kings of Israel before him.*

And as bad and evil as Ahab was, his wife, Jezebel, might have been even worse.

So, Ahab led the people away from worship of God and to worship of the false god, Baal.

Into this scene comes the prophet Elijah in 1 Kings 17. **Read 1 Kings 17:1-6** Think about how remarkable that must have been to have birds deliver your meals everything morning and evening. So, Elijah learned early on in his ministry that God would provide for his daily needs.

After that Elijah encounters a widow from Zarephath who God miraculously provides food for and also uses Elijah to raise her dead son back to life.

So, after 3 years people are running out of water and food. Ahab has been searching all over the land trying to locate Elijah and likely put him to death. Elijah comes and meets with Ahab and challenges him to a classic showdown between the 850 false prophets of Baal and Asherah and himself.

You may be familiar with the story. They each appear on Mount Carmel for this great showdown to find out which god actually has power. They each erect a sacrifice and the 850 prophets of Baal and Asherah go first and try to get their gods to send fire from heaven and consume their sacrifice. They shouted and danced and shouted and danced some more and when that didn't work they began cutting themselves and letting their blood flow out in the hopes their gods would respond. But after doing this all day no response.

Finally, Elijah took his turn. He had to first rebuild the altar that had been destroyed. Then he laid the sacrifice on it and proceeded to have 12 large jars of water poured on it to make the task of igniting it even more difficult. As he called out to God, here's what happened.

**1 Kings 18:38-39 (NIV)** *Then the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench.*

*39 When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, "The Lord—he is God! The Lord—he is God!"*

After this Elijah commanded the people to seize the false prophets and kill them and that's exactly what they did. 850 false prophets were killed that day. What an incredible spiritual high Elijah must have been experiencing that day.

Then Elijah tells king Ahab that he'd better get in his chariot and head back to his palace because a tremendous storm was going to come. And so Ahab heads home and once again, miraculously, God gives Elijah the capability to run really really fast and ran the 17 miles back to Ahab's palace faster than the chariot. Don't you marathon runners wish God would give you that capability?

I believe that, at this moment, Elijah is quite excited fully anticipating that this will be the turning point spiritual in the life of Ahab and the Israelite people and they will now, after 3 years of God demonstrating his power through the drought and climaxing with His powerful demonstration in consuming the sacrifice, turn back to serving God. And this is where I'd like to pick it up in reading the text at 1 Kings 19:1-18.

Please follow along in your Bibles as I read this fascinating text.

Read **1 Kings 19:1-18**

I think it's safe to say that things didn't turn out exactly as Elijah had hoped for after his tremendous spiritual high on Mt. Carmel. Even though Elijah had seen God work miraculously every day for the last 3 years and on Mt. Carmel – the threat of Jezebel to have him killed sends him into a deep depression. He flees as far south as he can possibly get, in order to get away from Jezebel. He flees far outside of Ahab's rule and then leaves his servant and goes out into the desert to die. But did you notice how

patiently and lovingly God responds to Elijah. He first takes care of his physical needs. Elijah was no doubt physically and emotionally exhausted after what he'd been through, which can easily lead to depression. When he finally stops running, God follows him the whole time and speaks to him in the cave and asks him twice the exact same question: "What are you doing here, Elijah." And did you notice that Elijah gave him the exact same "pity-party", "poor me" response each time. Why did God ask Elijah that question? It clearly wasn't because he was trying to figure something out – but because He wanted Elijah to figure out what exactly brought him from the high of Mt. Caramel to wishing he were dead. He was bringing Elijah to a time of self-reflection, which is often good for us to do. To stop and ask ourselves, why am I in this state of depression and self-pity. And sometimes with clinical depression you can't really provide an answer to that question. It may be a chemical imbalance in your brain which only God can heal or medicine can treat. But other times there may be an event or a series of events in your life which have brought you down this dark tunnel to where you are right now.

Let me give you 6 important points to consider as we look at Elijah's life and ours as well.

### **Tips on Depression:**

#### **1. Highs are often followed by lows.**

People that work on big projects experience this and ministers often do as well. That's why ministers most often take Mondays off – because they work and work all week on a sermon and they pour themselves into it and then there's this let down after it's all over. Same way with large projects. You strategize and work intensely on completing a project and then once it's over there's this letdown because what's next. That's also why there are so many suicides shortly after Christmas – there's this big buildup and then it's back to my stinky depressing life afterwards and people choose not to go back to that disappointing life. Elijah had experienced an incredible high on Mt. Caramel when God delivered the fire from heaven and then all of the false prophets were killed. But all it took was Queen Jezebel threatening his life to go into a deep depression.

When you find yourself in those spiritual high points or in those low points remember Psalm 30:5

**Psalms 30:5 (NIV)** *For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.*

So, take time off to refresh yourself. Jesus understood the need for that.

**Mark 6:30-31 (NIV)** *The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. 31 Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest."*

#### **2. We make ourselves open to depression when we take our focus off of God and onto our circumstances.**

Because it's easy to become overwhelmed with your circumstances. You've got to remind yourself to keep your focus on God and remind yourself that God is bigger than any of your circumstances. And remember the truths of *Isaiah 26:3; Psalm 42:5*

Physical stress can easily take our focus off of God and onto our circumstances and the remedy is to continually take your focus back onto God. But it's a continual effort.

#### **3. Focus on God's character and goodness**

God showed up and reminded him of His power (powerful wind, earthquake, fire), His gentleness (the whisper) and His purposes (gave Elijah assignments) and His encouragement (He told Elijah He had 7,000 loyal followers). Elijah could have recounted how God fed him daily by raven catering and that He'd raised a boy from the dead and provided his mother with a unending supply of flour and oil and that He'd brought a lightning bolt out of heaven to consume the water saturated sacrifice – but Elijah chose instead to focus on Jezebel's threat. God could have just have easily sent a lightning bolt to kill Jezebel.

#### 4. We are more susceptible to depression when we are alone.

Elijah left his servant and isolated himself out in the desert with his obsession over Jezebel's death threat. He didn't have anyone to counter his feelings of depression and fear. God recognized very early in creation that it was not good for man to be alone – and so God created woman. But that same principle applies to every one of us as well. We were not designed by God to live life alone. We need someone there with us and for us to remind us that no matter what we're going through – we're not alone. Not only is God with you but we are as well. That's one of the key components of the church. That you have a body of believers who are there to rejoice with you when you're rejoicing and weeping with you when that's appropriate. To have a group of people that can recognize when you're becoming self-absorbed and provide a wake up call.

Paul wrote about the importance of this dynamic in Hebrews 10:25

**Hebrews 10:24-25 (NIV)** *And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, 25 not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

Many preachers love to use this verse as the warning not to skip coming to church. But it goes much deeper than that. It's talking about the power dynamic that happens within the body. We spur one another on to love and good deeds and encourage each other. It's one thing to simply attend church each week and then go home and resume life as "normal" (whatever that looks like). But it's a powerful dynamic when fellow believers come together and not only focus on God but also focus on how God may want to use me to minister to someone else in need today. And the Holy Spirit alerts them to someone who needs encouragement and they go speak to that person or give them a hug. And maybe even they go further than that and follow up with a phone call or lunch later that week. When you're feeling depressed don't isolate yourself from the very people God wants to use to encourage you.

#### 5. What we do can affect how we feel.

Not only did Elijah isolate himself from everyone, including his servant, but he curled up in a ball under a bush and waited to die. When he encountered God on the mountain, God put him to work. He gave him several jobs to do. When we isolate ourselves and become consumed with our problems the mountain of despair keeps growing bigger and bigger and soon we find ourselves debilitated. Idleness leads to destructive thoughts and criticism of others. We tend to focus on what's wrong, in circumstances and people, than on what's right.

It's really difficult to control our emotions but we can control our actions which feed our emotions.

**Martin Luther** once said that a good technique in battling depression was to "*harness the horses and spread manure on the field.*"

**1 Thessalonians 5:14 (NIV)** *And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone.*

#### 6. Focus on helping others

**Dr. Carl Menninger** once gave a lecture on mental health and was answering questions from the audience. Someone said, "*Dr. Menninger, what would you advise a person to do if that person felt a nervous breakdown coming on?*" Most people thought he would say, "*Go see a psychiatrist immediately*", but he didn't. To their astonishment, Dr. Menninger replied, "*Lock up your house, go across the railroad tracks, find somebody in need, and help that person.*" That practice takes the attention off of yourself and onto someone else in need. And there's a great satisfaction that can be achieved by helping someone else.

**Great Questions Series**  
***“What are you doing here, Elijah?”***  
**1 Kings 19:9,13**

Is depression is sin?

Have you ever struggled with depression?

What did you find helpful during that time?

**Tips on Depression:**

1. \_\_\_\_\_ are often followed by \_\_\_\_\_

Have you ever experienced this in your life?

2. **We make ourselves open to depression when we take our  
focus off of \_\_\_\_\_ and onto our \_\_\_\_\_**

3. **Focus on God’s \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_**  
What do you tend to focus on when you’re depressed?

4. **We’re more susceptible to depression when we are \_\_\_\_\_**  
Who has helped you when you’ve been depressed? How?

5. **What we \_\_\_\_\_ can affect how we \_\_\_\_\_**  
What do you tend to do when you’re depressed? Does that help?

6. **Focus on helping \_\_\_\_\_**  
Who might God be directing you to reach out to today?

What’s one take-away from today’s sermon that you’ll apply?

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