

“Life in the Cave”

SCENES FROM THE LIFE OF ELIJAH (PART 5): 1 KINGS 19:1-21

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As we begin to think about our study this morning, I would invite you to try to imagine being given the assignment of trying to explain color to someone who was born blind. How would we start that conversation? Truly, that would be a tremendous challenge. I know that we have several very talented artists here at this congregation. But I would imagine that even someone skilled at using various colors would have a very difficult time trying to explain color to someone who has no idea as to what color really is. This past Friday night, I went on a walk with my kids to the new Hy-Vee grocery store that just opened near our house. It was cold. But on the way back home, the sun was pretty much gone, and my daughter said, “Dad, that color would be a good color for a dress.” That thought, of course, would have never crossed my mind. But I looked up at the sky, and it was all blue for as far as the eye could see. So here I am looking up, standing on the hill by our house in the middle of a Wisconsin winter, and I can see infinite shades of purple and blue from the east all the way to the west. And then, as I got home and continued working on this morning’s lesson, I kept thinking to myself: What a challenge it would be to try to explain that scene to someone who has never seen anything.

Those who have suffered with depression have used this scenario to try to picture the difficulty of explaining what they are going through to those who have never experienced it personally. The challenge of explaining depression to those who have never suffered with it, therefore, has been compared to the challenge of describing color to a blind man. Those who have not yet gone through it personally will struggle to understand and empathize with those who have.

This morning, as we move toward our text in 1 Kings 19, I would point out that like many other illnesses, depression can also be described on a sliding scale, ranging from mild to very severe. We think about a disease like high blood pressure. We know that it also can range from mild to very severe. We can be in the danger zone, our blood pressure can be on the borderline where we need to make a few lifestyle changes, or we can be at the point where medication is absolutely necessary in order to keep us healthy. In a slightly similar way, depression has also been described in terms of a spectrum, where we see it expressed in a wide variety of ways. The disease has many degrees of severity – from a passing feeling lasting a few weeks to a very serious illness that lasts for a lifetime.

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, “depression is a mood state that goes well beyond temporarily feeling sad or blue. It is a serious medical illness that affects one’s thoughts, feelings, behavior, mood and physical health. Depression is a life-long condition in which periods of wellness alternate with recurrences of illness.” Symptoms normally include some combination of the following: sadness, poor concentration, unusual sleep patterns (including the inability to go to sleep, waking up one to two hours early, or even sleeping for what seems to be days at a time), fatigue, low self-esteem, appetite disturbances (eating a lot more than normal or eating a lot less than normal), outbursts of anger, feelings of excessive guilt, self-induced isolation, an overwhelming sense of hopelessness, feeling agitated or feeling as if the world itself is moving in slow motion, difficulty making decisions, and also, thoughts of suicide. Suicide, by the way, is the 10th leading cause of death in the United States right now, and roughly 90% of those who commit suicide are struggling with some form of mental illness, commonly some form of depression.

Every year, depression affects approximately 8% of all adults in the United States. This means that roughly 25 million Americans will have an episode of major depression this year alone; however, only one half of those will receive any treatment. It is estimated that by the year 2020, depression will be the second most common health problem in the world. Thankfully, though, depression is one of the most treatable illnesses. Of those who seek treatment, between 80-90% are able to find some level of relief.

Over the past several decades, researchers have identified several factors that put a person at a greater risk of suffering with depression. Statistically speaking, women are two times more likely than men to be depressed. If you look at a map, you will find that the greatest number of cases are found in the southern United States – centered around Tennessee, Arkansas, Kentucky, Alabama, and Mississippi. The numbers show that depression occurs three times as often in people of higher socio-economic groups. It is also most common among those in their 40’s and 50’s. It is a growing concern among those in the ministry. In the cubbyholes this morning, I have given you an article by a man who once served as the head of the Bible department at Freed-Hardeman. Dowell Flatt is the reason why I first went to Freed-Hardeman. Personal care workers have the highest rates of depression. This includes those who provide childcare and those who help the elderly or severely disabled with their daily needs. After that, the next highest rates of depression are found among those who prepare and serve food – cooks, bartenders, waiters and waitresses. In a tie for third place are health care workers and social workers. The lowest rates of depression are found among engineers, architects, and surveyors.

As far as causes are concerned, the scientific and research world is still evolving on this. Biologically, a number of cases can be traced to a chemical imbalance in the brain. Some can be tied to hormonal changes that take place throughout life. There also seems to be some kind of a genetic connection, as depression tends to run in families.

Then, there are also some causes that researchers have labeled as “situational causes.” In other words, some cases of depression seem to be brought on by how we react to things that happen to us. Sometimes it can be brought on by substance abuse. At other times, someone will get overwhelmed while dealing with a major illness. The same thing can happen when dealing with other kinds of stress, the stress of everyday living, but especially the stress of a death in the family, a divorce, or again, the stress of caring for a loved one. It can also be brought on by physical or sexual abuse, or even the trauma that comes from a serious accident. Depression can be triggered by unemployment and the resulting financial struggles. And, as most of us know, it can also be brought on by giving birth, in what is known as post partum depression. And then, of course, sometimes people can face many of these situations all at the same time.

Beyond this, we are learning more and more every day. And just to illustrate that our understanding of this disease is very quickly changing and developing over time, I don't know whether you noticed this, but there were two rather significant studies released just this week. One study discovered a tie between mental illness and children who switch schools. In that study, children who switched schools more than three times in childhood were 60% more likely to suffer with various forms of mental illness. The theory is: When students are constantly uprooted, they go through their early years with a permanent "outsider" status, they are constantly "on guard," and that can lead to some very serious issues. And then also this week, another study came out explaining that children born to middle-aged fathers are more likely than those born to younger fathers to develop a wide range of mental illnesses. I think you can see that just in these two examples, we have looked at both biological and situational causes. So again, this is a rapidly developing field of research, and we are thankful to those who dedicate their lives to this particular field of learning, so that the rest of us as blind men (figuratively speaking) can try to have at least some idea of what others might be going through.

Did you know that a number of Bible heroes seem to have suffered with depression? And I say, "seem to," because the term "depression" has changed so much over time. And yet the symptoms do seem to fit. Do we remember that Moses once got to the point where he actually begged God to take his life (Numbers 11:4-15)? Did you know that the prophet Jonah also got to the same point, begging God to take his life as well? We think of great men of God like King David. There are some disturbing passages in the Psalms. We think of our scripture reading this morning from Psalm 31, where King David referred to being in distress, in constant grief and weeping, his strength was failing, he saw himself as a reproach to his neighbors, as an object of dread to his friends, forgotten as a dead man, as a broken vessel. We think of Job, suffering a combination of terrible loss as well as a debilitating illness (the combination of factors we talked about earlier), ***"Oh that my grief were actually weighed and laid in the balances together with my calamity! For then it would be heavier than the sand of the seas..."*** (Job 6:2-3). Job would go on and basically ask God to take his life. Several months ago, we looked at that passage where the prophet Jeremiah got to the point in his life where he wished that he had never been born. He actually cursed the day of his birth (Jeremiah 20).

Would you be surprised to know that Elijah also seems to have struggled with at least some level of depression (at least somewhere on the spectrum)? This morning, then, we come back to the prophet Elijah. Some of God's greatest servants struggled in this area. Let us be very clear, then: Depression does not necessarily indicate a lack of faith. Depression does not necessarily indicate an immoral lifestyle. Elijah was a very faithful man of God.

Several weeks ago, we learned that Elijah was a man of tremendous courage. He came on the scene out of nowhere and condemned wicked king Ahab for the sin of idolatry. We then learned that Elijah was sent to a widow's home where her faith was challenged to care for Elijah. She was miraculously sustained throughout the rest of the drought, but then her life caved in as her only son died. He was then brought back by Elijah. All of this brought us to last week's lesson where we studied the showdown on Mt. Carmel. There was the contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal. The prophets of Baal were killed, and we ended our lesson last week with the first rain in 3-½ years. King Ahab raced back to his home in Jezreel, and the Bible tells us that Elijah got up and outran the chariot, beating the king back home. By the way, last week we learned that California was in the middle of a terrible drought. Have you noticed on the news this weekend that they are now dealing with mudslides due to all the rain they've had over the past few days? Perhaps we have a lot more in common with ancient Israel than we might think! All of this brings us to 1 Kings 19. As we notice what happens next, I want us to keep in mind what we learned about depression this morning. I want us to keep an eye out for those symptoms, and then I want us to notice what happens next – not as a checklist, but instead,

as an encouragement. How did God encourage Elijah as he struggled? First, though, let us look at the passage – 1 Kings 19 (p. 582),

Now 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 even more, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time." And he was afraid and arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree; and he requested for himself that he might die, and said, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take my life, for I am not better than my fathers." He lay down and slept under a juniper tree; and behold, there was an angel touching him, and he said to him, "Arise, eat." Then he looked and behold, there was at his head a bread cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. So he ate and drank and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came again a second time and touched him and said, "Arise, eat, because the journey is too great for you." So he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mountain of God.

Then he came there to a cave and lodged there; and behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and He said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He said, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away." So He said, "Go forth and stand on the mountain before the Lord." And behold, the Lord was passing by! And a great and strong wind was rending the mountains and breaking in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of a gentle blowing. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave. And behold, a voice came to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Then he said, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away."

The Lord said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus, and when you have arrived, you shall anoint Hazael king over Aram; and Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint king over Israel; and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint as prophet in your place. It shall come about, the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall put to death. Yet I will leave 7,000 in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal and every mouth that has not kissed him."

So he departed from there and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, while he was plowing with twelve pairs of oxen before him, and he with the twelfth. And Elijah passed over to him and threw his mantle on him. He left the oxen and ran after Elijah and said, "Please let me kiss my father and my mother, then I will follow you." And he said to him, "Go back again, for what have I done to you?" So he returned from following him, and took the pair of oxen and sacrificed them and boiled their flesh with the implements of the oxen, and gave it to the people and they ate. Then he arose and followed Elijah and ministered to him.

Personally, I am so thankful that this chapter has been included in the Scriptures. It is comforting to me to know that one of God's greatest prophets struggled with what appears to be at least some level of depression, somewhere along the spectrum. We might be strong, we might be good at carrying burdens, but there are times when the burden gets to heavy, and something has to give. We think about what Elijah just went through, and we find that he was vulnerable. Talk about stress! Talk about a situation! A huge struggle in front of thousands of people on Mt. Carmel, followed by a huge letdown! So, let us look at a few things here.

I. **And first of all, as we look back over what happened here, did you notice some of those SYMPTOMS we talked about earlier?**

In verse 3, we find that Elijah is overwhelmed with fear and runs for his life. And so the first symptom we have here is overwhelming fear or dread. And at first we might think, "Well, fear is a pretty natural response to having an evil woman threaten your life." But when we think about it, we realize that if Elijah had been thinking clearly, he would have realized that Jezebel's threat was rather hollow, ***"So may the gods do to me and even more, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time."*** Think about it: How powerful were Jezebel's gods? Based on what just happened in the previous chapter, not very powerful at all! Elijah, though, still worn out after 3-½ years in hiding, still coming down off of the emotional high of defeating the 850 false prophets, still exhausted after running all the way from Mt. Carmel to Jezreel, Elijah was not thinking clearly, and in that moment of weakness, Elijah the great man of God became overwhelmed with fear. After everything we have seen Elijah go through over the past few chapters, his reaction in verse 3 is rather out of character for such a powerful figure. One thing that contributed to this moment of weakness is that this situation was not turning out exactly as Elijah had imagined it. Remember: Ahab was rushing back to the palace, but Elijah outran the chariot and got there first. What was Elijah hoping for at that point? Maybe he expected the queen to repent. Maybe he expected some kind of national revival. Otherwise, why would he be in such a hurry? Certainly he would not be running toward what he thought would be his own execution. But, as it is, instead of repenting, Jezebel gets mad, and Elijah reacts with fear. By the way, fear is exactly what he had just told the widow of Zerephath not to do. Remember? When she was faced with famine, Elijah had said in 1 Kings 17:13, ***"Do not fear."*** Elijah, then, was doing exactly what he had just told someone else not to do. Even preachers can get so caught up in a situation, even to the point where in a moment of weakness they fail to take their own advice. As James says, ***"Elijah was a man with a nature like ours."*** The same man who had just called down fire from heaven, the same man who had just killed nearly a thousand false prophets, this man who made it rain after 3-½ years of drought, is now overcome with fear.

As we continue looking at this passage, we see another red flag in verse 3 as the prophet flees to Beersheba. To do that, he has to flee across the border into the Southern Kingdom of Israel. And then, once he is there, he leaves his servant behind and goes even further. He travels by himself out into the wilderness. And then, once he is there for a short time, he keeps on going and makes it all the way to Mt. Horeb. This was a journey of several weeks. So, he isolates himself out there in the middle of nowhere. To me it is interesting: During some of those times when we really need the love and support of our Christian family, sometimes instead we pull away by ourselves. I remember reading about a man who wouldn't get out of bed to go to church one Sunday morning. His wife is begging and pleading. "But I don't want to go," he says, and this goes on and on, back and forth. And finally the wife says, "But you have to go to church today, you are the preacher!" Sometimes life is like that. Sometimes we really do not want to be near other people. Sometimes we just want to be alone, and so we withdraw from the public assemblies of the church, we withdraw from family gatherings, we start missing school and work. Elijah, though, took this to an extreme. He spent nearly 2 months in isolation out

there in the middle of nowhere. In this condition, motivated by fear, Elijah cut himself off from the very people who might have been able to help him see things more clearly.

Let's notice something else in this passage: In verse 4 the Bible says that Elijah **"...requested for himself that he might die, and said, 'It is enough; now, O Lord, take my life, for I am not better than my fathers.'"** So here we have the man who is held up as an example of prayer in the book of James, here we have a man who has demonstrated his ability to call down fire from heaven, and his request is, **"O Lord, take my life."** Elijah wanted to die, and he took steps to make that happen. He had a plan in mind. Knowing the power of prayer, knowing what God can do, Elijah asked God to take his life.

Consider also (in verses 5-6), that Elijah appears to have spent quite a bit of time sleeping. In other words, Elijah was absolutely exhausted. Remember: Besides everything else that had happened, Elijah ran 20 miles to Jezreel, and then he fled roughly a hundred miles to Beersheba, then he went another day's journey into the wilderness, and all of this is before the much longer journey to Mt. Horeb. The prophet was worn out. Like the bow that needs to be unstrung, minds and bodies also need time to rest, and when we are deprived of that rest, sometimes the body forces us to catch up a little bit. Elijah, then, was exhausted.

As we wrap up our summary of what Elijah was going through here, I would point out something else that seems to be spread throughout this passage, and that is, Elijah seems to have an overwhelming sense of uselessness. We see a sense of futility, even negativity in this passage, the sense that after all that he has been through, his life is pretty much useless. He sees himself as good for nothing. And because of this, it seems that he is perhaps a little bit angry at himself, maybe even angry at God. We have a sense of agitation. If this is what my life is all about, then why bother? He is on the run, he scores a huge victory, and now he is on the run again. What is the point of moving forward? Sometimes we can feel Elijah's pain here. We work hard, we fight the good fight, we really try to be a good husband or wife or whatever, but then we look back – our situation hasn't changed, and so we are tempted to just give up. At this point in time, Elijah saw his life as being rather pointless. This, by the way, is exactly why I always sign up for snow removal at church every year. As a preacher, sometimes it is hard to see the results of my work. With snowblowing, though, there is snow on the sidewalk, and then there is no snow on the sidewalk. That can be very fulfilling! Elijah, though, fails to see the point of keeping on. After all that he has done, Jezebel is still on the throne. So, these are some of the outward displays of what Elijah was struggling with in his mind.

II. With this as a basis for our study, I want us to move on and notice **WHAT GOD DOES HERE.**

But before we look at what God did, I think it's interesting to notice what God does NOT do. God does not give Elijah a lecture. God does not rebuke Elijah for his lack of faith or for his lack of prayer. God does not say, "If only you had prayed harder, then you would not be in this situation." God does not kill Elijah as Elijah had requested. God does not yell at him to get back on the job. God does not tell Elijah to "snap out of it." Instead, we find in this passage that God is incredibly kind. In fact, he comforts Elijah. We think of 2 Corinthians 7:6 where we find that God **"comforts the depressed."** That is exactly what happens here.

Notice, first of all, that the Lord God made sure that all of Elijah's physical needs were taken care of. The angel allowed Elijah to rest, and only interrupted that rest to make sure that Elijah had enough to eat and drink. Today we know how important it is to take care of ourselves. Not that eating right will take care of all of our problems – that is not the point here – the point is: God knew what Elijah needed, and God made sure that those needs were taken care of. Earlier, we noted some of the contributing factors as being major illness or accident. Science has now proven that sometimes some very simple health related problems can be the cause

of depression. It seems, then, that taking care of whatever the physical problem is what God does here. In the same way, if we are dealing with some kind of a chemical imbalance, we can allow the doctors to work with us on that. There is to be no spiritual shame in reaching out for help with those factors that modern medicine now allows us to control. That is what God did first – He took care of the physical. In Elijah’s case, he allowed for rest and also provided food and water.

There is something else that God did here, and that is: God listened. God allowed Elijah to vent without arguing. In verse 9, God asks the question, **“What are you doing here, Elijah?”** And Elijah just spurts it out. Elijah just dumps it on the Lord. And what I love about this question from God, first of all, is that God already knows the answer! In other words, God knows why Elijah is there, and so the question is not for the Lord’s benefit, the question is for Elijah’s benefit. It’s like the question in the Garden of Eden, “Adam, where are you?” God knew where Adam was! But he was asking that question for Adam’s benefit. In a similar way, we find here that the Lord is inviting Elijah to put this situation into words. The Lord is walking Elijah through it. And that leads me to the second thing I love about this question, and that is: God does not argue with the answer. God does not snap back. Instead, the Lord just listens. He invites Elijah to unload, and then he listens. Many years ago, I remember assembling my notes from a college class on personal and family counseling, and when it came time to summarize the entire class with a title for that notebook, I titled it “Tell Me About it.” In other words, that is really what a lot of people need. In a counseling session, they don’t usually need a rebuke or advice; they just need to tell somebody about it. And that is what God does here; he listens.

Notice something else here: In verses 11-13, we find that when the Lord does speak, he communicates in a new but very gentle way. He does not speak through the strong wind, or the earthquake, or the fire, but he speaks through a gentle blowing. Sometimes, when something goes wrong, we want God take care of it in some big spectacular way. But often, God works quietly. He works behind the scenes. He does communicate, but he communicates to us through his word. And God speaks to us best (through his word) when our hearts are quiet, when we are ready to listen. There is a value to reading our Bibles every day. And that is what happens here: God speaks, but he waits until Elijah is ready to listen. Elijah, then, makes his way to the mouth of the cave, and the Lord asks again, **“What are you doing here, Elijah?”**

That brings us to what God actually says. Starting in verse 15 (once Elijah is ready for it), the Lord gives him a new assignment. And to me it is interesting that this new assignment seems rather mundane. There is nothing flashy at all about it – the equivalent of shoveling snow at church – no flaming altars, no resurrections, no miraculously supplied pots of oil or flour – instead, just a simple mission to anoint two kings and another prophet. Therapists sometimes refer to this as “active rest,” getting back to work, but on lighter duty, easing back into things. That is what happens here. His new responsibility is to prepare the next generation. His attention is turned away from himself and his own troubles and toward helping others.

As we bring this passage to an end, I want us to notice one more thing here in the last few verses, and that is: The Lord God places Elijah in a loving community of people who are also dedicated to doing the Lord’s work. He put him there to be encouraged. He put him there to assist in the work. I would point out that the group is large and yet personal at the same time. Notice first, that the Lord reminds Elijah that there are still 7,000 in Israel who have not yet bowed the knee to Baal. The Lord God is saying to Elijah, “You are not alone” [paraphrased]. Beyond this, we also see that God assigned Elijah a partner in ministry, the newly ordained prophet Elisha. As I understand it, Elisha is intended to be a helper and friend, and eventually he will take over where Elijah leaves off (this is what we hope to study next week). These two men work together from this point on. The lesson here is: We need each other. It helps to have a close friend who understands what we are going through. It also helps to be part of a much larger group of those who share our faith.

Conclusion:

As we close, I would like to thank you for your attention and your patience this morning. I would also invite you to read the articles that have been placed in the cubbyholes. One of those is a very encouraging article by one of my favorite authors, Bret Carter, a man who serves as the principal for a Christian school out in Colorado. And then there is also an article by Dr. Dowell Flatt, the chairman of the Bible Department at Freed-Hardeman back in the late 80's and early 90's. Again, he is the man who is responsible for me attending Freed-Hardeman. He suffered with depression, and he has what I feel are some very helpful comments – again, going back to our picture at the very beginning, it might be a little like trying to explain color to a blind man, but my hope and prayer this morning is that the word of God has helped to bring at least a little bit of light to this very important struggle.

We would like to close this morning by offering an invitation. God sent his Son to die in our place. We respond to that sacrifice with awe – we are amazed at what the Lord has done, and in response, we turn to God through faith, repentance, and baptism in water for the forgiveness of our sins. If you have any questions, we hope you will ask. If you have something we need to pray about as a congregation, we would invite you to write it down and bring it to the front. We would be honored to go to God on your behalf. If there is some way we can help, if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, we would invite you to let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com