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**Elijah – When You’re Burned Out
& Feel Like You Want to Die
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1 Kings 19:1-14

There’s a big contest this evening that many of us are interested in watching, and we have passionate feelings about who wins. In *1 Kings 18*, there’s also a big competition with lots of spectators and it’s between the prophet Elijah and the prophets of Baal, and it was a matter of life and death. Elijah and his God emerge victorious and while it’s uncomfortable to hear, Elijah directs the killing of all the prophets of Baal who served Queen Jezebel. That brings us to today’s scripture which begins with King Ahab, perhaps the worst king Israel ever had—we’re told he sinned more than his father Omri who sinned more than his father Jeroboam; what a sad family legacy, each generation worse than the previous one. To secure an alliance, Ahab married the Phoenician princess Jezebel, the daughter of Priest and King Ethbaal of Sidon. Under her influence, Ahab built pagan temples and opened his palace to false prophets. Today’s scripture begins with King Ahab telling his wife Queen Jezebel what happened in the contest on Mount Carmel.

“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 like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.’ **Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life**, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there.

“But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came **and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die**: ‘It is enough; now, O LORD, **take away my life**, for I am no better than my ancestors.’ Then he lay down under the broom tree **and fell asleep**. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, ‘**Get up and eat.**’ He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, **and lay down again**. The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, ‘**Get up and eat**, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.’ He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.

“Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, ‘**What are you doing here, Elijah?**’ He answered, ‘I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. **I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.**’

“He said, ‘Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.’ Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces 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**; and after the earthquake **a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer**

silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, **‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’** He answered, **‘I have been very zealous** for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. **I alone am left,** and they are seeking my life, to take it away.’”

Elijah is one of the most important prophets in the Bible. Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel describes Elijah this way: “Fierce, uncompromising, extremely sensitive, he responds with rage to the slightest provocation. The man was never happy, not even in his triumph. He appears in the biblical narrative thundering, overturning all obstacles, electrifying everything around him. He wears a garment of haircloth, with a girdle of leather about his loins. His hair is long. He has no particular profession, in fact he is unemployed, homeless, and a bachelor. Tough, fierce, and cruel, irascible, inflexible, a destroyer of false idols and their worshipers. When he is alone, he is the loneliest creature on earth; when surrounded by crowds he is even lonelier. He hardly ever smiles. His mission is to punish complacent kings and their flatters, to bend the vain and encourage the humble, to show the great how small they are, and the mighty how vulnerable they are.”¹ Elijah was severe with kings, rulers, and tyrants, but never with the hungry, widows, orphans, and the poor. He is not someone to be taken lightly.

Let’s review the scriptural story. Queen Jezebel is outraged when she learns about the deaths of her prophets, and she sends a messenger to Elijah that she’s going to have him killed within 24 hours. If she could send a messenger to Elijah I don’t know why she didn’t just send someone to kill him, but she didn’t. It’s kind of like how villains always let James Bond escape. Anyway, Elijah is scared to death and runs for his life. He’s so depressed and despondent he walks and runs all day and collapses exhausted under a solitary broom tree and says he’s had enough, he’s done, he’s toast. He doesn’t want to be prophet anymore; he doesn’t want to live. “It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life.” Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever been so stressed, exhausted, burned out, at the end of yourself that you just want to crawl in bed and pull up the covers and have the pain, the stress, and the world go away? There are many people who can relate to how Elijah’s feeling. Sometimes we feel badly about feeling this way, but we’re in good company when we do.

Elijah is one of three significant people in the Bible who ask God to die – the others are Moses and Jonah. In *Numbers 11:14-15* overwhelmed with the burden of leading the people, Moses declares, “I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. **If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once**—if I have found favor in your sight—and **do not let me see my misery.**” Jonah is angry about God being merciful to people he sees as his enemies and like Mr. Grumpy Pants he sits outside the city to see if God will destroy Nineveh. *Jonah 4:8* says, “When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint **and asked that he might die.**”

¹ Elie Wiesel, *Five Biblical Portraits*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1981, p. 37, 40-42.

He said, ‘It is better for me to die than to live.’” Like Moses and Jonah, Elijah asks the Lord to take his life, as is the case with the other two, the Lord doesn’t do it. **Instead God gives Elijah some time in solitude, rest, and refreshment. Those three things are beneficial for us as well when we’re feeling burned out or discouraged.** Elijah falls asleep and then he’s touched by an angel who wakes him up offers him fresh baked bread and a jar of fresh water. Elijah eats the bread and drinks the water and goes right back to sleep. Often sleep is something we need when we’re exhausted and stressed. The angel appears a second time and says, **“Get up and eat,** otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” Elijah eats again and then journeys for over a month to Mount Horeb, the same mountain on which Moses encountered the Lord. Going for long walks and getting away are also good ideas when we’re feeling burned out.

On Mount Horeb, Elijah has a moving, terrifying, and sad encounter with God. His encounter is marked by despair rather than a sense of victory or accomplishment. Instead of rejoicing at having defeated Baal, and escaping death at the hands of Jezebel’s assassins, Elijah seems dejected and depressed. He wants to disappear altogether. He wants to die. The Lord asks him a question: **“What are you doing here, Elijah?”** He answered, ‘I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. **I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.**” This statement is false; it’s not true. Elijah isn’t the only one left who has been faithful. Two times just a few verses earlier in *1 Kings 18:4 & 13*, we’re told how Obadiah risked his life hiding and feeding 100 of the Lord’s prophets, and Elijah knows this because Obadiah told him (*1 Kings 18:12-13*). God could have argued with Elijah, “Why are you sad after your triumph? Stop feeling sorry for yourself. You’re not the only one left; you’re not the only one who has been steadfast. There’s Obadiah, the 100 prophets he’s been protecting, there are 7,000 in Israel who have remained faithful (*1 Kings 19:18*).”

God could have pointed out that Elijah was mistaken, that he wasn’t the only one who was faithful. But arguments, logic and facts are rarely if ever able to cure depression or to be heard by folks who are exhausted or feeling sorry for themselves. Rather than argue, God invites Elijah to stand on the mountain while the Lord’s presence passes by. It’s almost as if the Lord wants to remind Elijah of the reality of the God he is serving who just recently answered his prayers as decisively as possible. **Sometimes when we feel burned out and lacking in energy or hope we need to ask ourselves how connected we feel to the Lord and if our faith is helping to sustain us or if we’ve neglected to turn to the Lord** who is as *Psalms 46* says “a very present help in trouble.” In the scriptures God’s presence is often connected with wind and storm (*Psalm 18:12-14 Psalm 29*), earthquake (*Judges 5:5, Psalm 68:8; Nahum 1:5*) and fire (*Isaiah 30:27*). For a second time Elijah hears the question, **“What are you doing here, Elijah?”** **And this is the key thing to notice – Elijah’s answer is exactly the same as before. Even though he was ministered to by angels to sustain him on his journey (*1 Kings 19:5, 7*); heard the word of God (*verses 9, 13*), and been in the presence of the Lord as only very few people like Moses and Jesus have been (*verses 11-12*); his**

situation hasn't changed. His attitude, his "woe is me, I'm the only one who's been faithful, poor me" pity party thinking hasn't changed a bit. He hasn't learned a thing.

God's answer is a bit surprising because instead of comforting Elijah, trying to alleviate his pain and anguish, lifting his spirits, the Lord reprimands Elijah and tells him to stop feeling sorry himself, there's still work to be done, his mission is not yet complete so pick yourself up and get to it. This story is really about Elijah's attempt to resign as God's prophet and God's insistence that he continue. God speaks to Elijah without compassion because Elijah had spoken without compassion. Elijah was angry with the king and the people for worshiping idols and was too full of himself thinking he was the only one who was faithful. Obadiah dared to hide a hundred prophets and nobody in the community informed on them or betrayed them to Jezebel. Elijah is unfairly condemning a whole community. **Depressed people usually can't be talked out of their gloom, but what does sometimes help is a sense of purpose,** and that's exactly what God provides Elijah by giving him new tasks to perform including connecting with Elisha who will be his successor. God simply will not let Elijah go nor will the Lord let him quit before his work is done. God won't let go of you either.

What about you? Has God ever asked you, "What are you doing here?" Do you need to think about that question? Has your life taken a discouraging turn lately? When you experience a spiritual letdown, what helps you recover? What role does your faith play in picking you up when life knocks you down? Sometimes we may be the person who is burned out, depressed or despondent who needs a fresh encounter with God and renewed sense of purpose. Other times we may be like the angel who helps someone else in practical ways to give help, assistance, refreshment, and hope. How can you make yourself available as a ministering angel to members of your family, your small group, or your neighbors? How can you be the heart, hands and feet of Christ to others who are experiencing burnout, depression, or discouragement?

God gets Elijah out of his funk and back to work by giving him more to do. God shrugs off Elijah's complaints and commissions him for further service. My mother always said, "When you're feeling down or sorry for yourself, go do something for somebody else." That's still good advice and the Lord is with us as we do it.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. What moved Elijah to ask God to take his life? Have you ever felt as Elijah did; so exhausted and at the end of yourself that you wanted to die? What was going on and what was that like? Where did you find support or help?
2. Have you ever been "touched by an angel" with practical help at a crucial moment as Elijah was with food before his journey (*1 Kings 19:5-8*)? What happened?
3. Can you think of any significance to Elijah's journey being forty days and forty nights? What about his going to Mount Horeb (see *Deuteronomy 4:10-14*)?

4. What do you think God was saying through the wind, the earthquake, fire, sheer silence and gentle whisper? Has God ever asked you, "What are you doing here?"
5. When you experience a spiritual letdown, what helps you recover? What role does your faith play in picking you up when life knocks you down?
6. How can you make yourself available as a ministering angel to members of your family, your small group, or your neighbors? How can you help others who are experiencing burnout, depression or discouragement?