

## **RENEWING STRENGTH: When Life Depresses Us**

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Sequels usually disappoint. The second is seldom as good as the first. After the miracles of 1 Kings 17 and the triumph by the greatest prophet in the history of Israel in 18, Elijah got the “yips” when wicked Queen Jezebel sent him a nasty email threatening his life. After calling fire down from heaven and disposing of the evil prophets in the previous chapter, what was Elijah thinking? He crashed and burned. Rather than confront evil, the Mt. Carmel conqueror collapsed into a cowardly cave man. “Wilderness” is not only a physical place, it can be a spiritual one, too. Frightened and alone, Elijah forgets God, loses his momentum and doesn’t send out invitations to his pity party. It is easy to tank emotionally after great victories. School, work, family, friends and circumstances can easily wear us out. God intervened at Elijah’s lowest spot and strengthened him. Elijah hears he was not the only person faithful to God in the land. In fact, the conclusion of this chapter marks a transition – Elijah’s successor is appointed.

Do you spot a connection between his isolation and his depression? Depressed people tend to withdraw and isolate. This is THE great prophet of Israel. Even the greatest have limitations. While the word, “depression,” doesn’t appear in the Bible, the concept shows up a lot (Moses, Job, Hannah, David, Ruth, and Jonah to name just a few). There is even a book in the Bible called “Lamentations.” Jesus was a *“man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.”* Fellow believers and the Word of God (2 Timothy 3:10-17) help strengthen us.

**APPLICATION:** Feeling sad, lonely or scared is a normal reaction to stressful situations such as losing a loved one or your job or going through a divorce. When a person experiences depression, the feelings are more intense and last much longer than with ordinary sadness. According to statistics, over 322 million people worldwide live with depression (it’s more common in women than men). The symptoms may include “overwhelming” feelings of sadness, changes in appetite or sleep, inability to concentrate, no longer enjoying things you used to, feeling worthless, and thoughts of death. It is important to know if you are feeling sad or truly depressed. If you think its depression, seek professional help to get the treatment you need.

**Biblical Context** In chapter 18, Elijah had a tremendous victory over the prophets of Baal who were militantly opposed to the Israelites. Barbaric and idolatrous, their practices (idolatry, child sacrifice, sacred prostitution) violated the Old Testament teachings. There was no compromise with Israelites and Baalites.

There is an observatory on Mt. Carmel in Israel today where a statue of a knife-wielding Elijah is prominent.

**Our Context:** Because the knife-wielding statue is so prominent (and because the view is only of the Jezreel Valley, I've stopped taking groups there when I tour – it's a bit out of the way.) When **we** read the Old Testament, we disconnect with their barbaric times and methods. Yet, it is unfair to judge those who lived 2,800 years ago by our standards today. However, barbarism is known, even today. (How do we deal with ISIS?)

\*How do we deal with the separation of church and state. For most of the history of the world, there has been none. The King/Queen not only had political power but had complete rule over the spiritual realm. Ahab and Jezebel were more than King and Queen, they functioned as High Priest and Priestess for Baal. The Protestants and Catholics wars raged in Great Britain and Europe. The desire for religious freedom was a major motivation in the founding of America. I heard about the Protestant-Catholic tension in Northern Ireland and went to Belfast 2 years ago. That tension, though diminished, is still there.

Christians don't hold up certain practices as normative for us. We do not observe the Jewish dietary or ceremonial laws and customs. The civil law of the OT is not relevant for us today. Jesus told Peter after His #1 disciple struck the high priest's ear in Gethsemane: *"Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword.* (Matthew 26:52) Peter was going to fight. However, we also don't want to compromise with evil.

### **1 Kings 19:1-8**

*Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. <sup>2</sup> 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 as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." <sup>3</sup> Then he was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. <sup>4</sup> But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he asked that he might die, saying, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers." <sup>5</sup> And he lay down and slept under a broom tree. And behold, an angel touched him and said to him, "Arise and eat." <sup>6</sup> And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. And he ate and drank and lay down again. <sup>7</sup> And the angel of the Lord came again a second time and touched him and said, "Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you." <sup>8</sup> And he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God.*

This story Jezebel wore the pants in the family. Evil like Cruella Deville in the 101 Dalmatians, she would kill you or die trying (probably steal your puppies, too). It's option "A" or "B" – there is no "C" for compromise with her. When Elijah got her nasty note threatening his life, it came on the heels of his staggering "Super Bowl of the Old Testament" triumph. It's a mountaintop experience. He's dominant and in total control. When she threatens him, it seemed he would tell her, "*You are next!*" Having just faced the 450 prophets of Baal and called fire down from heaven, why he doesn't stand up and fight? Elijah crashed. He ran for his life through the Jezreel Valley all the way to Beersheba (120 miles away). Then, he walked away from his only companion, his servant. He is all alone in the valley. He asks the Lord to take his life. Clearly, he is depressed. Then he goes another 160 miles and rolls into the fetal position inside a cave. He truly "caved" to the evil, spiritual pressure of Jezebel.

There is a time for everything, including spiritual retreats and withdrawal. Jesus constantly modeled this. He withdrew to private places after major accomplishments (i.e. Feeding of the 5,000) to re-charge. After mountaintop experiences, we are emotionally susceptible. Yet, Jesus modeled community, not isolation. He had disciples.

Asbury is going through a capital funds campaign. We want to bring our students back from Venue 68 and build an outstanding student ministry facility for them on the slab west of the gym. We want to turn Venue 68 into a Development Center housing not only Restore Hope, 2<sup>nd</sup> Saturday and Asbury Seminary, but bring two new partners into that building: Good Samaritan and Building All Children. We want to build a covered, north portico that should help people get into our building (especially our seniors) and strengthen our endowment to help cover expenses for our building. We are calling this: "**BETTER TOGETHER.**" Elijah was kind of a Lone Ranger type of guy. It worked great for him, until it didn't. He illustrates the opposite of Better Together = "**WORSE ALONE.**"

God did not intend for people to live outside community. We truly are "Worse Alone." Loneliness is epidemic today. People are isolated. When alone, our thinking is easily skewed. We need someone who can tell us, "Maybe your perceptions are off a bit." Obviously, "BETTER TOGETHER" depends on WHO we are hanging out with. As Paul said, *Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals."* 1 Cor 15:32

Have YOU ever been depressed? Live long enough and if you have any feelings, you will be. We all have "ups and downs." Certain things make us happy and sad. But depression is when we really tank. I am not depression prone, but I can think of 4 times in my life I was on the depression spectrum. March 16, 1986 = my dad

died at Hillcrest. October 10, 2009 = my sister died. Both were 56. Death of loved ones is depressing. In a 2-month period in 2006, as our youngest left for college (we empty-nested), we put our cat/dog down within a week of each other, and I learned I had prostate cancer. But there was a 4<sup>th</sup> time in my life I've been depressed. It happened a few years ago. It was related to my role as the senior pastor at Asbury. Things went south for Asbury for several years. Our attendance, giving and morale decreased. A book, A Failure of Nerve, says a leadership challenge happens any time someone tries to lead. It's true in business, education, military, politics, ministry, etc. We see it happening a lot in the Bible. Leaders are always sabotaged and triangled. As a result, they often tend to withdraw and isolate. When our numbers decreased, people inevitably pointed to the leader and asked questions. We tried to correct. We wanted to bring people together, so we didn't have a separate church at Venue 68. We wanted to reach younger people, so we gave them the "prime" worship time at 11:00. I'm in the habit of getting up earlier than I did when I was younger, so I thought a lot of folks would be happy about getting out of Adult Discipleship Communities by 11:45. I'd read about how speakers can reach people within 15-20 years of the age spectrum and then they tend to lose effectiveness. I gave up the primary preaching at 11:00. We also tried to solve the "3 asks in 2 hours" problem (come to worship, attend an ADC and serve) so we tried something called "Learn 2, Serve 2." Some adjusted and loved one or the other and both. But many were angered. Some are still angry about it years later. We've tried to correct. Regardless, the bottom line for me is that I lost my nerve. I'm not blaming anyone else, but I failed to be needed to be leading, but didn't know what had happened. I'd never experienced decline in ministry before. Others tried to get me to step up, but I didn't know what to do. I'm not blaming anyone else. This was my fault. But since I was no longer preaching at 11:00, I'd often go into my office and hide at 11:00. I felt labeled as "ineffective." I lost my nerve. That's what this book, A Failure of Nerve, says happens to leaders.

In January of 2018, Rev. Steve Dickey (Methodist Manor) taught a class on the book. I tried to read the book 15 years ago, but it was a very hard read and I'd not experienced a failure of nerve then. By January of last year, I was coming out of the fog. I was amazed at how accurately it described what had happened to me. The book is very hard to read. The author, Edwin Friedman, was a rabbi and counselor. He's deceased. His family thought his lectures were so good they put them into 8 chapters, but they are repetitive and not in proper sequence. 2 concepts from A Failure of Nerve has helped me.

1) "**Self-differentiation.**" I am NOT what you say I am. I am more than my role as a pastor. You may tell me I'm wonderful or am ineffective but your words do not

define who I am. My identity is rooted in Jesus Christ. Yet, Friedman says the best anyone can do with self-differentiation is 70%. Leaders face sabotage and triangulation. Usually people say encouraging things, but not always. Some people can be mean and unforgiving. I've must believe – "I am not what YOU say I am." It's not that I don't listen to others or feel I'm perfect or anything like that. I'm always going to be learning, growing, improving and getting better. But I'm talking about my core identity.

2) Eliminating **anxiety** is a goal. The book says: "*Have a **calm, non-anxious presence.***" I can do that by staying locked into my true identity.

#### Application:

1) Elijah experienced "A Failure of Nerve." Ministry can be very hard. But you don't have to be in a Christian ministry to feel pressure, stress, trouble, anxiety. I don't know if Elijah was suicidal, but he was done with life. If you are dealing with depression, remember it's **normal**. In fact, if you AREN'T depressed after some things that happen in life, I wonder if you really understand it. There are legitimate reasons to be depressed. People are emotional. Live long enough and depression will hit you in some form of fashion. Some of it deals with circumstances and some of it deals with genetics.

2) Please, find and stay in **community**. Do not isolate. Elijah withdrew. He went Lone Ranger solo. He even left his servant, Tonto. His thinking became distorted and confused. He convinced himself he was the only one left in the faith. He literally "caved in." Other people and resources can help. There have been some special people in my life during these past few years who have consistently spoken words of affirmation and encouragement. They've strengthened my weak legs and helped me regain my voice. There are people who can help.

3.) God told Elijah to **DO** some things. Depression feeds on itself. It can be difficult to do normal, daily tasks, like eating and bathing. "*Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you.*" We've got to say "no" to our feelings and go do something. Eat right. Exercise. Encourage a friend. Write someone a thank you note. Pray. Join a Bible Study. Give some money.

4.) **God** never left Elijah. Elijah went on a 40-day trip through the same wilderness area Moses wandered with the Israelites during the Exodus. Elijah feels he has faithfully served the Lord, but he was not enough alone – the people are still rebelling against the Lord. The Lord responds with intimacy (a whisper), with tangible and practical help (Hazeal, Jehu and Elisha) and with reassurance – there are still some in Israel who are faithful to the Lord. Elijah is not alone, as he supposed. His efforts were not in vain.

5) God can **REDEEM** our suffering. When my dad died, I learned a new language – grief. When my sister had early onset Alzheimer’s, I learned that language, too. I can relate to those who empty nest when kids leave. When someone tells me they put their pet down, I can relate to those feelings. When a man reaches out to me because he is concerned because he might have prostate cancer, I can relate. When a leader says they are struggling with confidence, I can relate. In fact, I’m at a place in my life right now where I have abundant energy and I have a lifetime of experience. I’ve been in all kinds of ministry settings for 47 years. I’m not 38 years old now like I was when I came to Asbury in 1993, but I think I have more to offer now than at any time in my ministry. Suffering can be redeemed. Times of depression can serve a greater purpose. The worst day in the history of the world becomes “GOOD Friday” because of the Resurrection. The resurrection is a reminder that God does some of his very best work in deep, dark caves. Tonight, Jim Stovall will be talking about how some of his suffering has been redeemed.