

The Howling Black Dog and the Still Small Voice

Four Lessons for the Depressed from 1 Kings 19

Early in my ministry, I was serving as a youth pastor in Amarillo, Texas when I walked straight into a deep chasm of spiritual warfare. It was born out of too many promises, too many personal expectations, and a growing pile of disappointments. In the midst of all the victories I experienced back when I had less gray hair and more energy—lives changed, ministries growing—depression crept in like a snake in the castle of my personal world. And it whispered four words: Your ministry is over.

It was a difficult season. When I should have been in a place of rejoicing, all I could do was wish the journey of life was over.

Out of that time, I began to search the Scriptures and came across a familiar passage about depression. It's amazing how when we search the Scripture, the Scripture begins to search us.

In 1 Kings 19, I met a strong and dynamic leader who had a limitless amount of faith—certainly much more faith than a twenty-six-year-old youth minister. He had seen fire from heaven. He had confronted kings. He had taken up the sword of spiritual warfare and knocked the foundations of idolatry across an entire nation.

And yet here we see this man, Elijah, being threatened by one vicious woman. After so many victories, how could this be? He escapes into the wilderness, collapses under a broom tree, and says, "Enough. Enough."

At first glance, it doesn't make a whole lot of sense. Jezebel

doesn't even deliver the threat herself. She sneers to a messenger: "May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them."

And Elijah—the same man who had just called fire from heaven—was blanketed in fear. He ran. He told God, "I have had enough, Lord. Take my life. I am no better than my ancestors." And then he fell under that broom tree in total, stark, deep, dark depression—and fell asleep.

You know the story. An angel comes, touches him on the shoulder, and says, "Get up and eat." Then this: "Your journey is too much for you." And Elijah was strengthened.

The lessons I see in this story are some of the best counsel for anyone going through depression—those who have entered into this unwanted fraternity. We often call it "that howling black dog." Sometimes it's acres away from your house. Other times, it's right at your doorstep.

1. God Meets Us in Our Exhaustion

The first lesson I've learned, especially through the story of Elijah, is that God meets us in our exhaustion. He doesn't rebuke us. He doesn't hand us a gym membership. He doesn't rattle off all the reasons we should buck up and feel grateful. He doesn't even begin by sharing great wisdom.

Elijah had just come off the spiritual high of Mount Carmel, where God's power was displayed and his enemies ran for the hills. But God met him there in his exhaustion—with care, not a lecture.

Sometimes the best thing we can do when we're depressed is to get away, eat some good food, drink some water, and have a nap. As one of my mentors once said—and I quote this because it is staggeringly profound—"The most important thing to do

when you're exhausted is to get some rest." I know. Groundbreaking. But sometimes the most spiritual thing we can do is sleep and eat. God addresses the physical before he addresses the spiritual.

With every battle, every trial, every failure, and every victory, our bodies take a blow. Those blows can cause us to stagger into a cave that no one wants to enter.

2. Depression Can Follow Our Greatest Victories

Elijah didn't fall apart during the contest with the prophets of Baal. His boldness allowed him to mock the idolaters to their face, making caricatures of their gods. If he spoke in English, let's just say his trash talk would have definitely made the highlight reel.

But the emotional crash after that intense battle didn't indicate a lack of faith. It indicated humanity. Elijah realized that the power was never from him. It never was.

As we walk through depression, it's important to realize that the same great power that can calm storms and move mountains is also the God who brings us face to face with our own humanity.

3. Isolation Distorts Our Perspective

We hear Elijah say to himself and to God, "I'm the only one."

And the Lord responds—in this literal cave where Elijah spent the night—with a powerful question: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" That's a question I think God asks us all the time. He asked it in the Garden. And he asks it of us. Where are you?

For those times when I've entered into depression, I've also heard that still small voice: Where are you, Matt?

I can relate to Elijah's response. I've often prayed, "God, I've been faithful to you. I've been zealous for your name. And nothing seems to work." Israelites will be Israelites, and the church will be the church. And we feel those words of Elijah: "I am the only one left, and now they're trying to kill me too."

But then God gives Elijah a reality check. He tells him to get out of the cave and go stand on the mountain. His voice seemed to say, "Look, you've done some amazing things, and I've been able to use you to advance my kingdom. But I want to tell you this: you're not alone."

There were 7,000 prophets who had not bowed to Baal. In America today, I think God would say there are hundreds of thousands of churches and millions of faithful men and women who serve him. The reality check of depression allows us to see that it's not on our shoulders. The battle doesn't hinge on our strength to stand.

4. God's Rescue Is Rarely Dramatic

And then the last thing I see in the Scripture—the one that helps me when that dog is at my doorstep barking and I'm huddled in the corner—is that God's rescue is rarely dramatic.

He speaks softly. He speaks in a still, small voice. The wind, earthquake, and fire came, but God wasn't in any of that. And then slowly, steadily, he begins to speak with a gentle voice. Not an accusing voice. Not a screaming voice. Softly. Carefully.

When we're depleted, we may expect God to show up in spectacular ways—to rescue us from the waters like he did the children of Israel. But instead, he comes to us and invites us

to rest, to get a bite to eat, to take one step and then the next and then the next. And sometimes that's all you can do.

Don't concentrate on next week. Just look at today. God didn't give Elijah a five-year plan. It was just one assignment. Just one next thing.

If you're feeling the slings of depression, I hope you'll remember Elijah—a foremost prophet of God whose mighty deeds cover Sunday school walls everywhere. But the picture that has encouraged me the most is the one you won't find on a flannel board: an exhausted servant who encounters God through a still, small voice.

Shut down the email. Turn off the TV. Get off social media. Have a good meal. Take a nap. And listen.

That's not a complete prescription, of course. Those who are struggling with depression should seek all the tools that are available. All good gifts come from God—including connecting with a counselor, listening to wise counsel about medication, and learning how to set boundaries. But those first three steps—eat, rest, and listen—will help you get back in the fight.