

DEALING WITH DEPRESSION

Text: 1 Kings 19

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Earlier this year a teenage girl wrote a poem about her depression called 'Behind The Mask'. 'Hiding the hurt, hiding the pain/ Hiding the tears that fall like rain./Saying I'm fine, when I'm anything but,/ This ache in my soul rips at my gut. My skin is on fire, I burn from within./The calm on my face is an ongoing sin. The world must stay out, I've built up a wall./My fragile lie will collapse should it ever fall. Loneliness consumes me, it eats away the years/ Until my life is swallowed by unending fears. Waiting for someone to see I wear a mask/ And care enough to remove it, is that too much to ask?' This girl and what she expresses is not unique. Depression has been referred to as the 'common cold of emotional illness'. Famous people like Stephen Fry and Robin Williams live with it. Politicians like Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi and Winston Churchill lived with it. Churchill coined the phrase 'my black dog' to refer to his depression. Biblical characters like Job, Elijah, David and Jeremiah suffered with depression. Martin Luther, instrumental in starting the Reformation and Charles Spurgeon, one of the greatest of all preachers, were both bi-polar. And others like John Wesley, William Cowper, Abraham Kuyper, C.S. Lewis and more recently John Piper all lived with depression. 'Beyond Blue' says '1 in 8 men will experience depression. Women are more likely to be depressed. Men are less likely to talk about it'. Christians especially can feel hesitant to talk about this issue. Many think if you have faith you should never feel depressed. But even the most faithful of Christians can suffer depression. I raise the issue because we have said our current lowest factor on the Natural Church Development survey is

'Passionate Spirituality'. And nothing saps the passion in our relationship with God like depression. Usually depression does not affect our basic beliefs. But it is a time of 'deep anguish of the soul'. So we don't feel very spiritual. We might feel like the worst of sinners and worthless to God. The anger of God might be exaggerated in our mind and we have difficulty accepting his grace. We might feel far away from God and find it hard to read our Bible and pray and enjoy worship.

How does the Bible see these things? Our text shows Elijah as a example of a depressed person. We see he displays many classic symptoms: withdrawal, moodiness, fear, feelings of worthlessness, loss of hope, anger, irritability, distorted thinking and physical exhaustion. When you read 1 Kings 18 and then chapter 19 the difference in Elijah is quite striking. You might remember that on Mount Carmel Elijah challenged Israel to decide between God and the Baals. He said *"the god who answers by fire"* and lights the sacrificed bull on the altar *"he is God"*. After God lit the sacrifice all the priests of Baal were dealt with. Elijah was then instrumental in bringing an end to a three year drought through his prayers. And then Elijah had the energy to run ahead of Ahab's chariot for 30 kilometres as the king dashed to his house to avoid the coming storm. This same Elijah, now in chapter 19 has sunk into the depths of despair. We see him running away frightened when he is threatened by Jezebel. And there in the Judean desert he lies under a broom tree and wants to die. He has completely given up. It is disturbing that some Bible commentators accuse Elijah of cowardice and lack of faith. But that is unfair. We sometimes look on those like Elijah as super saints. In reality as James writes in chapter 5:17 *"Elijah was a man just like us."* He had the same weaknesses, frailties and emotions as the rest of us. He was on an incredible high and crashed to a deep, deep low.

Elijah must have thought after the great events on Mt Carmel, 'now finally Israel will serve God'. Instead he gets the message from queen Jezebel saying 'You have killed all

of my prophets. By this time tomorrow I will kill you'. So Elijah had run for his life. He ran all the way to Beersheba, the southernmost town in Judah. So it was on the edge of civilization. Beyond it was nothing but desert. He was getting as far away from Jezebel as he could. He left his servant there and headed a day's journey into the desert alone. Perhaps he left the servant because he didn't intend coming back. Or maybe he didn't want the servant to see how bad he was. Often when you are depressed you don't want to see anyone. Psychologists call it 'withdrawing'. When Elijah finally quit running he sat down under that tree and asked God to let him die. *"I have had enough, Lord, he said. Take my life. I am no better than my ancestors"*. The ancestors had failed to stamp out Israel's worship of the Baals. So had he. He felt a complete failure. Out of sheer physical exhaustion Elijah fell asleep. He was psychologically wrung out and physically shot.

It is interesting to see what God does with Elijah. Notice first of all God let Elijah sleep. Time out is so important with depression. Time to get over the stress or grief or shame or helplessness that leaves you exhausted. After a time God sent an angel who prepared a meal for Elijah, woke him up and gave him food and water. He then let him go back to sleep. If we want to get over depression we need to eat well and let our body regain its strength. Once more the angel came along and prepared Elijah for a long journey to Mt Horeb about 300 kilometres south. That's the other name for Mt Sinai. In other words he is going to the place where Moses received the Ten Commandments. It's the place where God made covenant with Israel. It took Elijah 40 days to get to Mt Sinai which at most should have taken about five days. So it hints at Elijah wondering around rather aimlessly in his depressed state. Verse 9 tells *"There he went into a cave..."* The Hebrew says he came to 'the cave'. The writer has a specific cave in mind. It's the cave where God revealed himself to Moses. Moses had become quite depressed after the Israelites had built the golden calf. He had to plead on their behalf when God threatened to destroy them. Moses had asked God to reveal his glory

and he had hidden in the cave as God passed by. Moses at that time had been so encouraged as God revealed himself as being full of loving kindness, mercy and grace. Now God has led Elijah to this same place to reveal his glory to him.

Let's have a look at what God does to help Elijah with his depression. We have already seen how God helped take care of Elijah's physical needs. That is the usual starting place. Good rest, good food, getting well again physically needs to be taken care of first before you can move onto the next step. By the way, that's where good medication nowadays can be so useful. The chemical imbalance with depression can now be stabilised in weeks rather than the months of physical recovery in the past. The next step is to look at the deep emotional and spiritual needs that need to be dealt with. That's where God taking Elijah to Mt Sinai is so significant. God asked him *"What are you doing here Elijah?"* You realise God is not asking because he doesn't know. It's an opening for Elijah to pour his heart out. It's a god open question like a counsellor might use. Look at what he says (:10) *"The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left and now they are trying to kill me too."* The Hebrew states it even more emphatically *"...and I am left, I, I alone"*. We can see Elijah's deep sense of failure, his sense of hopelessness. All he did has been for nothing, it's all meaningless. He feels very alone. That is how Elijah sees it. But is it a correct view of things? What about his friend Obadiah and the 100 prophets he saved. That's the thing with depression. Our view of things is often very negatively distorted. We highlight the bad and downplay the good. It is important, as God does here with Elijah, to be able to talk about what we feel, to express what is bottled up inside. And then to work out whether those deeply negative thoughts and feelings are valid. We may feel ourselves as being worthless. But is that really so when we realise Jesus died for us? When we realise there are people who love us and value us?

Now it is interesting to see what God does with Elijah after he gets things off his chest. You notice how Elijah's focus is on himself. He is the only one doing anything for God and he is a failure so what hope is there. Look at verse 11 *"The LORD said 'Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.'"* You notice God is going to reveal who he is. Not who Elijah is, but who God is. That is always God's way. If we have problems with our self worth, or our sense of failure, or the hopelessness of life, it's no good thinking about who we are. We will always see something that is not right. That's why God wants to transfer Elijah's preoccupation from himself to God. Verse 11 says God *"passed by"* just as it does in Exodus 33 for Moses. Let's see how God revealed himself (verse 10-12). *"Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earth quake, but the Lord was not in the earth quake. After the earth quake came a fire but the Lord was not in the fire. After the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave."* The Hebrew expression "a gentle whisper" literally means 'a voice of low whispers, a sound of gentle stillness.' Elsewhere in the Old Testament wind and lightning and earth quakes are often associated with God. God had revealed himself in the lightning at Mt Carmel. Perhaps Elijah had expected God to keep acting in that way and so strike down Jezebel. Things didn't go the way he thought they should. But here God is not in the violent wind or the earth quake. He is in the 'gentle stillness'. God is saying I may be still but I am not absent. I am quietly going about my work. That's how I usually do it. Jezebel may be threatening but I am in control. God is quiet and calm because from his perspective everything is in hand. His is a majestic stillness. Everything is going according to his plan in salvation history. He already sees and knows the final victory. Beyond Elijah God already saw the next great revealing of himself, that of his Son. He already saw Jesus' death and resurrection. And beyond that he already saw the final revelation. He saw the return of Jesus to bring justice and peace. He saw the new heavens and the new earth

where sin and suffering will be gone forever. God not only saw it. He is already there! He is beyond time and space. You can see why Elijah had to shift his focus from himself to God. In God there is complete hope and joy. There is a wonderful calm and stillness. He has it all in hand. I once stated in a Synod devotion that there should be a sixth point in addition to the five points of Calvinism. God is sovereign and has everything in hand. Therefore I can sleep well at night.

As proof of this point we see that for Elijah God had it all worked out. The depressed Elijah had said *"I am the only one; I and I alone"*. Well he had it wrong. God had everything in hand. He instructed Elijah to anoint new kings who would bring about God's judgement on Israel. And he had a new prophet in Elisha to take over Elijah's work. And almost as a by the way, to really jolt Elijah out of his despair God says in verse 18: *"I reserve seven thousand in Israel-all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal..."* In other words, Elijah, you are not alone.

When any of us struggle with depression, remember we are not alone. We do not need to feel ashamed and hide behind a mask. There are others who are struggling the same way. God will not condemn us for lack of faith. We see that in how he treated Elijah. He looked after Elijah's physical health. He gave him time. He gave Elijah the place to express his fears. In stillness and calm he helped Elijah regain perspective and hope. He gave him a new start. That's the pattern used for healing folk with depression today. I pray that we may help each other to see our doctor and counsellor and support groups and remind each other of the grace and healing of God. God's mindset is seen in Jesus. In his time many were made to feel failures and feared hell because of the burdens of the law put on them by the Pharisees. In Matthew 11:28 Jesus said *"Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."* 'The Message' translates Jesus this

way "Come to me, get away with me and you will discover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me. Watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly." May God help each of us come to Jesus and live freely and lightly.