

In The Cave of Despondency

INTRODUCTION:

A. IDENTIFYING WITH BIBLE CHARACTERS

1. What Bible character do you think you identify with more than any other?
2. I hesitate to name any names, because all of the people I would want to resemble were so great in God's kingdom--like David the "man after God's own heart", John the Baptist who was "more than a prophet", Peter "a rock in the kingdom", Paul the fervent apostle, or Barnabas the encourager.
3. More humbly, we might think more in terms of the characters found in Jesus' parables or miracles, especially the publican, whose only plea was "God, be merciful on me a sinner." Or we might see ourselves as the centurion, who considered himself "unworthy."
4. But the Bible, especially in the book of Hebrews, draw our attention to great men of faith. And in reading about these men we seem to compare and contrast ourselves with them, especially contrast, being that we see ourselves as inferior to such men and women of faith. But the Bible also draws our attention to a very heroic figure from the Old Testament and says that he possessed a nature like ours--[James 5:17](#)-- "Elijah was a man with a nature like ours..."
5. As much as we might shrink from saying that Elijah is just like me, the fact is that he possessed emotions just like we have; faced challenges just like we do; and he experienced many of the same things we have all experienced.
6. This morning I want to focus on an episode in his life I think we all can sympathize with--despondency (depression of the spirit from loss of hope, confidence, or courage).
7. But let's lay the framework before we get to our text in [1 Kings 19:1-18](#).

B. ELIJAH'S CHARACTER

1. Very few chapters in the Bible are devoted to Elijah; yet he is depicted as one of the most outstanding heroes of the Bible. In the O.T. account we see Elijah as a man of great physical strength; a man of unhesitating devotion to God; a bold spokesman for what is right; he almost seems superhuman in his courage in his against the prophets of Baal.
2. In the N.T., Elijah is referenced many times. John the Baptist was said to have the "spirit and power of Elijah" ([Luke 1:17](#)). Jesus made use of his example, as did Paul. And we see Elijah with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. He was considered great by the nation of Israel, for they thought that Jesus might be Elijah.

C. APPEARANCE BEFORE AHAB

1. He is introduced to us in [1 Kings 17](#) with a dramatic and sudden appearance before King Ahab, to whom he declared that there would be neither dew nor rain, except at the prophet's words. After making this prediction to the king, the Lord came to Elijah and directed him to hide himself by the Brook of Cherith, where he would be supplied morning and evening with bread and meat from the ravens and water from the brook (17:3-6).

D. AT THE WIDOW'S HOUSE

1. When the waters of the brook dried up, he was divinely commanded to go the Zarephath, where a widow was to feed him. There Elijah found the widow whose supplies of meal and oil were nearly exhausted. He requested that she bake a bread for him. But she explained to him that she had only a handful of flour and a small jar of oil; for she was going to made bread for her and her son so they could eat and die. But Elijah told her not to fear, but go and make the bread for her and her son, but to make him a small cake from it first. Then Elijah explained to her that her supply of flour and oil would last until the rains returned. And then she went and did as she was told.
2. Not long after the widow's son became ill and died; and the widow blamed Elijah for her loss. But he took the boy to his room, prayed, and stretched himself upon the child's body three times. Then the soul came back the boy and Elijah presented him to his mother, who then proclaimed, "by this I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is the truth" ([17:24](#)).

E. VICTORY OVER PROPHETS OF BAAL

1. Now we come to **chapter 18** to an event we are all familiar with. This is the chapter that brings to us the foreground to the things that follow in our text. After three years of no rain, God instructed Elijah to present himself before Ahab again. On his way to Ahab, the prophet met Obadiah, who was over the king's household, and Elijah told him to go and inform the king that he had come.
2. Obadiah became very fearful and explained to Elijah that Jezebel had massacred the prophets of the Lord, and how he had hid 100 prophets from her. And it was that Ahab and Jezebel had sent Obadiah to the surrounding nations and kingdoms to hunt Elijah down. Obadiah feared that as soon as he informed Ahab that Elijah is here, God would take Elijah away and he would be killed for not finding Elijah. Obadiah told Elijah, "you say to tell your master, 'Elijah is here,' and he will kill me!" (18:14). But Elijah told Obadiah that he would be staying to meet Ahab, and thus Obadiah left and did as Elijah had instructed him.
3. "Then it happened, when Ahab saw Elijah, that Ahab said to him, 'Is that you, O troubler of Israel?'" (18:17). But Elijah replied that it was Ahab who troubled Israel, because he had forsaken the Lord and followed Baal. And then Elijah challenged Ahab to bring to Mt. Carmel the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah, who were provided for by Jezebel. So Ahab assembled all the children of Israel and all the prophets and Elijah came to all the people and asked them, "How long will you falter between two opinions? If the Lord is God follow Him; but if Baal, then follow him." (18:21). But the people did not answer him.
4. So Elijah proposed a test to determine who was the true and living God. The prophets of Baal were to prepare an offering and Elijah was to do the same; the god who answered by sending fire to consume the offering would be God. The efforts of the Baal prophets proved to be ineffective, and Elijah mocked them as they tried to induce Baal to receive the offering. Finally, Elijah took charge, repaired the old altar of the Lord, prepared his offering, and instructed the people to pour four jars of water on it three times, so that the water soaked everything. When Elijah prayed, God answered immediately by sending fire from heaven and consumed the offering, the wood, and the altar, even the dust and water that was around the altar. When the people saw this, they fell on their faces and declared that the Lord was God. Then Elijah commanded that the false prophets be seized and executed by the river of Kishon.
5. Elijah then announced to Ahab that a great rain was about to fall. And instructed Ahab to take his chariot and go down to Jezreel before the rains stopped him; and then the rains came; but Elijah ran all the way to Jezreel in front of Ahab's chariot and ahead of the storm.

F. ESCAPE FROM JEZEBEL

1. **Read Chapter 19:1-18**

II. IN THE CAVE OF DESPONDENCY

A. THE DESPONDING PROPHET.

1. **1 Kings 19** reveals Elijah in a cave of despondency. A marvelous change has come over Elijah. It is difficult to imagine a more complete contrast in character than here. Elijah's change in disposition is quite understandable. Nationally, Israel had forsaken God's covenant--the very foundation of her existence. Religiously, they had thrown down God's altars and slain the prophet's with the sword. Personally, Elijah alone was left as one who was now a hunted man.
2. What happened to Elijah? Why has he allowed dismay to cause him to flee? What has become of Elijah's state of mind? It is one of despondency, fear, disappointment, weariness, and disgust. He now speaks and acts as a broken- hearted man--certainly not the Elijah who is so great!?!
3. But let's be careful before we judge. James says Elijah "was a man with a nature like ours" (**James 5:17**).

B. WE CAN SYMPATHIZE

1. We can sympathize with Elijah. Many of us have spent hours in such a cave; some have hardly been out of it. A sad and frequent experience of the Christian life is despondency. It is set before us here in this account and we need to seek to understand its causes. Let's notice how Elijah

responded.

C. ELIJAH'S RESPONSE

1. Elijah fled, and in the process he withdrew himself from others (19:3). He knew that Jezebel was more than capable of carrying out her threat.
2. The more he thought about the matter, the more discouraged he became. He was so discouraged he even had thoughts of dying. He prayed that he might die.
3. Elijah felt worthless. He begged the Lord to take his life because he felt that he was "no better than (his) fathers" (19:4). His feelings of worthlessness might have led to his isolation. Elijah had the "all or none" syndrome. Either all was successful or nothing was worthwhile--not even living. One bad event for Elijah meant that all was insufferable horrible. He had failed--why keep trying? "It is hopeless--I am hopeless!" may have been his cry. Surely he is living his sad life in vain.
4. He felt lonely. "I alone am left." was his cry. I do not have a friend in the world. All is lost. He was without the companionship and sympathy of those who would share his labors and sorrow. I can trust no one.
5. He felt that there was nothing else for him to do. This only deepened his despondency. Elijah's opportunity for action seemed over. "It is enough!" he cried.

D. OBSERVATIONS

1. Yes, we can sympathize. This world around us seems to be boiling pot that belches new trouble. True religion is on the decline. We are unindated with sinful activities around us. We have strived to be successful in our ministry as Christians, but we see very little, if any, fruit.
2. Some of us have isolated ourselves from other Christians, even the assemblies, because we feel we are worthless, or a failure. Many feel lonely because they feel no one has anything to do with them. Or many feel lonely because they are struggling with a weakness they feel no one understands or can help with.
3. Some have just recently lost loved ones, others are facing terminal or serious illnesses and have allowed despondency to set in. Some of us are so overwhelmed with our position in life, that we feel we cannot handle it (hits me personally as a preacher), or we are inadequate for it. WE CAN SYMPATHIZE. Now you know why James said Elijah was a man with a nature like ours!
4. Maybe only 25% of us find ourselves suffering some level of despondency; but the other 75% need to work to understand and sympathize.

E. WHAT CAUSED HIS DESPONDENCY?

1. I am sure his physical exhaustion had its part--he was worn and weary. But we know for sure it was his loneliness; his want of success; and his feelings of worthlessness; his constant thinking of Jezebel's threat and Israel's condition; and his inactivity by sitting in the cave. But let's notice how God responded...

III. GOD'S QUESTION

A. TIME AS A HEALER

1. I want us to first notice that forty days passed from the time Elijah fled until God spoke to him at Mt. Horeb. That means that God was allowing TIME itself to act as a healer for Elijah's despondency. There was reason to grieve over Israel, and God allowed time for Elijah to grieve. But grieving alone was not going to solve Israel's conditions or Elijah's emotions.
2. It might help us to recognize what God did NOT do in dealing with Elijah's despondency before we notice what He did do.
 - a. God did not condemn Elijah for a lack of faith. God did not rebuke Elijah for his depression. There is a point here to take note of. There is a strong bias among Christians about despondency. Most look down on those who suffer depression (despondency) and attribute it to the lack of study, prayer, and trust in God. But we need to understand that although this CAN BE the case, it also is NOT ALWAYS the case. We need to understand that. We don't

suffer because we have done something wrong (that's the Pharisee's way of thinking).

- b. God did not ORDER him to "snap out of it." If He did He would have done so before 40 days.
- c. God did not say, "Oh, you're just upset over nothing."
- d. Over the course of weeks that God dealt with Elijah He never threatened to leave, but listened and spoke to him. So what did God do?

B. GOD ASKED HIM A QUESTION

1. God asked Elijah a question. He said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (19:10,13). Again, he did not rebuke him, but spoke to him in a "still small voice" (19:12). In other words, "What are you doing here, Elijah? You, God's champion on Mt. Carmel. What can you accomplish in this cave and in this frame of mind?"
2. He asked this question as to open up the mind. Elijah was so discouraged he couldn't understand. But God did not give up.

IV. GOD'S ENCOURAGEMENT

A. GOD REVEALED HIMSELF TO ELIJAH

1. God took Elijah outside the cave and demonstrated His power over nature by causing a great wind, an earthquake, and a fire. He was reminding Elijah that God is in control. He could care for the prophet. After demonstrating this, God again asked Elijah--"What are you doing here, Elijah?"
2. That "still small voice" that followed showed Elijah that God not only works in extraordinary ways, but also in calm and peace. God still had work for Elijah to do. And it was work that would be performed quietly and not the way the events on Mt. Horeb took place. God works in mysterious (different) ways. There is a time for fire, earthquakes; but God also speaks quietly through His word.
3. We too need a revelation from God when we face despondency. Not miraculous, but through the scripture that tells us that "yes, God is in control. God is near."

B. GOD REPLACED ELIJAH'S THOUGHTS WITH TRUTH

1. Elijah had thought that he was the only one left. But God told him that there were 7000 in Israel that God reserved whose knees had not bowed to Baal. He was not alone.
2. Elijah was distorted in his thinking. He thought "all or none." Either all in Israel repent or my work is vain. But God told him that all was not lost. And that God would take victory over Ahab and Jezebel though other means. (For it was a king that Elijah was to appoint in Syria that would bring victory.) But God also did one more thing..

V. GOD'S COMMISSION

A. GOD GAVE A COMMISSION

1. God let Elijah know that he was not a failure by giving him a job. There was a task that Elijah was to do that would not allow him to be isolated any longer. God told him to "GO!". Elijah was not to remain in the cave any longer. For his own sake, and for others, he was to be up and doing the work of God.
2. This was God's way of getting Elijah out of his state of despondency. If Elijah remained idle, his heart would be prey to despondency. Although difficulties may surround us we must cast ourselves upon God and not drown in self-pity. In the Christian life, activity is one of the main secrets to maintaining our health spiritually.
3. God told Elijah to go and anoint a new king over Israel, and to anoint a new king over the enemy of Israel, and to prepare Elisha to be prophet in his place.
4. Jesus tells us, His disciples, to "GO! Make disciples of all nations. God doesn't see success as converting the masses, just doing OUR part (God will do the rest). Fight the good fight of faith. God will not be defeated and His purposes will be accomplished! We must be faithful and active

until death so we may be given the crown of life. "Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord" (I Cor. 15:58).]

VI. CONCLUSION

- A. This story should be an encouragement to us all in our service to God and in life. There are time when we grow discouraged (some more than others) in our efforts to serve God faithfully.
- B. We need to understand that the great servants of God are men like ourselves. They are formed from the same clay and they share in our human weaknesses. We must realize that we are not infidels because we have doubts or because we face despondency or depression. No one is completely above it--not even Elijah.
- C. Perhaps we, too, have fought some mighty battles against sin, only to find that we have not had any success. We may greive just as Elijah did--but God's message is the same for us today. Greive over sin in the world, but do not let that grief cripple you to the point that you cannot move forward to the tasks before you.
- D. Perhaps some have found themselves in the cave of despondency because of other reasons. You are not a faithless rebel, or an outcast. You just possess a nature just like Elijah's. God can heal that. Not miraculously like He did with Elijah, but through His word and through fellowship that HE has provided with others, you can overcome. What can you accomplish in that state of mind?
- E. We must all come to grips and realize that God has shown great wisdom in providing for us. He has given us Christ who is a sympathetic High Priest, His word as a guide, and He has given us each other to "bear one another's burdens" (Gal. 6:2). We must utilize each of these things to escape the caves of despondency. May those of us who are not in those caves cultivate sympathy for those who are.
- F. Sometimes we must go through these caves for a reason. God permits it, and sometimes it is a necessity spiritually. Sometimes we are buffeted by it because we depend too much on ourselves and not enough on God. And sometimes it is to take us though the desert of despondency so that we might, with God's help, blossom with renewed strength. Elijah is one such success story who comes forth with renewed strength and courage and so can we.