



Battling Depression

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Depression is not uncommon among those who are followers of God. Sometimes discouragement results through no fault of oneself, as it can arise due to physical exhaustion and a weakening of emotional stamina.



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Grave distresses or disturbances in life may create feelings of anxiety or entrapment. Confession may not even be pertinent if the depression is not the outcome of sin. Sometimes depression is the direct result of sin. Failing to trust God or failure to believe the promises of Scripture will always result in discouragement. If sin is the problem, then one must confess that failing and repent from such actions and attitudes.

Charles Spurgeon is a tremendous individual in church history. The pastor of London’s Metropolitan Tabernacle is the most widely read preacher beyond those in Scripture. He is known as “the prince of preachers.” Evidence of God’s blessing is abundant in his life, yet Spurgeon also struggled with profound times of depression. Spurgeon remarked, “Fits of depression come over the most of us. Usually cheerful as we may be, we must at intervals be cast down. . . . Knowing by most painful experience what deep depression of spirit means, being visited therewith at seasons by no means few or far between. . . .”¹

Spurgeon endured many life challenges. He suffered poor health (such as rheumatic gout), and his wife Susannah was a semi-invalid for long periods of time. London newspapers depicted Spurgeon as a charlatan and ruthlessly criticized him, because he was not a seminary-educated minister nor was he ordained. Spurgeon experienced the grasp of “Giant Despair” (the character in *Pilgrim’s Progress*), and his dungeon at “Doubting Castle.” Despite these hardships, Spurgeon confessed, “I have never lost my calm faith in God, but at times I have been so depressed that the cable has been strained to the utmost.”²

Anyone who invests in the lives of others is going to experience disappointment. People make promises they do not keep. Others start well yet finish poorly. Some ask for help and refuse the counsel that will improve their lives. Helping people is chal-

lenging work, especially when our hopes for them conflict with their sinfulness. Exhaustion is a very real possibility for anyone who desires to help or who leads people. One component of Spurgeon’s depression was exhaustion from numerous activities to help people.

Jesus commissioned His followers to be actively involved in helping others. When the Lord assigned this “Great Commission” (Matt 28:18-20), it became an undertaking to invest in the lives of others. People do not always respond as they should or as one desires; thus, preparing for such challenges is essential.

Sometimes we might imagine that the exemplary individuals of the Bible were above us humans, and perhaps exempt from the challenges and frailties that ordinary people experience. Certainly, one cannot deny the uniqueness of the prophet Elijah, yet he “was a man with a nature like ours” (Jas 5:17). The reality that the prophet was not some type of superhero is evident in the events subsequent to the tremendous victory at Mount Carmel (1 Kgs 18:20-46).

The Example of the Prophet Elijah

First Kings 19 does not begin with a spiritual reformation of the nation as a result of Elijah’s victorious confrontation with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. Queen Jezebel issued a death threat against the prophet (v. 2). In response, the prophet fled to another country, where he contemplated resigning his prophetic ministry, and even became so depressed that he wanted to die (vv. 3-8). God, however, graciously restored Elijah to service, and enabled him to persevere.

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God demonstrated his sovereignty against the false prophets of Baal, and allowed Elijah to be involved in that impressive encounter. Apparently, the prophet imagined that the victory was decisive, which is evident in that Elijah headed for Ahab's home territory (1 Kings 18:45).



home territory (18:45). The fact that he remained in Jezreel for only two verses of 1 Kings 19 proves the extent to which he misjudged.

The narrative of 1 Kings has given indications that the true leader of the opposing forces was not King Ahab. Queen Jezebel would not be as easily intimidated as her husband, and she proved her commitment to Baal was as resolute as Elijah's fidelity to the Lord God. Elijah quickly realized that winning a battle does not necessarily guarantee victory in the overall war, which then compelled him to retreat—both mentally and physically—as he perceived that his victory would become defeat. Elijah would be led to another mountain (Horeb), not to challenge Baal; rather, God would confront Elijah's partial acceptance and understanding of His divine power and presence (vv. 9-21).

For the moment, Elijah's joy was depleted as his life became rapidly deflated. He was more focused upon his physical senses than trusting the Lord God (cf. Mark 5:36; 2 Cor 5:7). Elijah believed the queen's words and disbelieved God's Word; he even forgot how God provided for him during three and

a half years. Fear conquered faith, and Elijah "arose and ran for his life" (1 Kgs 19:3).

Elijah became self-oriented as opposed to being focused upon the Lord God (cf. Mark 8:34-38; John 12:23-28). Note the evident progression: "your life" (1 Kgs 19:2); "his life" (v. 3); and, "my life" (v. 4). God would have certainly demonstrated His omnipotence if the prophet said, "take my life" as an act of devotion to the Lord; however, those words were spoken with despair and pride. Caution is always essential when imagining oneself as exclusively faithful (v. 10). Indeed, the Lord had 7,000 faithful people (v. 18), and Elijah would meet a young man whom he would anoint as his successor (vv. 19-21).

Sometimes believers can become so depressed concerning ourselves and various circumstances that the desire arises for God to end our earthly lives. Of course, if Elijah truly wanted to die, the wicked Jezebel would have certainly accommodated the request. Elijah was not the only individual who contemplated a premature death. Moses confessed the desire to die (Numb 11:11-15), as did the patriarch Job (3:1-16). The prophet Jeremiah cursed the day of his birth (20:14-18), and Jonah preferred to die rather than witness the Ninevites repent and be spared from God's judgment (4:3). Of course, the answer to despair is not death because such action is selfish, as it does not glorify the Lord God. The biblical response is to "die daily" to self (1 Cor 15:31), and trust God to remedy whatever circumstances have become depressing. The future can always be viewed with hope when God is the Lord of one's life.

The Example of Daniel's Friends

A certain repetition can be noticed in the beginning chapters of the book of Daniel. In the first two chap-

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ters, there was a true account of a genuine test of faith from those whose God is the Lord. Each time, there was careful and prayerful diligence to obey the commands of God. Each time, the faithful were delivered by the Lord, and then became one of the king's personal servants. The first time Daniel was one of many of the king's servants, but the second time, he would be given the position of "ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon" (2:48). Three times, there was a test of faith, obedience to God alone, and honoring of the faithful given from the king.

There are two lessons for us here. *First*, the tests of our faith are not occasional. Our flesh, Satan, and the world never test our faithfulness just once and then leave us alone. The onslaughts of the world, the flesh, and the devil are continual. God's people must always be diligent to understand and apply His Word to their lives, and to be discerning, never ceasing in prayer, and persevering as to the will of God for His church.

Secondly, God blessed His servants because of their faithfulness to Him. When the future is uncertain and God's faithful people serve Him—despite the onslaughts of the world, the flesh, and the devil—and follow Him with the Lord's glory as the sole quest and passion of life, then blessing always follows. The blessing will certainly occur in different manners, and may be surprising, but God is always faithful. God uses trials and tribulations to produce more significant maturity in the lives of those who belong to Him. For the church, death is the way to life, and being made alive in Christ Jesus is the path to victory.

Three times this occurred with either Daniel and/or his friends. Now they did not die physically, but sometimes that is the will of God, as



Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego confessed. No, they died to self. One trial and testing of their faith was met with another. What was their response? Doubt . . . depression? Not once. The trials and tribulations accomplish exactly what God intends; they produce more significant fruit in those of godly character, who know God and are unwavering in faithfulness to Him in the midst

of the most difficult persecution. God does use trials and tribulations to mold and shape His people into Christlikeness; not for the believer's glory but solely for the Lord's own, as He is so worthy.

Application

God is sovereign over all aspects of the believer's life. Therefore, abiding success in one's relationship with the Lord is always determined by godliness and faithfulness. God's people have a responsibility to be faithful, and that growing fidelity only comes from faith in God, as He has revealed His person and will in Scripture. As Romans 8:28 tells the church, God works all things together for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. Is that not evident in the lives of Elijah and Daniel and his friends? God gives grace in times of need. Never fear being faithful to God. God's grace is always sufficient. When discouraged and feeling overwhelmed, the means for recovery is a revived and more profound astuteness into God's nature, purposes, and will.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (New York: Sheldon & Company, 1875) 249.
- 2 Steve Miller, *C. H. Spurgeon on Spiritual Leadership* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2003) 50.