KGMLF
2019

MISSIONARIES, MENTAL HEALTH, & ACCOUNTABILITY

Support Systems in Churches and Agencies

Edited by:
Jonathan J. Bonk
J. Nelson Jennings
Jinbong Kim
Jae Hoon Lee

William Carey Publishing. Copyrighted content.

Missionaries, Mental Health, and Accountability: Support Systems in Churches and Agencies

©2019 by Global Mission Leadership Forum (GMLF)

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without prior written permission of the publisher, except brief quotations used in connection with reviews in magazines or newspapers. For permission, email permissions@wclbooks.com.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version (NIV)®, ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™. Used by permission of Zondervan.

Scriptures marked ESV are taken from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV)®, ©2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. All rights reserved.

Scriptures marked KJV are taken from the King James Version.

Scriptures marked NABRE are taken from the New American Bible, revised edition, ©2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 by Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Inc., Washington, DC. All rights reserved.

Scriptures marked NASB are taken from the New American Standard Bible® (NASB), ©1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. www.Lockman.org.

Scriptures marked NRSV are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, ©1989 by National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scriptures marked NKJV are taken from the New King James Version (NKJV)®, ©1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Published by William Carey Publishing
10 W. Dry Creek Cir.
Littleton, CO 80120 | www.missionbooks.org

William Carey Publishing is a ministry of Frontier Ventures
Pasadena, CA 91104 | www.frontierventures.org

Dorothy R. Carroll, copyeditor
Katie Koch, Mike Riester, interior design
Yena Hwang, cover design
Dr. Craig A. Noll, indexer

ISBNs: 978-1-64508-284-2 (paperback), 978-1-64508-286-6 (mobi), 978-1-64508-287-3 (epub)

Printed Worldwide

23 22 21 20 19 1 2 3 4 5

Library of Congress data on file with publisher.

William Carey Publishing. Copyrighted content.

01 1 Kings 19

ELIJAH AND THE HEALING OF DEPRESSION AND FEAR

by Christopher J. H. Wright

In our three Bible expositions at this year's KGMLF gathering, we shall look at three men who had significant encounters with God at points of critical need. All three were godly servants of the Lord, faithfully obedient and true to his call. But each of them went through experiences of brokenness, depression, despair, failure, and spiritual collapse—as do many loyal servants of God today. However, all three of them also experienced God's touch of personal healing in the deep springs of their persons and in relation to their mission for God. Perhaps considering each of them will reveal areas of our own inner lives and mission, where we may likewise stand in deep need of God's personal touch this week.

William Carey Publishing. Copyrighted content.

First of all, then, let us meet Elijah. The story of his collapse and restoration can be read in 1 Kings 19. It comes as quite a surprise to us as readers. For, in 1 Kings 18, we see Elijah at the pinnacle of his ministry. There he is on Mt. Carmel, taking on the whole army of the prophets of Baal single-handedly in the name of the living God of Israel, and achieving a stunning, fiery victory. We see a man in the prime of his strength and the peak of his success as a prophet of the true God. It is a high point of his mission, in leading a national turning back to Yahweh by the whole people, and it is a personal vindication by God of his calling and ministry. That is an easy chapter to preach from! But here in chapter 19, we find what seems like a different man altogether. Here he is in the depths of suicidal despair, defeat, and fear, literally running for his life and actually praying to die.

Let us consider first the ingredients of Elijah's despair and, then, the ingredients of God's therapy.

A. THE INGREDIENTS OF ELIJAH'S DEPRESSION

Emotional factors

Shock (vv. 1–2). After Mt. Carmel, Elijah probably had high expectations. Such a signal defeat of the god Baal must surely lead to a full-blown national revival. After all, the people had shouted out for hours, "The LORD, he is God!" Elijah himself had been vindicated. So, perhaps, he was planning a preaching tour, to take the word of God and the news of what had happened at Mt. Carmel all around the country. He had been mysteriously absent for three years, but now Elijah was back. Instead, the next day, he received news of this terrible threat to his life from Queen Jezebel. It must have been a severe and unexpected shock, going from being the hero of the moment to being a wanted man with a death-threat hanging over him. It was the ruin of all his hopes and plans. What if he did get killed? Who, then, would carry on the essential mission to bring the people back to the Lord?

Fear (v. 3a). This too is unexpected. We think of Elijah as an incredibly courageous man—a man who could walk into the palace of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel and announce God's judgment on them and their whole system of government (and walk out again alive!), a man who could survive in solitary hiding for months, fed by the miraculous generosity of ravens. Yet, here he drops into the very opposite: "Elijah was afraid and ran for his life!" Whatever plans he had been considering, whatever God had told him to do next, whatever the next phase of his mission was supposed to have been—he dropped it all and ran away in sheer panic.

Elijah was shocked and scared. Christians, including pastors and missionaries, are not immune to such emotions. We are not insulated against sudden bad news or real threats. And we are not (and should not be) emotional stoics who feel nothing (or pretend to). James tells us that Elijah was a man of like feelings as the rest of us. He felt what we can easily feel, and it drove him into massive despair and flight. It can happen to any of us. Maybe it already has.

William Carey Publishing. Copyrighted content.

2. Physical factors

Isolation (v. 3b). Perhaps it was out of kindness to his servant that Elijah left him behind at Beersheba. Perhaps it was just that his emotional state was such that he needed to get away from all human company. Perhaps it was to spare his servant's life, in case Elijah got caught. We do not really know, but the result was that Elijah was on his own. Now, he had been on his own before, of course. He had spent months by the brook Cherith with nobody but the ravens (and God) for company, which had led him into deep dependence on God and his provision. But this time, in his present frame of mind, his isolation became an insidious thing. Loneliness can be a real cancer. It can breed doubt and despair and unbelief. Remember Thomas, who was not with the other disciples when the Lord first appeared to them—somewhere out on his own where his doubts could fester. Isolation is a perfect incubator for anxiety and depression. And you do not have to be literally *alone* to be lonely, of course. A crowd can be a very lonely place. Even a jolly Christian fellowship, where everybody else seems to be doing just fine, can be terribly lonely for the fearful believer. Pastors and missionaries are vulnerable to a very particular kind of loneliness, even in the midst of their work that seems to be so filled with other people.

Exhaustion (vv. 4–5). Just think for a moment of that long, tense day on Mt. Carmel, followed by his marathon run to Jezreel (18:46). Then, immediately, he decides to head south to Beersheba, which is in the extreme south of Judah. He spends yet another whole day of lonely hiking farther into the wilderness in the scorching heat. We do not hear of him taking any food or drink in this whole time. The man was physically shattered. In such circumstances, with the added fear for his life at the hands of Jezebel's possibly pursuing thugs, it is not at all surprising that Elijah sinks into deep despair.

Spiritual depression is quite often linked to physical factors such as weariness, hunger, and lack of sleep. Such things in themselves do not cause depression, but they certainly can exacerbate it and make it even harder to resist or just 'shake it off' (which is not something we can do or should ever tell others to do).

3. Psychological factors

A "total-failure" complex (v. 4b). Read between the lines of what Elijah says to God. "I've had enough, Lord. I've done everything I can, and it's no use. Nothing has changed. I'm getting nowhere, in spite of what seemed like a great success. I'm a failure after all. And your mission is a failure too. Indeed, I'm no better than all the rest of the people for generations now. I'm no better than the people I condemn. So, I give up. You might as well let me die now, for all the good I'm doing. If you really love me, shoot me!" It is interesting that Moses had the same feelings of being overwhelmed to the point of preferring death to carrying on (Num. 11:14–15). This is a total collapse of nerve, a sense of utter failure, leading to suicidal depression. And it seems so irrational (as depression often does).

William Carey Publishing. Copyrighted content.

He had run away to save his life—but now he wants to die anyway, let God do what Jezebel had threatened to do! We need to use our imagination to grasp the mental turmoil in Elijah's head as he ran, walked, trudged, stumbled, maybe eventually crawled, on and on, far out into the wilderness—all the way from Jezreel to his juniper tree, finally all alone and in the depths of despair.

Distortion of the facts (vv. 10, 14). When someone is depressed it usually does no good to tell them that they are only imagining things, because probably they are not (and even if they are, imagined and perceived things become reality for them). Depression is not just fanciful. Sometimes it is related to facts but involves a distorted or partial reading of the facts. Look at what Elijah says, and compare it with the real situation. He is selective and partial on some facts. For example, he makes much of his own zeal for the Lord. But there were others too who had not been unfaithful to Yahweh, and he not only knew it, he had met some of them, such as Obadiah (18:1–15). He mentions how the Israelites had destroyed God's altars—but forgets that he had just repaired the one on Mt. Carmel. He says that they had killed the Lord's prophets, which was true, but Obadiah had kept 100 of them alive (18:13), and Elijah knew, and he exaggerates some other facts. For example, he complains, "I alone am left" (NRSV). But what about his own servant, and Obadiah, and the 100 prophets in a cave somewhere? "And now *they* are trying to kill me too," he adds, as if an army were searching for him, when all he had was a message from Jezebel (though she may have seemed as scary as a whole army!).

Here, then, is another frequent ingredient in spiritual depression among hard-pressed, exhausted servants of God. We see only part of the whole picture—and usually the worst part. We make a wrong selection of facts, or we twist and exaggerate some facts. We get things out of perspective or out of proportion. What we think and say and imagine may well have elements of truth—but not the whole truth. And when we sink into that bog of damaging and depressing thoughts, sometimes God has to take us aside and bring us back to his view of reality—which is what God eventually did with Elijah.

4. Spiritual factors

Failure to believe God's answer to his prayer. On Mt. Carmel, Elijah had prayed that God would give unmistakable proof that "these people will know that you, LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again" (18:37). In other words, he wanted unmistakable evidence of national repentance. And that proof had come with the shouts of the people when the fire of the Lord fell on the restored altar and the sacrifice: "The LORD [not Baal!]—He is God." Over and over again those words had rung in Elijah's ears. But now, in his depression and fear, he cannot even believe that it had really happened or that they had really meant it. His complaint in verse 10 completely bypasses the events of Mt. Carmel and goes back to the state of the Israelites beforehand.

William Carey Publishing. Copyrighted content.

His faith fails, even in the face of the evidence he had prayed for and had seen and heard for himself. This is astonishing. And yet it is not untypical. For in the throes of spiritual depression, even God's past answers to prayer, however wonderful and even spectacular, can seem like unreal, mocking memories.

Satanic attack. Now this is not mentioned explicitly, of course. The Old Testament does not give much attention to "the satan" (as he gets called; the word means, "accuser"). However, the worship of Baal and the whole system of Canaanite idolatry was unquestionably bound up with the work of the one whom the Bible calls the devil or Satan. Its worship of nature, its immorality and sexual depravity, its callous oppression and injustice (as typified in the behavior of Jezebel)—all these things bear the fingerprints of the dark kingdom of the evil one. *And Elijah had challenged it!* Elijah had made a laughing stock of Baal and his prophets. He had taunted the futility of Baal's claim to be some kind of god. He insisted that the law of Deuteronomy 13:1–5 should be carried out: that false prophets who led the people away from the worship of their living, redeemer God should be executed. And Satan fought back. Satan is a defeated enemy but never accepts defeat (until the time he will finally be destroyed). Look at the way he constantly plagued the ministry of Jesus. In the same way, we may discern his hand here in the circumstances that produced Elijah's suicidal thoughts, fear, and despair.

We hardly need to be reminded that Satan, though defeated by Christ at the cross, is still alive and active in today's world. He still fights back viciously against those who dare to challenge his dark world or who release captives from his bondage in the power of the name of Jesus. This is one reason why acute depression quite often follows after some signal spiritual victory or "successful" period of ministry for the Lord.

These, then, are some of the ingredients of Elijah's depression. These were some of the things that were breaking into his relationship with God, destroying his confidence in the mission God had given him or in his own ability to carry it out.

Let us turn, with relief, to the Master Therapist—God the healer at work. How did God deal with his exhausted, despairing, suicidal servant?

B. INGREDIENTS OF THE DIVINE THERAPY

I marvel at the beauty and simplicity of the way God gently and yet firmly nursed his ailing servant back to wholeness and active service. Of the four things that God does, we can start at the most basic level.

1. God gives him sleep, food, and drink (vv. 5–7)

God meets Elijah at the point of his most pressing and urgent need—his physical exhaustion, hunger, and thirst. God did not turn up demanding a serious spiritual counseling session. God did not rebuke him, call him out as a failure, or tell him to turn around and get back to work. On the contrary, not just once but twice, God refreshed Elijah with the gift of sleep and the provision of food and drink.

William Carey Publishing. Copyrighted content.

Thank you for reading this preview.
To purchase a copy of this book, visit:

https://missionbooks.org/products/missionaries-mental-health-and-accountability

William Carey Publishing. Copyrighted content.