

# Case Study 1 – Coping With Discouragement

1 Kings 19

## 1. Introduction

The trouble in ministry is that it can be all too easy to lose heart. It is a stressful calling even for those who love doing it. People do not generally come to us when things are going well, but when they have a problem or when they experience a crisis. We therefore need to engage with a disproportionate amount of the suffering of others which may play havoc with our own emotional state. We have highs and lows like any other human being. For example, on one day God surprises us with a great victory as we have the immense privilege of leading a new person to Christ through one of the pastoral offices, but then the very next day we are brought back to earth by a well-intentioned dragon in the shape of one of the gatekeepers of the church who has a definite opinion about how our job could be done much better! We all need to learn resilience.

The story of Elijah is a story of how God cares for his prophet in the midst of discouragement and fear and helps him become resilient. This morning's reading comes after a momentous day in Elijah's single handed fight against idolatry in Israel. You will recall how he had issued an outrageous challenge to the opponents of God and mocked them mercilessly all day. You will recall how after carefully preparing the altar and sacrifice he called down fire from heaven. You will recall how he eliminated the prophets of Baal, prayed fervently for rain and then ran the equivalent of a marathon through the valley of Jezreel. This ministry assignment had not surprisingly sapped every available reserve of mental, emotional, physical and spiritual energy and had left him ill-equipped for what happened next. He suspected the repentance of the people was skin deep and furthermore he knew that Queen Jezebel was now on

the warpath, so the seemingly invincible strong man cuts and runs. Perhaps you too can identify with this feeling. If so listen carefully to how God deals so kindly with him in his weakness.

## 2. The Weakness of Elijah (verses 1-10)

The iron man had feet of clay over the threat of the evil queen (2). It was not an idle threat because she had already killed off many prophets in her fanatical zeal to see her crude religion become the state church. Elijah was scared and *fled for his life*. I disagree with those commentators who say he went for 'conscience sake, from conviction, out of obligation, not fear'. Rubbish he fled like a startled, frightened rabbit from one woman. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD when the Empress Eudoxia threatened the great Christian preacher Chrysostom, he sent a reply with her messenger saying *tell her I fear nothing but sin*. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century when friends urged Martin Luther not to go to the Diet of Worms he replied *though every tile on the house of that city were devils, I will not be deterred*. Elijah was not like this, but very human in his weakness.

He fled south to the safety of Judah (3) leaving his servant there before pushing himself further into the Negev Desert. Exhausted he sat under a broom tree (which was a flowering desert shrub). He was bitterly dejected, heavy with disappointment and he had had enough. The text is powerfully evocative –

*But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: 'It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.'*

At the end of his tether he wanted to give up, but God in his kindness was holding on to him. He did not need a sermon yet. God knew he needed food and sleep. Then God knew he needed more food and sleep! God marvellously sends an angel to wait upon him and also provides a savoury bread cake and water for his exhausted servant. The same God who had acted in severe

judgement the day before against the peddlers of false religion is now so gentle, so understanding, so gracious and so loving. So my dear colleagues in gospel ministry, even if

we want to give up, even if we have had a gutful in our ministry position, we can never get away from God's love in Christ. Nothing can separate us from his love if we belong to Jesus. God cares for all his weak, fearful servants even if we are cracked up, exhausted and discouraged.

But please notice that nervous and physical exhaustion alone does not fully explain Elijah's plight. They do not help explain fully his weakness. His problem was basically spiritual. His problem was a loss of perspective on the way he was seeing things. I think there is a hint in verse 4 when he says *I am no better than my ancestors*. Who had suggested to him he was better? Does this give a window into his mind? Was he conscious of his career? Had he been tempted to think of his place in the history books? Had he been seduced by the desire to be significant? Perhaps this is why he had fled. He had appeared to be very successful. The people had confessed *the Lord – he is God*, yet their hearts had not really changed. There had been no true repentance. All his labours seemed useless, his career was finished and he had run away without a clear word from God. Perhaps his inner thoughts were: *What was the point in serving God? Never see results just get pain and troubles. I might as well give up*. Moreover like all driven people when he resigns from his job he wants to resign from life as well. It has happened by stealth, but his focus is no longer on God but himself (4). It is a crisis of faith.

This assessment is confirmed by his subsequent conversation with God. In his kindness he is led to Mount Horeb, where God had enacted the covenant with Moses and revealed his glory. The language is so evocative (a 40 day journey, the same mountain and

the same cave) and it is clear God intends to give him a Moses-like experience. But before this happens Elijah gives God a piece of his mind twice for emphasis –

*'I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.'*

Do we not detect a tone of complaint in his words to God? Is he not saying he has been fighting tooth and nail for God's kingdom while God himself has been doing zilch? Do you notice Elijah has got himself on centre stage, thinking the whole of God's purposes depends on him? He has an over-inflated view of his own importance as if he had done what God asked and revival had not come. Preoccupied with self he forgot God in spite of daily evidence of his love. My dear colleagues this text speaks to us in our human weakness. It speaks to us all in our responsibilities as bishops, priests and deacons. It warns us not to lose the perspective of faith and reminds of the ongoing kindness and faithfulness of God. It reminds us to rest completely in God.

### **3. The Message of God (verses 11-18)**

The rest of the reading focuses on the sermon God finally delivers to his much loved but rather self-focused prophet. There is a real engagement with God followed by a fresh word from God. The message takes two forms –

In the first place, there were successive demonstrations of power. Wind, earthquake and fire are all signs associated with the coming of God in judgement (read Psalm 18:8f). They are signs of his holiness. As I have already suggested these are hints of Sinai and so these dramatic, scary events are a prelude or a preparation for God's revelation of himself. But please notice God was not in the spectacular (verses 11-13) for when his revelation comes it arrives in the 'gentle whisper' (or 'the voice of drawn out silence'). When Elijah hears this he

instinctively recognises the presence of God and covers himself as Moses did of old. We are not told anywhere what the still small voice means so in my opinion any interpretation is mere guesswork, but suffice it to say that in this encounter with God Elijah was reminded of the Lord's character. Years earlier when Moses met God on this mountain he learned that God was both merciful and just –

*The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty*

God has not changed. As he revealed himself to Moses so he manifested himself to Elijah and so he has made himself known to us in the Lord Jesus Christ (and not least in the unspectacular act of dying as a common criminal on the cross for us).

In the second place, God speaks again to his servant whom he has told to stand to receive a fresh commission (11). Although he has encountered the very presence of God as it were, notice how God clarifies that by his word (15-18). If Elijah has been drawn to Horeb for a purpose it is to show him that God's covenantal purpose remains unchanged and that he still has work to do. In effect God says to him: *It's no use staying here. Stop examining your navel. I still have things for you to do.* So

Elijah is recommissioned. He must face the fear of death. He must return north to anoint the next generation of God's servants. He is to return to duty and must trust God to advance his own cause. God's promise is that his kingdom will come. Everything will be put right in the end (17). God will build his church (18). Although it seems hard to believe, at the end of the day God's word will achieve what God wants.

Even though he feels alone, he is not alone because a perfect number of God's people will be preserved. God promises -

*Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.*

With these words ringing in his ears, Elijah resumes his life of faith and service, but not alone because God generously gives him a ministry companion (19-21). Forgetting self he once again becomes preoccupied with God's purposes and gladly serves God the true king.

Sisters and brothers it is no surprise to me that studies in resilience in ministry focus first on spiritual formation, particularly listening to God and speaking to God. In fact one research project suggests

that the clergy who were interviewed were so caught up in the work of the church that they failed to do the work of the church, namely to abide in Christ (John 15:4). They were so busy they failed to cultivate their first love by developing their daily relationship with Jesus and growing authentic faith. In

particular the need was highlighted to reflect and meditate on Scripture so that God's word soaks our being, transforms our thinking and frames all our responses. If like Elijah we genuinely encounter God and hear his word we will gain perspective and be better equipped to persevere in ministry.

#### **4. Conclusion**

So this part of Elijah's experience is very instructive whenever we feel dispirited, disheartened and discouraged in ministry. It does not matter whether it is because we see so little fruit from our gospel labours or because we are facing determined religious opposition from within or without the church. If we think we are alone and are tempted to think it all depends upon us or even worse to give up; then remember the lessons Elijah learned. God is at work. God's

word is effective. God's purposes never fail. God's promises are never in vain. God's kingdom will come! Moreover when Jesus returns in glory we will discover that the kingdom of God (which now seems small, insignificant, weak and powerless) is greater and bigger than we can ever imagine for we will be part of that crowd worshipping God which is described in the Book of Revelation -

*After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!'*

Finally even though in God's purposes we are dispensable because he does not need us to do his work in the world, yet he graciously and lovingly uses weak vessels like us to bring about the fulfilment of his kingdom. Moreover in the present he calls us not to be successful, but faithful in the places he has put us and in the tasks he has given us. Our gentle, loving, merciful and infinitely loving God keeps whispering in our ears: *Don't be discouraged. Keep believing my gospel. Keep living my gospel. Keep speaking my gospel. Remember your labour for me is never in vain.*

+ *Trevor Edwards*

24<sup>th</sup> May 2017