

Elijah

Elijah was called during Israel's darkest hour. Ahab and Jezebel were turning people away from God. The writer of Kings recorded, "And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord above all that were before him. And it came to pass, as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he took to wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Zidonians, and went and served Baal, and worshipped him. And he reared up an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he had built in Samaria. And Ahab made a grove; and Ahab did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him" (1 Kings 16:30-33). Ironically, like Jesus, Israel needed Elijah the most but cared about him the least. Because of this, he lived a hard, lonely life. But this difficult life teaches five great lessons about service to God and discouragement.

First, doing good is sometimes not appreciated. Elijah was tasked by God to prophesy about Israel's sin (including the announcement of a drought), but instead of seeing the people repent, he had to flee Israel and hide in the hometown of Jezebel (1 Kings 17:2-24). During this time, God provided for him by allowing him to be fed by the ravens and by sending him to the widow of Zarephath. A supplementary thought to consider is that in the unlikely area, at least the Gentile widow was able to see the work of God. After the raising of her son from the dead she said, "Now by this I know that thou art a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in thy mouth is truth" (v. 24). So while he was not appreciated by his own countrymen, he was appreciated tremendously by someone!

Second, numbers do not matter. In 1 Kings 18:4-40, Elijah was considered a troublemaker, but when the time came to test that assertion on Mount Carmel, God and Elijah came out victorious. Elijah had to face 450 prophets of Baal (plus 400 prophets of Jezebel), but he triumphed because truth was on his side. Truth is never determined by the majority — what is right is always in the minority. Jesus even told us this is the way it would be (Matthew 7:21-23). He said previously in Matthew 7 that the way to eternal life is constrained, and few would find it (vv. 13-14). So while it is hard to stand against the majority, as you stand you will secure your spot in the eternal dwelling place of God (cp. Revelation 2:10).

Third, he thought he was alone (1 Kings 19:1-10). After killing the 850 prophets, one would think Elijah would be on a "spiritual high" from which he would never come down. However, he was so discouraged because he knew of Jezebel's plot to kill him; he did not think he would fare any better than the other prophets. Feeling alone is awful, but God has promised, "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee" (Hebrews 13:5; Psalm 23:4; Acts 18:20). Also included in God's provision for His children is the fellowship of other Christians. While I may feel I am alone, I know this is not the case, for I have brothers and sisters who are devoted to me (Romans 12:10; Galatians 6:2).

Fourth, we are often impressed by something big. To help Elijah in his despondency, God showed Elijah a great wind, an earthquake, and a fire. Each were well-known signs of judgment of sin (Psalm 18:7, 12; Isaiah 13:13; 29:6), but God was not in any of those

physical manifestations. Instead, God spoke to Elijah in “a still, small voice” rather than a grand gesture (1 Kings 19:11-14). For the moment, God’s will was not to judge Israel, but for Elijah and Elisha to continue God’s dealings with His people from the present into the next generation. God does not always operate in the realm of the spectacular, but the quiet, soft whisper may be what produces the greatest good. Do not be ashamed of what you cannot do; be content with what you can do, and be willing to do it.

Fifth, you can do more than you realize (1 Kings 19:15-18). Instead of being angry and harshly rebuking Elijah at his weakest point, God graciously gave him tasks to do. He was to anoint Hazael and Jehu to be kings over Syria and Israel, respectively. He was also to anoint Elisha to begin working with him as the next main prophet for the Lord. A good way to handle discouragement is to heartily work in God’s vineyard (Ecclesiastes 9:10). But it is so easy to be discouraged when it does not seem as though any good is being accomplished. Our work may go unnoticed and it may take years for it to bear fruit, but it will still be rewarded (1 Corinthians 3:11-15). God assured Elijah that there were 7,000 others who had not given up their faithfulness to God, and that was why he needed to return (cp. John 13:1-17; Galatians 5:13; Hebrews 6:10).

Life cannot be lived exclusively on an incline. It will have its valleys and peaks, its downs and ups, its lows and highs. Discouragement is tough to handle, but it is not impossible. Elijah shows that although you can be a tremendous worker in the kingdom, discouragement is real and is always close, lurking in the shadows. Never let this effective tool of the Devil destroy your faithfulness to God. These episodes are recorded to give us hope (Romans 15:4). Our greatest glory is not in never falling, but in rising each time we fall.

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