

Learn how to deal with discouragement. A look at the life of Elijah. By Mary Lowman



Discouragement is a topic that we all can relate to. It is encouraging that we have examples in the Bible of godly people who went through periods of discouragement and learn from their stories.

Elijah was a great man of God who went through a deep and prolonged period of discouragement. I've stood on Mount Carmel in Israel where Elijah called down fire from heaven and felt myself transported back to that time. What a sight it must have been. And yet, this great, powerful, courageous man struggled with a dark period of discouragement.

That in itself should encourage you, if you're in that struggle right now. Just to know that godly people can be discouraged, and God doesn't forsake them or condemn them. There is a way back, and we'll see some important principles as we study how God dealt with Elijah when he was sorely discouraged.

Read I Kings 18.

This is a scene of great victory. Elijah pulls off one of the great miracles of the Old Testament, and he stands tall and solid as God's prophet. What a man!

Now Read I Kings 19:1-5. How would you describe Elijah at this point, immediately following his great victory?

We see in Elijah a symptom of discouragement. Verse 4 says:

I have had enough, Lord, he said. Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.

What is that symptom?

The Cause of Elijah's Discouragement

What caused Elijah to be discouraged at this time of great victory? I think the clue is found in verse 5:

Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep.

Elijah was discouraged because of exhaustion. After a great spiritual victory, when he called down fire from heaven and destroyed all the prophets of Baal, one little woman scared him to death because she threatened to kill him. And he was ready to give up.

I find that I am often discouraged after spiritual victories. And it doesn't take much to discourage me at that point. Usually those spiritual encounters are emotionally and physically exhausting, and there is an inevitable letdown afterwards.

How Elijah Defeated His Discouragement

It is important for us to recognize that God deals with us as individuals. We are all created uniquely; no two of us are exactly alike in makeup and personality. Therefore, we have differing responses, reactions, response times, and ways of dealing with our discouragement. Note step one for Elijah.

1. Needed rest and nourishment

Read 1 Kings 19:5-8.

Can you remember the last time you were truly exhausted—spiritually and/or physically? (Could it be now?) Did you feel discouraged at that time? O Yes O No

What other feelings accompanied those feelings of discouragement?

Often when we go into a period of discouragement right after a spiritual blessing or experience, we are baffled. We didn't expect it and it's hard to understand why. And that leads to feeling guilty about feeling discouraged. Have you ever been there?

Our physical, mental and spiritual well-being are all very closely connected. Therefore, when one area is exhausted, the others are adversely affected. Elijah needed food and sleep and more food and sleep.

When you know you need a time of rest, what do you do?

Do you feel guilty when you take time for needed rest? O Yes O No

Women certainly have a tendency to take on false guilt. Remember Elijah the next time you feel guilty for taking some time to replenish your body. God's directions to him were to sleep and eat and get his strength back.

Notice what God directed Elijah to do next, during this period of acute discouragement:

2. Time alone with the Lord

Read 1 Kings 19:9-10. After regaining his strength, he went to a cave in the mountain Horeb where he got more sleep. Then the Lord asked him a curious question: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Why do you think the Lord asked Elijah this question?

Take that thought one step further. Why would the Lord ask anyone a question? God is all-knowing. Omniscient is the theological term we use. Describe what these passages tell us about God's knowledge.

Isaiah 40:28	
Psalm 44:20-21	
Psalm 94:11	
Mathew 6:8	
1 John 3:20	

Based on these scriptures, does God ask questions because he has a need to know? O Yes O No

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If God knows everything, then why does he ask questions? What do you think?

Ask any good teacher why they ask questions—to find out what the student truly knows and understands, to help the student discover for herself or himself something they need to learn, to cause the student to think deeper and more clearly. God was trying to get Elijah to focus on some key causes for his discouragement, to help him defeat it, but first Elijah had to know where he was. Note Elijah's answer to the Lord's question in 1 Kings 19:10: (NIV)

He replied, "I have been	for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites
have rejected your covenant, torn dow	n your altars and put your prophets to death with the
sword. I am the	, and now they are trying to
, too."	

Here we see two other very common symptoms of discouragement. When you're discouraged, everything looks worse than it is and you throw a lot of pity parties!

Was it true that Elijah was the only one left? (See verse 18)
O Yes
O No
Was it true that "they" were trying to kill him? (Who is "they"?)
O Yes
O No
Was it true all the prophets were put to death with the sword? (Elijah was a prophet.)
O Yes

O No

Think about yourself. When you are feeling discouraged, don't you almost always see the situation to be worse than it really is? And don't you almost always start feeling sorry for yourself?

Please remember this, the next time you're in one of those periods of discouragement. Make yourself remember because it won't come naturally. Your thoughts will be "Well, it's different this time," but remember that it isn't. Once you are aware of these two common tendencies—to see things worse than they are and to feel sorry for yourself—you've made some great progress toward defeating discouragement.

Read 1 Kings 19:11-13. God revealed himself to Elijah in a mighty way and then God asked him the same question again: "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Read verse 14 and compare it to verse 10.

Is this deja vu? Elijah gave God the exact same reply, word for word. It makes you want to take him by the shoulders and shake him and say, "Hey, man, get with the program! Didn't you see God when he revealed himself to you?"

There's a lesson for us here. Before I give you my thoughts, think it through for yourself. What does this tell you about our condition and how we're likely to respond when we're discouraged and feeling sorry for ourselves?

When we are in deep discouragement, it's very difficult for us to see God in anything. God just doesn't seem to be there anymore, does he? Where'd he go? And even when he goes out of his way to reveal

himself to us, we can be so self-consumed, so blinded by the enemy that we can't see or feel him.

How did the Lord respond to Elijah's dismal performance here? Read 1 Kings 19:15-18 and describe it in your words.

Did the Lord tell him to shape up or ship out? O Yes O No
Did the Lord scold him for his lack of faith? O Yes O No
Did the Lord tell him he was on his own after this? O Yes O No
Did the Lord threaten him if he didn't behave better? O Yes O No
Does it encourage you to see the patience and lovingkindness of God in dealing with Elijah? O Yes O No
Read Psalm 103:14 and fill in the blanks:
For he knows, he remembers that we are

When you're in a period of discouragement, you may not be able to snap out of it as quickly as you would like to. But please don't give up; remember how patiently our Lord dealt with Elijah, and he'll do the same with you.

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Here's another important principle in defeating discouragement that we learn from Elijah:

3. Obey the Lord

Fear has taken over Elijah's mind; he is not thinking clearly. It's another common symptom of discouragement—irrational fear. What are the Lord's instructions to Elijah at this point (verses 15-16)?

What do you think Elijah felt like at this point in time?

- O He felt like running away.
- O He felt like Bible study.
- **O** He felt like being alone.
- O He felt sorry for himself.
- O He felt like offering sacrifices of praise to God.
- O He felt like preaching a sermon.
- O He felt like giving up.
- **O** He felt like praying.
- **O** He felt like going back where he came from, right into Jezebel's territory where she might find him and carry out her threat to kill him.

I can imagine this last option is not what Elijah wanted to do—to go back the way he came, head right back to the place he's running away from. He is still in discouragement, wanting to quit, thinking things are worse than they are, feeling sorry for himself, and fearful for his life. Going back would have seemed like sure death for him the way Elijah was thinking at that time. Yet that is exactly what God instructs him to do.

Read Isaiah 55:8-9 and fill in the blanks:

For my	are not your	, neither are your	my	, declares	s the
Lord. As the h	eavens are higher th	nan the earth, so are my	higher th	an your	and
my	than your	<u>.</u> .			

Can you think of a time in your life when the directions you received from God seemed to be directly the opposite of what your own common sense would tell you to do?

I find this to be continually true in my walk with God The way I would do it and the way God does it are usually quite different. And it's still difficult at times for me to relinquish control and trust God's way.

You have to hand it to Elijah at this point. Even though he is in deep despair and his mind and feelings are very much out of control, he still obeys God and does exactly what God tells him to do without hesitation or question.

Why do you think Elijah was so willing to obey God even though he didn't feel like doing it and it most likely was not what he would have chosen to do?

We obey God in the dark times if we have established a pattern of obedience in the good times. We do the right thing even when it goes against our feelings when we've spent lots of time getting to know God, learning to trust him, and building an attitude of obedience in our lives.

I use the term "Emergency Room Christianity" to describe a common tendency I note in myself and other believers. It's our desire to have instant solutions, quick fixes, immediate results. We go along in our lives, doing our own thing, until the day we run into a crisis. Then we want to run to the Lord's Emergency Room and cry for help and fast relief.

This Emergency Room Christianity syndrome is at epidemic levels. What are the contributing factors in our society to this kind of attitude?

Emergency Room Christianity doesn't work too well if that's all we do. Certainly we see that God wants us to cry out to him for help in any emergency, but it is necessary to establish an ongoing pattern of trusting God. We must build spiritual muscles throughout all the days of our lives, which prepare us for the tough times. That's one reason this study is important to you, whether you feel discouraged now or not. That day will come, and if you prepare for it by studying God's Word and understanding his principles, you will have the resource that you need to apply the power of scripture to your immediate Emergency Room problem.

The step of obedience is so important to finding victory. Often the way we defeat discouragement is to simply obey. Even when we don't want to, even when our feelings aren't working right, even when everything in us wants to run away and hide, feel sorry for ourselves and bail out. For Elijah, it came down to a sheer act of obedience, and then he found the encouragement God was preparing for him.

Now, this is not easy to do, and we will only be willing and able to obey in the face of discouragement

when we have instilled obedience as a way of life before we became discouraged. Elijah had made a commitment to obey the Lord, and that discipline, that practice of obeying was a natural response for him. It would have been difficult if not impossible for Elijah to obey during that deep discouragement if he had not learned obedience earlier in his life.

God had a wonderful surprise for Elijah as he traveled back to where he came from. Read about it in 1 Kings 19:19-21. God sent him an encourager by the name of ______.

Where did they meet?

Do you think Elijah would have found this attendant if he had not obeyed God and had stayed at Horeb and refused to go back?

O Yes

O No

Did Elijah know ahead of time that Elisha would be found on the road back to where he came from? O Yes

O No

Put yourself in Elijah's shoes as he starts this journey back to where he came from, in obedience to God. Which of these following words would describe his state of mind as he began that journey?

O Joyful	O Fearful	O Tired
O Eager	O Excited	O Apprehensive
O Doubtful	O Enthusiastic	

Elijah obeyed God in spite of his feelings, not because of them.

Read Hebrews 11:6 and fill in the blanks:

And without ______ it is ______ to please God, because anyone who comes to him must _______ that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

When you obey God in spite of your feelings, what are you demonstrating to God?

Since you can't please God without faith, and since pleasing God should be our highest ambition, can you see how we should even be thankful for the situations which force us to learn to walk by faith?

Could God have immediately solved Elijah's problem, brought Elisha to him, killed his enemy Jezebel, or done anything else he pleased to bolster Elijah's faith and make him feel better?

Why do you think God chose to deal with Elijah by sending him back where he came from instead of instantly solving his problem?

Please remember this when you wonder why God isn't moving as quickly as you would like, or you think the way he has chosen for you is a hard and difficult way. You just don't know what awaits you as you walk down that road in obedience to God. He's got something good for you, for his plans for us are always good (see Jeremiah 29:11). And more than anything else, he is giving you an opportunity to learn the joy of walking by faith, not by sight, which will please him greatly.

Ask God for your "Elisha"

One of God's greatest gifts to us is encouragers. Do you have a person in your life who is your "Elisha"? Are you an "Elisha" to someone else?

We need to share our faith with each other during our days of discouragement. Someone else can have faith for you when you're finding it impossible to believe, and their faith will bolster and encourage you.

Read Hebrews 10:25 and fill in the blanks:

Let us not give up	, as some are in the habit of doing, but let
us	one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Maybe you really don't have an "Elisha" in your life. Ask yourself why. Have you reached out to others? Are you regularly attending a good church and/or Bible study group where you can find "Elishas"? If so, and you still don't seem to have that person who is your encourager then make it a matter of daily prayer. Meanwhile, let God teach you that you have Jesus!

Conclusion

Here are some important things we learn from our study of Elijah and his bout with discouragement:

- Consider your physical condition. Do you need some rest and nourishment? Take care of those needs—and don't feel guilty about it!
- Spend some alone time with the Lord. Force yourself to do it, if necessary. Get away from people and noise and other influences and just center down with God.
- Do what the Lord tells you to do, even if it seems like the wrong thing to do; even if you don't feel like doing it (and you probably won't).

Suggested Assignment

Pray for an "Elisha"—an encourager—if you don't have one now.

Lord, right now in my life there is no one to come alongside of me and encourage me. If that would be a good thing in my life at this time, would you please send that person my way? Also, make me willing to go it alone with you, if that is your plan at this time. Meanwhile, may I not be judgmental or critical of others who I think could be an "Elisha" to me but they aren't. Help me to keep my eyes on you. Amen.

Pray that God would reveal to you anyone who is in need of encouragement right now and to enable you to be an "Elisha" to that person.

Lord, undoubtedly there is someone near me who needs encouragement now. He or she may not show it on the outside, but you know the heart. Please help me to be sensitive to this need, and to be willing to give encouragement, even in the midst of my own need. I know that healing often comes when we give to others. Thank you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Memorize this passage: Psalm 103:13-14.

As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.