

A Prophet's Discouragement

1 Kings 19:1-18

Inside the word “discouragement,” we see the word for “heart” (*cour/cor*). When you’re *encouraged*, you feel your center pulsating with excitement and energy. When you’re *discouraged*, on the other hand, the pumping slows. The excitement and motivation slows from a trickle to a mere drip, and sometimes stops altogether.

The prophet Elijah experienced deep discouragement after a towering victory atop Mount Carmel. Yahweh had answered his quiet prayer with a mighty display of fire, incinerating an altar and sacrifice, and proving to the thousands of observers that Yahweh, not Baal, was the true God. No doubt Elijah’s expectations were high. Perhaps this would be the moment Israel would finally turn from her Baal-worship to the one true God.

But this was not to be. Jezebel, wife of King Ahab, resolved to have Elijah executed, and put him on the run. Fleeing Jezebel, Elijah bemoaned his condition: “It is enough,” he cried, “Now, O Lord, take away my life for I am no better than my fathers” (1 Kings 19:4). Elijah was a deeply discouraged man.

We can gain some insight into our own struggle with discouragement by studying Elijah’s.

1. The Circumstances of Discouragement

The circumstances of Elijah’s discouragement reveal emotional factors, social factors, and physical factors.

Emotionally, Elijah was disappointed. After the mountain-top experience of Carmel, after the roaring chant of the people crying out, “Yahweh, he is God!” (18:39), after the slaughter of Baal’s prophets, and after the torrential downpour after nearly three years of drought, Elijah had expected a national revival. This did not happen, and Elijah’s disappointment was bitter.

Socially, Elijah was desolate (lonely). He had left his faithful servant in Beersheba, and took a day’s journey alone. This servant was undoubtedly more than an employee to Elijah, but more like an apprentice who had become a close friend. Now without this companion, Elijah was all by himself.

Physically, Elijah was depleted of food and rest, and possibly dehydrated. He had walked over 100 miles from Jezreel to Beersheba. At a fast walking pace, that would have taken him at least a couple days, if he walked 12 hours per day. Then from Beersheba, he took another day’s journey.

Don’t Ignore Your Body

There were indeed spiritual factors at work in Elijah’s discouragement, but we should not overlook these other factors as well, especially since the text slows down to tell us exactly what God did to provide for Elijah’s depleted body. Even before speaking to Elijah, God fed him and gave him rest.

God has made us embodied creatures whose well-being is intrinsically connected to our rest and diet. Therefore, when dealing with our discouragement, we should be careful to give proper attention to our bodies as well as our souls. We might be tempted to think that something is wrong with our spirit, but maybe the problem is with our stomach! If you are feeling discouraged, instead of immediately asking, “Where is my faith? Where is God?” think about the fact that God first gave Elijah a loaf of bread and a jug of water. In other words, ask, “Am I properly rested, nourished, and exercising?”

Someone might object, “This is unspiritual. If we really trusted God, it wouldn’t matter how well-rested we are.” It is true that we are called to depend on God in all kinds of circumstances, whether fatigued or famished. But it is a mistake to say that the greater our faith the less our need for food and rest. In fact, such an approach subtly questions God’s wisdom in making us embodied creatures. Why not trust God by accepting your limitations, and embracing the means he has given you—namely: rest, food, and society?

2. The Heart of Discouragement

Granted, Elijah’s circumstances gave rise to his discouragement, but they do not fully explain it. Indeed, something deeper was going on in Elijah’s heart.

Note first that Elijah took forty days to walk what could have been an eleven-day journey. Why did he take this long? Not because he needed all that time, but because he was trying to make a point by reenacting Israel's forty-year wandering in the wilderness. Elijah chose as his destination Mount Horeb, otherwise known as Mount Sinai. Here God had descended in black clouds, lightning, thunder, and earthquake. Here God had forged a covenant with the people of Israel, promising that he would be their God, provided they worship and obey him alone. It seems that Elijah was saying this: "God, Israel is a lost cause. Come again to this mountain with lightning and thunder, and start over with me."

At the heart of Elijah's discouragement was an exaggerated view of his own importance and a small view of God's covenant faithfulness. This impoverished view of God's love and greatness resulted in his extreme and contradictory mindset. On the one hand, he wanted to die. On the other hand, he didn't think God could do without him. Perhaps much of our discouragement can be traced back to a deficient view of God and an exaggerated estimation of ourselves. Self-esteem is not all it is cracked up to be; much more important is a proper God-esteem. If we esteemed God as both sovereign and loving, we would see that, while God doesn't *need* us, he graciously chooses to use us. So we are neither indispensable nor unnecessary.

3. The Remedy for Discouragement.

To this conflicted, irrational, and deeply discouraged man, God speaks—but not as Elijah expected. Elijah expected God to reveal himself in a spectacular way, which is exactly why God sent wind, earthquake, and fire, only to withhold his voice in any of those things. Finally, it was in a "still, small voice," a quiet whisper, that God finally spoke to Elijah.

God wanted Elijah to know that while God might sometimes work in the spectacular, he is *always* at work in the ordinary things. God continues to work this way—revealing himself in ways that aren't outwardly impressive. This is, in fact, the way God came into this world: not with blaring trumpets, thunder, and lightning, but as a human being, Jesus Christ of whom it is said, "He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets" (Matthew 12:19).

There are important parallels between Jesus on Mount Calvary and Elijah on Mount Sinai. Elijah heard from God, but Jesus cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Elijah thought (wrongfully) that he was the only one who was faithful to God. Jesus really was the only one who was faithful to God. Jesus endured God's abandonment so we never have to.

Reflecting on the connection between the word "discouragement" and the term for "heart" (*cour/cor*), how does the imagery of the heart pulsating with excitement or slowing down contribute to the understanding of encouragement and discouragement?

For Discussion

1. How might unmet expectations contribute to feelings of discouragement in our own lives?
2. The text emphasizes the importance of considering the body in dealing with discouragement. How do physical factors like rest, diet, and exercise relate to our emotional and spiritual well-being during challenging times?
3. Elijah's reenactment of Israel's forty-year wandering suggests a faulty view of God's ability to keep his covenant with Israel. How can we learn from this and seek renewal in our own lives when faced with discouragement?
4. Elijah's view of his own importance and God's covenant faithfulness played a central role in his discouragement. How might an exaggerated view of ourselves and a diminished view of God contribute to discouragement in our lives?
5. God's response to Elijah was not in the expected spectacular ways but in a "still, small voice." How can recognizing God's work in ordinary things and quiet moments be a remedy for discouragement?
6. In what ways have you seen God at work in the *ordinary*, and *unimpressive* aspects of your life, or others' lives?
7. There are parallels with and contrasts between Elijah on Mount Sinai and Jesus on Mount Calvary. How does Jesus' experience of enduring God's abandonment provide a unique perspective on discouragement and its remedy?