

When Discouragement Reigns

Elijah is one of those Old Testament personalities we never tired of reading about. I'll confess, though, that there is one event in his life that perplexes me. It's not one of the miracles. It's not his boldness. It's the one time he felt sorry for himself.

The apex of Elijah's ministry was his encounter with the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. If you're not familiar with the story, check out 1 Kings 18 and see Elijah's faith, audacity, boldness, and sarcasm (when he taunted the prophets of Baal). What happened was not some miracle off in a corner; this was a bold, in-your-face display of God's sovereign power.

So how did Elijah follow that up? He ran away. Queen Jezebel, the biggest cheerleader for Baal, was royally hacked at the "stunt" Elijah pulled at Mt. Carmel so she threatened his life. So, the prophet who boldly defied hundreds of Baal's prophets, humiliated them, and then ordered their deaths was afraid to stand up to the queen. What happened to his bold faith??



I see one simple reason—a reason we can all identify with: discouragement. Elijah's faith had not faltered, but he was weary and feeling low. Elijah did the one thing we tend to do in times of discouragement, and it's the one thing we shouldn't do. He went to be alone.

When we are by ourselves and feeling down, the blues have a way of feeding on themselves. Discouragement can breed discouragement. We often want to be by ourselves in those times, but those are the very times we need the presence of others. We need others to counter our despondency.

Discouragement skews reality for us. *No one understands ... I'm the only one ... No one else feels this way ... I'm all alone in this.* Ever feel like that? Elijah did. When God confronted him, Elijah whined. "I have been very zealous for the Lord God of Armies, but the Israelites have abandoned your covenant, torn down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are looking for me to take my life" (1 Kings 19:10).

Elijah was *not* alone! Of course, God was with him, but God reminded him that 7,000 others in the land were as committed to God as he was (v. 18). And apparently Elijah forgot his conversation with Obadiah, a man who had

protected 100 other prophets of God (18:13). Elijah's discouragement had clouded over these facts.

With the Covid-19 pandemic came an onslaught of depression. We were created to live in community, and the forced isolation temporarily removed a key antidote to the blues. We need people in our lives—and nothing comes close to the community we experience when we are with other believers. We need the encouragement that comes when we gather, pray together, read God's Word together, and worship together (Heb. 10:24-25). In the struggles and challenges we face, we realize we are not alone. We can stand for Christ because others are standing with us.



But then the pandemic closed our churches. Sure, we could meet via Zoom, but an online platform is not the same. For too many believers, the practice of their faith was something they did in isolation, which translated into an anemic faith.

As we began to gather again, many did not return. Many churches have only seen half their regular attenders returning. My own church is still down by a third. Why? Some people got used to watching a service online lounging at home in an easy chair, wearing their pajamas, and holding a bowl of Cap'n Crunch. They were not as engaged as those gathered. Many got used to their anemic faith and left it at that.

As a believer, I can experience that "I'm-all-alone-in-this" feeling if I spend too many days by myself. I need you. You need me. We need each other. We need the encouragement we can give each other as we pursue a walk with God together. Elijah would've done better if, when he ran away, he ran to the other prophets. They were also in hiding but being with the other prophets would have dispelled Elijah's weariness and discouragement.

If you're discouraged, get to church. Even more so, get plugged into a Bible study group, a smaller setting where believers can encourage each other.

If you're not discouraged, find those who are. Find those who have not returned to your group and reach out to them. Let them know you are there for them. Look at those in the pews around you. You are likely surrounded by people who are discouraged and lonely. They may hide it well, but they need you. Be the presence of Christ to them.