**Elijah – The Prophet who was Depressed. 1 Kings 19:1-21.**

I’ve been thinking quite a lot recently about those two great prophets of the Old Testament, Elijah and Elisha. They lived and served God in troubled times, and their stories have a lot to teach us. Elijah is famous for opposing the wicked King Ahab of Israel, calling down fire from heaven, and finally being caught up bodily into heaven. Yet the Bible tells us that this great servant of God was “a man of like nature with ourselves” (James 5:17, AV) – “the same kind of person as we are” as the Good News Bible puts it, or “a man just like us” in the NIV. And here in 1 Kings 19 we find this great servant of God in a state of despair and depression. It could happen to any one of us... So let’s have a look at his story.

**1: Elijah in Danger – 19:1-3.**

We see Elijah first in his hour of danger, for right at the start we find that King Ahab’s wife Jezebel is after his blood. In chapter 18 we can read of the famous contest on Mount Carmel, when the LORD had answered Elijah’s prayer by sending fire from heaven and the people had responded with the cry “The LORD – he is God! The LORD – he is God!” (18:39). Elijah had then gone on to kill all the 450 prophets of Baal, but now Queen Jezebel was demanding vengeance. “Heaven help me,” she said, “if you are not as dead as they are by this time tomorrow!”

And Elijah fled. On Mount Carmel, on the mountain top, it had seemed that the LORD had been victorious and the followers of Baal had been defeated. But in the city of Jezreel, in the ‘real world,’ it seemed that nothing had changed: Jezebel, who worshipped Baal, was still in power: she had already killed many of the prophets of the LORD (1 Kings 18:4) and now she was determined to kill Elijah too. So Elijah “ran for his life” (v. 3).

Maybe we haven’t been in quite as dire a situation as that. But maybe we have been in one where it felt that the whole world was against us – where nothing seemed to be going right, where all our hopes and plans for the future have been dashed, where the outlook seems very dark indeed. The apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians of a time when “We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself” (2 Corinthians 1:8). Maybe you are feeling like that right now? Old age, illness, ever-increasing food and heating bills, or the news of wars and rumours of wars in the world around us can all make us feel “under attack.”

**2: Elijah in Despair – 19:3-18.**

Now we see him in the hour of his despair, for Elijah – that man just like us – knew periods of depression as well as of elation. So we find him sitting under a broom tree (or a juniper tree as the AV calls it) in the wilderness, praying that he might die. What a contrast with the victorious prophet of a few days before! But such fits of depression can sometimes overwhelm us so suddenly and so quickly after some great experience in our lives. What then were the causes of Elijah’s despair?

We should note first of all that he must have been physically and emotionally exhausted after his experience on Mount Carmel and then running in front of Ahab’s chariot to Jezreel as we read in chapter 18. It was not for nothing that he fell asleep, and was fed by the angel, under that broom tree. But exhaustion was not Elijah’s only problem. The sudden attack by Jezebel in what he thought was his moment of victory had brought on a great sense of failure. Three things stand out in Elijah's complaint to God, in 19:10 and 14:

a) A Sense of the Failure of God’s Purposes – for it seemed that all God’s plans, as Elijah understood them, had come to nothing. Surely the nation of Israel should have been brought back to God by the events on Mount Carmel? But no – it seemed that God was still being rejected by his people, and that he was not in control after all. Sometimes, when we look at all that is happening in the world, we may be tempted to feel, like Elijah, that God is no longer in control of what is going on.

b) A Sense of the Failure of God’s People – for Elijah clearly felt that the Church, too – or the nation of Israel as it was in those days – had also failed. “Only I am left – and they seek to kill me!” said Elijah. “There’s nobody else left – the Church has dwindled away, and I seem to be the only one left to proclaim the Gospel.” As we see churches closing around us and mosques proliferating, do we begin to feel the same way?

c) A Sense of the Failure of God’s Prophet – for we have a personal sense of failure here as well. It wasn’t just that everything seemed to be going wrong around him – as so often happens in these cases, Elijah felt that he himself was a failure. “I am no better than my fathers” he says in v. 4. “I can do no more than they did to bring this nation back to God.” In spite of all that he had done and sought to do, it seemed as he sat under the broom tree that all was failure. He could see no lasting fruit, even from his mightiest miracles. What, then, was the point in going on?

Do we ever find ourselves feeling like this? That everything seems to have failed – ourselves, the church, even God himself? Then let us see what God says to his despondent prophet in verses 15-18, where he tells Elijah to go back the way he had come and to anoint Hazael king over Aram and Jehu king over Israel, and to anoint Elisha to succeed him as prophet. All was not lost, for God had reserved – or would reserve – 7,000 people in Israel who had remained faithful to him and had not bowed down to Baal. Here we see each of Elijah’s problems answered, for:

a) God’s sovereignty is still in operation: he is still in control. And he shows it by commissioning Elijah to go and anoint kings and prophets to work his will upon the earth. The anointing of Hazael and Jehu would bring about great changes in Israel’s political situation – and not necessarily for the better. They would be kings who would bring trouble and judgement upon Israel rather than blessing, but they were kings who would nevertheless carry out God’s will. And note well, they were anointed, not merely *appointed*, making it clear that they were being set in place by God himself. And make no mistake – God is still every bit as much in control today.

b) God’s servants have not failed utterly. Even when things look their blackest, God still has his faithful followers, the 7,000 who still follow him and serve him. And that seven thousand, I believe, is a symbolic rather than a literal number – a figure denoting the sufficiency and adequacy of God’s “little flock” (Luke 12:32) to do all that he asks of them. And we should remember that, although the church might seem to be struggling here, it is growing by leaps and bounds in other countries. And even here, Satan does his best to ensure that we only hear the bad news about the church and not the success stories. This is Christ’s church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it (Matthew 16:18).

c) God’s spokesman still has a ministry; for the Lord sends Elijah back into the battle with a new sense of purpose and a twofold task – to set in motion God’s judgement upon a sinful people, and to appoint a successor so that the prophetic line will continue. Elijah might have felt that he was finished, but God made it clear that *he* was not finished with Elijah! After all, it was not his own battle he was fighting, but God’s – and it was not his own strength he had to rely on, but the almighty power of Good.

Even so, when we feel hopeless and despondent, the Lord would say the same things to us. He would remind us of his sovereignty, restore our faith in his Church, and re-commission us to go out to speak for him and call others into the Kingdom.

**3: Elijah and his Duty – 19:19-21.**

And here we see Elijah obeying God, going back to where God wanted him to serve, and carrying on the ministry that God had given him to do. The first thing we see is Elijah calling Elisha to be first his servant and then his successor – for it was Elisha who in fact anointed Hazael as king of Syria (2 Kings 8:9-15) and sent one of *his* servants to anoint Jehu king over Israel (2 Kings 9:1-6). God’s work on earth would continue, even when Elijah had been called up into glory. And I believe that this is something that we, as God’s people, should pay attention to today. Paul, writing to Timothy, tells him to entrust “the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses” to “reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Timothy 1:2). We, too, have a responsibility to pass on our Christian faith to others who will be qualified to teach others in their turn.

So let’s take heart – even if the times are hard and we are feeling discouraged and downhearted. Though I would urge anyone who is really suffering from depression to seek medical help. Or to talk to my son Dave, who has been there and can give some good and helpful advice. But we all need to remember that – however bleak things look – our God really is in control. We need to remember, too, that in spite of persecution in m any places, the church is alive and active around the world. And – most of all – we need to remember that God still has a job for us – that is, me and you – to do: to work and pray together, to share the good news with others, and to do what we can to train up the next generation of Christians. That great commission of Matthew 28 – to “Go... and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” – is still in force, as is the Lord’s promise that “surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” So let’s do as he says!