

## 1-10-10 1 Kings 19:1-9 “Despair, Discernment & Direction”(Part 1) by Richard Boatman

<sup>1</sup> Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. <sup>2</sup> So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, "May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them." <sup>3</sup> Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, <sup>4</sup> while he himself went a day's journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, LORD," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." <sup>5</sup> Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep. All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." <sup>6</sup> He looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again. <sup>7</sup> The angel of the LORD came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." <sup>8</sup> So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. <sup>9</sup> There he went into a cave and spent the night.

Reacting in fear paralyzes us spiritually. It dulls our ability to hear from God and to think clearly. **The fear factor** tends to magnify the threat or the problem and minimize or obscure the potential solution. And fear can hit us suddenly. For the disciples it was a violent storm on the Sea of Galilee. For us it may be a doctor's report or a job termination. For Elijah, it was the life threatening words of a villainous terminator, Queen Jezebel.

Sometimes the fears we must face are not precipitated by anything we've done. They are tests. The book of James says, "Consider it pure joy...when you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking in anything" (1:2-4). But in some cases we open the door to fear. We hang out in places or open our minds to environments not suitable for residents of God's kingdom. Or we simply make false assumptions.

In my first pastorate I nearly burned out. I opened my life to confusion and fear. I did this by assuming that to see a need meant I was to meet that need. I was working huge hours a week, building ministry *for* God—assuming this is what God wanted. I was working *for* God not *with* God. The secret of Jesus' ministry comes to us in two slightly paraphrased statements from John's gospel: "I only do that which I see the Father do" and "I only speak that which I hear the Father speak." This granted Jesus great freedom to come and go, not based on apparent need but

upon the Father's directive. It seems to me that Elijah had moved from following God's command to assuming that God was now going to overthrow Jezebel. It seemed logical. After all, Elijah had just called fire down on the altar at Mount Carmel and had 450 of Jezebel's best prophets of Baal slain. Surely God wanted to finish the destruction of darkness. But when Elijah stood within a stone's throw of the treacherous queen, there was no sense of God's presence with him. Jezebel's threat went right to Elijah's heart and he fled.

Elijah ran to Beersheba, a hundred miles to the south. Here he left his servant—probably the widow's son he had raised from the dead—and then went another day's journey into the desert...the **desert of despair**. He finally stopped at the shade of a broom bush and prayed: *"I have had enough, LORD. Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors."* Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep. Have you been there? You feel hopeless. You still pray...you still believe in God, but your spiritual gas tank is on empty and your trust is shaken.

Surely **depression distorts our view**. Take Elijah for example. He had predicted a famine would come, and it did. He was fed by ravens and then supernaturally by a widow's meager barrel of flour and jar of oil. He watched God raise the widow's son from the dead and God send fire down from heaven. He predicted and witnessed the miraculous rain and experienced heaven-sent stamina as he outran King Ahab's chariot. Elijah had seen firsthand these seven remarkable demonstrations of the Lord's power, and yet now he wanted to die. Depression had completely distorted his view and robbed his memory of God's reality.

Despair and depression are difficult periods to navigate, but—you may be surprised—I think they are often very necessary for our spiritual growth. Again James says: "...the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete."

My personal times of feeling depressed have been associated with some form of loss and subsequent change—my traveling ministry "drying up" or God moving me to different church styles or types of mission fields or experiencing personal failure or loss and then new opportunities. Psychiatrist M. Scott Peck puts it this way: "The feeling of giving up something loved—or at least something that is a part of ourselves and familiar—is depression." He continues, "Many people are either unwilling or unable to suffer the pain of giving up the *outgrown* which needs to be forsaken. Consequently they cling, often forever, to their old patterns of thinking and behaving, thus failing to negotiate any crisis, to truly grow up, and to experience the joyful sense of rebirth...into greater maturity."

This process of growing up by learning to let go of former ways of “thinking and behaving” places at center stage **the faith factor**. At the core of Paul’s assertion that “I die daily” is faith. But by faith, I am not referring to a rigid set of laws but to a fluid relationship with a person, namely, Jesus. And the real lesson born out of the desert of despair is rediscovering the daily and vital rhythm of living in Christ. It requires a near constant letting go of the old and embracing the new.

Years ago, we went on a three day cruise with Michael and Mandy. It was one of those promotions that required listening to a timeshare presentation. But finally, we made it to the ship and what a wonderful time we had. When back on land, we stayed a few nights at a motel in Daytona Beach, and while there, experienced something quite extraordinary: we continued to feel the movement of the ocean. Though on land, our inner rhythm had acclimated to the ebb-and-flow of the ship. But after a few days, this inner movement faded away.

Being on the ship is like a vital devotional life. If we don’t regularly get “back on the ship,” pretty soon the rhythm of Christ fades. Like Elijah, we drift from devotion and consequently make assumptions *about* God without really listening *to* God. We assume and we coast and we find ourselves in the desert of despair. And once there, we often get away from **tending to the basics**.

Are you feeling despair or depressed? Elijah was. And God sent an angel to bring him back to the basics. The angel offered several things, practical that are vital to living a balanced and whole life. Read the last part of today’s passage and you’ll find these six basic principles—practical and spiritual—to climbing out of despair: **First**, eat right. It seems simple, but our eating habits can catapult us into lethargy and ill health. **Second**, sleep well. Don’t take worry to bed with you. Unharness the mental horses and deal with them tomorrow. Learn to speak against fear and ask the Holy Spirit to guard your mind as you rest. **Third**, exercise. Teddy Roosevelt was a rather frail child with a great mind. His dad told him that his mind could only go as far as his body would allow. This became an inspiration for a lifetime habit of exercise. **Fourth**, embrace a new journey. This will mean saying good-bye to old patterns that were for a different season and discovering new horizons and potential. **Fifth**, reconnect with the God of Scripture, the God of Mount Horeb or Sinai. Our faith becomes so filled with assumptions and feelings that are often in defiance of what God tells us in Scripture. And **sixth**, learn to be alone with God. Turn off the cell phone...the texting...the TV and computer, and give yourself in complete attentiveness. For it is in solitude that the **journey of discerning** often comes to fruition. And our journey of discerning is a call to the heart of worship.