

Highs and Lows of Elijah

It's been a tough 27 months – battling our way through Covid and if we are honest, many of us are tired – some may even be burnt out. The Covid-19 pandemic is still taking and disrupting lives. Although vaccines and treatments promise that someday life will return to some kind of normality, a growing number of people are experiencing pandemic burnout. Then there is Long Covid and we recognise that some of our fittest young people are still struggling to get back to full health.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines pandemic fatigue as being “demotivated” and exhausted with the demands of life during the Covid crisis.

The WHO warns that this fatigue could ultimately lead to a longer, more devastating pandemic.

Then as we begin to emerge out of Covid, a war sparks off in Ukraine and suddenly we are dragged into another depressing situation, and we cannot forget Brexit, and now talks again of Scottish Independence.

If you are feeling that your batteries are low, you're not alone. I'm part of the Church of Scotland minister's Facebook page, and it's interesting reading the comments from some of my colleagues, from all over Scotland, and the feeling is pretty low at the moment and I know ministers in independent churches are also facing these challenges.

Then there is the whole issue of reduction of ministries and buildings within the Church of Scotland. It's been a tough time and I certainly don't want to depress you further this morning, but sometimes we need to face up to the facts and reality of the situation.

The prophet Elijah was burnt out, exhausted from fighting battles, drained from facing up to opposition, he was on his knees, like a defeated boxer, but yet he still managed to hang onto the ropes.

All pleasure had gone out of his life. He was in deep depression and he had lost the joy of his salvation, in other words, the joy of living, and all that he could see was darkness, doom and gloom, and yet there was a flicker of light, a seed of faith. God had not finished with him!

And what was God's response? How did God meet Elijah's needs? He refreshed him with His Grace!

When Elijah ran off, he eventually stopped running and collapsed under the shade of a juniper tree and prayed to God to take his life. The Lord gave him the opportunity to rest, to sleep, to renew and refresh his body and mind. This is where his renewal begins. It begins with rest. Sometimes we need to take rest. Too many people, are too busy, and their lives can go out of control easily. Our young people today live such busy lives with all the demands of modern living, working to pay the mortgage, working to provide for children, and so stress is multiplied until breaking point.

When God created the world, he created a cycle of rest. He built into Creation, an opportunity for his creatures to take one day of complete rest out of seven. This was not to kill our joy, but this was to renew and refresh our souls. God rested on the seventh day.

If we were to walk up to the retail park right now, what would we find? The busiest day of the week on the day of rest. I'm not being judgemental, but just pointing out, one of the main reasons for people to burn out is that they don't take enough rest.

Elijah needed to rest, as our Lord Jesus did on several occasions, he took rest; whether he was up the hill praying or even found sleeping on the back of a fishing boat. He needed his rest.

And when Elijah had rested, he was then in a much better place; we all know the difference that a good night's sleep can make to our minds and souls; when we go to bed with a problem on our mind; often we wake and find a solution or a new perspective to the problem.

He was awakened in his sleep when God sent his angel to care for him. God has his angels; they might come in different shapes and forms; more than likely they will be human, but nonetheless an angel of God. They may come in the form of a carer, a doctor, a psychiatrist, a charity worker, a friend, a family member, a fellow Christian. God will send an angel to you, and that angel touches you and helps you.

Elijah's angel told him to get up and eat. As Elijah stood up and looked, he saw bread baking on hot stones and a jug of water. The smell and nutrition of cooked bread and the refreshment of water, was exactly what his soul needed at that moment in time. So, he ate and drank, and went back to sleep.

God is in the business of caring for our souls, caring for our lives, Jesus said he did not want one of us to be lost, and so at our deepest need, if we allow God – he will come to us and bless us with his angels, his Spirit.

God knows the importance of the material, that our bodies are so important for our wellbeing, sleep, food and drink and then more sleep and more food that is what Elijah had, God revived his physical needs.

General William Booth, founder of The Salvation Army, once said to a group of new officers, "I want you young men always to bear in mind that it is the nature of a fire to go out; you must keep it stirred and fed and the ashes removed."

Elijah's fire had gone out and God was to rekindle him and it began with his physical body.

Then it continued with his spiritual life.

God did not desert Elijah. But notice, he did not remove his burden. His challenges were still there. Queen Jezebel was still on the throne, and still after him, but what God did for Elijah was to refresh him. Jesus said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" and that promise is for all who follow Jesus, in our time of need and darkness he is ever present.

Elijah saw God being with him, when he was at the top of the Mount Carmel, performing an amazing feat of destroying the pagan religion, and he saw God with him at the lowest point of his life.

It's amazing that we can go from such a high point to a such a depth, in such a short time. But we see this often, politicians falling from high office; high flying entrepreneurs entangled in financial disasters and so the list goes on.

But God is ever-present, whether we are at the top of our game or the bottom of the ladder, or even in a gutter, God's love doesn't change. It searches us out.

The Lord gave him physical strength and then he was about to strengthen his spiritual life. He was told by the angel that the journey ahead was too great for him, to go on his own strength. So, he was further strengthened by the hand of the Lord.

How true that is for us also in life; the journey ahead is too great for us. But there is one who travels with us. Whether that is a journey that we must do individually or collectively, remember, like Elijah, that it is too great for us with our own strength.

That is a problem in our world today; too many people doing it with their own strength; the Christian faith is an invitation to allow God to journey with us; Jesus said, *Come to me all who are heavy burdened and take my yoke upon you for my burden is light and my yoke is gentle.* Christ invites us to find our rest in him. He doesn't want us to battle with life, rather he said *I have come to give you life in all its fullest.*

Mount Horeb was a spiritual place for Israel; it was where Moses encountered the burning bush and the Ten Commandments, and it was here that Elijah found a cave, and it was here the word of God came to him.

But the Word did not come to him in spectacular fashion. It was no blinding light or immediate conversion. It came to him in a still small voice. God did put a spectacular firework display on for Elijah before the word came. Fire and earthquake and then silence, and then God spoke to him. Reminiscent of Moses and the Ten Commandments – great powerful display coming from Mount Horeb and then God came in the cloud and spoke alone to Moses.

God comes to us in our quieter moments, when we can slow down enough to listen. Often life is lived at a frenetic pace and the Holy Spirit gets no opportunity to speak into our souls. Sometimes God has literally to shout *slowdown...*and then when we do, he will speak and guide us.

What did God say to Elijah...*Go back the way you came!*

Was it some great prophetic word...some deep insight into the mysteries of God?... No... rather a very simple.... *What are you doing here...? Go back the way you came....*

This was the moment that Elijah realised that he had been running away.... running away from responsibility.... running away from people.... running away from God's will....and similar to Jonah, he had to pick himself up and go and do what God wanted him to do.

I'm sure that there are times when we all feel like running away? Life has been tough...opposition seems to be coming in so many different directions that we wish we could be like David and say *if only I had the wings of a dove.*

But what we do discover in our passage is that God had a purpose for Elijah, to go back the way he came; he was to go back, and to anoint the king of Syria and the King of Israel and he was to go back and anoint Elisha as his successor,

and more than that, he was told that he wasn't the only one faithful to God, but there were 7000 others who have not worshipped Baal.

God was not finished with Elijah, he had important work still for him to do. Elijah had to pass on the keys; he was to realise that he was not alone but God was very much in this with him. The Kings and the prophet were to be anointed and Elijah was to pick himself up and get back and get on with it.

Perhaps Elijah's issue was that he had an ego problem; he thought that he was the only one who could do God's will; that he was the last man standing; but God opened his eyes to see that God had other plans and Elijah was still part of it, and he was to go back and to continue the work by anointing others to take over from him. That in itself takes humility, that he was no longer going to be at the centre but he was to make way for others.

So, this chapter of Elijah's life came to an end. He returned again ready to continue the work to which God called him. He returned having met with God under the tree and in the cave.

What about you this morning? Have you met with God under the juniper tree or in the cave, or wherever that may be for you, in a quiet room of your house? As he refreshed Elijah and gave him a new and fresh vision for the way forward, so he can do for you also.

Amen