

Exhaustion & Depression

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Date: 17 February 2019

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[0 : 00] Well, throughout this month we've been doing a very short series called Christians from Monday to Friday, which is in many ways emphasizing the fact that a relationship with Jesus is not something that's just confined to a Sunday.

It's something that should affect every single part of our lives. So far we've been looking together at, in many ways, we've been focusing on the amazing opportunities that our weekly routines bring for us as Christians, whether you work, whether you are looking after your family, whether you are studying, whether you're at school, whatever you're doing.

Monday to Friday is an amazing opportunity for you to go out and live the life of a disciple of Jesus. On Sundays we gather together, and on Mondays we scatter, and we have wonderful opportunities to make contact with the world and for our conduct to be such that we stand out in an amazing way. So, for lots of reasons, being a Christian makes Monday to Friday brilliant. It makes it absolutely brilliant.

But at the same time, we are not saying that Monday to Friday is always great, even if you're a Christian. And the Bible recognizes the fact that as Christians, sometimes life from Monday to Friday can be really, really hard.

[1 : 32] And the reality of how life can be hard is seen very clearly in the passage that we read about Elijah. When we think of Elijah, we tend to think of one of the most outstanding servants of God in all of history.

He's one of these big, big names that stands out in the history of God's people. He was an outstanding prophet. He witnessed extraordinary things. His dedication to God was incredible when he was surrounded by a whole nation that was opposed to him and that was opposed to the Lord. The chapter before this, as we said, chapter 18 is one of the biggest triumphs that we ever see. It's one of the most thrilling events in the whole of the Bible.

You go forward to the New Testament, to the Mount of Transfiguration. Elijah is one of these figures, one of the two, along with Moses who comes and speaks to Jesus.

So when we think of Elijah, it's very easy to think to ourselves, well, he was an outstanding believer and everything was brilliant for Elijah.

[2 : 39] But the Bible doesn't just tell us about Elijah's triumphs and successes. The Bible tells us much, much more. And the chapter that we read, First Kings 19, is a remarkable chapter because it shows us that this great man who achieved great things was also a man who really struggled.

And he reached some incredibly low points. And for many of us, that's the reality of life. And that's what I want us to think about together tonight.

And I want us to focus on two things in particular that we see in this chapter because when you look at Elijah here, what do you see? You see someone who's exhausted and you see someone who is crippled by depression.

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done and had he killed all the prophets with the sword, then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah saying, so may the gods do to me and more also if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.

Then he was afraid and he arose and ran for his life and came to Beoshiba, which belongs to Judah and left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a boom tree and he asked that he might die saying, it is enough now, oh Lord, take away my life for I am no better than my father.

[4 : 13] And he lay down and slept under a boom tree. I want us to focus on these two headings of exhaustion and depression.

And first of all, we're going to see how after the great triumph of chapter 18, chapter 19 tells us that the opposition to God only gets worse and Jezebel's response is not to back down, but it's actually to intensify her opposition and she resolves to kill Elijah.

So Elijah flees and even though he's had this great victory, he doesn't think, well, I'll be able to stand up to Jezebel. His instinct and his response is to run. And verse four describes for us how he wandered into the wilderness alone, isolated and exhausted.

And so in just a few verses in the historical narrative, Elijah has gone from presiding over one of the greatest triumphs in the history of God's people, one of the greatest displays of the existence and authority of God to lying down under a tree in the middle of nowhere, exhausted.

And we know that he was exhausted because verse five tells us that he lay down and slept and then he's told to eat and he still doesn't recover enough and he lies down again.

[5 : 34] And verse seven tells us that he needs to replenish his strength for what lies ahead. Elijah is absolutely exhausted.

And I'm pretty sure that virtually everyone in here can not only picture the fatigue and weirdness of Elijah, but I'm pretty certain that you can all say, I think I know how that feels.

And for all of us now in life, very, very often we are battling with exhaustion. And it's ironic in a way because the last 20 years, I think I've brought so many changes into life that give the appearance of making things easier.

So our phones can do pretty much anything. We just pull our pockets out and we've got access to whatever we want. Their TV can be recorded or it can be downloaded to fit round whatever we were doing.

I remember when I was wee, you used to always have to be home at a certain time on Saturday for gladiators. But not now.

[6 : 42] Not now. Fits around everything that we're doing. Access to information has never been easier and communication has never been simpler. And so it all looks like it's making life easier, but I think that with all of these things, the last 20 years have also brought an ever-increasing level of exhaustion into our lives.

And I'm not saying I can explain why that is, but I do wonder whether all of these technological advances have actually, in reality, just placed more and more demands on us.

Because our smartphones mean that we take work to bed with us. When you lie down at night and then you can check an email and see that there's something you haven't done or something that you need to do.

The instantaneously of email gives this pressure to reply. You always feel that you get an email and think, I must reply to that because everything is wanting an instant response.

And if you've got 30 episodes of Top Gear or Gladiators or Downton Abbey or whatever it is recorded on your SkyPlus box, you've got to find the time to watch it.

[7 : 49] And you think, oh, I'm not doing that. I haven't watched it and I'm not keeping up. And all of these things can just add more and more pressure. And alongside that, we now live in a world where more and more and more is happening.

And yet, at the same time, we're constantly being scrutinized with this fear that if something goes wrong, then we're going to be blamed. And the result of all of that is that for many of you and for many people around us, we're absolutely exhausted.

But the amazing thing about the Bible is that not only is it our book of theology, not only is it our book of moral instruction, not only is it a book of spiritual guidance, it is also a book for the exhausted.

And the Bible never ignores the fact that there are times when we are crippled by fatigue and we're left absolutely worn out. That's why the Bible will give us the testimony of those whose flesh and heart faints and fails.

And it's God who knows all too well that even youths grow faint and weary and young men shall fall exhausted.

[8 : 59] And what does God think of the exhausted? Is he disappointed? Is he frustrated? Is he angry?

Is he impatient? That's often how we feel, but God is different. Because God's opinion of the exhausted are found in Jesus' amazing words, come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

You could, I think, justifiably paraphrase that and say, come to me, all who are exhausted, and I will give you rest.

God knows and understands our experience of exhaustion. Jesus himself experienced it. John 4.6 is an amazing verse. Jacob's well was there, so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well.

It was about the sixth hour. Just remember that if you feel absolutely exhausted, Jesus knows what that feels like.

[10:02] He knows exactly what that feels like. So if you think of all the great aspects of who Jesus is, you think of his wisdom, you think of his teaching, you think of the miracles that he performed, alongside that in Jesus, there was also a vulnerability to exhaustion in exactly the same way that you and I are vulnerable to exhaustion.

And for that reason, the Bible is the place where we should go in our exhaustion. There we will find people who feel exactly the same way as we do, and there we will find the God who cares for those who are utterly worn out.

And that's what we see when we look at Elijah's situation. He's exhausted, so God gives him exactly what he needs. He gives him rest, and he gives him nourishment.

We see that in verses 5 to 8. God gives him an opportunity to rest. God gives him food and water. And that reminds us of a fundamental biblical truth.

God likes rest. Now by that, we do not mean laziness. God does not want people to be idle or inactive or lazy, but God does expect us to balance the busyness of work and the activities of our lives with regular rest.

[11:31] That's one of the great purposes in establishing the Sabbath day. God firmly believes in rest. And the problem that we often have is that the more tired we get, the harder it is for us to rest, because we're plagued by guilt and frustration over all of the things that we're struggling to do.

And very often that's the case. The more tired you get, the more you think, I need to do this, and I need to finish that, and I'm not getting this done. And it weighs down on us more and more and more and more. And the simple and wonderful answer is just to listen to God.

And the theological truth is that when we rest, we are glorifying and honoring God, because we are simply saying, Lord, I need what you have given.

I need to do the very thing that you have told me to do. So when you are exhausted, when you stop and rest, you are not letting God down.

You are actually glorifying Him. So if you're exhausted, then think about how you can rest.

[12:36] And when you rest, praise the God who likes rest. Often we think that our resources are unlimited and that we can keep going and keep going and keep going.

But it's God whose resources are unlimited, not ours. And He understands that. And we don't. That's why we read at the start. The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth.

He doesn't grow faint or weary. His understanding is unsearchable. So He gives power to the faint and to the one who has no might. He increases the strength.

Even young people faint and grow weary. Young men shall fall exhausted. But they who wait in the Lord shall renew their strength.

Exhaustion is something then that we all feel from time to time. And it's something that God understands and that God can help us with.

[13:40] Exhaustion can be a good feeling in a certain sense because it can bring an element of satisfaction with it. So if you go on a Saturday and go and walk up on Monroe in Scotland and you get home at night, you will feel exhausted.

Your legs will feel sore. But it's a good feeling and you can often rest well in that context. But that's not the kind of exhaustion that Elijah experienced in these verses.

This severe physical exhaustion will eventually inevitably have an effect on our minds. And that's where we see that Elijah wasn't just exhausted.

I think we can justifiably say that he was also depressed. And as hard as physical problems are, it's the battles in our mind that are the hardest of all.

There's a wonderful quote from Spurgeon that I just want to read out to you. The mind can descend far lower than the body, for in it there are bottomless pits.

[14:48] The flesh can bear only a certain number of wounds and no more, but the soul can bleed in 10,000 ways. I've put it up twice. Sorry, I didn't mean to do that.

The soul can bleed in 10,000 ways. Depression combined with depression is a horrible combination.

Because in that situation, we feel utterly worn out and at the same time, we feel utterly dismayed at ourselves, dismayed about all that we are and all that we fail to do and all that's going wrong in our circumstances.

In that situation, resting is not so much a relief, but an immense challenge. And that's where we find Elijah. He's broken and depressed.

We see that he's dismayed by his own failings and weaknesses. He says, I'm no better than my father. His circumstances leave him distraught. He says, I've been jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts, for the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars and killed your prophets with a sword and I, even I only am left and they seek my life to take it away.

[15:55] Elijah's in this awful situation where he feels like a complete failure and he feels like the whole world is against him. And that is very, very often where depression will leave you.

We feel that the world and our circumstances are conspiring against us. And within us, we feel an overwhelming sense of inadequacy, frustration, failure and despair.

And so if we look within, we feel bitterly disappointed. If we look around, we feel troubled, threatened and insecure.

And all the time, we feel that God must be utterly disgusted with our behavior. We think God must think that we're so rubbish and so far from what we should be and that we're a huge disappointment to him.

And that raises the question, what should we make of Elijah's behavior in this passage? So you read 1 Kings 19, what do you think of Elijah?

[17:05] And how should you judge his behavior? What do you think? It's an interesting question because many people interpret this passage by being quite hard on Elijah.

So he's viewed as somebody who's wallowing in self-pity. He's somebody who's being disobedient to God by running away. He's often kind of criticized as a coward because of his fear of Jezebel. And it's easy to come to this passage and to interpret it as a way of avoiding depression. So you look at all the things that Elijah did.

He ran away. He doubted. He feared. And you can say, well, Elijah did all of these things wrong. That's what left him in a depressed state. Here we are finding instructions as to how not to be depressed.

The key message of this passage is don't be like Elijah in 1 Kings 19. Yes, be like him in 1 Kings 18, but don't be like him in 1 Kings 19.

[18:04] That's how some people approach this passage. I don't think they're right.

Because I think the truth is there's times when we're all like this. And I think the lesson of this passage is not so much about avoiding depression, but rather about how God deals with those who are depressed.

And the vital truth that I want us to see, especially if we are flat or depressed ourselves, is that God is not hard on Elijah.

He's amazingly patient and gracious towards him. And we have to look quite closely at the text to see that. In verse seven, we see that God leads Elijah to Horeb.

God's angel prepares him for his journey. God leads Elijah through his depression. Now Horeb is another name for Sinai, the mount where God gave his commandments.

[19:07] And you have to ask yourself, is it a coincidence that God's covenant spokesman Elijah ends up back where God's covenant law was given? So we think of Elijah wandering off into the middle of nowhere, running away in fear, and yet all of a sudden we find he's actually at this key location in the history of God's covenant dealings with his people.

I don't think we can say that Elijah was just running away from God aimlessly when Vershade tells us that his destination was the mount of God. And so despite Elijah's frail mental state, God was never abandoning him.

God was in fact leading him. And it's a reminder that if you are depressed, never, ever forget that God will never stop leading you.

God is not a part-time shepherd. Every time we wander off, he will lead us back. Every time we can't see the way he will still be our guide.

Every time our soul sinks into depression, he is still by our side. Elijah was in the depths of despair, but not for one moment.

[20 : 16] Not for one moment was he outside the care and protection of God. And neither are you.

But don't forget that although God was leading Elijah, Elijah still felt horrendous. And that brings us to our next point.

God leads Elijah and God speaks to Elijah. God reveals himself to Elijah by speaking to him. And we saw that in the passage how Elijah has these conversations with God.

I want us to notice just two important things here. First, I want you to notice that there's a lot of repetition in all of this. So in verse nine and in verse 13, God asks the same question to Elijah. And both times, Elijah gives the same reply. And it seems to be the case that Elijah's frame of mind in this chapter is the same. At the beginning, he's depressed, and then after at least 40 days, he is exactly the same.

[21 : 20] And the truth that's been revealed to us here is that God is well aware that depression is not fixed overnight. And God does not expect you to feel better straight away.

And when we are low in our feelings of self-worth and when we're feeling insecure, you can be told something again and again and again, and yet it struggles to sink in. The same things, the same worries, the same fears can bother us again and again and again.

They can come before us night after night after night. But God's patient, repetitive conversations with Elijah remind us that God is happy to tell you again and again and again that he loves you and that he will be with you.

And you can go back to God with the same worries and fears and doubts and struggles and insecurities and as the perfect Father, God will listen to you again and again and again and again. When we think negatively about ourselves, it's virtually impossible to avoid the conclusion that everybody else thinks the same. So if we think that we're a waste of space, we think that God thinks that we're a waste of space.

[22 : 33] But God's opinion of you is never, ever shaped by the way you view yourself. We think that our weaknesses are a reason to hide from God, don't we?

So you think maybe about the fact that you get tempted by stuff is a reason to hide to God, hide from God. The fact that you get tempted by awful things, you think, well, for that reason, I should hide from God.

The truth is, there is a reason to run to God because God says that Jesus experienced every temptation that we face yet without sin and for that reason, we should confidently go near to him and find grace and help.

God expects us to need him, God knows that we are weak, God does not mind reassuring us again and again and again. You've got these great words in Psalm 42, it says, why are you cast down on my soul and why are you in turmoil with me?

Hoping God, for I shall praise him, my salvation. Then they're repeated a few verses later and then they're repeated in the next Psalm as well. God does not expect you to recover instantly.

[23 : 52] God does not mind reassuring you again and again and again. Remember we read at the start the passage from Isaiah chapter 40 and it said there that God does not grow faint or weary.

You've got this great description of God as the Creator, the one of unlimited power, the one who never gets weary. And so you think to yourself, God, that's speaking to us of the fact that God's all powerful and in his sustaining of the planets and the stars and of life and of light and all the different things that are going on.

In God's providence, in God's sustaining, he never grows weary. In his ruling power, he never grows weary. And that's true and that's where my mind tends to go. But the fact that God never grows weary, it's also telling us about God's policy in regard to reassuring and comforting people who are brokenhearted and depressed.

He does not grow faint or weary. God never gets weary with you when you struggle and when you're afraid and when you're feeling low, he does not grow faint or weary.

The second thing I want you to notice is where God's voice is heard. So we saw the repetition of it all, but also where God's voice is heard. We've got these great description here. You have the wind and the earthquake and the fire, but God's not in any of these.

[25 : 30] Instead, his voice is heard in a small whisper, a low whisper. And the key point to notice here is that very often when we are depressed, we can often think that we need an earthquake in our lives or that we need a hurricane or we need something dramatic to take place.

So we think that our circumstances are needing to change. We need to change job, change house, change husband, change wife, change everything, that there needs to be an earthquake in our lives.

Just not to say that sometimes our circumstances can be damaging, but it's important to remember that you don't need an earthquake in your life when what you really need is to listen to the voice of God.

And Eli didn't need the earthquake or the wind or the fire. He needed to hear God's voice. And that's where we need to remember the crucial truth that God's word is true.

Now that might seem like the most basic thing to say, but God's word is true. Now that's something that if you struggle with depression, you really have to remember that God's word is true.

[26 : 43] Yes, that's obvious, but it's essential to grasp it because so often depression cripples us because it convinces us of things that are false.

And it magnifies things that are only half true, and it turns them into overwhelmingly distressing thoughts. That's what happened to Elijah.

He thought he was the only one left. He thought all hope was gone. And the key response is to listen to the still, gentle, unchanging truth of God's word.

So when we're depressed, we feel like we're a waste of space. That's not true. That's not the theological truth that God's word presents before us because the theological truth of God's word is that you are created as the handiwork of God made in his image and eternally precious to him, made as the apple of his eye and the one who can hide in the shadow of his wings.

And that's probably not how you feel, but it's theological truth. Our state of mind can leave us full of regret about our mistakes and our sins.

[27 : 57] So we think I've mucked up so much in my life and I've caused so much damage and I've done so many things that are wrong. And yet the truth of God's word says, come, now let us reason together.

Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow. Though they're red like crimson, they shall become as wool. Depression can leave us despairing about everything that's gone wrong in our lives.

We're full of regret. We think, why did I do this? Why am I like this? Why is this happening in my life? But God's word, the truth of God's word gently reminds us that our times are in God's hands, that before we were born, God's eyes saw our unformed substance.

In his book, we're written every one of them the days that were formed for us, when as there were yet none of them, as Psalm 139 tells us.

And perhaps worst of all, we tend to be crippled by the fact that we blame ourselves for everything that's wrong with us. We see ourselves as the biggest problem that there is. And yet we must remember the truth of the Bible, and we must remember the truth of the Bible, the fact that the fallen state of the world and the misery that that brings into people's lives is not your handiwork, ultimately.

[29 : 14] Ultimately it's the handiwork of the devil. And he is our enemy, and Elijah's despair is ultimately due to the powers of darkness turning people away from the true and living God.

And yes, we are all guilty sinners, and yes, we are not what we should be before God, but God's ultimate enemy is not you. It's the devil.

And God's desire is to liberate you from his clutches and to restore you to a perfect relationship with himself. Very often we're depressed because we convince ourselves of the reality of things that are ultimately not true.

And so that's why God's word is where we go in order to find the truth. Finally, we see that God has plans for Elijah.

Elijah takes this journey through the passage that we read. He runs away, he heads south, he ends up at Horeb. But the key point is that the journey is not over.

[30 : 31] The Lord says to him, go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus, and there he instructs him to anoint a new king over Syria, a new king over Israel, and to call Elisha as his assistant and as his ultimate replacement.

The key point that I want us to see here, and that I think has been said before us in God's word here, is that if we are in the midst of depression, so often we forget that there is a bigger picture. Very often we can take a screenshot of our lives, so you can take a screenshot with your phone of something that you're reading or of a video or whatever, and it's like we snap that moment. And we think that's it. We think that's the whole story, this brief window, this tiny screenshot. And that's the tragic mindset that can leave people feeling suicidal.

Elijah wanted his life to end because he thought that that was it, that this was the whole story.

[31 : 43] And Suicide is a tragic self-confidence in our own judgment.

We think that this is the whole story, and there's nothing more. And yet the passage is reminding us that we are part of a much, much bigger picture.

Notice that at no point does God disagree with Elijah. He's well aware of the desperation of the situation for Israel and for Elijah himself. God doesn't go to Elijah and say, oh yeah, actually it's not that bad.

He acknowledges the fact that things are difficult. God does not expect us to think that everything is always perfect, but he does expect us to remember that his plans are wiser than ours.

His judgment is superior and his ways are not our ways. He expects us to trust him.

[32 : 47] That's what he wanted Elijah to do, and that's what we need to do. But the last thing I want you to notice in the passages is a really important little word.

I often say this, the big words in Scripture are amazing, the little words are also amazing. And there's a little word in God's question to Elijah.

You can see that at the very bottom of the screen there, God comes to Elijah and he says, what are you doing here, Elijah? And I think that the word here is beautiful because it reminds us that here is the place where God will meet us, even if that is at the very depths of your depression.

And it's a reminder that God wants us to talk to him wherever we are and in whatever situation we find ourselves.

He wants us to pour our hearts out about what has left us in this condition. God wants to meet us and is ready to meet us here, whatever here is for you tonight.

[34 : 07] But it also reminds us that God doesn't want to leave us here. He doesn't want to just leave you in the depths of depression.

He will meet with you so that he can show you where to go because we're on a journey just like Elijah was.

And what we always have to remember is that that journey will only be over when you enter into paradise and there depression will be one of the many former things that will have passed away. So what does God think of the exhausted and the depressed? Well, he knows exactly how you're feeling. He knows exactly where you are.

When you may well be a man or a woman of great sorrows, you might be well acquainted with grief and maybe Monday to Friday in your life is really tough.

[35 : 15] But God knows what that is like and he knows how to help. If you're exhausted, if you're depressed, you can go to God.

The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all.

Where else can you go to find hope like that? What in the world can give the depressed and the exhausted a peace and a comfort and a security that can compare to what Jesus will give you?

Let's pray. Dear God, our Father, we thank you for all the joy and happiness that life can bring and for the many, many things that we can be thankful for.

But we also come before you acknowledging that very often life is really hard and often we're exhausted, often we are depressed. And for some people, that may be a very, very big part of their lives.

[36 : 45] And we thank you that your Word gives hope and comfort and help to the exhausted and the depressed.

We thank you so much that you know us to our very core and that you are ready to meet with us wherever we are. And we pray for those who struggle with exhaustion, for those who have got a lot of pressure at work or a lot of worry or concern.

We pray for those also here who have battled depression in their lives. And we pray that they would know your continuing help and strength.

We also want to thank you for all the mental health support that is provided through our healthcare service. And we pray for all those involved in that work.

And we thank you for them. And we pray, Lord, that in everything, and we would remember that we can come to you just as we are. Help us, Lord, and help us not to trust our minds when they're broken.

[37 : 59] Help us to always just trust your Word. Amen.