

What We Can Learn From Elijah's Extreme Emotional Swings

In 1 Kings 18, we find Elijah standing in total victory on top of Mount Carmel, but in the very next chapter, he is cowering in a cave wishing to die. What caused this extreme emotional swing and what can we learn from it? Let's review the facts.

Elijah had just returned from the showdown on Mount Carmel with the false prophets of Baal. He rebuilt the broken altar and prayed literal, visible fire down from heaven. As a result, a backslidden nation repented and returned to Jehovah shouting, "The Lord, He is God!" (1 Kings 18:39). Elijah ordered all the false prophets slain with the sword. Next, he fervently prayed seven times and God restored rain for the first time in 3 1/2 years. (Ironically, Baal was supposedly the god of war, weather and fertility but was powerless to send fire on the pagan altar or rain to relieve the drought). Then, upon seeing a tiny cloud, Elijah prophesied a great downpour. Finally, God moved on him, and he outran King Ahab's chariot from Mount Carmel to Jezreel (about 17 miles). Not a bad day's work! That summarizes 1 Kings 18—a divine visitation, a landslide revival and complete spiritual victory for Israel.

In contrast, 1 Kings 19 opens on a sour note—Elijah received a death threat from Jezebel, Ahab's evil queen. Her message: "By this time tomorrow, you're a dead man!" (see 1 Kings 19:2). This powerful prophet of God who confronted a wicked king, a backslidden nation and 850 false prophets, fled for his life from *one* woman. Elijah fled from Jezreel to Beersheba, the southernmost border of Israel (about 113 miles). Then, he went another day's journey (24 miles) into the wilderness, collapsed under a juniper tree and asked God to take his life.

Let's get something straight, Elijah didn't really want to die. If he did, he should have stayed where Jezebel's henchmen could find him. He was merely discouraged, emotionally and physically drained—burnout.

Burnout is defined as “fatigue, frustration or apathy resulting from prolonged stress, overwork or intense activity.” Perhaps Elijah thought, *I've done all these great things for God and what is my reward? My picture on a wanted poster and a bounty on my head.* Here are four helpful things we learn from this ancient account:

1. **Even prophets are human.** James 5:17 (NLT) explains, “Elijah was as human as we are ...” We do ourselves a disservice when we place Bible characters up on an unreachable pedestal. They were not perfect superheroes. They were flawed human beings just like us, complete with weaknesses, failures and temptations. That gives us hope, because if they overcame their limitations by God's grace, we can too.
2. **Even great people deal with doubt.** Elijah burst on the scene in 1 Kings 17:1 and was mightily used by God when he called Israel to repentance, sealed up the heavens to prevent rain, multiplied a widow's meal and oil, prayed fire down from heaven, raised a dead boy back to life, and parted the Jordan River with his mantle. Now, he's dealing with doubt and he's not the only one. Moses doubted his ability to speak and lead Israel. Even John the Baptist had second thoughts about Jesus and asked, “Are You He who should come, or should we look for another?” (Matt. 11:3). Peter nearly snapped after denying Christ and teetered on the brink of despair. Abraham Lincoln had severe bouts with depression. We too will deal with doubt. We are not immune. So what do we do then? We keep believing anyhow, keep fighting the good fight of faith and continue walking by faith and not by sight.

3. **After big victories, beware of dark valleys.** This is not negativism, it's realism. After fire fell from heaven, then came the death threat. After victory on Mt. Carmel, then came despair in the cave. We can't live on the mountaintop all the time. We will face some deep valleys, so don't be surprised. Life is full of peaks and valleys, highs and lows, bitterness and sweetness. Our emotions fluctuate like a yo-yo—up one day and down the next, but our devotion must remain constant, based on faith not on our feelings.
4. **You may be in the minority, but you're not alone.** Don't succumb to the Elijah syndrome—thinking you're a lone ranger. He mistakenly assumed he was the only one left serving Jehovah. "I have been very zealous for the Lord, Lord of Hosts, for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, thrown down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword, and I alone am left, and they seek to take my life" (1 Kings 19:10). Elijah was unaware that Obadiah, King Ahab's palace manager, had hidden 100 true prophets in caves and secretly fed them. In addition, God also had a righteous remnant in Israel that remained loyal to Him, "Still, I have preserved seven thousand men in Israel for Myself, all of whose knees have not bowed to Baal" (1 Kings 19:18). True, most of Israel fell under the idolatrous, immoral spell of Jezebel, but there was a faithful minority who stayed true to God.

The same is true today. The vast majority is on the broad way to destruction, but there is still a minority on the narrow way to life. Paul alluded to this, "So then at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace" (Rom. 11:5). The righteous remnant (a moral minority) is preventing this world from being totally overrun with evil and is keeping judgment at bay. Friend, you're not the only one striving to live right and please God. So the next time you have an extreme emotional swing, think of Elijah, and

remember that the same God who sends fire on Mount Carmel will also inspire you in the cave. {eoa}

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