

Three years ago, I don't think I'd ever used an emoji, unless you want to count old school emojis where you'd draw a smiley face in a note or a card. But we didn't call them emojis. If you're wondering what an emoji is, it's a small digital graphic, usually a yellow face that communicates an emotion or idea. Emojis are now everywhere, and we use them for everything. We post an update and we punctuate it with smiley faces. We send a text with crying eyes. We fire off an email with angry face.

We begin a new series this morning called "More than a Feeling." What I mean by that is that you are more than a feeling. You are more than the sum of your emotions. We live in a culture where the heart tends to rule the mind. What we feel is much more important than what we think. We let our feelings have the last word.

A biblical response to this isn't a resigned stoicism which remains aloof to both pleasure and pain. It isn't to keep a stiff upper lip. We aren't disembodied computers. God created us with a full array of emotions. As beings created in the image and likeness of God, it is not surprising to read in the Bible that God too expresses a full range of feelings, from negative emotions such as anger and sorrow to the more exuberant feelings of joy and compassion. Jesus also, in his earthly life, experienced the full range of human emotion including being "*overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death* (Mt. 26:38)."

I. Reality of Depression

We begin this morning with depression, because depression is America's most common mental health issue. One out of ten of us are dealing with some level of depression right now. Another one out of ten will deal with it on some level this year. If you're female it's even more likely, and if you're younger, your risk is higher. We come to church. We put on our happy faces. We tell everyone that we're doing fine, but this is a real struggle for some of us.

Depression is a serious illness that causes feelings of sadness and a loss of interest in activities you used to enjoy. It can lead to a variety of emotional and physical problems and decreases your ability to function in daily life. Depression often presents with the following symptoms.

- Feelings of sadness
- A sense of hopelessness and helplessness
- Insomnia, trouble sleeping and trouble getting up
- Thoughts of suicide and believing that I would be better off dead.
- Restlessness, irritability
- Low self-esteem
- Eating disturbance - usually loss of appetite and weight
- Fatigue, weakness, decreased energy
- Diminished ability to think or concentrate
- Loss of interest and pleasure in activities you used to enjoy.
- Chronic pain that fails to respond to typical treatment

- Feelings of isolation and the idea that no one cares or understands.
- The belief that nothing will ever get better

We all experience some of these things from time to time. It's completely normal. It's part of being human, but when you experience four or more of these symptoms on a regular basis, I think current guidelines suggest two weeks, you will be diagnosed with depression. It becomes a downward spiral that descends into darker and darker phases of depression.

Now if you hear this and you think, "That's me! That's where I am. That's how I feel," I need you to know this, first of all, you are not alone. One of the distinctives of depression is that you feel like you're the only one who is feeling what you feel. Depression convinces you that not only does no one else know how you feel, but also that they don't care.

You are not alone. There are many people who've gone through exactly what you're going through, and the church is filled with brothers and sisters who care very much for you. Let me tell you what kind of company you're in. Years ago there was a young Midwestern lawyer who suffered such deep depression that for a time his friends kept all knives and razor blades away from him. During this time of his depression, he wrote these words, "I am now the most miserable man living. If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would not be one cheerful face on earth. To remain as I am is impossible. I must die or be better." The man who wrote those words was none other than Abraham Lincoln.

Winston Churchill, perhaps the greatest Prime Minister in the history of Great Britain, who rallied his nation during the darkest days of WWII. He called depression a "black dog" that pursued him all of his life. Some of the most successful people who have made some of the most significant contributions to human history suffered tremendous bouts of depression.

I also need to stress this. Suffering from depression does not mean that you are a bad Christian, that you are not spiritual enough, or that God does not love you. Sometimes Christians find it hard to admit that we are depressed because we feel like that means admitting there's something wrong with our faith. Being depressed is not a sin.

Martin Luther, the great reformer, preacher and theologian battled depressive episodes throughout his life. Luther wrote of his "horrible and terrible thoughts" of melancholy as they called it in those days.

Another preacher wrote, "I, of all men, am perhaps the subject of the deepest depression at times...I am the subject of depression so fearful that I hope none of you ever get to such extremes of wretchedness as I go to." That was none other than Charles Spurgeon.

Some of the greatest heroes of the Bible battled suicidal thoughts. Moses, who delivered Israel from bondage in Egypt, was so exhausted and emotionally drained from leading the people he complained to God, "*I am not able to carry all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me.*"

If you will treat me like this, kill me at once, if I find favor in your sight, that I may not see my wretchedness. (Numbers 11:14-15)"

Jonah, the runaway preacher who was swallowed by a great fish also longed to die. *"Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live!"* (Jonah 4:3)

This morning, we want to look at Elijah, the first of the great prophets. He fell deep into a pit of despair. Here's what we read in 1 Kings 19:3-4,

Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, 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."

Three great men: one a patriarch, one a preacher, and one a prophet. Yet all of them were so depressed they wanted to die. Every one of them said, "Stop the world, I want to get off."

One of the remarkable things about Elijah's depression is that it comes so quickly on the heels of one of his greatest victories. Elijah had just faced down the evil King Ahab and his 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah. The whole nation had been lured into idol worship by these false prophets. As a punishment, God had caused a severe drought. It hadn't rained in three years.

This was a showdown of epic proportions. Both sides offered a sacrifice and prayed to their respective God or gods and asked them to consume the offering. God's true power was displayed in dramatic fashion when fire came down from heaven and consumed not only Elijah's offering drenched in water, but the sacrifice offered by the false prophets as well.

The people rallied to Elijah's cause and all 850 false prophets were put to the sword, and then God sent rain. It was a total victory. Success and accomplishment are not guarantees against depression. It can happen to anyone, and it can happen when you least expect it.

The evil King Ahab got in his chariot to go tell his wicked queen Jezebel what Elijah had done. Jezebel was the worst of the worst. She was an idol worshipping princess from one of Israel's neighbors. She's the one that introduces all this idol worship into Israel's royal family. She's the one that imported all these false prophets. She's the one that tried to murder all of God's true prophets. While she had successfully killed hundreds of prophets, the one guy whose head she wanted more than any other was Elijah. She's one very wicked woman. This sets the stage for Elijah's plummet into depression.

II. The Reasons For Depression

Nearly all psychiatrists agree that depression is caused by a combination of factors. There can be biological issues that cause an imbalance in the brain's neuro-chemicals that directly cause feelings of sadness. There are emotional triggers stemming from traumatic events that in some

cases don't pass with time. There are psychological factors that cause us to have unrealistic expectations or to lose perspective.

Of course, as believers we understand there is a spiritual dimension to all of this. Usually, it's a combination of these things that lead to depression. I'm addressing depression this morning from a pastoral perspective. We're talking about the spiritual dimension that is layered throughout this. I'm not a doctor. I don't play one on TV and I didn't stay at a Holiday Inn Express last night.

Listening to a sermon is food for the soul, but this does not qualify as seeking professional medical advice. If you are dealing with depression, it is wise to speak to a doctor. There may be factors that have to be addressed on a medical level. There is no shame in that. It does not make you less spiritual. You can still pray. You can still grow in Biblical wisdom. We would see no contradiction if you were feeling chest pains in going to see the doctor and also seeking God's healing power. It's no different here.

Now we all experience some of these things some of the time. Feeling sad after a traumatic event is completely normal. Psalm 30:5 says, "*Weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.*" But sometimes there are things that keep us stuck there. We get trapped in a rut and we can't get out. Maybe we're tired and exhausted and we don't get the rest we need. This can happen to you if you are going through a rough patch at work and you're working lots of extra hours. It happens to new moms with all the pressures of having a baby in the house at a time when your hormones are all out of whack.

Layer this with the fact that often, during these challenging chapters in life, we don't eat the way we should. When this goes on for too long we're depriving the body of its ability to handle stress.

Another contributing complication are feelings of loneliness. Maybe we're busy, and so we grow disconnected from our social lifelines. Our social relationships are more than just fun and games, they're oxygen for the soul. For whatever reasons you quit going to church for a couple of months, you cut out your weekly ballgames, card games, night out with your friends, you can find yourself in a pit of isolation. This isolation reinforces a lot of our negative self-talk. A lot of us experienced this during the pandemic lockdowns. For introverts like me, the first couple of weeks were kind of fun. Yay, no people! After a month though, it became real apparent how much we need other people. I need people.

You mix some of these things, like lack of rest, poor diet, isolation with a traumatic event, or a chemical imbalance in the brain, or just old fashioned stress, it's a recipe for depression.

Let's look at Elijah through the lens of these factors. 1 Kings 18:45 tells us that King Ahab rode off in his chariot from his showdown with Elijah to the city of Jezreel to go tell his wicked wife what went down. Verse 46 says, "*The power of the Lord came on Elijah and, tucking his cloak*

into his belt, he ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel.” So, Elijah, runs on foot cross country and beats Ahab back. Even with God’s power enabling him, I have to imagine that Elijah was tired. His adrenaline had to have been pumping that whole time, and now he is exhausted.

Ahab then makes it to Jezreel himself and tells queen Jezebel what happened, and she is furious. I Kings 19:2 says, *“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.”* Next thing you know, there’s “Wanted Dead or Alive Posters” all over town.

So, now, he’s got a death sentence hanging over his head. He’s physically exhausted, and there is an existential threat to his life. Vss. 3 and 4 don’t sound too surprising, *“Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness.”* So this is like running two marathons, two days in a row. He’s physically worn out. He’s emotionally drained, and now he’s all alone. He’s in the middle of the wilderness with no one to support him or encourage him. He’s isolated.

The rest of vs. 4 and 5a reads, *“He came to a broom bush, 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.”* He crawls under the first bit of shade he can find and begs God to die.

This is a coping mechanism some of us will recognize. Crawl into the nearest hole and throw a little pity party for ourselves. That is what had happened to Elijah. Elijah had every reason to be confident. God had just given him the greatest victory. He stood strong and God sent fire from heaven. The people rallied to his cause and all the false prophets were defeated. God sent rain and there was revival in the land.

But Elijah wasn’t focused on any of those positive things. All he could see is the negative. Depression lies to you. You focus on the negative only and ignore the positive. Elijah is drinking from the intoxicating cup of self-pity. It is intoxicating, but it is also deadly poisonous.

Like a lot of people who make suicidal threats, Elijah doesn’t really want to die. How do we know this? He just ran for his life. If he really wanted to die, he could have just let Jezebel catch him. She’s already proven she’s fully capable of killing prophets. His real problem was self-pity.

Feeling sorry for ourselves can be absolutely paralyzing. We lie down in the bed of pity, pull the blankets of depression up over our head, and just have a sad ole time. When things don’t go the way we want, we sometimes want to curl up in a fetal position and start talking about how bad things are and how unfair life is. This is called negative self-talk. If anyone tries to tell us something positive, we bite their head off.

We sound like the old children’s song, “Nobody likes me, everybody hates me / I think I’ll go eat worms! / Big fat juicy ones / Eensie weensy queensy ones / See how they wiggle and squirm.

Let’s talk about the spiritual side of depression for a moment. Depression did two things to

Elijah. It maximized his enemy and it minimized his faith. Jezebel became the big bad wolf. It's all Elijah could see. He forgot all about the incredible victory God just gave him.

It does the same thing to us. It takes whatever negative thing is going on in your life and magnifies it a hundred fold. It then makes us doubt that God can do anything about it. It makes us feel helpless and hopeless, and it makes our worst fears feel inevitable.

III. The Remedy For Depression

As I said, depression is not a sin. There's nothing wrong with getting depressed. There is a problem in staying depressed. God has not called us to wallow in a pit of despair. Our enemy is the only one who rejoices when we are too depressed to fight a battle that's already been won.

A. Physical Refreshment

So how does God pull Elijah out of this? It begins with physical refreshment. Notice how God takes care of Elijah's physical needs. 1 Kings 19:5-8a says,

Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep. All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." 6 He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again. 7 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." 8 So he got up and ate and drank.

God did two things for Elijah. First, he gave him a time to rest. Elijah sleeps twice in this story. Secondly, God gives him something to eat. Elijah wanted to die, but God gave him a nap. Then an angel wakes him up and gives him some angel baked bread, or would that be "angel food cake?" He takes another nap, and then more food and drink to strengthen him.

One of the lessons here is you've got to take care of yourself physically. Sometimes what we need is just some old fashioned R & R, rest and refreshment. You see, God is the Great Physician. He knows more about health than anyone. God understands that you need good food and good rest. Some of you, what you really need right now is not a Bible verse. You need to look at your menu and you need to look at your schedule- a proper diet and proper rest.

Listen to Psalm 127:2, *"In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat— for he grants sleep to those he loves."* Sometimes the most spiritual thing you can do is take a nap.

B. Spiritual Revival

Only after Elijah is physically refreshed, is he then ready to attend to spiritual matters. God tells Elijah take a journey, he travels all the way to Mt. Horeb. Horeb is just another name for Mt. Sinai. So God has Elijah go all the way to the very place where where Moses met with God up on the mountain. Think of the significance of this. Elijah, this is the same place where Moses encountered me, and now I want you to encounter me. This place symbolized God's love and presence with his people.

Elijah has been physically refreshed, but his life is still filled with all this angst over Jezebel. He gets to the mountain, crawls in a cave and goes to sleep again. The next morning, God asks him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” In verse 19, Elijah pours his heart out to God,

“I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

God tells him to go and “stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.” This is a big deal, because the same thing happened to Moses. Moses asked to see God with his own eyes. God tells Moses that no one can see his face and live, but God says, “I will hide you here in the cleft of this rock and allow my presence pass by. Then you can see my presence. God is now making the same offer to Elijah.

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. 12 After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.

This is exactly what Elijah needs in this moment. He doesn’t need the overwhelming power of God in the wind, earthquake or the fire. He needs to know the tenderness of a God that loves him. God gave Elijah rest and refreshment; then He brought Elijah to this very special place to give him a fresh revelation of Himself. This is the spiritual revival that Elijah needs.

God knows when you need a strong hand, but He also knows when you need a gentle whisper. Your heavenly Father knows when you are wounded and hurting. Isaiah 42:3 says, “A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.” The safest place you can be is in his mighty hand.

Sadly, though, one of the first things we often do when life gets really stressful, and depressive feelings are closing in around us, is we cut out the spiritual things. They’re easy to let go, and we don’t miss them immediately. Scripture and prayer fall by the wayside. We cut ourselves off from church, we starve our hearts, minds and souls of worship, fellowship and truth. We deprive ourselves of the very things that sustain us in the roughest times. Emotional and mental health sometimes require spiritual revival.

C. Emotional Renewal

Next, God gives Elijah emotional renewal. He encourages his heart. Notice that spiritual revival comes before the emotional renewal. Sometimes, we simply cannot get our heart in the right place, until we get our soul in the right place with God. Take care of matters with God first, and then you will be in a much better place to start tending to your emotional health. It’s in the presence of God we can put our hearts back together again. Never underestimate the importance of the spiritual in your emotional and mental health.

One of the things that's been tormenting Elijah emotionally is this feeling that he's all alone. There is no one on his side. He feels like he's the only guy in the whole country who doesn't worship idols. Did you hear that in vs. 19, "*I am the only one left.*" But God gives Elijah a crucial bit of information in verse 18 that strengthens his heart. It brings him emotional renewal.

Here is what God tells him, "*I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him.*" You're not the only one, Elijah. You're not in this alone. There is always more going on. God is working in ways you cannot see. God has people and plans you don't know about.

D. Outside Reengagement

The final thing we need is outside reengagement. One of the things that depression does is it focuses all your vision inward. You think only about yourself, how you feel, how bad everything is for you. Others outside of you almost cease to exist. This is why it's extremely important when fighting your way out of depression that you force yourself to look outward.

It's very instructive that after God gave Elijah physical refreshment, spiritual revival and emotional renewal, He also gives him something to do. He gives Elijah a mission. The last few verses of this story describe how God calls him to go all the way back to Israel to anoint a new prophet to succeed him and to anoint a new King of Israel. Ahab's days are done.

You want to quit wallowing in a pit of self-pity, go out and do something for someone else. Someone once asked Carl Menninger, the famous psychiatrist, "What would you advise a person to do who is experiencing deep depression and unhappiness?"

He didn't say, "Go see a psychiatrist" Here's what he said, "Lock the door behind you, go across the street, find somebody that's in need, and do something to help them." Volunteer. Get involved in a ministry. Serve. Love other people. Being outwardly focused isn't just something you do after you get all your stuff together. It's how you get yourself together.

Let me wrap it up with this. Feeling sad is normal. It's okay to get depressed, but what we don't want is to stay there. God has provided some very helpful tools to help dig us out of the pit of depression. Get the physical refreshment you need. Don't neglect your relationship with God and deprive yourself of the all-important spiritual revival you require. Look for the positive in things to find emotional renewal, and when you start feeling yourself becoming isolated and inwardly focused, remember the outside reengagement.

The Bible uses many names for God. It describes him in many ways. The name of God that we need to know in dark times is that He is the God of all comfort. The gentlest place you can be is in his mighty hand.