

SCRIPTURE & WELLBEING

4 Exhaustion

Today we're exploring exhaustion and burnout with a focus on the biblical prophet Elijah, who at one point in time suffered a mental breakdown.

Pray

'Thank you, Lord, for promising to be my strength when my strength runs out.'

Scripture

'A sound of sheer silence.'

1 Kings 19:12



The Prophet fed by a Raven by Clive Hicks-Jenkins, 2007.

Acrylic on Panel. Private Collection.

<https://clivehicksjenkins.wordpress.com/tag/the-prophet-fed-by-a-raven/>

Clive Hicks-Jenkins is a contemporary Welsh artist who has painted Elijah with a modern twist. Elijah has to face, not just dependency on the elements for his survival, but on God for his direction. God works with everything and nothing, so our offering can always become something; and it can be silence that helps us in our darkest times.

Reflection

To Jewish people, he is a prophet of the highest order, a miracle-working hero of faith who kept Israel from sinking into idolatry, was mysteriously whisked off to heaven and will return one day to announce the Messiah and God's eternal *Shalom*. Characteristically, though, Scripture doesn't shy away from also showing us the man as human and vulnerable:

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had 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 like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.' Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there.

He himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: 'It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.' Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, 'Get up and eat.' He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, 'Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.' He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.

Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' He answered, 'I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.'

He said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.' Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'

He answered, 'I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.' Then the Lord said to him, 'Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place.'

1 Kings 19:1–16

Theologically speaking, the story of Elijah is a monotheistic manifesto; the God of Israel is the only God, Baal is fake news, as is any other foreign deity under the sun. Unlike Baal, God is not some nature god, but the creator and ruler of the cosmos. Evidently, some ancient Israelites believed in cocktail religion: take some Yahweh worship and add a dash of Canaanite spirituality. Elijah will have none of it. The God of Israel is the one true God and his followers must be devoted to him alone.

Elijah's journey to Mount Horeb and his encounter with the Lord echo the account of Moses at Mount Sinai during a forty-day period. Such is Elijah's status that, in the Gospels, he appears alongside Moses to converse with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. It is all the more remarkable that we are given access to a low point in the great man's life: a period of

depression. Elijah displays symptoms of burnout, triggered not only by an intense and prolonged struggle against the forces of idolatry, but by the queen's threat to kill him. Jezebel is the final straw. Exhausted by his battle with Baal's prophets, Elijah no longer has the energy to face yet another threat.

Generally speaking, threat and depression are psychologically linked. People, for example, who were made to feel unwanted in early childhood can spend the rest of their lives doubting their right to exist. They may have long forgotten the Jezebel of their childhood: someone who rejected them or simply couldn't deal with them. They may fail to make the connection between early trauma and their sense of being superfluous and in other people's way. Unaware of how this narrative is shaping their behaviour, they worry about being a burden, apologise for everything, try to please everyone and ignore their own needs. They may even think of themselves as loving and humble, while failing to identify their obsequiousness as a form of self-rejection, caused by the distant, primal experience of being unwanted. Inevitably, the constant tension between loving others and hating themselves eventually results in the emotional exhaustion we call depression.

After being cornered by the hostile forces of paganism and overcoming them, Elijah is finally knocked out by one rejection too many: 'It is enough,' he says. Suddenly, his achievements appear null and void; he is literally losing the will to live: 'O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.' (1 Kings 19: 4). Just as people who suffer separation and loss of love often end up in depression, Elijah, cut off completely from other human beings, doesn't want to go on living. There is no way he can help himself. So God sends an angel, who brings him food. Elijah experiences what we all crave, deep down: to be wanted, even when we're too drained to be useful. It's what people on the fringe, who were considered worthless, experienced when Jesus ate with them: they were of no use to him either, and yet he wanted to be with them for their own sakes.

Notice how God's 'therapy' includes Elijah's physical needs. Body and soul are a unit, and delivery from depression is never merely a mental process. At first, an angel's touch brings Elijah back to life, so to speak. And Elijah accepts the need for food and sleep. What really brings him back to the land of the living, though, is neither the tender angelic waiter, nor the 40-day Mount Horeb exercise regime, but his encounter with God, who asks him a question reminiscent of the one we came across in Solomon's dream: 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' The prophet has lost his bearings. God meets him in his confusion. When Elijah thinks all is lost, God renews his calling and restores his vision for the future: he will be anointing rulers and discipling his successor. Life will go on. Elijah is still wanted, still of value, still loved in his hour of weakness and need.

Elijah's encounter with God is not linked to earthquake, fire and storm, but happens in silence, when God, as other Bible translations put it, speaks to him in a still, small voice. No doubt there is a theological message here: Baal, the Canaanite god, was associated with the natural phenomena listed in the account, but the true God wasn't in them: God transcends nature. There's something else: Elijah needs the noise and the action and the drama to stop, in order to hear God's voice again, in the stillness that follows the storm.

Pray

Thank you, Lord, for your steadfast love for me, and that in times of exhaustion, self-doubt or isolation I am not alone. Help me to hear your voice and feel your touch. Amen.

Reflection and action

Take time this evening to enter the silence at the end of the day, and listen to God. If you are going through a period of mental ill health, ask yourself if there might be a link between how you feel about yourself in the present and your earliest childhood experiences. Do you notice behavioural patterns now that might be linked to those early experiences? Could it be time to explore these links in a counselling setting?

Reflection on the painting



Young woman sleeping by Rembrandt van Rijn, 1654.

Brush with brown wash.

The British Museum, London

www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1895-0915-1279

One of the most beautiful discoveries you will find in the British Museum's print room is this drawing of a young woman sleeping with her head resting on her right arm. It is Rembrandt's second great love and common-law wife, Hendrickje Stoffels, who he had a relationship with after his beloved wife Saskia died tragically young. This extraordinary artist uses a single brush as if it were calligraphy and to create the shadows he drags the ink sideways. Every single line, curve and curl is spot on – nothing is out of place. It is drawing as perfection, and love at its most intimate since here is a picture of someone totally at ease, while fast asleep.

At first sight, this picture might appear quite simple. How wrong we would be, since the longer we gaze at it, the more we see its brilliance. We can feel the weight of exhaustion in the woman's body, the shoulders and arms vying to hold her face from falling inwards. Her left leg is bent outward to maintain gravity while sinking deeper into oblivion. Rather than focus on her anatomy, Rembrandt creates an affectionate vision of this woman in rapid flourishes. This vision enhances the power of the unconscious when we are not awake. The soporific atmosphere created by the angle and pose make us want to join her in a nap.

Rembrandt is at the height of his powers with this liquid gold, a far cry from his biblical canon and magnificent self-portraits. This is life at home and in miniature, not blatant patronage of the wealthy and the proud. Here is empathy and curiosity, emotion rather than expression. Rembrandt has suffered enough and yet more tragedy is to come; still he finds meaning in the domestic, the ordinary behaviour of those around him. He longs to live and to love. The older we are, the more we realise that life is beyond our control. Today is all we can know and Rembrandt paints this wisdom best.

Do not fear for I have redeemed you ... I love you

But now thus says the Lord,
 he who created you, O Jacob,
 he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
 I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
 and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
 and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the Lord your God,
 the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.
I give Egypt as your ransom,
 Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.
Because you are precious in my sight,
 and honoured, and I love you,
I give people in return for you,
 nations in exchange for your life.
Do not fear, for I am with you;
 I will bring your offspring from the east,
 and from the west I will gather you;
I will say to the north, "Give them up,"
 and to the south, "Do not withhold;
bring my sons from far away
 and my daughters from the end of the earth—
everyone who is called by my name,
 whom I created for my glory,
 whom I formed and made."
Bring forth the people who are blind, yet have eyes,
 who are deaf, yet have ears!
Let all the nations gather together,
 and let the peoples assemble.

Bible texts for further reflection

Separation

Self-hate and self-harm

Starting afresh

Exodus 2:1–10

Mark 5:1–20

Luke 15:11–32

Further reading

The Return of the Prodigal Son: A story of Homecoming by Henri Nouwen, Darton, Longman & Todd publishers, 1994.

The Ignatian Adventure: Experiencing the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola in Daily Life by Kevin O'Brien, Loyola University Press, 2011.

Thinking, Fast and Slow by Daniel Kahneman, Penguin Books, 2012.