The Elijah Syndrome
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THE ELIJAH SYNDROME

Bravery and Burn-out
The Elijah Syndrome

Twenty eight times, Elijah’s name appears in the New Testament! He was an important character, when it came to the nation of Israel.

The closing words of the prophet Malachi echoed across four hundred silent years of Israel’s history.

“But before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes, I will send you the prophet Elijah. He will bring fathers and children together again; otherwise I would have to come and destroy your country.” [Malachi 4:5 Good News Bible]

And so they waited for Elijah.

John the Baptist appeared in the style and dress of the ninth century BC rustic prophet and Jesus said of him: “And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come.” [Matthew 11:14]

Still the people didn’t recognise him. The angelic announcement to his parents had predicted his ministry would be like Elijah’s: “And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous - to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” [Luke 1:17]

When Jesus asked them who they thought He was, they replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” [Matthew 16:14-15]
On the Mount of Transfiguration Elijah and Moses appeared with Jesus. Matthew records: “Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters - one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” [Matthew 17:3-4]

Jesus had used Elijah as an object lesson to the nation:

“Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon.” [Luke 4:26]

On occasions, Jesus’ disciples were confronted by the scribes with the theological problem of Malachi 4:5 concerning Elijah appearing before the Messiah. Matthew 17:10-12 records. “The disciples asked him, “Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?” Jesus replied, “To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.” [Matthew 17:10-12]

And suffer at their hands He did! Elijah’s name was heard on the lips of Jesus’ enemies as He was dying on the cross. They heard Him cry, “Eloi, eloi lama sabachthani!” and responded:

“When some of those standing there heard this, they said, “He’s calling Elijah.” One man ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. “Now leave him alone. Let’s see if Elijah comes to take him down,” he said. [Mark 15:36] The rest said, “Now leave him alone. Let’s see if Elijah comes to save him.” [Matthew 27:47-49]

They got it wrong! But Elijah was an important character to Israel and he is an important character when it comes to us! The Apostle Paul used Elijah as an illustration concerning God’s mercy to Israel in his letter to the Romans. [Romans 11:2-5]

But the most unusual place to find Elijah’s name was in a passage written by James in 5:13-20

“Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.
Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. **Elijah was a man just like us.** He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops. My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins. [James 5:13-20 NIV]

And my particular focus is on v17. **“Elijah was a man just like us.”**

Actually, that is a fair translation of what you may have in your Bible.

Some versions read, “A man of like passions,” or “a man subject to like passions as we are.”

The Greek words are “homoiopathes hemin” – [used also in Acts 14:15]. “hemin” – “with us”; “homoiopathes” – “of like feelings or affections.”

Or – “**one who finds himself in the same or similar relations, whose attitude or feeling is the same or similar**”

The point is that Elijah was not a super-human being when he prayed so effectively, but was just like us, a human being. [Word Meanings in the New Testament, Ralph Earle, p 437]

Historically, it was the time of a divided Israel when two nations formed after civil war – Israel in the north comprising ten tribes and Judah in the south embracing Judah and Benjamin.

Ahab became king of Israel in the thirty-eighth year of Asa, who was the king of the southern nation, Judah. His corrupt reign will last for twenty-two years in the northern nation.

Ahab had married Jezebel, the daughter of the King of Tyre. [1 Kings 16–22] and Jezebel was a dominant influence on Ahab. She was committed to introduce idolatry into Israel’s capital city of Samaria.

She promoted her Phoenician cult of Baal as opposed to the worship of Yahweh. This made the name of Baal anathema to the Israelites as she spread the idol worship of Baal throughout the nation.

It was time for God to intervene.
In 1 Kings 17:1-9, we read a remarkable story.

“Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, “As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word.”

This is the first mention we have in the Bible concerning Elijah. Elijah was a Tishbite. Tishbe was east of the Jordan River.

Israel was rejecting God for idols and this man was rejecting idols for God!

Elijah means, “My God is Jehovah!”

His sudden appearance before King Ahab was like a lightning bolt leaving its mark on the tree it hit – Ahab was struck by the lightning bolt of the prophetic announcement that came from the lips of this rustic prophet who stood before him, clothed in the courage that could only come from an external power.

The decree echoed in the courts of the king – then God spoke to Elijah.
“Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah: “Leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan. You will drink from the brook, and I have ordered the ravens to feed you there.” So he did what the Lord had told him. He went to the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan, and stayed there. The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook. Sometime later the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land.

Now began a three year sojourn in which he learned the truth concerning God’s provisions in difficult situations. This is an odd journey for the prophet to take. To a brook that would eventually dry up because of his own prophecies!

Obediently, he went there and stayed by the brook and ‘enjoyed’ the food that the ravens brought. Think about that. What kind of food do ravens bring? Usually road-kill!

**Message:** Sometimes God provides for us out of His rich storehouse and at other times just our ‘daily bread.’
If your present work situation is ‘daily bread’ – enjoy it while you can. I’m sure Elijah would have thought of roasting ravens on an open fire during this time. But he stayed on a road-kill and water diet.

Oh no! Now the brook is drying up! Can he reverse his prophecy to look after himself?

Sometimes in the providence of God we find that things don’t always go as we plan – even when we ourselves have declared the “faith statements” concerning our future.

Elijah must learn the lesson that God is always in control. His sovereign purposes will always come to pass.

While we may feel the results ourselves, we must ever remember that “God causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” [Matthew 5:45] Presumably the application will also extend to “lack of rain” to that ultimately we will know that God is in ultimate control of all things!
His children of God should be different than the rest of the world. We all experience like circumstances, but as Christians we are to rise above our circumstances. Elijah will learn this lesson.

Then the word of the Lord came to him: “Go at once to Zarephath of Sidon and stay there. I have commanded a widow in that place to supply you with food.”

Embarrassment city! Now he has to live on handouts from a widow. Worse than that, he asks for her last bit of food for himself first. Who can understand that?

“Just make me a snack before you and your son die by depriving yourself of your last morsel – use those sticks you’ve just collected for a fire!”

Well, the story got better as the woman was also on a journey of faith and learned that God could supernaturally meet her needs!

He did and He will! But our focus is on Elijah and his journey.
The story continues in 1 Kings 18:1: “After a long time, in the third year, the word of the Lord came to Elijah: “Go and present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the land.” So Elijah went to present himself to Ahab. Now the famine was severe in Samaria.”

Back to the palace he went at the command of the Lord. One can only imagine the preparations of his heart as he considered the next stage of his mission.

Now, ungodly Ahab had a counsellor called Obadiah. [Not the minor prophet]

The story continues in v16: “So Obadiah went to meet Ahab and told him, and Ahab went to meet Elijah. When he saw Elijah, he said to him, “Is that you, you troubler of Israel?” “I have not made trouble for Israel,” Elijah replied. “But you and your father’s family have. You have abandoned the Lord’s commands and have followed the Baals.”

What a man! It seems that there is hardly a fear in his body.
His whole being reflects confidence, faith, trust, assurance, self-confidence and determination! Something has to be said for road-kill and bread rolls! He is super cool and confident! And sometimes he makes me feel like I want to give in before the starter’s gun goes ‘bang!’

“Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel’s table.” So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. Elijah went before the people and said, “How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.” But the people said nothing.”

In a little while it is all over! The last hoarse sounds of the 850 prophets are heard escaping their croaky throats.

No more transfusions are left in the tents of the paramedics – they have cut themselves once too often in their frenzy! They sit exhausted on the ground – their god has not answered by fire!
Elijah steps forward – repairs the old Jewish altar. He follows the pattern of ancient Israel when they built the two twelve stone pillars when they had crossed the Jordan River. He prepares his sacrifice and orders them to drench the altar and the sacrifice with water. Now that would have taken some time if there had been a drought in the land and they trekked up and down the mountain with their skin buckets!

He steps back and with a confident voice calls out to his God to answer by fire!

A crack and boom of thunder and a flash of intense fire from eternity and the sacrifice, water, altar and even the dust around the area is consumed! The God of Israel has answered by fire! He is the true God!

There is more to come! In v40: Then Elijah commanded them, “Seize the prophets of Baal. Don’t let anyone get away!” They seized them, and Elijah had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and slaughtered there.

Five hundred metres down the slopes of Mount Carmel they marched the 850 prophets to their death! Down to the valley where the river Kishon had not flowed for three years! There, they died!
The story moves so quickly from v41: “And Elijah said to Ahab, “Go, eat and drink, for there is the sound of a heavy rain.” So Ahab went off to eat and drink, but Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees. “Go and look toward the sea,” he told his servant. And he went up and looked. “There is nothing there,” he said. Seven times Elijah said, “Go back.” The seventh time the servant reported, “A cloud as small as a man’s hand is rising from the sea.” So Elijah said, “Go and tell Ahab, ‘Hitch up your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.’” meantime, the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain came on and Ahab rode off to Jezreel.”

This story reads like a Hollywood epic! Fire! Wind! Rain! The elements bow to the will of the prophet! It is not yet over!

“The power of the Lord came upon Elijah and, tucking his cloak into his belt, he ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel.” v46

A 40 kilometre run as the crow flies! But this was over hills and mountains – across the Kishon Valley and the Great Plain of Esdraelon to Jezreel.

He was either very fit or heavily anointed, because he kept ahead of Ahab’s chariot. Imagine how Ahab felt to see this prophet flying ahead of him. Imagine the horses when Ahab finally arrived in Jezreel!

Now, what if the story had finished here? We would all be miserable.

After all, “Elijah was a man just like us!”

I don’t know about you, but I think I would feel a bit despondent! Sometimes I have felt like I’m the guy that gets sand kicked in his face when I’m on the beach.

Honestly now, do you wake up every morning, look into the mirror and say, “Hi, you fine specimen of faith, good looks and positiveness!”

Or, do you, when you eventually find the mirror, see something like Cinderella’s pumpkin?

Are there times in your life when you really feel like kicking the cat? Of course – we are human – just like Elijah!

We cannot live on super octane seven days a week. We need time to recuperate! I think Elijah was on a high and had almost physically, mentally and spiritually exhausted himself. He let his batteries run down!
How do I know?

He had, in a short time:

• confronted an evil king and issued a challenge!
• climbed a 500 metre mountain,
• spent the day insulting pagan priests,
• repaired an altar
• prepared a sacrifice,
• dug a trench,
• called down fire,
• supervised the execution of 850 false prophets,
• spent time in intercessory prayer for rain,
• ran a sixty kilometre marathon,
• kept in front of a team of sweaty horses pulling a chariot
• Listened to a cursing evil king cracking a whip!
Elijah may have thought that Ahab had repented! But it was not to be! The story continues in chapter 19:1. “Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. 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. Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there.

Now he started on a 140 kilometre journey south!

Then, “he himself went a day’s journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, 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.”

A further 20 kilometres into the desert! Under a small tree! I can identify with this part of Elijah’s life! Most of the grass under our juniper trees is well worn! The mighty prophet, who has recently called down fire, is calling out to die! Oh, the extremities of human nature!

"I want to die!” He should have stayed where Jezebel could get him!
"I want to sleep!"

"Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep. All at once an angel touched him and said, “Get up and eat.” He looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again. V5-6

"I want to sleep again!"

Even supernatural intervention couldn’t rouse him! There are times even the miraculous does not seem to arouse us from our scepticism – we are just too tired!

“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.” So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he travelled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. V7-8

Look at his journey – a further 200 kilometres south!

“There he went into a cave and spent the night. And the word of the Lord came to him: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” V9

"I want to justify myself!"

“He replied, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken 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.” V10

We leave the security of our trees and wind up in a cave!

The Lord said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” 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. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. V11-12
Elijah was on Mount Sinai! He knew that God had brought him back to review the history of the nation! It was at this mountain, years before, that Israel encountered God in thunder and lightning [Exodus 19:16] and smoke and fire. [Exodus 19:18]

Israel had experienced the mighty winds of God when He opened the Red Sea and delivered them from the Egyptians! [Exodus 14:21] Elijah knew his history!

But there were still a few things he didn’t know! Then it happened!

The wind! – Surely God, you’re there! – But God wasn’t there!

The earthquake! – Surely God, you’re there! – But God wasn’t there!

The fire! – Surely God, you’re there! I only read about winds and earthquakes, but I saw you in the wind and fire on Carmel!” – But God wasn’t there!

Then a still small voice! Surely, God you’re not there! But God was there!
God knew that Elijah didn’t need the dynamic, active and energetic manifestation of God’s presence – God would be with him in the gentle things!

“When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” He replied, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken 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.” V13-14

Elijah was still overwhelmed by his own needs. He was focussing on himself rather than the God who was attempting to reveal Himself to him!

That is always a danger when we are stressed out and lose perspective – we focus on the things we see, not on the things that require the gaze of faith – upon the things we cannot see, yet believe are there for us.

It was time for new directions – “The Lord said to him, “Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram.” V15

600 kilometres back north! To Damascus! I wonder what he thought about on that journey.

I know what I would have thought about! Particularly if it was this year and I had to rethink some of the things that may have brought me to the edge of burnout and a nervous breakdown!

In a sentence, God was saying, “Get your priorities right!”

Watch your strength! Watch your vocation! Watch your emotions! There are times to repair our altars, time to pray for rain and time to run a race!

But, if we find ourselves running for our lives; sleeping under juniper trees and living in caves – It may be time to stand before God on the mountain!

Elijah’s deliverance came when he stood on the mountain! Let’s go and visit another smaller mountain – Calvary!

It is a good place to stand in our minds and allow God to place a right perspective in our hearts concerning His grace and our need of it!
Remember, we don’t always know **ALL** the facts!

When Elijah was thinking the world was his responsibility, God reminded him in verse 18 **“Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel - all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him.”**

God still had everything under control. We don’t have **ALL** the facts in our faith walk!

There were actually 7000 and one [Elijah] who had not bowed the knee to the pagan gods!

When you feel that it *all* depends upon you, remember, it doesn’t – primarily it depends upon God! Always work with Him!

And watch the Elijah Syndrome!
The Travels of Elijah
