

1 Kings 19:1-15 Times of Refreshing

Let me begin by saying what a privilege it is to be called as a minister of the Gospel! The hand of God is evident in so many ways. I suspect people sometimes look at ministers and think they are immune from spiritual down times. That's not so. We're subject to the same ups and downs as anyone else, and sometimes, more so.

When I was in ministry training, I did an elective subject called 'The Minister's Personal Growth'. For that subject's intensive, we had a guest lecturer from the USA called Arch Hart. He is a psychologist and author of many books, a Christian, and through his career, has dealt mainly with clergy.

He began the course by quoting some research which said that 75% of ministers in the USA don't "finish well" - meaning only 25% of clergy are still clergy in a good state of mind by the time they reach retirement. Many drop off the edge along the way through disillusionment, disappointment, being bullied, frustration and overwork. (Don't worry - I'm part the 25% that is doing fine.) Though I suspect in the Anglican church in Australia, where there is more accountability and care, the figure is nowhere near as high.

However, I've had my moments - as have many of my colleagues. Many of you will know Jay and I lost our daughter when she was 21 - fairly early on in my ministry. At the time, I seemed to cope ok. But over the next few years there was a series of events which on their own, were all part of life, but which then compounded and began to affect the way I was feeling about life and ministry. I plunged, and found myself in a spiritually dark place. I seemed to be there a long time.

The turning point for me came at a clergy retreat. It was an Elijah -type experience. But before I share a bit more of my own story, let's look at what happened to Elijah. It's so full of insight for our own walk with God!

Elijah was really used by God. He'd just come from an incredible 'high' in his ministry. He'd challenged the prophets of the false god Baal to a duel where Elijah had seen God not only destroy the credibility of this false god, but had totally obliterated his prophets. Then he'd prayed for rain after years of drought, and against all odds, it came. Then God supernaturally strengthened Elijah, and he jogged ahead of the King's chariot and the storm, all the way back to Jezreel - which the scholars reckon was about 30 kms.

Now, you'd think after all that had happened, Elijah's faith would be unwavering. But it wasn't. When King Ahab told his Queen, Jezebel, what

happened, Jezebel swore she'd kill Elijah. Elijah panicked, and ran for his life. He took off by himself into the desert and he moped. Listen to the place he was in: **"I've had enough, Lord," he said. "Take my life; I'm no better than my ancestors."** He'd decided that his work had been fruitless. He was fighting a losing battle. It was all too hard, and life was not worth living any more.

Poor Elijah. Jezebel was one scary woman! We can fully understand why he was in the place he was in – why he would feel the way he did. **But God didn't want him to stay there!**

Have we ever found ourselves in a similar place? Where life just seems to get harder and harder? Where we feel older and tired? Where we can't do the things we used to do. Or perhaps circumstances seem to conspire against us, and our problems look insurmountable. Or maybe we are beginning to fold under the weight of the problems of those we love, because there seems nothing we can do to help. It happens to all of us. And we can begin to get depressed – as Elijah.

But God doesn't want **us** to stay there either!

Look at how God so gently and lovingly ministered to Elijah!

- ❖ For starters, he let him sleep. v5 says, **"Elijah lay down under the tree and fell asleep."** Sleep is so very important in any healing process.
- ❖ Then God sent an angel to bring him food. **"..an angel touched him and said, 'get up and eat'.** He looked around and there was a cake of bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and lay down again. Elijah was so worn out, God gave him breakfast in bed, served by an angel! Imagine waking to the fragrant smell of freshly baked bread, and the gentle presence of an angel. How loving and compassionate and nurturing God was.
- ❖ He received understanding: v.7 **"The angel touched him a second time and said, 'get up and eat, for this journey is too much for you.'** God knew exactly where Elijah was physically and spiritually, and ministered to his need.

In our own down times, we need to realise that God is on our side. He's not punishing us (usually...) and he doesn't condemn us for feeling the way we do. Rather he understands us. He ministers to us through our family & friends, our church, and the medical profession.

We also need to realise that that God does not want us to stay in that dark place. He wants us whole. He wants us strong, and thriving and trusting in him.

When Elijah was feeling stronger, he got up and went on his way. He traveled for 40 days and nights, until he got to Horeb - the mountain of God. Elijah had left the desert still not fully healed. God knew that, and so ministered to him again.

Horeb is significant, by the way. Scholars think that Mt Horeb and Mt Sinai are one and the same. That's where Moses met God. It's where Elijah was about to meet God. We all have our Mt Sinais.

v9 says, "The word of the Lord came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

God now became Elijah's counselor. He was asking him to take stock; to look within; to discern his true motives. Had Elijah come to Sinai because God had sent him or because he was running away? He was running away of course...

Elijah was still focused on his problems. Unlike Moses, who had prayed for the wayward Israelites, Elijah condemned them, and when God asked him what he was doing there, he gave God a rundown on how hard it had all been.

"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'm the only one left, and now they're trying to kill me too!"

God's response? He showed Elijah a dramatic display of the power of the wind, the earth and fire – the three elements that were traditionally seen as God's means of judgment. And yet, God was not evident in any of them.

Through the symbolism of these events, God seemed to be saying that though Elijah was perhaps hinting that God should judge Israel – using earth, wind or fire – that it was not God's will to do it at that time. Rather, Elijah was to continue with his mission to the people, and hand it over to Elisha for another generation.

It was only in the complete stillness that Elijah heard the gentle whisper of God's voice. Interestingly, once God had Elijah's attention, he asked him exactly the same question he'd asked him before. "Elijah, what are you

doing here?” -perhaps giving him the opportunity to reassess his previous answer.

Sometimes, we can be a bit thick, can't we? But thankfully, God perseveres with us. He must have persevered with Elijah, because in the next verses, we read that he moved forward, following the Lord's instructions.

In our dark times, we also need a Mt Sinai – a place where we can go to be alone with God, and where we can pour out our hearts to him and give him the time and space to be our counselor. We're told in John, that this is a major role that the Holy Spirit plays in the believer's life. If we are prepared to go to our Mt Sinai, we can be confident that God is deeply compassionate; that he knows us through and through; and that he will touch us, guiding us back to wholeness and fruitfulness, if we'll but listen to him.

Earlier, when I was not in such a good place, God did for me what he did for Elijah. The desert thing came first - that partial healing. At a clergy conference which was in May of that year, a colleague twigged to the fact that I wasn't my usual bouncy self, and dropped a word in the bishop's ear. George encouraged me to take some time off, so I took a week's leave. I was hoping that it would be a quick fix I'd come back feeling more myself. Disappointingly – I didn't. It was a week of rest and relaxation though. I came back feeling physically refreshed, but not spiritually or emotionally.

Then about 3 months later, God led me through a Sinai encounter. That was at the annual clergy retreat in August. The clergy retreat is silent. In between set times of gentle, reflective worship, there are hours to spend alone with God. It was during those still, silent hours, that God was able to minister more deeply. He helped me look within. He showed me the difference between what was genuine grief, and what was self indulgence. He gently highlighted areas where I needed to repent, and he reaffirmed my call. It was beautiful. As I responded to God's 'counseling', the healing came, and I left the retreat centre feeling completely renewed.

Perhaps there are some of us who identify with Elijah this morning. If so, let's have the courage to come honestly to our heavenly father with the way we're feeling. Let's give him the time and the space in our lives, to speak to us through the silence and minister to our deepest needs. As we respond to him, we'll find we'll come away refreshed and renewed and healed.

If we're in a good place, then let us praise God and stay grounded in him, so that like Elijah, we might fare well through those inevitable down times that will come our way.