

Victory of the Lamb // May 29, 2022 // Pastor Ben Sadler
Sermon: "God & Depression" // Series: Emotions: Dealing with Feelings

It is about a decade since a time that I went through a season of depression. Emily tells me that she knew something was wrong when I stopped reading. Usually, for better or worse, I usually have stacks of books piled up around the house. But when I was depressed I stopped reading. I stopped taking care of myself. I started to gain a bunch of weight. I lacked motivation. I lacked hope.

I didn't really know what was going on and why I felt so depressed. I wanted answers. I wanted to get better. There was a book that I kept on hearing about called *A Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl. Frankl was a Jewish psychologist who survived the holocaust. Supposedly this book was one of the most influential books in the US. So, reluctantly I started reading the book, and immediately I was hooked.

In the book, Frankl describes what he learned about human psychology in the concentration camps. You see, Sigmund Freud, the so-called father of psychology, said that humans were pleasure-driven creatures like all other animals. But that is not what Frankl observed. He saw that even when Jews were stripped of all their pleasure, many still had a will to live.

This led Frankl to come up with a new theory of human psychology, which he called Logotherapy. Logotherapy is based on the idea that humans are purpose-driven creatures. He summarized his philosophy in this simple phrase: **He who has a "why" can endure any "how"**. In other words, if you have a why or a purpose in life, you will not give up on life. You will stay alive and motivated.

And that's exactly what the Nazis were trying to erode away the Jews. They wanted them to lose a sense of meaning and purpose. They knew if the Jews lost their sense of purpose, they would die even before they reached the gas chambers. So the Nazis took away their names and gave them a number. They took away their sense of family and grouped them with strangers. They took away their work and gave them pointless toil. Everything was designed to take away their sense of meaning, purpose, and hope.

Frankl observed that the Jews who believed the lie that their life had no meaning or purpose would die. And the only hope for survival was to regain a sense of meaning and purpose even in their loss and suffering.

Not only did Frankl encourage his fellow prisoners to find purpose in the camps, but after he survived the Holocaust, he took over a psychiatric ward that had a high suicide rate. After Frankl took over this hospital, the number of suicides went down to zero.

This book helped me come out of my depression. I came to realize that I was depressed because I didn't see any meaning and purpose in my life. And because I had lost a sense of meaning and purpose, I had lost all hope. If I was ever going to feel good again, I had to believe that my life still had meaning.

Today we are concluding our sermon series **Emotions: Dealing with Feelings**. And today want to talk about the feeling depressed and hopeless. I imagine that many of you have felt depressed and hopeless. And so here is the question I want to answer today: **How can we regain hope when we feel depressed?**

To answer that question, I want to go back to the story of Elijah. Elijah was a prophet of God who served the northern tribes of Israel in about 850 BC. About fifty years before Elijah, the nation of Israel was divided into two groups: Southern Judah and Northern Israel. In Southern Judah, there were a few kings who held true to God's Word and continued to support worship in Solomon's temple. But in the north there were no good kings. Immediately after the split between southern and northern Israel, the northern kings started to introduce pagan worship of Baal. One of those kings was king Ahab and his very wicked wife, Jezebel. They removed all the prophets and priests from the north and installed over 450 pagan priests to worship Baal.

Well, God called a very great a powerful prophet named Elijah to confront King Ahab and Queen Jezebel and call the northern tribes of Israel to repentance. This all culminated in a show down between the prophets of Baal and Elijah, the prophet of Yahweh, the Lord. In this battle of the prophets, they made two altars, one to Baal and one to Yahweh, the God of Israel. Elijah told the prophets of Baal, you pray to your god and I will pray to the Lord God and whoever lights the altar is the true God. The 450 prophets of Baal agreed to this competition. And they began to call on Baal to light their altar and burn their sacrifice. They went so far

as to cut themselves to make Baal have pity on them. Elijah poked fun at them and said, “Pray louder maybe Baal is sleeping or on a trip.”

But then Elijah soaked his altar with water to make it even more challenging to light on fire. He prayed to the Lord and fire came from heaven that completely consumed the sacrifice and the altar and everything else. Elijah’s God proved to be the true God. This was the height of Elijah’s success. His ministry and all that he believed seemed to be validated for all to see. He probably expected all the people in Northern Israel to reject Baal and return to the Lord God. And most importantly he probably expected King Ahab and Queen Jezebel to stop persecuting the prophets and the followers of the Lord.

But that’s not what happened. We read, **Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. ² 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.” (1 Kings 19:1-2)**

Things did not get better for Elijah and the people of God, but they got worse. Instead of turning from her wicked ways, Jezebel doubled down on her hatred of Elijah and put a bounty out for his head.

Elijah was devastated. So he fled Northern Israel to Beersheba, which is on the southernmost tip of the southern Judah. And then he took a day’s walk into the wilderness, and he prayed that he might die,

“I have had enough, Lord. Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.”

Elijah no longer found any meaning in what he was doing. It didn’t seem to make any difference. Even after he had one the battle against the prophets of Baal, the people and especially their leaders hardened their hearts and wanted to kill Elijah. He saw no point, no purpose, no meaning, and so he asked God to end his life.

I imagine that many of you have been in this position. You tried to the right thing at home, but your family is not turning out the way that you wanted. Maybe your marriage is struggling. Or you kids have rejected you and their faith. Maybe things aren’t working at your job. You tried to do the right thing but you fail at work. Maybe you are sick. Thought you were doing the right thing, but now you have a debilitating disease. What you do doesn’t seem to work. It doesn’t seem to

matter. You have lost a sense of meaning and purpose. And so you have no hope. Viktor Frankl called this an existential void, a crisis of meaning.

Now what do you think God is going to do next to help Elijah? Is he going to give him some Bible verses? Does he tell him to pray harder?

Let's see: **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. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. ⁹ There he went into a cave and spent the night.

Before God starting helping Elijah work through his emotions of despair and hopelessness, he took care of his body. He gave him food, water, and told him to rest. He took care of his body before he addressed his soul.

That is the first answer to our opening question: **How can we regain hope when we feel depressed?**

First, attend to your body. Eat, drink, sleep, and move. Some of you are so depressed, you are in such a fog that you won't hear anything a Christian friend, pastor, or counselor might tell you. First, get a good night's sleep, eat some nutrient dense food, move your body with some exercise, drink as much water as you can. Then once you are physically stable, then we can address your heart.

Now once Elijah had a good meal, drank some water, and rested he went on a forty-day journey way down into the wilderness to Mount Horeb. Mount Horeb is another name for Mount Sinai. This is the same mountain where God met with Moses. When Elijah reached that mountain, the Lord had a question for him. He said, **"What are you doing here, Elijah?"**

So how do you think the Lord spoke to Elijah? What was his tone? Did the Lord ask this question like a frustrated boss or a disappointed Father? I don't think so. I think he was speaking like a concerned friend. What's going on Elijah?

Elijah responds, **“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.”**

Recently, I was at a pastor’s retreat and the leader said, “When we are depressed and hurting, we focus on ourselves and our problems.” That’s what Elijah is doing here. He is depressed and so he is only thinking about himself and his problems. He has forgotten that the prophet Obadiah has hidden a hundred prophets in two caves. He is not the only one left. But that’s what happens when we are hurting our vision gets distorted.

When I was depressed, I looked at my ministry and all I could see was my failures. All the people who didn’t return. All the bad decisions that I made. All the problems I caused. I couldn’t see all that God was doing.

If you are depressed that is probably where you are too. Our pain seems to magnify our problems and our failures and our shame. In fact, if you are depressed and I was to ask you to tell me what’s going wrong you could probably give me a list of all the people who have hurt you and all the things that you have screwed up. And those might be true. But you can’t see all the blessings and the good that is going on either.

When we are depressed, we can only feel our **pain** and see our **problems**.

So what does God do in response to Elijah pain and self-loathing?

¹¹ The Lord said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.”

This again is very similar to the story of Moses. Just like God’s presence passed by Moses with power, now God wants to reveal his glory and his presence to Elijah.

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord,... Elijah experienced this hurricane-like wind. This is what Elijah wanted. He wanted the powerful God to act blow his enemies away. But we read...**but the Lord was not in the wind.**

Then the text says... **After the wind there was an earthquake...** I remember experiencing an earthquake when I was living in the Dominican Republic. That is

an unsettling power. Elijah must have thought, that's what I want God to do, shake the ground and show the world his power...**but the Lord was not in the earthquake.**

So then we read, ¹² **After the earthquake came a fire...** Now fire is certainly a sign of God's judgment. Fire came down and burned up the sacrifice on the altar when Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal. That's what he wants again... **but the Lord was not in the fire.**

Finally, the text says, **And after the fire came a gentle whisper.** ¹³ **When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.** God finally came to Elijah in a gentle whisper. But the Hebrew doesn't exactly say whisper. It means something like a "voice of silence" like a thin, silent breath.

In other words, I believe God was trying to tell Elijah, that God was at work even in the silence. Yes, sometimes God does great and visible acts of power. But even if he doesn't. Even if we can't see or understand how he is working: **God is working in the silence.**

We know that is true because that is what happened on the cross. When Jesus, our Savior, cried out in the Garden of Gethsemane that there be another way, God answered in silence. Then when Jesus was on the cross, crying out in pain, Why! Why! God did not respond. God seemed to be silent. And yet, in the silence God was absorbing all our pain and wickedness into himself and paying for all our sin. God was at work in the silence, we just needed to wait a few days. Because in a few days after his death, Jesus rose from the grave and showed that he was victorious over sin and death.

But Elijah didn't seem to get the point of the silent whisper. His pain was so deep and he was so focused on his problems that when God asked him again, **What are you doing here, Elijah?** Elijah just repeated his problems with the same feelings of despair: **"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."**

He didn't understand God's vision and what he was trying to teach him through the silent whisper. So God had to be blunt.

¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. ¹⁷ Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. ¹⁸ Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him.”

In other words, God tells Elijah, *I have work for you today. I want to anoint and appoint new leaders who are going to carry on my work. Appoint new kings and appoint a new prophet, Elisha to carry out the work you started. And by the way, you are not the only one left. There are not just 100 prophets that are hidden in a cave, but 7000 believers, even in the pagan region of northern Israel.*

The story is told that there was a period in life of Martin Luther, the great reformer, when he got so depressed that he didn't want to leave his house. His wife, Catherine, got dressed in funeral clothes and walked into Luther's room. He said, “Why are you dressed like that. Who died?” She responded, “God is dead!” Luther said, “Oh that is nonsense.” And she said, “Well, then why have you been acting like he has?”

My dear wife has had to be so blunt with me as well. When I was depressed, she had to confront me and say, “Wake up! God is not dead! God is still at work through his church! He is still at work!”

Can I be so bold with you today? Some of you are ready to hear this. You are depressed, but you are ready to receive some straight talk. All you can feel is your pain. All you can see is your problems. Listen up: **God is still at work in the silence.** Your life still has meaning and purpose. God still has good work for you to do. Your family needs you to be there for them. Your job needs you to work for the people you serve. Your community needs you to be present for them. There is still lots of work that God is calling you to do.

So back to our opening question: **How can we regain hope when we feel depressed?**

After attending to your physical well-being...next...

Believe that God is at work in the silence.

He is going to do some of his work through you.

This might mean starting small. Maybe your victory tomorrow is just getting out of bed on time. Maybe your little victory is greeting one of your coworkers with a smile. Maybe your little victory is putting away your phone and making real eye contact with your son, daughter, spouse, or friend.

The reason Viktor Frankl's work has been so helpful to me is that he clarified why we sometimes fall into despair and want to give up on life. We are not pleasure-driven creatures. We can have all the pleasure in the world and still want our life to be over. We are purpose-driven creatures. We want to know that our lives have meaning and purpose. We need to know that there is purpose in our pain and meaning to our suffering.

In other words, we need hope. Our hope is in the Lord. He is here even when he seems to be silent. Whether his silence is on Mount Sinai or Mount Calvary or if his silence is in your home or hospital bed. Because God is still at work, your work still has meaning. There are still good things for you to do. Believe that God is at work in the silence and that he wants to do some of his best work through you. Amen.