

Spiritual Comedown: The Other Side to “Take My Life”

*“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 desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die.”
(1 Kings 19:3-4)*

I wonder with what emotion Elijah approached God that day at Horeb, when, tattered, broken, he fled from Jezebel, his greatest victory swiftly followed by the threat of death. No doubt he felt fear; despair, too; almost certainly discouragement.

But I suspect there would also be another emotion – one harder to identify – swimming around in there. I should not interpret the passage too much in the light of my own experience, but I know that, if I had been in Elijah’s position, beneath everything else that I felt, there would be a large, not unhealthy, dose of spiritual shame. Why do I say this? Because I think of the dizzying heights of Elijah’s Mount Carmel experience; I think of the wonder and majesty of God’s actions there, and of the ways in which God’s appearance then must have silenced so many doubts, some of them possibly in Elijah himself. Then, perhaps in a state of sheer exhaustion, often following on the heels of spiritually ecstatic experiences, Elijah finds that all is not won. Queen Jezebel remains as evil as she has always been. God’s wondrous delivery on Mount Carmel has done nothing to change the minds or hearts of that infamous queen.

Did Elijah think that all would be changed? Did he expect his whole nation to repent? Possibly. Or perhaps he simply had not eaten enough, or slept enough, and his spiritual comedown was, physically, quite easily explained. Either way, it reveals something that is so often neglected in the more spiritually inclined denominations. Yes, there are the dizzying heights of Mount Carmel and all it represents; and yes, if we serve the same God as Elijah, these things are possible to this day (though we would do well to remember that Elijah lived in a day and age that was polytheistic, not atheistic; the question was never, *Is there a God?*, rather, *Which God should we worship?*; we cannot expect God to act now *exactly* as he acted then). Nevertheless, spiritual comedown is still a very real experience. It affects many Christian leaders and laypeople, and happens as often as spiritual highs happen, if not more often.

We do not see exactly what was going on in Elijah’s mind when he fled to Horeb, so I am wary of making assumptions which cannot be supported. But, when I look at his behaviour, I see signs that are all too familiar to me. I think of the times when I have had wonderful experiences of God’s grace, only to be brought back to earth far too swiftly. This is certainly assumed when people talk about the passage. Of course Elijah was discouraged. Of course he was ready to give up, all because of Jezebel’s threats. And, while we can understand his response – I certainly have never had my life threatened, but know that I do not like the idea, and suspect I’d like the reality even less – we have trouble meshing it with our view of a man like Elijah, who showed such forthrightness and certainty at so many other times. Besides, Elijah had had God send ravens to feed him for an

undefined period of time (NIV simply says “some time”); he had seen God miraculously make jars of oil never run out. Yes, Elijah knew the goodness of God. He had also had his life threatened many times before. So why was now any different?

I don’t know for sure. I’m not Elijah. But I look at how he acted on Mount Carmel, and I think of how I would have felt in his position. No doubt Elijah was a much stronger, more godly man than I will ever be. But I know that, if I had God’s power work in me that way, I would expect miracles to always happen through me. I would not take any failure after that. It would shatter my illusions too quickly.

Which is why I suggest that Elijah felt shame: because, after God has used you in such powerful ways, the pride in us would surely be shamed to have *our* miracle prove to not be as all-encompassing as we had hoped. And, if it was about *us* and what *we* could do, not God, then the failure – if it was even a failure at all – would be ours.

Not that there was any failure at all. God remains sovereign in all things. God’s sovereignty had been proven, beyond any doubt. Yet we know from everywhere in the Bible, and from history itself, that people can be confronted directly with the wonder and power of God and still choose not to believe. God – shocking, almost blasphemous as it is – allows that to happen.

So Elijah may have felt spiritual comedown because he invested too much of himself in the miracle – not in the sense that he allowed it to give him hope and purpose, for that should always happen, and there is something wrong with us if it doesn’t. No, because he saw in the miracle not only God’s success but his own. We see a hint of this in the words that he speaks to God when he approaches him at Horeb: “Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors” (1Kings 19:4). Note his words there: *I am no better*. He isn’t doubting God, but himself. He is doubting his own ability as a prophet.

In truth, Jezebel’s threats did nothing to diminish what God had done on Mount Carmel; it simply revealed what Elijah would surely know – that no miracle is ever going to convince everyone. Elijah knew that because of Pharaoh, even because of the Israelites themselves.

Yet, as a prophet, Elijah came from a lineage that included men like Moses and Samuel: men who, like Elijah, had been “very zealous for the LORD God Almighty”, who had performed wonders in his name, and yet who had not succeeded in transforming the people God entrusted to them. So, there’s a sense when Elijah says “I am no better than my ancestors” that he is accepting the same defeat that both Moses and Samuel had had to accept before him.

Yet why does this cause him so much shame? Why does it make him wish to die? If Samuel and Moses had been “no better”, then why does he expect so much of *his* ministry? Is it, perhaps, because he wants to be better himself? If so, then he considers the ministry to be about him, not about the God he serves. He looks at

the failures of Moses and Samuel and sees not God's character, or God's sovereignty remaining in the face of human unfaithfulness; no, he sees human failures, and wants himself to be greater than that.

When I think of my greatest experiences of spiritual comedown, they have been at times when I have invested too much of my own pride, my own sense of self-worth, in the actions of God. We know from history that God does not accept full victory on earth, here, now; we know that he allows humans to continue to fail, to continue to rebel and reject him. We also know that he allows us to do so, despite being his followers. In this there is so much of his grace, and much that should cause us shame. Elijah's shame, of course, was not entirely of the best kind; he felt shame because he had been proven weak. He felt shame because he was not perfect and because he had not been more successful than his ancestors.

Yet I suggested earlier that there was also a "not unhealthy" type of shame mixed in with everything else Elijah thought. What do I mean by that?

Well, it's the sort of shame that, had they been so inclined, Israel might have felt when Moses struck the rock in anger; the shame that comes from knowing that your doubts have been unfounded, that you, of all people, should be believing at that moment, not doubting.

Because, if Jezebel's threats in no way diminished God's grandeur, then they should not have diminished Elijah's faith. But they did; which reveals not only Elijah's weakness – he was not powerful enough to transform Jezebel – but also his pride. And he *should* be ashamed to have his pride revealed in this way.

More than pride, Elijah's response also showed that he carried a clear sense of how God *should* act, rather than a willingness to let God act as he chose. If he had learnt anything from history, it should have been that God acted, and continues to act, as he saw, and sees, fit; he has never acted as humans think he should. Perhaps Elijah hoped that Mount Carmel had changed all that; that now God showed himself in ways that humans would have chosen for him. Yet perhaps the best lesson of Mount Carmel is that it was a once-off; that God did not continue to appear in that way. And just as well too; if he had have done, he would no longer be God, but the very same kind of voodoo deity that Baal was: a god who acted because his prophets bled themselves, not because he chose to.

So, when Elijah prayed to God to "take his life", we see the reverse of the prayer of commitment that has been spoken on so many Christian lips. When we say "Take my life" to God, he takes it very literally; having taken Elijah's life, he was not going to act as Elijah wanted him to. This meant that Elijah would have to accept whatever God did. God would always look after him, regularly amaze him, but he would never become just what Elijah expected him to be.

How much, I wonder, of spiritual comedown results simply from the fact that, after a spiritual high, we expect highs forever? I know that I so often fall into the trap of thinking that now, finally, God is playing by my rules. Which isn't to say that he never does what we want, but we have to be particularly careful before

we decide why he does answer our prayers: not because he is bound by them, but because he is gracious and loving. Nor should we ever forget that, like any good father, he will only answer the prayers that are good for us to have answered; and, like the best of fathers, he will never answer a prayer the granting of which would hurt us, no matter how many times we kick and scream in protest.

So Elijah was no better than his ancestors; yet the most important thing for him to learn was that God would not always act as he wished. Having given his life to God, he needed to let God act entirely as *he*, God, chose. For Elijah, the greatest act of surrender would now be to *live* for God, knowing that he was no better than his ancestors but that he had been chosen by God, not as a personal adviser, but as a servant. And it was that broken shell of Elijah approaching God at Horeb that best allowed God's glory to come and inhabit him for the remainder of his ministry.

(Tawau, Sabah, Feb 2010)