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SNAP OUT OF SELF-PITY!

Today's Text: 1 Kings 19: 1-21; Phil. 4: 4-13

Extracts:

1. **“Then Jezebel sent a messenger unto Elijah, saying, So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I make not thy life of one of them [i.e., the 450 prophets of Baal slain on Elijah's order] by tomorrow about this time. And when he saw that, he arose, and went [i.e., fled] for his life, and came to Beersheba, which belongeth to Judah, and left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree: and he requested for himself that he might die; and said, It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers” [1 Kgs 19: 2-4].**
2. **“For I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. I know both how to be abased [i.e., made low] and I know how to abound [i.e., be prosperous]: everywhere and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me” [Phil. 4: 11-13].**

*USA television network has just aired a movie with the title, **D.C. Sniper: 23 Days of Fear**.¹ It is based on the true story of a shooting spree that terrorized Washington, D.C., and the neighbouring states of Maryland and Virginia between 2nd and 22nd October 2002. At the centre of the investigation was the Montgomery County Police Chief, Charles Moose. Chief Moose touched the hearts of Americans as he shed tears during his numerous television press conferences to report more deaths and no clues to arrest. By the time that John Allen Muhammed and his teenage protégé, John Lee Malvo, were arrested, 23 days from the first shooting, 13 innocent victims had fallen. As people rejoiced and celebrated, Chief Moose was laden with guilt that despite his tireless efforts, people died. With tears in his eyes, he apologized to the victims' families for letting them down. One man patted him on the back and said, “we understand and we have forgiven you. Much more, we are grateful.”*

How often have you found yourself in a similar situation where you feel sorry for yourself when you should be happy? How often do you see yourself worse off than everybody else? How often have you suffered set backs and exclaimed, “Why me?” How do you feel when you see yourself in the mirror? In your relationships with your spouse, parents, colleagues, boss, teachers, pastor, etc, do you feel ignored, put down, ridiculed, threatened or sidestepped? These are manifestations of self-pity. We all have phases of it. However, it becomes a problem if it persists or we indulge in it. In today's lesson, we find Elijah praying to die soon after his major victory over the 450 prophets of Baal. What could have prompted him into such self-pity? How did he come out of it? What lessons can we learn from the whole story? Let's find out.

¹ www.usanetwork.com/movies/dcsniper/synopsis.html

1. Self-pity at a glance

According to a Nigerian proverb, the snake seen by one man is always longer than the stick with which it is compared. In plain language, people exaggerate not only their achievements but their pains. A wife whose husband forgot to bring birthday flowers for just this year may complain to her “gossip club” that he has forgotten to do so for the past five years! When a lazy student fails an exam, he will tell his parents or guardians, “the teacher failed me!” When even random sampling for airport scrutiny picks out a person of colour, s(he) will feel that it is racism at work. When we look at ourselves in the mirror, we hardly see beauty! Successful people are complaining. Struggling people are complaining. Is there anyone out there who does not get involved in self-pity?

Let us differentiate self-pity from envy. With envy, we are unhappy over the success or achievement of other people. With self-pity, we see ourselves as worse off than everybody else. We feel that we are not getting what we deserve. We feel used or abused, put down or slighted, ignored or sidestepped, threatened or neglected. We justify why we are in pains or earn less than others or are shorter or less beautiful! In reality, we may actually be the centre of other people’s envy or admiration!

As we said earlier, self-pity infects every one of us. Even our Lord Jesus felt sorry for Himself as He suffered on the cross and He cried out, “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?” [Matt. 27:46]. Of course, we know that His Father did not forsake Him and the heathen onlookers knew that He was the Son of God [vv.51-54]. When Jeremiah saw the prosperity of the wicked around him, he complained to God, saying, “But Thou, O Lord, knowest me: Thou hast seen me, and tried mine heart toward Thee: pull them out like sheep for the slaughter, and prepare them for the day of slaughter.” God’s answer was a puzzle! He challenged Jeremiah that if he was tired of running against the footmen, how could he contend with horses [Jer. 12: 1-6]! In other words, how God judges sinners should not be Jeremiah’s problem.

Self-pity becomes an issue when we indulge in it because it can hurt us spiritually. Let us learn from Elijah’s experience.

2. Elijah returns to the wilderness!

Elijah had just attained the height of his prophetic ministry. According to his word, God had brought a drought on the idolatrous kingdom of Israel that lasted for three-and-a-half years. During the period, God miraculously fed Elijah in the wilderness (through ravens) and in Zarephath (by a widow). On God’s direction, Elijah had challenged the 450 prophets of Baal to a spiritual contest to prove who was the true God. Elijah won when fire came down from heaven to consume his sacrifice whereas the 450 prophets of Baal could not get their god to do the same thing. On Elijah’s order, the people seized the prophets of Baal and killed all of

them. King Ahab went home to tell his wife, Jezebel, what Elijah had done. So, she sent a warning that she was going to kill Elijah the following day.

In response, Elijah ran back into the wilderness after leaving his servant in Beersheba in Judah. There in the wilderness, Elijah prayed to God, “It is enough; now, O Lord, take my life; for I am not better than my fathers” [1 Kgs 19: 1-4]. His self-pity did not stop there. Even after God had revealed Himself and asked, “What doest thou here, Elijah?” he replied, “I have been jealous [i.e., zealous] for the Lord God of hosts: because the children of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant, thrown down Thine altars, and slain Thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away” [vv. 9-14].

At the time that God asked Elijah what he was doing there, he was hiding in a cave on mount Horeb, “the mount of God” [v. 8]. That suggests that his self-pity had not gone away. Since he took flight from Samaria, God had sent an angel to feed him. On the strength of the food and drink, he had travelled forty days and night to Horeb. So, why did the self-pity persist?

Elijah’s self-pity could have been as a result of all or some of the following:

a) *Fear*

Jezebel was the one who had introduced Baal worship into Israel. Therefore, Elijah’s victory over the 450 prophets of Baal was a humiliating defeat for her. It threatened her control over her husband, Ahab, and his kingdom, Israel. So, as soon as she was told of the death of the prophets, she threatened to avenge it by killing Elijah the next day. On hearing that, Elijah “arose and went for his life” [1 Kgs 19: 1-3].

That is a natural reaction for anyone who feels threatened. When Saul threatened to kill David, he fled from his presence [1 Sam. 20: 42]. However, for a man of God, whether to flee or stay depends on what God asks you to do. After all, Jezebel swore by her gods to succeed in killing Elijah [1 Kgs 19: 2], the same gods that Elijah had proved were idols and hence powerless! When Herod threatened the life of infant Jesus, God instructed Joseph to take Him to Egypt for safety [Matt. 2: 12-15]. On the other hand, when the Jews rejected Paul in Corinth, the Lord appeared to him in a night vision saying, “Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace. *For I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee: for I have much people in this city.*” Paul stayed on for a year and six months! [Acts 18: 7-11].

b) *Stress*

Elijah had become exhausted physically, mentally and emotionally. This man had been through every kind of hardship for almost four years. He had slept on the bare floors of the wilderness with a piece of wood for

pillows. He had lived on sandwiches and cakes for all the period, part of the food delivered by birds. As he was coming out of that ordeal, he had to single-handedly fight a major spiritual battle against the evil forces represented by Baal and its worshippers. The rains had returned, suggesting a return to prosperity. Now, instead of a pat in the back, his life was being threatened and the people who had seen God's power so openly demonstrated had not raised a voice or arm in his defence. Why was he still alone and where were the other people of God?

That was the frustration that Elijah poured out to God [1 Kgs 19: 9-14]. How often have we found ourselves in a similar situation? All around us, there is immorality masquerading as popular culture. When you speak against it, they call you "conservative" or "full of hate" or self-righteous. Official corruption has earned your country a high rating on *Transparency International's* annual list of the most corrupt nations in the world. Yet, the champions of such corruption are decorated with the highest national honours! There is no way that you will not feel for yourself if you are trying in your small corner of the world to be God-fearing.

c) *Impatience with God's next move*

We tend to see our calling in linear terms. In other words, we prefer to be moving from pain to pleasure or enjoyment and never having to suffer again! However, God's calling is not like that. We are like clay in the hands of a potter, and God can use us as He pleases. Elijah expected a well-deserved respite after what he had passed through. It was the turn of other prophets and believers to take over. Now, instead of help, he was back to square one. I doubt if he would be as enthusiastic about his second wilderness experience as with the first. But it was not God who sent him this second time. We were not told that it was God who told him to flee from Jezebel. Apparently, that was why God asked him, as he wrapped his mantle round himself in a cave on mount Horeb, "What doest thou here, Elijah?" [v. 13]. In other words, who brought you here?

As you lie on your bed or put your head on your office or classroom desk brooding over your circumstances, God is asking you the same question, "What are you doing here?" Did you put your problems before God and what did He ask you to do? We are not saying that people of faith do not also use commonsense. But, if you are supposed to walk by faith, you cannot again follow sight-based commonsense!

Happily, we have a merciful God. He took Elijah out of self-pity and He will also do it for us. Let us examine how He helped Elijah.

3. **Elijah snaps out of self-pity!**

When we are labourers in God's vineyard, we are supposed to grow forward, not go backward. As a result of self-pity, Elijah's ministry suffered a set back. He had hidden his servant in another country (Judah) and he himself had returned to the wilderness. Why should Israel be abandoned to the idols that God had just exposed as false? Elijah had to be sent back and here was how God prepared him:

- a) Even though it was not God that sent Elijah back to the wilderness, He provided for his needs there. He sent an angel twice to serve him "cake baked on the coals and a cruse of water" [**1 Kgs 19: 6-7**]. On the strength of that food and drink, Elijah travelled for forty days and nights to Horeb, on to the mountain on which God first appeared to Moses in a flame of fire [**Ex. 3:1**]. We see a confirmation that in the eyes of God, Elijah did not return to a spiritual wilderness. This food was cooked and delivered by an angel. The water came in a container, not from the brook! In deed, "weeping may endure for a night but joy cometh in the morning" [**Ps. 30:5**]. Elijah's self-pity took a back seat as soon as he re-established connection with His God.
- b) Having now refocused, God revealed much more of Himself to Elijah. Before now, Elijah had known the God that answered by fire. This time, there were strong winds followed by earthquake and fire but God was not in any of them. Instead, He manifested Himself to Elijah in "a still small voice" [**1 Kgs 19: 9-12**]. That represents a high form of spiritual discipline, just as it is possible for the conductor of a major orchestra to produce melody with a mere rolling of the eye. Paul has said, "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them because they are spiritually discerned....Who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ" [**1 Cor. 2: 16**]. When a believer has the mind of Christ, s(he) can say like Paul, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" [**Phil. 4:13**].
- c) Elijah received reassurance from God. Part of Elijah's self-pity came from his belief that he was the only prophet left on God's side in Israel. First of all, that position could not be correct because Obadiah, a governor under Ahab, had informed Elijah that he had hidden away 100 prophets of God [at fifty per cave] from Jezebel's killing reach [**1 Kgs 18: 4,13**]. God had a higher figure for Elijah for "I have left Me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him" [**1 Kgs 19: 18**]! Therefore, things were not as bad as Elijah had thought! So it is with us too for when we cry that we have no shoes, God shows us people who do not even have feet!
- d) God put Elijah back on his earthly assignment. He gave him a fresh mandate. First, he should go to the wilderness of Damascus [**v. 15**]. You see what I mean that for every spiritual upliftment in the Lord's vineyard, we need a wilderness preparation! From the Damascus wilderness, Elijah was to go and anoint Hazael king over Syria, Jehu king over Israel, and Elisha as prophet in his [Elijah's] place. Ahab's fate would be sealed in

the hands of these three people [vv. 15-17]. Elijah did as he was commanded. With respect to Elisha, Elijah cast his mantle upon him. He left everything, after paying farewell respects to his parents, and went after Elijah [vv. 19-21]. In like manner, we are not alone. God has lined up people who will help us to carry out our spiritual responsibilities.

4. Conclusion

The lessons for dealing with self-pity that have come out of this week's study are as follows:

- a) Continue to look forward, not backward, in your walk with the Lord. Paul has said, "Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended; *but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before. I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus*" [Phil. 3: 13-14].
- b) Keep in mind that God now drives your life. He is not a mere passenger in your life-vehicle because He chose you [Jn 15: 16].
- c) When the going gets tough, praise God instead of pitying yourself. The Psalmist says, "Seven times a day do I praise Thee because of Thy righteous judgments" [Ps. 119: 164]. In every circumstance, we are to give thanks [1 Thes. 5:18].

God knows the troubles that you are passing through in doing His work. Each time that you think your situation is terrible, always remember that there are people pointing at you and saying, "those are the lucky ones!" It is by God's mercies that we are not consumed, so says Jeremiah, "They are new every morning; great is Thy faithfulness" [Lam. 3: 22-23].

So, what is your problem? Snap out of self-pity!