

God's prescription for exhausted doctors

Living with daily pressures



Christian doctors face extraordinary pressures – not only do we often feel asked to do the impossible with inadequate resources, but our own sense of duty can drive us to take on responsibilities that surpass our ability to cope.

The prophet Elijah, after his victory over the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel suffers a major spiritual and mental meltdown.¹ He is overwhelmed by fear and exhaustion and withdraws into himself. The Lord's response is a wonderful demonstration of his character and compassion but also a brilliant model for us in helping Christian colleagues buried by personal and professional challenges.

The Lord is at first, entirely simple and practical – ministering to Elijah's physical needs with food, rest and solitude. Lack of food and sleep can distort our perception of reality and impair our ability to cope. One of the first lessons I learnt as a junior doctor was to make sure, even on a busy take, that I made time to eat. One of the first statements in the Lord's prayer is 'give us this day our daily bread'.² My favourite verse for busy doctors is 'the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.'³

Next, God urges reflection: he twice asks Elijah in different locations, 'what are you doing here, Elijah?'⁴ The question on each occasion elicits the same response: '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.'⁵ In answering the question, God prompts Elijah to recall that he's in this situation precisely because he was trying to be faithful. He is also reminded that he had, in fact, faced tough trials. He is beginning to understand that his feelings in the circumstances are completely understandable and appropriate.

Third, God reminds him of his power. Elijah was remembering selectively - he had to some extent forgotten who he was working for and what he had already achieved. God sends a great and powerful wind to tear the mountains apart and shatter the rocks. Then an earthquake. Then the fire. Then a gentle whisper. Then more questions. Elijah is beginning to know again the peace that passes understanding.⁶ To be still and know that God is God.⁷

But God is not finished with him yet. Next comes his recommissioning: 'go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there... anoint Elisha... to succeed you as prophet'.⁸ He was learning like the apostle Paul that 'God's strength is made perfect in weakness',⁹ that God 'comforts us in our distress so that we might in turn comfort others'¹⁰ and that these things 'happened that we might rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead'.¹¹

Every servant of God who is used mightily needs preparation in the crucible of trial. Even the Lord Jesus, we are told, 'learned obedience through what he suffered'.¹² Not that he was ever disobedient, but rather that his trials prepared him ultimately for the cross that won our salvation, and that during them he was sustained by the 'joy set before him'.¹³ Elijah's suffering, like his master's, was to save a chosen remnant.

The next element of God's prescription was reinforcements. Elijah, in starting the fightback against Baal-inspired apostasy, needed a larger team. Although he had faced Ahab, Jezebel and the prophets of Baal alone, he was not actually alone. There were seven thousand others¹⁴ who had not bowed the knee to Baal, who had not compromised and who would ultimately stand alongside him.

It's a reminder for us, that however alone and isolated we may feel in the spiritual battles we face, a multitude of Christian brothers and sisters too great for anyone to count are being kept similarly faithful in their small corners of the vineyard all around the world. One day we will stand with all of them, drawn from throughout the ages, before the throne of Christ.

Finally, Elijah is reminded of God's sovereignty. It is the Lord who is in control of this great drama, working it all out to a glorious conclusion. Elijah, one of the greatest prophets who ever lived, points forward to that 'Elijah who was to come',¹⁵ John the Baptist.

Just as Elijah was to point out and introduce the world to Elisha who would follow him and surpass him, so John the Baptist would point Jesus out to his disciples and declare, 'He must become greater, I must become less'.¹⁶

Peter Saunders is CME Chief Executive

references

1. 1 Kings 19
2. Matthew 6:11
3. Luke 5:15-16
4. 1 Kings 19:9,13
5. 1 Kings 19:10,14
6. Philippians 4:7
7. Psalm 46:10
8. 1 Kings 19:15,16
9. 2 Corinthians 12:9
10. 2 Corinthians 1:4
11. 2 Corinthians 1:9
12. Hebrews 5:8
13. Hebrews 12:2
14. 1 Kings 19:18
15. Matthew 11:14
16. John 3:30