

When Christmas Is Not So Merry

A Study of 1 Kings 19

Characteristic of Completeness: Christian Life

Big Idea: God meets you where you are.

Related Scriptures: Numbers 11:14-15; Job 30:15-17; Psalm 34:18; 55:4-6; Matthew 5:4; 26:37-38; 2 Corinthians 1:3-4; 7:6; Philippians 4:8

Introduction:

1. One Christmas song says, “It’s the hap-happiest season of all.” For some folks, it’s true. For others, it’s a Christmas crock. Christmas can be a downright depressing time. Some of you here this morning know exactly what I’m talking about.

It’s a time of togetherness. But it reminds you of how lonely you feel.

It’s a time for family. But it reminds you of how dysfunctional yours is.

It’s a time for giving. But it reminds you of how in debt you are.

It’s a time for celebration. But it reminds you of how weary you are.

It’s a time for memories. But it reminds you of the loved one who is no longer here.

It’s a time for dreaming of white. But you are dreading the darkness.

It’s a time for bowl games. But ASU is not going.

Christmas can be depressing.

2. Depression is not something Christians like to talk about, even though I would guess that every person in this room has struggled with it to one degree or another. We think it’s a sign of weakness. We think that good Christians shouldn’t be depressed.

Nevertheless, if you find yourself struggling with depression this morning, you are in good company. Some of the godliest people who ever lived struggled with depression.

- a. Moses of the Bible struggled. When the Hebrew people persistently complained to Moses, their leader, as they were traveling in the wilderness, Moses became overwhelmed. Moses cried out to God in ► Numbers 11:14-15:

^{NKJ} Numbers 11:14 “I am not able to bear all these people alone, because the burden is too heavy for me. 15 If You treat me like this, please kill me here and now—if I have found favor in Your sight—

and do not let me see my wretchedness!”

- b. ► David of the Bible struggled. After being faced with his own moral failures, he said in ► Psalm 55:4-6:

^{NKJ} Psalm 55:4 My heart is severely pained within me, And the terrors of death have fallen upon me. 5 Fearfulness and trembling have come upon me, And horror has overwhelmed me. 6 So I said, “Oh, that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest.”

- c. ► Job of the Bible struggled. He said in ► Job 30:15-17:

^{NKJ} Job 30:15 “Terrors are turned upon me; They pursue my honor as the wind, And my prosperity has passed like a cloud. 16 And now my soul is poured out because of my plight; The days of affliction take hold of me. 17 My bones are pierced in me at night, And my gnawing pains take no rest.”

- d. ► Even Jesus Himself struggled. On the night before He was to be crucified, ► Matthew 26, Verses 37 and 38 record . . .

^{NKJ} Matthew 26:37 And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and He began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed. 38 Then He said to them, “My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death . . .”

2. This ► morning, I want to take a closer look at one person in particular who struggled with depression. His name is Elijah. He was a great prophet and man of God. Let me give you a slice of his life which is presented in 1 Kings 18 and 19. This slice of his life doesn't teach us everything there is to know about depression, but it does provide a lot of helpful information.

- a. The place was the northern kingdom of Israel.
- b. The time was between 874 and 853 B.C.
- c. The northern kingdom of Israel was under the rule of King Ahab.
- d. King Ahab was the first king of Israel to marry a heathen princess. Her name was Jezebel and she worshipped the false God named Baal.
- e. Jezebel led Ahab and the nation of Israel to forsake God.
 - 1) Jezebel systematically killed the prophets of the true God.

- 2) In their place, Jezebel established hundreds of prophets of Baal.
- f. Elijah, a prophet of the true God, issued a challenge to King Ahab and the prophets of Baal. Elijah said . . .
- 1) You invite all of Israel and the prophets of Baal to Mount Carmel.
 - 2) There, we will sacrifice two bulls. We'll put one bull on one stack of wood. We'll put the other on another stack of wood. But, we'll not set fire to either of them.
 - 3) Then you call on your god, Baal, to start your fire, and I'll call on my God, the Lord, to start my fire. We'll see which one responds.
- g. Ahab took up the challenge.
- 1) The stage was set and the prophets of Baal called on the name of Baal all morning, but nothing happened. No fire.
 - a) One of my favorite parts is where Elijah begins to mock the prophets of Baal in ► 1 Kings 18:27:

^{NKJ} 1 Kings 18:27 And so it was, at noon, that Elijah mocked them and said, "Cry aloud, for he is a god; either he is meditating, or he is busy, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is sleeping and must be awakened."

The phrase ► "he is busy" is a polite translation. It literally means, "he's in the bathroom."
 - b) This was particularly appropriate because one of the meanings of the name Jezebel is "where is the dung,"¹ which is not a Roberta Flack song from the 70s.
 - 2) After ► the prophets of Baal had their turn, then, Elijah called on the name of the Lord and fire came down and consumed the sacrifice.
 - 3) All the people who saw said, "Wow! The Lord, He is God!"
 - 4) And Elijah killed all the prophets of Baal that day.
- h. Then King Ahab returned to the city of Jezreel by horse. The Bible says Elijah

¹ Oberholtzer, class notes.

ran ahead of him on foot all the way.

- i. Now this does not seem like a depressing story. It's a story of victory. How could Elijah become depressed about these things?
- j. Well, when Ahab reported to Jezebel all that had happened, she was unconvinced that the Lord alone was God, and she threatened Elijah's life. The ► first two verses of 1 Kings Chapter 19 record it:

^{NKJ} 1 Kings 19:1 And Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, also how he had executed all the prophets with the sword. 2 Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time."

- k. Elijah became depressed at the news and fled first to Beersheba and then to Horeb to struggle with his depression.

- 3. From this biblical account, I glean ► three things relating to depression that serve as the outline of my sermon. First, we're going to cover some ► symptoms of depression. Second, we're going to identify some ► contributors to depression. And finally, we're going to see how God ► helps with depression. All of this generally falls under the category of ► the Christian Life. It has to do with understanding God's provision for living the Christian life. And so, the Christian Life is our Characteristic of Completeness in Christ for the week.

- I. Let's take a quick look at a few of ► the symptoms of depression that are reflected by Elijah in 1 Kings, Chapter 19.

- A. First there is ► withdrawal.

- 1. This is reflected in Elijah's response to Jezebel's threat in ► Verse 3:

^{NKJ} 1 Kings 19:3 And when he saw that, he arose and ran for his life, and went to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there.

- 2. Withdrawal from people and circumstances is a common symptom of depression. We want to escape. We don't want to have to deal with people or decisions anymore.

- B. Elijah not only manifests withdrawal, he also experiences ► despair. This is a common part of depression.

- 1. Despair is reflected in ► Verse 4:

^{NKJ} 1 Kings 19:4 But he himself [Elijah] went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he prayed that he might die, and said, "It is enough! Now, LORD, take my life . . ."

2. When we're depressed, we've had enough. We feel like giving up. Giving up our job. Giving up school. Giving up our relationships. And in some cases, giving up our lives.

C. Elijah also shows a third characteristic common to depression: It's ► lethargy. A chronic listlessness and lack of appetite.

The desire to escape in sleep and the reluctance to eat are reflected in Elijah's retreat into the wilderness in ► Verse 5:

^{NKJ} 1 Kings 19:5 Then as he lay and slept under a broom tree, suddenly an angel touched him, and said to him, "Arise and eat."

Elijah was lethargic and needed to be reminded to eat.

D. Elijah also experienced ► loneliness. He feels like there is no one who can relate to his plight. He feels that he is completely alone in his struggle.

1. The loneliness is reflected in ► Verse 10 where Elijah says to God:

^{NKJ} 1 Kings 19:10 . . . "I have been very zealous for the LORD God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life."

2. When depression settles in, we feel like no one can relate to how we're feeling. We feel like we're the only weird one who can't seem to cope.

In sum, ► the symptoms of depression manifested by Elijah include withdrawal, despair, lethargy, and loneliness.

II. Now, ► let's take a look at some of the contributors to depression—a few of the things that invite depression. This is by no means an exhaustive list. I realize there are some chemical and hormonal factors that can contribute to depression. I just want to focus on a few contributors reflected in Elijah's life.

A. First, there is ► fatigue.

1. At the time Elijah received the threat from Jezebel, the queen, I think he was

exhausted. Think about it. He experienced the stress of his confrontation with the prophets of Baal. He expends the energy to kill them all. Then he ran to Jezreel, the city. First ► Kings 18:46 records:

^{NKJ} 1 Kings 18:46 Then the hand of the LORD came upon Elijah; and he girded up his loins and ran ahead of Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel.

It's easy to read right past this verse without realizing this is a 23-mile run!² It's a marathon! He's exhausted.

2. In our culture, we too are ripe for depression. Many of us are operating with little or no margin. Our answer to getting things done is to pedal faster and sleep less. Many of us are running on empty, inviting depression.

B. In addition to fatigue, there is an unexpected contributor to depression: It's ► success.

1. Elijah had experienced phenomenal success. He defeated the prophets of Baal, and ► 1 Kings 18:39 records . . .

^{NKJ} 1 Kings 18:39 Now when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, "The LORD, He is God! The LORD, He is God!"

It must have been exhilarating for Elijah to see God work through him in such a miraculous way.

2. But strangely, on the list of the most stressful events in life is remarkable success. And, the times we are most vulnerable to depression are immediately following mountain-top experiences. Satan often seems to use mountain-top momentum to push us headlong into a valley. Perhaps we set ourselves up for it when we get to thinking in the midst of our success that we have somehow finally risen above the pain and drudgery of life. Then, Monday comes, and we're again faced with reality.

C. The final contributor to depression I want to mention is ► failure. It's probably better to call it ► perceived failure, because whether or not the failure is real is irrelevant to how you feel about it.

1. Even though the Lord had worked miraculously through Elijah, even though Elijah had eliminated the prophets of Baal, the response of Jezebel spelled failure for him.

² Briscoe, *Running On Empty*; 20.

You see, Elijah recognized Jezebel as the source of Baal worship and idolatry in Israel. His efforts had failed to change her mind. She remained unrepentant. To him, he had merely pulled the top of the weed, but the root remained; it would grow back. To him, he had merely killed a few ants, but the queen remained; she would produce more.

His apparent failure prompted Elijah to say in ► Verse 4:

^{NKJ} 1 Kings 19:4 “. . . I am no better than my fathers!”

“They haven’t been able to break this idolatrous leadership, and neither have I. I am a failure.”

2. Depression often stems from a self-blocked goal. We perceive that we ourselves are the reason we can’t achieve our goal.

Elijah had the goal of changing Jezebel’s mind about God. When the goal was blocked, he blamed himself for the failure.

3. That’s a common pattern for depression. We establish a goal and it is not achieved. We have no circumstances to blame. No other people to blame. So we blame ourselves. We think there’s something fundamentally wrong with us that we can’t achieve the goal. We begin to believe we’re failures.
4. We can become depressed when we can’t seem to make things right in our marriage. When we can’t seem to shake our addiction to alcohol or drugs or pornography. When we can’t seem to achieve the lifestyle we’ve always envisioned. When we can’t overcome our illness. When we can’t seem to achieve the kind of security in life we think we need. The list is endless.

Well, we’ve ► covered some of the symptoms of depression and some of the contributors to depression.

- III. Now, I want to examine how ► God provides help for depression. I want you to see how God patiently, graciously, gently meets you where you are. In fact, that’s ► the big idea of my sermon: God meets you where you are.

God meets Elijah where he is and nurtures Him back from depression. Let me show you.

- A. First, God deals with Elijah’s ► physical needs.

1. I want you to see that God doesn’t send an angel to Elijah to lecture him. He doesn’t tell him to snap out of it. He allows Elijah to get some rest and He feeds him. Let’s pick it up in ► 1 Kings 19:5:

^{NKJ} 1 Kings 19:5 Then as he [Elijah] lay and slept under a broom tree, suddenly an angel touched him, and said to him, “Arise and eat.” ►
 6 Then he looked, and there by his head was a cake baked on coals, and a jar of water. So he ate and drank, and lay down again. ► 7
 And the angel of the LORD came back the second time, and touched him, and said, “Arise and eat, because the journey is too great for you.” ► 8 So he arose, and ate and drank; and he went in the strength of that food . . .

2. If you are struggling with depression, I encourage deal with the possible physical contributors first. Don't overlook them. Get some rest. Eat properly. Get a check up.

B. Second, God deals with Elijah's ► temporal needs. He patiently gives him some time to work through his depression.

1. I want you to notice something about Elijah's retreat in ► Verse 8. It says,

^{NKJ} 1 Kings 19:8 . . . he went . . . forty days and forty nights as far as Horeb, the mountain of God.

This doesn't mean much until you understand that the normal trip from Beersheba to Horeb would have taken only about ten days—only about a fourth of that time. God gave Elijah the time he needed to wander. To process. To work it through.

2. Depression often takes longer to process than we would like or expect. So part of the solution is to simply give it some time. If you're depressed, don't expect to snap out of it immediately. Be patient.

And, if you're dealing with a depressed person, give them time. Don't tell them to snap out of it. Meet them where they are.

C. Finally, God deals with Elijah's ► spiritual needs. He encourages Elijah to reflect upon some truths that he already knows. God gently reminds Elijah, by His actions and by His words, to remember some truths that help overcome depression.

But God doesn't force feed Elijah some tired platitudes. Rather, He comes alongside and gently guides Elijah to rediscover some truths for himself. God's reminders are punctuated with the question: “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

1. The first reminder comes in the form of an object lesson in Verses 5-9. The reminder seems to be: God is our ever-present Provider and Protector. But God doesn't come right out and say this; rather, He helps Elijah rediscover it.

- a. The object lesson occurs when the angel comes to watch over Elijah. To let him sleep. To gently touch him. To feed him. To strengthen him. To follow him to Horeb.
- b. Then God invites Elijah to reflect on this provision and protection with a question at the end of ► Verse 9:

^{NKJ} 1 Kings 19:9 . . . and behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and He said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

I think there are many questions implied by this one question. “Who sent you an angel? Who provided the bread? Who provided the water? Who provided the fire with the prophets of Baal? Who gave you the strength to kill them all, and then run to Jezreel? Who is with you right now, even though you have run from everyone else? Who is doing this, you or Me? What are you doing here? What are you accomplishing apart from Me?”

The message from God is unspoken, but it is unmistakable: “I am your ever-present Provider and Protector. It’s Me, not you.”

- c. If we could only keep this mind! Somehow we slowly drift from God. We move step by step from dependence on Him to dependence on ourselves. We like sheep go astray. We take our eyes off the Shepherd and put them on ourselves. And, when we don’t have our Shepherd continually in view, we think we’re on our own. And when we’re on our own, we inevitably face a river we can’t cross, a mountain we can’t climb, and we become depressed. We all need a Shepherd. We all need God, our ever-present Provider and Protector.
- d. This truth still hasn’t sunk in quite yet with Elijah. God meets Elijah where he is. But Elijah is not listening yet. He is still pretty wrapped up with himself as he responds to God’s question in ► Verse 10:

^{NKJ} 1 Kings 19:10 So he [Elijah] said, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life.”

- 2. So, God orchestrates a ► second reminder. The reminder seems to be: God is in charge of outcomes and He doesn’t always operate in the way we expect.
 - a. But again, God doesn’t communicate this directly; instead, He uses

another object lesson. He orchestrates a strong wind, then an earthquake, and then a fire. Any Jew would have expected God to speak in the context of these miraculous events. But God doesn't. God chooses to manifest Himself in a still small voice. Let's pick it up in ► Verses 11-13:

^{NKJ} 1 Kings 19:11 Then He [God] said, "Go out, and stand on the mountain before the LORD." ► And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore into the mountains and broke the rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; ► and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; ► 12 and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; ► and after the fire a still small voice. 13 So it was, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave . . .

- b. Then, once again, after this second object lesson, God invites Elijah to reflect on the truth by asking the very same question, in a still small voice, at the end of ► Verse 13:

^{NKJ} 1 Kings 19:13 Suddenly a voice came to him, and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Again, I think there are many questions implied by this one question. "You were expecting Me in the wind, weren't you? But, I was not there. You were expecting Me in the earthquake, weren't you? But, I was not there. You were expecting Me in the fire, weren't you? But, I was not there. You expect Me to always operate in the realm of the spectacular, don't you? Well, I don't. This time, I was the still small voice. Not the outcome you expected, was it?"

"Who's in charge of outcomes anyway, you or Me? Who caused the people to acknowledge Me as God before the prophets of Baal, you or Me? It wasn't you. Well then, who was responsible for Jezebel's refusal acknowledging Me as God? It wasn't you. You wrongly attribute this to yourself because it's not what you expected from Me."

The message from God is unspoken, but it's unmistakable. God says, "I'm in charge of outcomes and I do not always operate in the way you expect."

- c. What a liberting idea this is! The results of our efforts are up to God, not us. We are in charge of obeying; He is in charge of outcomes. And the outcomes aren't always what we expect.

- d. Elijah has not fully recognized this truth. God meets Elijah where he is. But Elijah is not listening yet. He is still pretty wrapped up with himself as he responds once again in ► Verse 14:

^{NKJ} 1 Kings 19:14 And he said, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God of hosts; because the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life."

3. So, God becomes a little more direct with His third reminder. The reminder is clear: God still has a job for us to do.

- a. God lays this out for Elijah in ► Verses 15-16:

^{NKJ} 1 Kings 19:15 Then the LORD said to him: "Go, [Go! Go!] return on your way to the Wilderness of Damascus; and when you arrive, anoint Hazael as king over Syria. ► 16 Also you shall anoint Jehu the son of Nimshi as king over Israel. And Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel Meholah you shall anoint as prophet . . ."

- b. Even though Elijah felt all washed up, God still had a job for him to do. And God still has a job for us. "Go; be my witness." "Go; be my ambassador." "Go; be my representative." "Go; we've still got work to do."

4. God ► concludes with a final reminder: We are not alone.

- a. He communicates this in ► Verse 18, where He says to Elijah:

^{NKJ} 1 Kings 19:18 "Yet I have reserved seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

- b. Elijah was wrong earlier when he said he was the only one left who followed the Lord God. He was not alone. There were 7,000 others.
- c. And, we are not alone in our circumstances. We aren't the only ones who are trying. We aren't the only ones who struggle with depression. We aren't the only ones who feel the pain. We aren't weird. We aren't abnormal. We are not alone.

God meets Elijah where he is. And finally, Elijah begins to listen.

Finally, Elijah begins to rediscover God's care and concern for him. Finally, after God meets him where he is, after God gently and patiently and graciously helps him, Elijah begins to listen, he begins to rediscover God's care and concern for him.

5. Are ► you listening yet?

This morning, God meets you where you are.

He's gives you an object lesson over and over again. It's called communion. The object lesson includes some bread which helps you remember Christ's body given for you. And some juice which helps you remember Christ's blood shed for you.

And as you are about to take it, it's as if God is whispering to you. Not in a great wind, not in a strong earthquake, not in a raging fire. But in a still small voice: "What are you doing here? What are you doing here?"

And behind that one question are so many other implied questions.

"Did I not bring you here this day to meet you where you are?"

"How much love for you is behind this little piece of bread, My body given for you? Remember?"

"How much care and concern for you are reflected in this little cup of juice, My blood shed for you? Remember?"

"Are you listening yet?"