

From the Peak to the Pits

By Santiago Lange

The prophet Elijah had just experienced the greatest victory of his career on top of Mount Carmel. Although opposed by eight hundred and fifty false prophets, Elijah had triumphed because God had sent fire down to burn up the sacrificial bull and the water-soaked altar. Elijah triumphed again when God sent a heavy rain to end the drought that had scorched the ground for three and a half years. Each success led to another.



Becoming a Christian can be another “mountain high”. For some, it may feel like a great weight has been lifted off their shoulders. Reading the Bible becomes a real delight and an ardent desire. The only problem with “mountaintop experiences” is that sooner or later one might well have to come down. Moses came down from Mt. Sinai and discovered that the people replaced him as a mediator with a golden calf. Jesus came down from the Mt. of Transfiguration where he had appeared with Moses and Elijah, only to find at the bottom that His disciples had „messed up a simple healing“.

It seems to be a fact of life that whenever things appear to be going well, instead of levelling off, they insist on crashing. We like to think that our success is due to our own talents or abilities so that we can control the direction of our lives. That’s why slipping from the peak to the pit is more than just inconvenient – it can shatter our rosy image of ourselves.

Elijah was a man just like us. After a string of successes, he came face to face with Queen Jezebel. She was not impressed. In a rage she said: *“I swear I’m going to do to you what you’ve done to my prophets!”* This cruel woman unnerved Elijah and he thought it best to run for his life. He took off all the way down to Beersheba (at the bottom of Israel) and kept on going into the wilderness. In the depths of depression, he prayed, *“Oh God, take away my life.”*

Like many of our failures, it’s hard to figure out exactly what happened to Elijah. We know that fear played a significant role. The King James Version isn’t as clear on this because it translates 1 Kings 19 verse 3 as “And when he saw that....” Most of the modern translations are more accurate with the Hebrew and say, “And he was afraid.” He had good reason to be afraid. Throughout the Bible, Jezebel is portrayed as ruthless and evil. If she made a promise to kill you, she kept it.

Oddly, people who are quite talented can also be handicapped by fear. Success may come easily to them but in the back of their minds there’s frequently a little voice saying, “It’s not going to last! Disaster is just around the corner.” Not rarely, this fear can be traced to a low image of the self. Some kind of fear was certainly behind Elijah’s failure, but that alone can’t explain all of his actions. Physical and mental exhaustion may perhaps also have played a part.

Psychologists tell us that depression is due just as much to our physical well being as to our mental state.

Another factor contributed to the prophet's failure, the "Elijah Complex". The Elijah Complex is summed up in 1 Kings 19, verse 10.

"I have been very jealous for the Lord God of hosts: for 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..."

Isolation is one of the worst things that can happen. It's unnatural to be alone. Elijah felt he was alone and this feeling played a major role in his depression. According to 1 Kings 19 verse 3, part of it was his fault because it says he left his servant behind at Beersheba. And over in verse 18 God tells Elijah that seven thousand other Jews were still faithful believers. So, the prophet was NOT alone, in spite of his perception.

Some Christians who seem to have a consuming desire to serve and follow God are actually suffering from an "Elijah Complex". By thinking they are "the only believers left" they end up cutting themselves off from the help and encouragement of other brothers and sisters in the Lord. That's a great way to set oneself up for trouble.

Failure is surely one of the hardest things for a Christian to accept. All of our social and cultural emphasis is on outward signs of success. Our churches have to have bigger budgets and greater attendance. Individual believers often judge their spiritual standing on how well they do in the world. There is a subtle belief that if you're really trusting God, failure is somehow not an option and actually impossible.

However, Christians can fall. Sometimes personal fault is not involved, but the failing cause might be connected to the messed-up world we live in. Yet, we must honestly face the facts and learn to admit that our defeats can also be due to personal sin or shortcomings. Whether it's pride or lust or fear, believers can be assailed by sin and experience setbacks. Failure due to sin is the hardest to deal with. We have difficulty facing it ourselves and there's no way we're going to let others know about it. We could proverbially just end up like Jonah under a juniper tree wishing we were dead. But, hear the good news, the Bible also speaks of forgiveness, grace, hope and glorious victory. When Elijah was alone in the desert, God sent an angel to him. God could have zapped him. Instead He lifted him up. That same God is willing to reach out to all of humanity right now, to tell all of us that we are not alone and that every single life is most precious and meaningful.

God is with us in all our victories and He is with us in all our defeats.
Believe it, accept it, and live it! ☐