

# Flu and The Soul

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Lately we have had messages on growing, that it isn't something we drift into, that it is incumbent upon the Christian to grow, that it is indeed a gift to us such that even while our outer selves break down our inner selves are able to be renewed. We grow by having a vision for growth and how wonderful it is to be a growing person, making a commitment to it, having a method as well. There are some topics that we should visit routinely as a church and be growing in there. For example, getting beyond anger.

There are some emotions like anger and fear that are considered quite normal but life would be better with less of both, agreed? There is another emotional state that is common but it isn't given quite the same sanction of normal as anger and fear and that is depression. I suppose we might say that if anger and fear are like common colds to our emotions, then depression is like the flu. It happens and it happens to a lot of people and it's no fun. If we want to grow as Christians in managing anger and the pastor thinks we should have an annual sermon on the matter, then let's say the same for depression.

There are forms of flu that are severe and dire and the same is true with depression. In this simple sermon we're not going to get into the forms of depression that require hospitalization or that bring us

into the suicide zone. We'll be a little more garden variety today. But if you have had or are experiencing severe depression, I want you to know ... even though you may not feel it, that you are cared for and there is hope. If you are having suicidal thoughts, please call me or the national suicide hotline or talk to someone. There is help.

There's more to be said than this communion Sunday sermon can hold, we'll start today and continue next week.

Last week I showed you a photo. Here's one for this week. Have you ever felt this way? Blue. Glum. In the dumps. Sad. And all these where it settles in, weighs down, and lasts. I look at this picture and I think, "Hey, this guy is walking. How about when you don't even, can't even get out of bed?" I've felt that way.



This melancholy of soul is not unknown to the Bible. Christian faith, while optimistic, is real and human. David said, "Why are you cast down, O my soul?" Jeremiah wondered why he had even been born. Jonah said, "I just want to die." Jesus, in the Garden of Gethsemane, was heavy in his soul.

Today we are going to look at yet another who found himself depressed and what helped. His name is Elijah. Hear now the Word of God.

Before we look at Elijah I want to mention four titles that I just grabbed off my shelf and when I looked at them I thought they covered a hefty part of the waterfront when it comes to addressing components of this struggle. The titles I have put on a marker board and you might look for them in the library or on Amazon. (*Overcoming Depression* by Hauck, *How to Stand Up for Yourself* by Hauck, *Dealing with Your Discontent* by Steinke, *Man's Search for Meaning* by Frankl).

As I scribbled notes for this message I started out with signs, causes, cures – what are the signs of depression, the causes of it, the cures for it? Under signs I had what we've already said, a prolonged emotional lethargy and dreariness. But I added fatigue (tired all the time), sleepiness (don't want to get out of bed), sleeplessness (keep waking up, tossing and turning), health problems (getting a lot of colds, my back aches), overeating (a whole bag of potato chips), loss of appetite (not interested in eating)... and not only were there some that were opposite signs, like sleepiness or sleeplessness, but there were some that you'd wonder is this a sign or a cause? If I overeat when I am depressed, then I look at myself all bloated, I'm *more* depressed. If I drink alcohol when I am depressed, that's a depressant, so I get more depressed. So there are some behaviors that go hand-in-hand with depression either arising out of it or adding to it.

In Elijah's case let's write real big, "Fatigue." That's a major cause of some people's depression. It may be a physical trough caused by illness that affects the emotions or it may be a psychological exertion of holding up a façade. And oddly enough, it can be a fatigue for some of not having enough meaningful and challenging to do. From an injury that frustrates you by keeping you from doing what you want, to its medicine that causes weight gain, to dreams that you discover you are in your underwear in public, to the man who was vigorous in his eighties until he gave up tutoring children in math at the local school and suddenly got sick and died, these are windows into what I have just said.

But in our Bible passage, here it is a nutshell – two chapters before he was on Mt. Carmel in a nose-to-nose emotional, spiritual, physical winner-take-all confrontation with, count them, 450 prophets of Baal. It was a spectacular, emotionally skyrocketing but exhausting defeat of those prophets that he worked with God. Those circumstances made him ripe for going from mountain top to valley. Elijah did so literally– Mt. Carmel to the Valley of Jezreel – and emotionally (a keyed up then let down effect). He ran from one to another, the mountain to the valley, about 90 miles, all of it fleeing before someone who did not like him, Jezebel, and both of these, the run and the enemy anxiety adding to his weariness index. He says, v. 4, "I'm done and I want to die."

Human beings get worn down, physically and emotionally and psychologically.<sup>1</sup> Engines have an add oil line on the dipstick and if we had dipsticks, we'd have a line too. When we have held too much for too long, worked too much for too long, gone without sleep or food or friendship or kindness for too long, we sag and we slow and we cave in. It doesn't mean we shouldn't work hard or handle the mountain top contests that we are put in. But it does give us a clue to why we might find our emotions not bouncy but flat, gray, dark even. They are worn, maybe so worn that the bounce back will be a long time coming.

Notice the helps for "done-and-I-want-to-die" Elijah – he sleeps, he eats. These two works mean two things. First, there is simply the passing of time. How many times have things simply looked different in the morning? Most people simply find that with time things just do get better. It may be as soon as the next sunny morning or it may take a bit longer. But here's an oft repeated phrase in the Bible that can be applied here – "And it came to pass." For most of us, most of the time, in with a lingering depress, it will pass. Let yourself know that it shall come to pass.

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<sup>1</sup> Fatigue and fog. There are often let downs after big achievements, our psychology releases and we depress not having anymore the same goal and focus and meaning.

Second, find what rests you and what nourishes you both at the body level and mental level and the emotional level and the relational level and the spiritual level. I would like to make the small observation that just as junk food fills you up but does not nourish you there may be things like zoning out in front of the tv that may not be truly restorative. Bottom line – give yourself some good TLC tonic. Take a walk in nature. Listen to lovely music. Have coffee with a dear friend. Go to the massage therapist. Make a beautiful salad and set it next to a sizzling steak. Take in a play. Help a neighbor with her yard.

Elijah's depressed self is before God. His whole being of discouragement and depression is a prayer received by our observing and caring God. But Elijah does utter words that are conversation with God. Saying a prayer is a help in virtually every situation. And God answered with rest, an angel, and some food. But he also answered in a still, small voice. I take that to mean while we often look for big answers or silver bullets, we should get ourselves to notice the small, plain, daily graces. Maybe it's the color of the sky, the sound of the wind, the taste of the Lord's Supper.

It is the Lord's Supper Sunday and this table is set in a world, in your life and mine, where there is a lot of simple good. But there's also a lot that is depressing and we'd be oblivious and unfeeling to not see it so. Our own sins, our self-inflicted problems, the selfishness and stupidity and meanness of others leads

to depression. In other words, depression can be apropos. We'd be crazy not to feel it.

But if we don't find forgiveness, for ourselves ... or to extend to others, that heaviness of sin will continue. And if we are talking causes and cures, there is one who is the cure of all ailments, Jesus Christ. This table tells us he cares. Many religions take it for granted that deities are not interested in little human beings in the slightest, and that if they are, it is antagonistically. But the God revealed in the Bible and in Jesus Christ is interested in us and he cares. And he came to forgive us and to deliver us from sin, from ours and the whole world's.

This table has a still small message – Come to me, you who are weary, and I will give you rest. I have overcome the world.