
◇

DIFFICULT TIMES

Do You Believe God Will Not Deliver You From Your Present Hard Time?

1 Corinthians 10:13

Ezekiel Oghenekaro

◇

Have you ever noticed that sometimes trouble comes in batches? Life can go on smoothly for a while and then all of sudden *Bang!* – Things go wrong – not just one thing, but several things at once. And you wonder what hit you.

Somebody once had three flat tires in two weeks. He never gets flat tires. But suddenly he had three in two weeks. And two of them happened at the *same* time!

A flat tire is really no big deal. Having two at the same time was a real annoyance, but nothing more. But what if those flat tires were real crises and three of them all of a sudden came all at once in life?

Hardships (from health crises and financial problems to grief and broken relationships) befall every person living in this fallen world – Christians and non-Christians alike. But as a Christian, you have access to the Holy Spirit, who will empower you to overcome each hardship you face when you ask God to help you. Those who have walked with God in time past have in one time or the other given up believing their situations were hopeless, that God had abandoned them. Some even went to the extent of taking their life. We are going to consider two men who had difficult times in the bible who felt their cases were hopeless.

KING SAUL

“The Philistines gathered together and came and camped in Shunem; and Saul gathered all Israel together and they camped in Gilboa. When Saul saw the camp of the Philistines, he was afraid and his heart trembled greatly. When Saul inquired of the Lord, the Lord did not answer him, either by dreams or by Urim or by prophets” (1 Samuel 28:4-6).

Saul's forty-year career as king of Israel was a mixture of glory, turmoil, and anguish. At the close of his reign, once more his old enemies the Philistines invaded the land of Israel. This invasion differed from the previous ones in several major ways. First, this Philistine army was probably the largest Saul had ever faced. They also attacked a different part of the country of Israel. Previous battles had usually been in a valley of Dan, Benjamin, or Judah, or on the heights above one of these valleys. The Philistines now marched north in their own territory and crossed into Israel beyond the Plain of Sharon. They turned east into the Plain of Esdraelon, or Jezreel. They

occupied the northern hills, while Saul and his army were on the south, on the slopes of Mount Gilboa. The goal of the Philistines was to cut Saul off from the northern tribes. Second, Saul's military experience quickly convinced him of the desperate nature of his situation.

The army of the Philistines was probably the most formidable Israel had yet faced. Saul knew that his only course was to attack, but he also knew that his army would certainly meet defeat. As Saul faced this battle, a third tragic difference is seen between this battle and those of the past. This time, Saul had no communication with the Almighty. Saul had stubbornly chosen to live outside the will of God. The Spirit of the Lord had left him many years before (**1 Samuel 16:14**). He now had no high priest to consult God on his behalf. Saul had killed Ahimelech and eighty-five other priests at Nob (**1 Samuel 22:16-18**). Although other prophets were available, none had any word of the Lord for Saul.

Saul desperately looked for any method to receive some message of hope. He said, *"Seek for me a woman who is a medium that I may go to her and inquire of her"* (**1 Samuel 28:7**). His aides relayed to him the presence of a woman nearby who could communicate with the dead. To consult with her, though, Saul would have to travel to Endor, a few miles from his camp, and disguise himself to hide his identity. Previously, acting in accordance with God's law (see **Numbers 23:23; Deuteronomy 18:9-12**), Saul had banished from his kingdom all mediums and spiritists. His trip to Endor would expose him to great danger, for he would have to sneak through the enemy encampment at night. Most of all, he knew that the woman would not practice her illegal art if she recognized him as king.

Upon meeting Saul, the woman was wary and suspicious. Saul assured her, even swearing in the name of the Lord, that nothing would happen to her. When she agreed to help him, Saul requested that she bring up Samuel from the dead. Before she could finish her incantations, Samuel appeared. (The woman seems to have been more surprised by his appearance than Saul was.)

Samuel, unfortunately, had no words of comfort for Saul. He prophesied that the next day would bring death to Saul and his sons. God's mercy had come to an end for Saul, and justice would be done. Saul was to receive just punishment for his disobedience in dealing with the Amalekites.

The next day, Saul manfully went to battle. As he expected, the conflict went badly. It was the Philistines' archers who turned the battle against Israel. Their showers of arrows kept the Israelite army in retreat. This attack wounded and killed many of the Israelites.

With the battle turning against him, Saul determined to kill himself. He asked his armour bearer to kill him, probably remembering what had happened to Samson at the hands of the same Philistines (**Judges 16:21**). When the armour bearer refused, Saul fell on his own sword and died. Saul's life ended in the face of a hopeless situation. Some even believe that his self-

murder was justified under the circumstances. We will not focus on this situation, but on Saul's mistakes that led to his hopeless situation.

HOW DID THIS HAPPEN?

He Loss the Lord

Saul's mistake is obvious—he lost his relationship with God. How much different the battle could have been had he maintained a solid relationship with Him! How Saul needed to find again the faith that had led him to victory at Jabesh Gilead long ago! He had stated, "... *this day the Lord has rescued Israel*" (*1 Samuel 11:13b*). The spirit of the Lord, which had come mightily on Saul at Gibeah, had left him after his disobedience at Gilgal (*1 Samuel 10:10; 16:14*).

How could this happen? Quite simply, God will never be meaningful in lives where He is not wanted. His response to a constant rejection is to answer in kind. God will never force Himself on those unwilling to respond to Him. Saul's life shows the result of a person's continuing in rebellion. He found himself at the point of no return. Saul's supreme need was to throw himself upon the mercy of God in repentance; yet Saul would not do this, and he eventually reached this point of no return.

A Loss of Direction

Sin has the power to drive us to seek willingly what we once despised. One of Saul's major religious accomplishments was to banish mediums and spiritists from the land. In a last desperate act, he sought such a person.

A Loss of Meaning (Purpose)

None can deny that Saul's position became most difficult. The defeat of his army turned into a rout. He was seriously wounded or lapsed in a deep state of despair. He came to view suicide as being preferable to capture and torture. Some will wonder if his suicide was justified. The morality of suicide is a subject usually avoided in polite company and in Bible classes, but to ignore the question is to ignore reality. Suicide is a common occurrence. It is not confined to the mentally disturbed, the terminally ill, or those hopelessly addicted to drugs or alcohol. Suicide is the second most common cause of death among teenagers. Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem. It is not a Christian solution to any problem.

ELIJAH

After His prayer for has been answered, Elijah was excited! His God had been victorious in the confrontation with the prophets of Baal. He had heard the people shouting, "*Jehovah is the Lord!*" He had finally seen the torrential deluge that would end the drought. At the close of chapter 18, Elijah was waiting at the gate of Jezreel while Ahab went into the palace. No doubt he believed that as the repercussions of all that had happened permeated the upper levels of government, the whole nation would return to the Lord. I can see the prophet trembling with excitement.

In chapter 19, a different picture is painted of the man who just had such a great victory. *“Now Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword.”* *“Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah” (v. 2a).* Elijah had probably been expecting a messenger—one who would say, “Come into the royal court; be an advisor; help us get back to the Lord.” However, that was not the message.

Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, “So may the gods [her gods] do to me and even more, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them [one of the dead prophets of Baal] by tomorrow about this time” (v. 2).

In other words Jezebel's message was telling Elijah, “Within twenty-four hours, either I'm going to be dead or you're going to be dead”! Some wonder why Jezebel sent a messenger. If she was really serious, why didn't she just send an assassin?

How did Elijah react? *“And he was afraid¹ and arose and ran for his life” (v. 3a).* Here was the man who had stood up to thousands, many with weapons, on Mount Carmel, and now he ran from this deranged queen. He *“ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah” (v. 3b).* Beersheba was in the southernmost part of Judah—about one hundred miles from Jezreel. Elijah, who had had little or no sleep and probably nothing to eat, *ran* that one hundred miles. When he reached Beersheba, he *“left his servant there” (v. 3c)* Whatever Elijah's reasons, he leaves him behind.

Elijah did not stop at Beersheba, the city bordering the Sinai wilderness; he pressed on. “But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree” (v. 4a). Some translations have *“a broom tree.”* *“And he requested for himself that he might die” (v. 4b).* Is this not ironic? He was fleeing for his life so that he would not be killed by Jezebel, yet now he was saying, “I wish I were dead.” He continued, “And said, ‘It is enough; now, O Lord, take my life, for I am not better than my father's [my predecessors, God's spokesmen who came before me]’” (v. 4c). apparently, he thought he would be “better than his fathers.” He thought he could do what they had not done: turn Israel back to the true God. It had not happened, so he said, “I'm turning in my prophet's badge. I am ready to die.”

Here we have a classic case of discouragement: a man who is down, a man who thinks that his situation is hopeless, a man who feels trapped by circumstances. Chances are, all of us have been there at least once in our lives. Just how did Elijah end up under the juniper tree?

First, he was guided by human reason, not divine revelation. He got off track regarding his relationship with the Lord. Up to this point, he had waited until “the word of the Lord” came to him before he took the next step, but not this time. He began to rely on his own judgment rather than God's will.

Second, as a result, Elijah could not think clearly; his thinking processes were short-circuited. If he had been thinking clearly, he would have reasoned that if he could defeat the thousands on Mount Carmel with God's help, he surely did not have to be afraid of one woman. Instead, negative thoughts filled his mind; they began to whirl through his head.

Third, he gave in to fear. When we give in to fear, it mushrooms. When Elijah gave in to fear, he did not stop running for one hundred or so miles!

Fourth, he was unprepared for the let-down that can come after victory. Every coach knows about that let-down. Victory makes us vulnerable. Even congregations of the Lord's church can have a let-down after an attendance drive or other special event. Elijah was not ready for the let-down.

Fifth, he cut himself off from his sources of strength. He cut himself off from God; he had not waited for the word of God. He cut himself off from men; for whatever reason, he had said good-bye to his servant. Elijah has been called "*the loneliest man alive.*" Depressed people are often lonely. The strange thing is that, even though they are lonely, invariably they have cut themselves off from others. "I don't want to see anyone. I don't want to be around people." God made us so that we need others. "*It is not good for . . . man to be alone*" (**Genesis 2:18**). Even Jesus, in the Garden of Gethsemane, wanted His disciples to "keep watch" with Him (**Matthew 26:40**). Elijah had cut himself off from his support system.

Sixth, he let himself get overly tired. He apparently had not eaten for several days. He had run for miles. He was exhausted physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Elijah broke.

Seventh, he gave in to self-pity. "I've tried so hard," he said, "but I haven't accomplished anything. I'm no good!" Some think that attitude reflects humility, but it does not. It indicates the opposite. It is a subtle form of selfishness, thinking too much of self. Self-pity is a monster. It whispers lies in our ears, then begins to exaggerate, making everything seem worse than it is. Self-pity can even make an individual consider suicide. "It is enough now, O Lord," Elijah said. "*Take my life.*"

Do you see where Elijah is? Discouragement and depression came to this great man of God. It can happen to anyone. Moses wished that he were dead (**Numbers 11:15**), as did Job (**Job 3:1ff.**) and Jonah (**Jonah 4:3**). Even Paul despaired of his life (**2 Corinthians 1:8**). It can happen to you.

CONCLUSION

- A. God took care of Elijah's physical needs: rest and food (vv. 5-8).
- B. God dealt tenderly with Elijah as He turned Elijah's attention from his problems to Himself (vv. 9-14).
 - 1. God first used questions to draw Elijah out of himself.
 - 2. Then He used sounds to draw Elijah out of the cave.
- C. God gave Elijah meaningful work to do (vv. 15-18).
 - 1. Note that God answered everything Elijah had said earlier.
 - a. Elijah: "Israel has forsaken Your covenant"; God: "Hazeal, king of Syria, will punish Israel."
 - b. Elijah: "Ahab and Jezebel have thrown down Your altar"; God: "Jehu will destroy the dynasty of Ahab. There will be no worship of Baal after that."
 - c. Elijah: "They have slain Your prophets"; God: "I will provide a replacement [Elisha]."
 - d. Elijah: "I only am left"; God: "Seven thousand have not bowed the knee to Baal."

God was telling Elijah that his life was not over; he had meaningful work to do. a. "There may not be another showdown on Mount Carmel, but there will still be dramatic moments." God also planned for him the important work of training younger men! God gave Elijah a friend and companion (vv. 19-21). Elijah got out of the dark cave and went to do God's bidding. He had "jumped the tracks," but God put him back on track!