



Living with Pressure and Stress

1 Kings 19:1-14

The Bow Should Not Always be Bent

The Battle of Agincourt (1415) took place between Henry V of England, who had 8,000 troops, and the Dauphin, King of France, who had 20,000 troops. Yet Henry won the battle against all the odds. There were several reasons for the victory, but primarily it was the use of well-trained archers.

The English Long Bow was made from a yew tree which, when fully grown, would make a six foot bow, with a draw weight of 60-80 lbs. It could be deadly up to 350 yards.

As an integral part of their training, archers were taught to remove the bowstring when the bow was not in use, as the bowstave would eventually weaken and break if it were always bent. This illustration is a helpful reminder that if you consistently live under pressure and stress, at some point you will snap.

Recently I have been inviting my congregation to explore the life of the Old Testament prophet Elijah. In 1 Kings 19, we made a surprising discovery. In previous chapters, Elijah had been a fearless, uncompromising, powerful leader. Yet in chapter 19, he struggled with discouragement, despondency, and depression. He was physically tired, emotionally exhausted. His energy was depleted, and he could not shake it off. *The bow will eventually break if it is always bent.*

In the preceding chapter, Elijah experienced the greatest triumph of his life. He had stood alone, a solitary figure, challenging the prevalent culture of his day, along with the moral and spiritual darkness that accompanied it. He faced not only the most powerful man of the day, King Ahab, but also the 400 prophets of Baal, and he had a remarkable victory over them.

Elijah was afraid and ran... (19:3)

As 1 Kings 19 begins, Elijah has been threatened by Queen Jezebel and her husband King Ahab: "Elijah was afraid and ran for his life" (19:3). Reading those words, your mind immediately goes back to the Elijah who was a fearless, undaunted, determined individual standing against the most powerful individuals in the nation. You ask, "What happened to his trust in the invincibility of God's grace which he had learned years before?"

Now after the intensity of the last few years when Elijah has been living under constant stress, he is physically and emotionally exhausted. He is weary on the inside, vulnerable, and his emotions are on a downward spiral. The threat from Jezebel was the straw that broke the camel's back. You can hear it in his words, "I have had enough, LORD..." (19:4). *The bow will eventually break if it is always bent.*

The devastating consequences of a global pandemic and the restrictions of COVID-19 over the last 14 months have caused significant pain for so many. For some it has meant the loss of a job, a business, or the promotion that was expected, and your life has been put on hold. Others have experienced the deep pain of a miscarriage or the loss of a spouse to the long, slow deterioration of dementia. Maybe your marriage has turned sour and ruptured. *The bow will eventually break if it is always bent.*

Still others have battled with the debilitating trauma of addiction and its consequences. Some have fought anxiety and fear, depression and mental illness or struggled with the past, grieving over events, derailed dreams, and high hopes that have collided with harsh realities. Now you have hit rock bottom and cannot shake it off. *The bow will eventually break if it is always bent.*

Elijah, in an attempt to get out from under the stress and strain, had separated himself from the strengthening relationship of others. He was trying to cope on his own. Discouraged people are often lonely people. Elijah sought solace and comfort in the shade of a broom tree, and then discovered there is little shade beneath the barren branches of discouragement and loneliness.

But God was not finished with Elijah.

And the word of the LORD came to him (19:9)

It is very clear that Elijah needed proper rest and nourishment, but if ever he was to be the man he once was, he needed to be restored and renewed spiritually as well as physically. So we read the wonderfully refreshing words, "And the word of the LORD came to him" (19:9).

When Elijah sought isolation in a cave, God invited him to "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by" (19:11). God was reminding Elijah that loneliness and isolation in the darkness of a cave will not refresh you. If Elijah was ever to have his heart restored and his mind renewed, he needed to engage with God Himself.

The passage tells us that the presence of God was felt in the force of the wind which passed by the mouth of the cave. An earthquake accompanied the presence of God as the mountain trembled and shook, and fire flashed by the mouth of the cave. But the voice of God came as a gentle whisper. A still, small voice. God often speaks into the quiet moments of darkness, discouragement, and despair. He whispers in soft undertones, gently, encouraging us to lean in, to listen, to be quiet.

If you prefer to spend your time engaging with a smart phone on TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, WhatsApp, and Facebook, He will let you do so. If you are convinced that your time is better spent exploring a digital playground, He will let you do so.

But Elijah discovered what so many have given down the centuries. When we unstring the bow, slow down, shut out the noise of a busy, demanding lifestyle and be still, then we will know His refreshing and renewing grace. When we put down the demands and stresses of the day, let go of the grief over past events, derailed dreams, and high hopes that have collided with harsh realities, and rest in Him, then we are renewed and refreshed. Whatever we have faced over the last 14 months, we can rest in Him and trust again in the invincibility of God's grace.