

Speaker 1: [00:08](#) Hello and welcome to this episode of the St Andrews Enfield podcast with me, Steve Griffiths. In this episode, I want to address a really sensitive topic, which is how we can deal with depression or burnout in our lives. And right at the start, I want to say that I'm not really trying to offer a definitive podcast on the issue, but instead I just really want to start a conversation and to say really that more than anything else, it's okay for us to talk about mental health issues and that we must be able to do that in a nonjudgmental way that is open and honest and hopefully supportive and empathetic. And we're all aware just how important this topic is. So many of us have suffered or are suffering with depression or burnout or anxiety or stress. And I count myself amongst that group of people because to be absolutely honest with you, um, I have suffered from a prolonged period of depression in the past and on a couple of occasions

Speaker 1: [01:18](#) um, I've suffered from burnout and deep anxiety as well. I won't bore you with my life story, but I was a carer for seven years from the age of 27 for my first wife before she died of cancer at the age of 36. And my sister died of cancer at the same time. She was 34 and that same year, uh, one of my closest friends died as well as two of my grandparents. And I was a single parent for two years with a six year old daughter whilst a parish priest in a very tough church in the East End of London. And during that period, um, I suffered depression for many years and I've experienced burnout and anxiety in my ministry as a parish priest as well. I sometimes think the expectations that are put on a priest are often too much really for one person to carry. As well as leading the people of God into a closer relationship with God,

Speaker 1: [02:18](#) we've also got to run a staff team and care for ancient buildings and raise millions of pounds, develop strategies for growth, uh, sit with the dying, care for the bereaved, help the mentally ill and the homeless. And then, of course, we are trustees of charities and governors of schools, we do weddings, baptisms and assemblies. And, um, some of us live with threats of physical violence on a very regular basis as well in our parishes, and so much more. And on top of that, um, we need to try to be there for literally hundreds of people as they go through their life crises, offering support and prayer as best we can. And so the demands, the expectations, on a parish priest are often overwhelming. Um, and it's not surprising that so many, uh, church ministers suffer from depression or burnout. But I don't say any of this with any personal agenda other than to say that if that's how you're feeling today, burnt out, depressed and anxious,

- Speaker 1: [03:22](#) um, then there are others who have experienced their own pain. And, and whilst I would never say I know how you feel, um, I will say that you are not alone. You may feel isolated today, but the church is a community that must support one another through dark times. And the passage that I want us to think about today in relation to this is from 1 Kings 19:1-9. Um, it's a profoundly important passage for us to think about. It teaches us a great deal about coping when we are in an emotionally dark place because it's a story about Elijah when he was in a very dark place in his life and he was clearly suffering from burnout. Perhaps he was suffering from depression as well. So how does this passage fit into Elijah's story? Well, first, let's set some of the context.
- Speaker 1: [04:30](#) We need to start off by thinking about what had happened to Elijah three days earlier, recorded in the previous chapter, in chapter 18 of 1 Kings. Elijah had been on Mount Carmel, um, engaged in a colossal confrontation with the prophets of Ba'al and the reputation of Elijah's God was at stake in this confrontation. And in the presence of hundreds of Israelites, uh, 450 prophets of Ba'al and 400 prophets of the goddess Asherah, um, Elijah had performed a miracle that proved the existence of his God. And after the miracle had happened, Elijah ordered that the false prophets should be rounded up and taken to the river and executed. It was a, it was a huge moment in the life and ministry of Elijah because the powers of darkness had been discredited, he had challenged the political and spiritual leaders of the nation. He'd vindicated his own ministry in the power of God. And into the bargain,
- Speaker 1: [05:41](#) he'd angered Queen Jezebel so much that she sent him a death threat. Um, Elijah was under tremendous physical, emotional, and spiritual stress. And so it's not surprising that he was completely burnt out and perhaps suffered some sort of a breakdown. Um, Elijah, was exhausted. He'd given everything that he possibly could. He was completely drained and he lost all perspective on life. And the death threat from Queen Jezebel was the final straw. And we read in verse three of Chapter 19 that Elijah was afraid and that his only thought was to escape and run away. And, as is so often the case when we burn out or we suffer with depression, um, it was not the reality of the present situation that impacted Elijah so much as fear and anxiety about the future. Elijah fell victim to fear and depression, tipped over the edge by what might happen in the future at the hands of the revengeful Queen.
- Speaker 1: [06:59](#) And for a moment in time, Elijah lost sight of the majesty and the power of God whose miraculous interventions he'd just

proved. Um, and he succumbed to the fear and anxiety of worrying about possible futures. And interestingly, our English translations of the Bible have verse three of 1 Kings 19 saying, "Elijah was afraid" but the original Hebrew says, "Elijah sees how things are." But the truth is that Elijah didn't see how things were at all. Instead, he feared how things might be. His imagination was working overtime with these possible futures and that was distorting his vision of reality. Through fear and anxiety and worry for the future, Elijah had stopped responding to things spiritually and was now just reacting to the circumstances of life. Uh, he made an assessment of the situation and decided that to run away was the best option. And so we read in verse three that "Elijah got up and fled for his life and came to Beersheba." But that was in complete contradiction to where God wanted him to be. Because in verse 15, God says, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus." We look at this passage, we look at verses three and four, particularly, they offer so much information about the psychology of Elijah as he suffers with his depression and burnout. And we can learn a lot about ourselves in these verses. And there's two things in particular that I want to focus on in this podcast.

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And the first is that depression or burnout can lead us to choose isolation. Firstly, um, in verse four, we're told that Elijah went a day's journey into the wilderness. Now this is important because it shows us that Elijah, through his depression, was removing himself from the community of faith. He was removing himself from his spiritual family. Elijah believed that no one could help him. Uh, he believed that no one understood. So he left the community and went out into isolation. Elijah just wanted to be left alone, perhaps to die alone. And there's a real temptation for all of us when we are depressed or burnt out to stop engaging with church, to stop coming to church. But I'm convinced that that is the worst thing that we can do because if the local church, congregation and community stands for anything, it must be a place where we love one another and support one another and encourage one another in good times and in bad. If our local church community is ever a place that tolerates gossip or backbiting or judgment or unfair criticism or intolerance with one another's perceived weaknesses, then we will have utterly failed as a church. So if we're feeling depressed or burnt out, don't choose isolation. Don't stop coming to church. We need to be absolutely sure that we are not alone in our dark places of life and that we can get support and understanding from

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one another.

Speaker 1: [10:48](#) And the second key point really from verses three and four is that, um, depression and burnout results in confused and chaotic thinking that makes no real sense at all. And there's a real contradiction in Elijah's thinking here. In verse three, we read, uh, "He fled for his life." But in verse four, we read his prayer to God where he says, "O Lord, take away my life." So did he want to live or did he want to die? Elijah was oscillating between a desire to survive and a desire to die. On the one hand he wanted to fight on, but on the other hand, he wanted to just sort of roll over and give up and die. Elijah was completely and utterly burnt out. And this verse five, um, really starkly says then he laid down and fell asleep. And depression, burnout, is exhausting. It's completely mentally and physically exhausting.

Speaker 1: [11:50](#) And so here we have a picture of the darkness that was surrounding Elijah. We have a sense of his depression, his burnout, his anxiety. And perhaps some of us can relate to that well today. But where was God in this story? How did God respond to Elijah when he was at his lowest point? What can this passage teach us about how God responds to us when we suffer depression or anxiety or burnout? I'm sure that the last thing you want to hear today, of course, are some sort of spiritual platitudes, pie in the sky, um, metaphors, phrases like, uh, "God knows and understands" uh, don't cut it when you're depressed, or ideas like "Jesus took all your pain when he died on the cross", uh, they don't really offer too much balm to a wound. Even though we know it's true, um, they're not the kind of phrases that we want to hear necessarily, uh, when we're feeling depressed or burnt out. So what practically did God do when Elijah was burnt out? Well, let's take some time now to think about God's practical and pragmatic intervention here.

Speaker 1: [13:16](#) Well, the first thing that God did is absolutely crucial. Um, he let Elijah sleep. God knew that Elijah was exhausted, so he just let him sleep. And as Christians, we don't need to be on the go for God all the time. We don't need to fill our days with good deeds or prayer or Bible study. Sometimes we just need to sleep. And it's a hard thing to say, and for some people it can be a hard thing to hear, but as a parish priest, I can't always be available because I need to rest. If I'm to stay sane and function as a human being, I need time with my family. I need time for my hobbies. I need time to do nothing at all. And I know that members of my congregation can't always be available to me to volunteer for more and more ministry in the, in, in, in the church because they need time to rest and recuperate as well.

Speaker 1: [14:20](#) Um, if we are not rested Christians, then we are no good to God, the church, or one another. And then after God let Elijah sleep, he sent an angel to him who gently woke Elijah and in verse five said, "Get up and eat". Now when an angel appears, we expect some deep and profound spiritual message. We expect God to, um, impart some really deep spiritual message to Elijah about his life and ministry. But that doesn't happen. With real gentleness, the Angel of the Lord just says, "Get up and eat". God is so practical. Uh, he knew Elijah needed to sleep, so he let him. He knew Elijah needed to get his strength back. So he fed him. And then what happens next? Well, in verse six, we read that Elijah lay down again and went back to sleep. And we simply cannot address spiritual and emotional depression or burnout if we are not looking after ourselves physically.

Speaker 1: [15:22](#) And God knows that if we are to fully recover, we need to sleep and we need to eat and we need to sleep again. And then in verse seven, the angel comes back again and says, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." And then, God provides more food. So if there's one thing to learn from this, it's surely has to be that we need to be, um, we need to be gentle with ourselves when we're depressed or burnt out. God is gentle with us. And we must be gentle with ourselves too. Um, healing takes time. Healing, uh, cannot be rushed. Healing involves body, mind, and spirit. And all three need to be nourished. So take your time. God can wait for you. The world can wait for you. God can wait for me. The world can wait for me. The parish can wait for me. Uh, take all the time you need to rest and sleep and eat and begin to get back some sense of perspective so that the issues that you're facing can be addressed.

Speaker 1: [16:55](#) So moving on with the story, uh, we notice again what the angel said in verse seven. He said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." Now the emphasis is still on Elijah's recuperation, but this time there is a mention of a journey. God is gently introducing to Elijah, um, hope and promise for the future. You see, Elijah thought that his journey with God was over. He thought that his time with God was done and that there was nothing left to do but die alone in the wilderness. But God had other ideas. God had not finished with Elijah, even though Elijah had given up on himself. Uh, with real gentleness, God doesn't give any details of the journey. And I think again, that's, that's really important because Elijah was still in the process of recuperating. So the last thing he needed was to hear God say, "Right Elijah,

- Speaker 1: [17:59](#) I want you to leave here and devote yourself to a life of prayer and service, uh, walking on the edge of society, constantly vulnerable to the attacks of others so that my name will be glorified." Um, that would have been completely lacking in compassion and it would have stressed Elijah out even more. So, um, God doesn't give any details of the journey. He just gives the promise of a future worth living for. And in verse eight, we read this, "Elijah got up and ate and drank. Then he went, in the strength of that food, 40 days and 40 nights to Horeb, the Mount of God." And the fact that the journey lasted 40 days and 40 nights is highly significant, of course, because here he is being likened to Moses and his journey through the wilderness arriving at Sinai, which is the same place as Horeb, where Elijah was being led.
- Speaker 1: [18:59](#) And so Elijah makes this journey, uh, and guess what? When he arrives, he goes back to sleep. Verse nine, "At that place, uh, he came to a cave and spent the night there." So more rest in order to face what lay ahead. So in this story of Elijah's depression, we see that God has physically restored him, uh, through food and sleep. We see that God has emotionally restored him through the promise of a future, and we see that God has spiritually restored him by bringing him back to Horeb, a sacred place. And having been healed and restored physically, emotionally, and spiritually, Elijah is now in a place to meet with God in an intense and powerful way. And that's the next phase of Elijah's story. We're not going to cover that in the rest of this podcast, but you might want to have a read on, um, about Elijah's story, in your own time.
- Speaker 1: [20:08](#) So what do we learn from this incredible passage? What does it have to say to you if you are suffering from depression or burnout today, or if you're feeling anxious or fearful for the future or on the edge of a precipice? What does this passage have to say to me when I find my parish ministry uh, sometimes so utterly overwhelming? Well, firstly, we are reminded to be kind to ourselves, to eat, to sleep, to rest up for a while. Don't be driven by other people's agendas at the expense of your health. Healing and restoration is a process that takes time and needs to engage, uh, with our body, mind, and spirit. And secondly, we've learned that how you or I might be feeling right now is not the end of the story. Uh, we don't have to roll over and die alone in the wilderness, either physically, spiritually, or emotionally.
- Speaker 1: [21:13](#) Uh, God has not given up on you. This is not the end game. There is the promise of a journey. And when you are ready, God will take you on that journey. But he won't start it until you're

ready because he loves you too much for that. So take your time. There's no hurry. And thirdly, we learned that, uh, your journey will lead you to a sacred place. It will lead you into intimacy with God, if that's where you want to go. Um, how you're feeling today is not the end game. Uh, I, I talk an awful lot in my sermons at church about finding God in the ordinary of life. Um, and the truth is that Christian spirituality is intensely pragmatic. God is with us in the real mess of life. That's what the Cross of Christ is all about. That's what the incarnation is all about.

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The Word became flesh. God gets his hands dirty in the mess of our lives and he works, uh, in the most pragmatic way to restore us to life in all its fullness in body, mind, and spirit. That was the experience of Elijah, and that's the experience of so many Christians around the world. And it can be your experience as well. Uh, there's no rush. God is at work. He will restore you. He will heal you at a pace that you can handle. So go get some sleep. Get something to eat. Hear the promise for the future. And when you are good and ready, get up and follow God to the sacred places that he has in store for you. So I hope that this has been a useful podcast for you. If you want to continue the conversation, then please do email me, uh, steve.griffiths@london.anglican.org. Check out our website, standrewsenfield.com. Our Facebook page is St Andrew's Enfield. Uh, please do tell other people about this podcast. And don't forget to subscribe. So wherever you are, whatever you're doing. I hope that you have a, uh, a blessed and rested day and that you will know the peace and the healing of God on you in body, mind, and spirit. Bye.