

CHRIS HODGES

WITH DUDLEY DELFFS

Out of the Cave

STUDY GUIDE | FIVE SESSIONS

HOW ELIJAH **EMBRACED GOD'S HOPE**
WHEN **DARKNESS** WAS ALL HE COULD SEE



HarperChristian
Resources

Out of the Cave Study Guide

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Introduction

No one is immune to depression—not Christians, not pastors, not even God’s prophets.

Perhaps there’s no better case study for exploring the darkness of depression and the power of God’s light than the life of the Old Testament prophet Elijah. Chosen by God to be his prophet to the people of Israel, Elijah nevertheless struggled to trust God’s goodness and to experience his power in the midst of anxiety, fear, and uncertainty.

Elijah’s experience reminds us that everyone is susceptible to depression. No matter how powerful, accomplished, or successful we may be, we can still succumb to fear, doubt, and a sense of hopelessness that robs us of our life’s purpose and joy. Even when we’re walking with God, as Elijah was, we can still stumble and get lost in the wilderness of tangled emotions.

But we don’t have to stay there. Elijah’s example reveals that God is always with us, even in the darkness of depression. Elijah’s retreat into the cave of hopelessness and his life-changing encounter with God there reveal a path to our own way back into the light.

Most experts agree that depression is now the number one health problem in the world. Whether the into it descent is gradual

or sudden, the impact of depression affects every area of a person's life. Compounding the problem, many people still stigmatize those who suffer from depression and other forms of mental illness. They sympathize when someone gets physically ill or suffers a bodily injury, yet they often dismiss the issues a person may have related to emotional and psychological health. Somehow, they assume, a person's emotional and mental health should be completely within his or her control at all times.

For followers of Jesus, this stigma is even greater. Many believers assume that God's peace, power, and protection should prevent them from feeling anxious, depressed, and afraid. But that's not what we find in the Bible. In fact, just the opposite! In God's Word, we're told to "fear not" at least 365 times—one for each day of the year—along with reminders of God's presence in the midst of any and every human emotion . . . including depression and anxiety.

Elijah's battle with depression and his God-inspired victory over it offer hope and healing for us today. Depression is a powerful and complex condition . . . but it can be overcome. In addition to seeking medical treatment, exploring talk therapy, and relying on God's Word within a trusted community of believers, we can also make changes in our lifestyle, attitude, and habits that facilitate the peace and joy we can experience in Christ.

We can follow Elijah's journey into the light of God's healing presence.

How to Use This Guide

Group Size

The *Out of the Cave* video study is designed to be experienced in a group setting (such as a Bible study, Sunday school class, or other small-group gathering) and also as an individual study. If you are doing the study as a group and the gathering is large, your leader may split everyone into smaller groups of five or six people to make sure everyone has enough time to participate in discussions.

Materials Needed

Everyone in your group will need a copy of this study guide, which includes the opening questions you will discuss, notes for video segments, directions for activities and discussion questions, and personal studies for between sessions. You may also want a copy of the book *Out of the Cave*, which provides further insights into the material you are covering in this study. To aid your study experience, you will be encouraged to read specific chapters in the book to prepare for the group's next meeting.

Facilitation

If you are doing the study with a group, you will need to appoint a person to serve as a facilitator. This person will be responsible for starting the video and keeping track of time during discussions and activities. (Note that the videos can be accessed at any time via the streaming code found on the inside front cover of this guide). Facilitators may also read questions aloud and monitor discussions, prompting participants to respond and assuring that everyone has the opportunity to participate. If you have been chosen for

this role, there are additional resources in the back of this guide to help you lead your group through the study.

Personal Studies

Between sessions, you can maximize the impact of the course with the personal studies provided for each week. You can treat each personal study section like a devotional and use them in whatever way works best for your schedule. You could do one section each day for three days of the week or complete them all in one sitting. These personal studies are not intended to be burdensome or time-consuming but to provide a richer experience and continuity between your group sessions.

SESSION 1

EVEN PROPHETS GET DEPRESSED

After getting all fired up,
it was almost inevitable that Elijah would cave in.
Depression often comes on the heels of a
spiritual and emotional high.

FROM CHAPTER 1 OF *OUT OF THE CAVE*

Welcome

No matter how strong your faith may be, you likely experience times when frantic thoughts keep you awake at night. Times when your emotions overwhelm you and leave you feeling pulled by their undertow. Moments when you don't know how you will keep going. As you struggle to get through another day, you wonder, "Why do I feel this way?"

You're not alone. Regardless of how long you've followed Jesus, how accomplished you are, or how much money you have, you can still experience times of fear, doubt, anxiety, and depression that rob you of your purpose, peace, and passion. Just like God's prophet Elijah, you may be strong in your faith and suddenly feel like you've fallen into a deep cave of despair. In fact, depression often occurs right after a major spiritual or emotional high point.

Depression is not something you can ignore—and understanding it can help you overcome the stigma often attached to it and other mental illnesses. While many variables are often involved, and biological contributors may require medication as part of treatment, depression also sends a distress signal that your life is out of balance. You must consider all areas of your life as you seek to move forward out of depression.

In this study, we will look at the depression the prophet Elijah faced after he came off the spiritual high point of defeating the prophets of Baal. His story will reveal that we never have to remain in a cave of despair. God is always with us and always willing to lead us out of our personal darkness and into his eternal light.

Share

If you or any of your group members are just getting to know one another, take a few minutes to introduce yourselves. Then, to get things started, discuss one of the following questions:

- What keeps you awake at night? Too much caffeine? Scary movies? Worrying about family? Something else?

— or —

- When you can't sleep at night, what do you do instead? Count sheep? Drink warm milk? Read a book? Get up and eat a snack? Pray? Something else?

Read

Ask one person to read the following passage, and then discuss the questions that follow.

¹ Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. ² So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, "May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them."

³ Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, ⁴ while he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, LORD," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors."

⁵ Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep.

All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat."

⁶ He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again.

⁷ The angel of the LORD came back a second time and touched him and said, “Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you.”⁸ So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. ⁹ There he went into a cave and spent the night (1 Kings 19:1–9).

What do you identify with most in this description of Elijah’s descent into depression?

What word, phrase, or image stands out or resonates for you in this passage? Why do you think it strikes a chord right now?

Watch

Play the video segment for session 1 (see the streaming video access provided on the inside front cover). As you watch, use the following outline to record any thoughts that stand out to you.

God called Elijah to warn Israel of impending doom if they continued to reject him and worship idols. Consequently, Elijah arranged a showdown on Mount Carmel with the prophets of Baal, in which God’s fire descended and consumed the water-soaked altar.

Ahab, the king of Israel, and his wicked wife, Jezebel, hated Elijah and vowed revenge. Jezebel sent a messenger to tell Elijah that she would kill him within twenty-four hours. This sent the panicked prophet running away into the wilderness.

There are two key observations we can make based on Elijah's experience:

1. Depression often comes on the heels of a spiritual/emotional high.
2. Depression often comes when our minds take over.

Depression can be defined as a mood disorder characterized by anhedonia, extreme sadness, poor concentration, sleep problems, loss of appetite, and feelings of guilt, helplessness, and hopelessness.

There are biological, physical, and neurological factors that contribute to depression and anxiety. Medication may be required as part of treatment. However, if we only focus on these biological factors, we can miss the whole picture.

Many times, we are just afraid to talk about depression because there is a stigma associated with it. *It's okay not to be okay.* When we battle depression, we must remember that God wants to reveal himself in a very special way and make us whole again (see Psalm 46:10, Psalm 16:11, and Isaiah 61:3).

Discuss

Take a few minutes with your group members to discuss what you just heard and explore these concepts in Scripture.

1. Are you surprised that Elijah experienced depression on the heels of such a major spiritual victory? Why or why not?

2. Why do you think Jezebel's threat on his life triggered Elijah's flight impulse? How did her threat get in his head and contribute to his downward spiral?
3. When have circumstances caused you to encounter thoughts and feelings similar to those of Elijah? If you have battled depression and/or anxiety, were there specific events that led up to that struggle?
4. How would you define depression? Explain your answer.
5. Do you agree that experiencing depression may be a distress signal indicating your life is out of balance? Why or why not?
6. What are some of the ways depression and mental illness continue to be stigmatized even by people who follow Jesus? How can we overcome these stigmas in order to help more people experience healing, wholeness, and freedom?

Respond

Briefly review the video teaching outline and any notes you took. Also reflect for a moment on the group discussion you just had. In the space below, write down the most significant point you are taking away from this session—including the teaching, activities, and discussions.

Pray

Go around the room and share any prayer requests you have. Pray for those requests together silently, out loud, or both. Thank God for bringing you all together to study the life of Elijah and to learn more about depression and how to move through it. Ask God to give you wisdom, compassion, and strength as you consider painful chapters in your life and reflect on tough times. Trust that the Lord will protect each of you and guide you in his truth.



BETWEEN - SESSIONS

PERSONAL STUDY

If you haven't already started reading *Out of the Cave* by Chris Hodges, now is a great time to begin. This week, read the introduction and chapters 1–3 before doing this personal study. The questions and exercises provided in this section are designed to help you receive the greatest benefit from reading the book and applying it to your own life. There will be time for you to share your reflections at the beginning of the next session.

Out of Your Cave

Depression can be a uniquely personal experience that's difficult to describe or express to other people. While Elijah's situation reflects his unique experience, it also reflects a journey through depression that many find similar to their own. Remember how after Elijah's astounding victory, he seemed to plummet rather quickly. He went from the awesome display of God's power and glory on Mount Carmel, which included an embarrassing defeat for King Ahab and the 850 prophets of Baal, to being at the lowest point imaginable—wishing he were dead. Consider the contrast between these high and low points as you read the following passages.

³⁶ *At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: “LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command.”* ³⁷ *Answer me, LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.”*

³⁸ *Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench (1 Kings 18:36–38).*

³ *Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, ⁴ while he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. “I have had enough, LORD,” he said. “Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors” (1 Kings 19:3–4).*

What stands out or strikes you most about these extreme scenes in Elijah’s life? Can you relate? When have you gone from a high point to a personal low back-to-back? Looking back, how would you describe your descent?

Do you think the pressure of such a public moment on Mount Carmel contributed to the personal moment Elijah experienced under the broom tree? Why or why not? How do you usually handle the stress and tension between your public life and your private life?

Even after God answered Elijah’s prayer in dramatic fashion, a short while later the prophet feared for his life and ran away. When

have you doubted God's faithfulness even after you've experienced his power in answer to prayer?

Elijah reached a point where he told God, "I have had enough, Lord." When have you reached a similar breaking point where you cried out, "Enough is enough, Lord! I can't keep going any longer"? How did God answer your prayer then?

What do you think Elijah meant when he told God, "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors"? What's the connection between Elijah's feelings that he is no better than his ancestors and his desire for his life to end?

Have you ever felt so scared, alone, and defeated that you tried to run away from your problems, either literally or figuratively? What are some ways you sometimes pursue unhealthy escapes when you're feeling low?

Into the Light

You can't begin to come out of your cave until you admit you are in the cave. You have to come clean, acknowledge the problem, and move past any sense of shame or stigma that you have attached to

your depression. You can be helped in this regard by recognizing that you aren't the first person to face depression . . . and you won't be the last. In fact, the Bible contains many examples of people who battled such thoughts and feelings. Many of the Psalms, in particular, express feelings of pain, fear, anxiety, and doubt. Often, the psalmist can give voice to what you are struggling to admit. Just consider the following psalm written by King David:

¹ *Listen to my prayer, O God,
do not ignore my plea;
² hear me and answer me.
My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught
³ because of what my enemy is saying,
because of the threats of the wicked;
for they bring down suffering on me
and assail me in their anger.*

⁴ *My heart is in anguish within me;
the terrors of death have fallen on me.
⁵ Fear and trembling have beset me;
horror has overwhelmed me.
⁶ I said, "Oh, that I had the wings of a dove!
I would fly away and be at rest.
⁷ I would flee far away
and stay in the desert;
⁸ I would hurry to my place of shelter,
far from the tempest and storm."*

¹⁶ *As for me, I call to God,
and the LORD saves me.
¹⁷ Evening, morning and noon
I cry out in distress,
and he hears my voice (Psalm 55:1–8, 16–17).*

What do you find surprising in the psalmist's disclosures in this passage? Why?

Which of the psalmist's phrases, statements, and questions resonate with you the most? When have you felt this way? What were the circumstances?

When has your "heart been in anguish within you"? How many serious bouts of depression have you experienced in your life?

How have you experienced the stigma attached to depression? What harmful messages and destructive labels were assigned to you or to others around you who have experienced depression?

How has your understanding of depression impacted your relationship with God? When you're feeling low or anxious, have you tended to run toward God or away from him?

What indications of hope does the psalmist express in this passage? What truths give you hope when you're battling similar thoughts and feelings?

Personal Reflection

One of the ways to describe and define depression is to compare it to something else. While Elijah literally ran away and hid in a cave, his journey into interior darkness reflects what depression feels like for many people. Others describe it as being in a fog, or experiencing a slow-moving storm front, or being frozen in place. For this exercise, think about your own experiences with depression and what you've observed in others or learned from reliable sources. Then answer the following questions as you creatively describe and define it.

Depression reminds me of:

The images I associate with depression include:

How would you illustrate your own understanding of depression? What image, metaphor, or picture comes to mind that expresses what you thought and felt during that time? Grab your favorite creative tools—pencil and paper, crayons, markers, paint, whatever you want—and come up with a visual representation of depression that does not rely on words. You can sketch, doodle, draw stick figures, use geometric shapes, paint, color or whatever you enjoy. Don't worry about artistic quality—just find a way to express depression visually.

In preparation for next week, read chapters 4–9 in *Out of the Cave*. Make a note of any key points or questions that you want to share at your next group meeting.