

Elijah's needs (1 Kings 19:1-15a)

The prophet exhibits all four HALT states at once in 1 Kings 19.

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June 17, 2022

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It is said that when we are emotionally activated and on the verge of making rash decisions, we should employ the acronym HALT: ask ourselves if we are hungry, angry, lonely, or tired.

Psychologists tell us that these states inhibit our decision-making abilities, so it is best to address our physiological needs before we act.

Elijah exhibits all four HALT states at once in 1 Kings 19. Having heard of Jezebel's decree to have him killed, he flees to the wilderness, asking to quit his role as prophet and to die.

Further dramatizing this moment is the fact that it occurs directly after Elijah demonstrates boldness and clinches victory over Baal's prophets in chapter 18. After such a triumph, what explanation is there for Elijah's bleak outlook? Does Jezebel's decree really elicit a visceral fear response when a whole fleet of Baal's finest did not?

Elijah's behavior may strike us as irrational, but human emotions often are. In his HALT state, he falsely claims that he has been left alone to complete the work and declares that he is done with his ministry and his life.

God does not shame Elijah for his feelings but validates them. Before asking more of him, God addresses Elijah's physiological needs, providing him with food, water, and 40 days of retreat.

In this era when our many obligations and concerns conspire to leave us little time to tend to our own needs, we can glean wisdom from the beat God offers Elijah before calling him back to work. We cannot be effective in other facets of our lives when our physiological wells are dry.

Similarly, Elijah's story offers a balm in an age of increasing clergy burnout. God's prophets know what it means to feel overwhelmed by the weight of their calling and endure the range of human emotions experienced in ministry, and God is not above attending to their woes. While there is more to preventing burnout than self-care, checking in with ourselves when we notice emotional activation rise in us can allow us to enforce our own boundaries in a field that does not always lend itself to a healthy work/life balance.

The world's problems will not be fixed by ensuring we feed ourselves, sit with our anger, reach out to a loved one, or take time to rest. But meeting our own needs does ensure our own health and capacity to heed God's call to step out of our caves and face the challenges of the day.