

WHAT FAITHFULNESS FEELS LIKE

SERIES: PRAYERS FOR THE
MOMENT



Catalog No. 20200830
1 Kings 19:1-19
Seventh Message
Paul Taylor
August 30, 2020

1 Kings 19:1-19

The global pandemic that we're facing has been difficult in so many areas—our economy, our education, our families, and of course the fact that we're still worshipping remotely. But one of the most significant and possibly lasting effects of this season has been on our mental health.

Symptoms of depression and anxiety in the United States have skyrocketed in the past year. A recent poll found that 30% of people in the US have symptoms of depression, up from 7% last year; and 36% of people have symptoms of anxiety, up from 8% last year.¹ Researchers talk about multiple waves of impact from the pandemic. The first is physical health; the second is our economy; the third is a pandemic of mental health.²

This resonates with me. Personally, the crisis of the pandemic has followed what had already been a very difficult past few years for me. Around two years ago, I started having symptoms of anxiety and depression. For a few months, I faced severe insomnia. I spent most of 2019 talking to a counselor and working through some issues in therapy. In the beginning of 2020, with the help of some new therapy techniques and medication, things had improved considerably.

But then, 2020 happened. For the past few months, I've seen a recurrence in many of my symptoms. I've been dealing almost daily with physical symptoms of anxiety. Lately, I've seen some improvement, but this continues to be a regular issue for me.

Where does God fit in when you're struggling with your mental health? What happens when you hit rock bottom, and you're not sure how to keep going? What do you do when you're just not sure you can keep going? How do you walk alongside others who might be facing these kinds of challenges?

In our summer series called Prayers For the Moment, we've seen how different biblical characters pray in their unique circumstances. I've loved hearing from a variety of voices and learning from a variety of stories.

This morning, we're going to see a man in the middle of a mental health crisis. He will face one of the darkest emotional places of his life. He is depressed, anxious, and suicidal. He will run as far away from his pain as he can get, but it will follow him there. And in that dark place, we will see him pray. We will see what faithfulness feels like.

I'm very eager for us to look into this story and learn from Elijah this morning. It's easy to think that people with a strong faith and a solid walk with God always feel great. I worry that sometimes our version of American Christianity leads us to think that way. For some reason, we think that mental health challenges can't happen when you have a strong faith.

The man we're going to meet this morning is named Elijah, and he is one of the most famous prophets in the Old Testament. Elijah's relationship with God stands out as unique. He appeared on the mountain when Jesus was glorified, and the New Testament praises him as a hero of faith.

However, this faithful man faced some dark times and dark thoughts. He walked through an incredibly lonely season. He faced feelings of complete despair and hopelessness. We're going to hear how Elijah prayed in those dark times.

There is so much to talk about in this story. I'd love at some point to hold a retreat on mental health from Elijah's story, but for now, we only have thirty minutes, so I want to make sure that I say upfront what I want you to hear from this message.

First, it's okay if you are facing a mental health challenge. It's not your fault. You haven't failed. Second, God can meet us even in the darkest places. In fact, sometimes light shines the brightest in the darkest places. And finally, there is hope. There is always hope.

It's okay, God is there, and there is hope.

The Backstory

Elijah is a fascinating person. The first time we hear of him in 1 Kings 17, he comes on the scene, declares that God has stopped the rain in Israel and runs away into the wilderness to live as a hermit.

During that time, ravens bring him food. He stays with a widow, performs a miracle to extend her flour and oil, and raises her son from the dead.

Finally, God promises to send rain, but only after an epic showdown between himself and the prophets of Baal. You may be familiar with this story. Elijah challenges the prophets of Baal to a contest. They prepare an offering and ask Baal to light it on fire. Hours of futile efforts pass with no success.

Then Elijah prepares the offering for the God of Israel. He douses it with water, not once but twice until it is dripping wet. Elijah prays, and God shows up. 1 Kings 18:38 says, “The fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust.”

Next, all the people who were gathered proclaimed faith in God. We are told that they fell on their faces repeating, “The LORD, He is God! The LORD, He is God!” Then they chased down the prophets of Baal and slaughtered them. And finally, it started to rain. The drought was over.

If your job is to be a prophet, then this is the most significant possible achievement you could enjoy. Elijah brings about one of the most decisive demonstrations of God’s power and identity that we have recorded in the Scriptures. Everything comes together. Think about how he must have felt.

Elijah probably hoped that things would finally change. After years of God’s people ignoring him, now they saw for sure who he is. After years of the weak King Ahab and his evil wife Jezebel, God won. This was the moment when everything in Israel was going to change! Elijah travels to the capitol to celebrate his victory and he’s met by Jezebel.

But instead of backing down, Jezebel doubles down and insists that she will kill him. Even after Elijah’s incredible success, nothing was going to change.

Elijah was devastated. He proved that YHWH was God, but it didn’t matter. So Elijah runs. He runs from Jezreel in the far north of Israel to Beersheba in the far

south. Then he leaves his servant there and goes even farther south.

Elijah literally travels off the map, as far away from everything as he can get to. In a moment, he has gone from his greatest triumph to a place of deep depression. Elijah’s disappointment overwhelms him, and he sinks into a suicidal depression. And he prays.

How Elijah Prays

We think of prayer as nice and spiritual. Prayer is supposed to be holy. We feel like good Christians when we pray, which only reveals how much of our performance mentality creeps into the idea of prayer. But Elijah’s prayer in this moment is anything but nice and pretty.

1 Kings 19:4b-5a:

And he asked that he might die, saying, “It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers.” 5 And he lay down and slept under a broom tree.

This is Elijah’s prayer for the moment: Please, God, take away my life. Elijah was faithful. He saw God show up, but then nothing changed, and Elijah fell apart.

Later in the story, God reaches out to Elijah with a simple question. We’ll look at that question in a moment, but for now we’re focusing on Elijah’s prayer. Read what Elijah says next.

1 Kings 19:10:

He said, “I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away.”

God asks Elijah the same question twice, and Elijah answers it in the same way. Word for word, the very same. We are getting a picture into Elijah’s prayer at his darkest moment. Let’s walk through it carefully to understand what he’s feeling. We’ll zero in on four different phrases that he uses.

As we look at these phrases, I want you to consider whether you’ve been in this place. Have you felt what Elijah felt? Have you prayed what he prayed?

The first thing Elijah says is “It is enough.” Some translations say “I’ve had enough.”

Elijah was overwhelmed. He felt like he couldn’t handle the things in his life. They were too much for him. After all, God had tasked him with representing himself to the rebellious nation of Israel. Elijah thought he had done a good job, but he concluded that it didn’t matter. This is Elijah saying “I’m done. I can’t go on anymore.”

And so he makes a request of God: “O LORD, take away my life.”

Elijah was hopeless. This is how bad life had gotten for him. He didn’t want to live anymore. Nothing on earth was worth it to him. He had failed, and he couldn’t see any future worth participating in. As he looked toward tomorrow and the day after, nothing seemed worth it to him. Things were terrible, and he couldn’t imagine them changing for the better.

Later, after God gently inquires, Elijah explains his feelings. First, he says “I have been very jealous for the LORD.”

Elijah was discouraged. He did everything right. God asked him to declare a drought, and he did. God asked him to care for a widow, and he did. God asked him to challenge the prophets of Baal, and he did. Everything God has asked him to do, he did. But nothing seemed to work, and nothing ever changed. Elijah was faithful, but it didn’t seem to matter.

Elijah’s final complaint was that he was the only one: “I, even I only, am left.”

Elijah was lonely. He thought that he was the only one who cared about God. He felt like the whole world was against him. It’s absolutely true that one very powerful person was completely against him, but Elijah thought that everyone was trying to kill him. He felt completely alone.

Elijah was overwhelmed, hopeless, discouraged, and alone. His prayer to God was one of the darkest in the Scriptures. “I can’t do it. I don’t want to live. Nothing I do matters. And I am completely alone.”

Have you been there? Have you felt overwhelmed, hopeless, discouraged, and alone?

As I started preparing for this message, someone asked me why I wanted to preach this prayer. I told

them that I wanted to preach this because I resonate with Elijah. I have been where Elijah is.

For me, it just feels like such a heavy season. The global pandemic; the new awareness of racial injustice; the lament that I’m just now seeing the racial injustice embedded in our country; the waves of mourning for things lost: graduations, special moments, and everyday interactions; uncertainty for the future; and a new level of divisiveness.

I have been surprised at how anxiety manifests in physical ways. It’s usually a heaviness in my chest. It’s not a racing heartbeat, not really shortness of breath. It feels like someone is sitting on my chest. Sometimes I’m not even aware of feeling anxious, but my body tells me differently.

Just like Elijah, I’ve felt overwhelmed, hopeless, discouraged, and alone. Maybe you have too.

I’ve been spending a lot of time running lately. A few weeks ago I was in Truckee and did a ten-mile run around an alpine lake. I was really excited about the route.

But halfway into the run, I tweaked something in my back. All of a sudden, every left step sent a stabbing pain through my whole body. But I had five miles left to get to my car, so I pushed through the pain and ran.

Towards the end of that run, I remember thinking, “I wish this were easier. I wish I could just go and do a ten-mile run and enjoy the whole thing and not feel so much pain. I wish I felt strong.”

And then the thought came to me---I think it was from God: this is what strength feels like. This is what it feels like to be strong.

What I want is to feel strong enough to go through hard things without them feeling hard. But I realized that real strength means that you go through hard things even though they feel hard. The harder they feel and the more perseverance you have, the stronger you are.

Elijah’s prayer suggests that faith works the same way. Elijah was faithful. He did what God asked of him. He saw God move in spectacular ways. But still, Elijah found himself in this dark place, feeling overwhelmed, hopeless, discouraged, and alone.

Maybe this is what being faithful feels like; not all of the time, but perhaps sometimes being faithful to God means that you have to walk a very dark road. You may not get quite to the same point as Elijah, or maybe you have. But if you think that faithfulness feels like constant peace and joy and confidence, listen to these words from the apostle Paul: For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself (2 Corinthians 1:8b). Paul says in Romans 9:2 as he grieves Jewish unbelief, I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart.

We could hear from David and Abraham and Jeremiah; from Peter; from Jesus as he weeps in despair and cries in pain. Brothers and sisters, this is what faithfulness feels like.

I'd like for us to stop putting mental health into a separate bucket. Sometimes we think that only certain people have mental health challenges. But that doesn't reflect a biblical picture of how God created us. Everyone has mental health problems. Just like everyone is subject to physical issues at times, everyone is subject to mental health problems.

Sometimes you can heal on your own from some physical health problems; others require professional help. Mental health is the same---some issues are clinical, and some are less severe. But everyone faces stress. Everyone has anxiety. Everyone loses hope at times.

I hope that Elijah's prayer normalizes mental health for us. Please don't find yourself looking down on Elijah. Don't think that you would do better. We often do that when we see biblical characters struggling or making mistakes. It's much better to ask what they found in those struggles rather than thinking if we work hard, we can avoid them.

Let's see what Elijah found in that dark place because not only does he pray; he has a conversation with God, and God responds to him.

How God Answers

Elijah shows us the raw and brutal prayer of a man who has lost hope and is overcome by his loneliness. But God responds to Elijah.

1 Kings 19:5-7:

And he lay down and slept under a broom tree. And behold, an angel touched him and said to him, "Arise and eat." 6 And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. And he ate and drank and lay down again. 7 And the angel of the Lord came again a second time and touched him and said, "Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you."

After Elijah runs away, God feeds him and guides him to a new place. In the strength of that bread and water, Elijah travels for forty days to Mount Horeb. That's another name for Mt. Sinai. Mount Horeb is where Abraham and Moses met with God, and this is where Elijah will meet with God.

First, God asks him the question that led to his response above. But then God shows up for Elijah and asks the same question again. Elijah had hid himself in a cave.

1 Kings 19:11-13:

And he said, "Go out and stand on the mount before the Lord." And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. 12 And after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper. 13 And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

This is the second time that God asks Elijah that question. This is the question which Elijah answers twice in the same way: "I've been jealous for the LORD; the people have sinned; I'm the only one left."

We're going to look at how God responds to Elijah, but first I want us to notice what God *doesn't* do. There are several ways that we tend to respond to people that aren't helpful.

God doesn't **correct** Elijah, and he doesn't try to **fix** him.

One of the worst things about struggling with depression or anxiety is when well-intentioned people suggest that it might be your fault. Maybe if you just had more faith. Maybe if you just tried to pray. Maybe if you just—dot, dot, dot. God doesn't correct Elijah's pain. He doesn't blame him, and he doesn't make him feel bad for how he feels.

God also doesn't step in to try to fix him. Instead, God accepts Elijah where he's at: running from his pain, hopeless and overwhelmed, and too tired to go on. God **accepts** him there.

He starts off by saying "Arise and eat." I love how practical that is. Before addressing your deep struggles, let's make sure you have some food in your belly. God feeds him enough to make a journey to meet with God in a new way. Step by step, not all at once, God **provides** for Elijah.

The next thing God does is to agree with Elijah's feeling of being overwhelmed. He tells him "the journey is too great for you." God uses the same word that Elijah uses when he says "It is enough." The words for "great" and "enough" are the same in Hebrew. I love that. I've been repeating this phrase to myself the past few weeks: "the journey is too great for me."

God **affirms** Elijah. He doesn't say, "Come on, you can do it." He affirms that Elijah can't do it. But that isn't the end of the story.

Finally, God reveals himself in "the sound of a low whisper." You may not have noticed this, but God tells Elijah to come out of his cave, but Elijah doesn't at first. It isn't until he hears the whisper that we are told that Elijah wrapped his face in a cloak and stood at the entrance to the cave.

Elijah had seen God show up in powerful ways. He knew the God of the wind and the earthquake and the fire. Now he sees the God of the quiet whisper. Elijah encounters God in a new and intimate way.

God **showed up** for Elijah.

I love how tender God is with Elijah. Elijah was overwhelmed, hopeless, discouraged, and alone. But God accepted him, provided for him, affirmed him, and showed up.

This is how God responds to Elijah. God is there.

As I've wrestled with anxiety, several things have helped. Therapy, medication, diet, and exercise have all played a part. So has practicing contemplative prayer in the mornings. I've established a new rhythm of quieting myself before the LORD. I usually use Psalm 37:7 as I meditate: "Be still before the LORD, and wait patiently for him."

I've experienced God in new ways. I often find that when I sit outside in the morning and quiet myself before God, I notice the sound of the birds. I've come to conclude that those birds are a reminder of God's presence in my life. Sometimes the morning is completely quiet; sometimes the birds are loud and raucous; At times, they are far away, and at other times I can hear them in the tree next to me.

It's always different. God's presence is never the same, but he's there *all the time*—sometimes in lightning, sometimes in a whisper, occasionally distant, and occasionally close. His presence doesn't always take away my anxiety. He doesn't fix me, but here's there, and I get to encounter him.

Conclusion

Many of us are struggling with mental health challenges. I'd even venture to say that all of us are.

I want us to recognize that it's normal to struggle with mental health. Many of the faithful saints in the Bible did. God is there in the midst of the struggle. He doesn't always take it away. I've come to realize that my journey with anxiety is part of the path on which God has me. Jesus isn't a solution; he's a companion.

I'm not saying that you shouldn't get help. Medical professionals have been a great help to me in my journey. I'm suggesting that you invite God into this part of your health journey and see what he is going to teach you through it.

There's one more thing that God says to Elijah at the end of this story. It's the final response to Elijah's prayer. God gives him a mission. He tells him to go and anoint two political leaders and to make Elisha the next prophet. God also reminds him that even though he feels alone, he is not. There are 7000 other faithful followers of YHWH out there.

Brothers and sisters, if this God is real, and if he meets us in our depression and anxiety, then we aren't the only ones who need to hear this. This message of Jesus

Christ is good news to the world. As hard as the last few years have been for me, I have walked them with Christ and in a community. Plenty of people have neither.

Throughout this story, God continually invites Elijah to take one step forward. Arise and eat; go to Mount Horeb; come out of the cave; go and anoint these leaders. God is tender with Elijah, but he doesn't pamper him. God is understanding, but he still calls Elijah forward. He is sensitive to Elijah's weakness, but he doesn't leave him there.

God calls Elijah forward even in his weakness, inviting him to a life of complete dependence on Christ. I think this is what the apostle Paul meant when he said in 2 Corinthians 12:9, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Paul didn't say that God took away his weakness, just that God's power was made perfect in it. We are weak. If you haven't figured that out yet, you will. It is in our weakness that we will discover God's strength even more. That's what faithfulness feels like.

Let me return to the main ideas that I began saying that I wanted to you to walk away with: it's okay, God is there, and there is hope.

Endnotes

1. Suzan Song, "COVID-19 losses and uncertainty have led to a mental health crisis. Here's how to help," *NBC News*, August 2, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/covid-19-losses-uncertainty-have-led-mental-health-crisis-here-ncna1235547>
2. Cindy Minn and Isabelle Hau, "The Next Pandemic: Mental Health," *EdSurge*, May 30, 2020, <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2020-05-30-the-next-pandemic-mental-health>