

A JOURNEY OF ENCOUNTER



Chapter 5: The Days of Elijah - 'From celebration to crisis and opportunity' Based on 1 Kings 19:1-18

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INSPIRE

In Chapter Five of our 'Into the Wild' prayer adventure, we meet Elijah, a prophet and mighty prayer warrior who has just achieved the greatest success of his life. Spiritual revival has come to Israel through his obedience to God: fire falling from heaven, the people of Israel on their knees crying, 'The Lord - he is God!' a tangible darkness in the land overcome by the goodness and glory of God, and the end of a three-year drought. What a day!

But then comes the desert, the loneliness, the fear and the depression, and we discover that even the highest highs can be followed by soul-crushing lows. Join us as we accompany Elijah from the mountain of victory through the desert of despair to an encounter with God which challenges and strengthens him.

Read alone or with a friend, reflect on the discussion questions over the phone with someone or in an online small group / Bible study, try the prayer activities... and see what happens when you make time to listen to the small, quiet voice of God.

If you'd like to receive regular updates throughout the 'Into the Wild' journey over the coming year, including invitations to our regular Zoom prayer gatherings, [sign up here](#).



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EXPLORE

Introduction

God moved in mighty power when Elijah prophesied and prayed on Mount Carmel. We could reasonably expect the prophet to be triumphant and elated, if exhausted, but he would surely be confident in this spectacular victory - wouldn't he?

Yet the moment he received a message from Queen Jezebel, Ahab's wife, threatening his life because he had killed her prophets, Elijah was gripped with fear. He fled to Beersheba. He travelled about 80 miles south from Jezreel, but even then he did not feel safe. He journeyed one more day into the desert, collapsed in the shade of a tree and prayed to die. 'Enough of this, God - take my life!'

How could victory turn to vulnerability so quickly? How could a mighty man of God become so frightened and fearful, even suicidal?

These wise words from Winston Churchill might have encouraged him, had Elijah been born in our day instead of around 900 BC:

'Success is not final, failure is not fatal. It is the courage to continue that counts.'

Context

These days, Elijah might have been diagnosed as bipolar. He seems to have experienced periods of extreme energy and activity followed by days of extreme fatigue and depression - some of the symptoms which this physiological imbalance in the brain can cause. Mental health issues can affect everyone. There may be no obvious cause for severe anxiety and depression. Christians are not immune; indeed, many do suffer, and it can be distressing when other people assume that there is a specific reason for the condition and offer a 'quick fix'.

Christian leaders and workers can be especially vulnerable to burn-out and breakdown, particularly when working in isolated situations with little support and a demanding workload. During the early months of lockdown, a Baptist minister acquaintance of mine regularly shared on Facebook details of his heavy workload. By the end of July he had officiated at 70 funeral services for families in his area and wrote that he could not yet see the possibility to take a much-needed break. His friends could only pray and advise and hope that this man of God, living and working alone, would come through. Another minister commented, 'Please, please make time for yourself. I got this badly wrong and am still living with the consequences.'



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Perhaps Elijah felt he had fallen too far into despair and self-pity to be restored, but God had not finished with Elijah. In a tender, practical and powerful way, God ministered to this broken servant and equipped him for the tasks he was called to fulfil.

Deepen

The first step in Elijah's recovery was simply to rest. In the shade of the desert tree he could sleep safely for as long as he needed. When he woke up, he was hungry, and God had that in hand too. An angel was there with freshly baked bread and cool water. Elijah obediently ate and drank and then slept again. Eat, drink, sleep and repeat - the simple process that God implemented to restore and prepare Elijah for the next step.

How often do we seek for dramatic spiritual solutions to a personal crisis when simple practical measures would go a long way to restoring mind, spirit and body?

It may surprise us to read that the next step for Elijah was a 200-mile walk to Mount Horeb! Moderate physical activity is often recommended as a means of building strength, but Elijah's trip took '40 days' (though the biblical phrase may simply mean 'a long time'). The route from Beersheba would not usually have taken as much as a literal 40 days, but God was leading Elijah on a wilderness journey, a personal time of reflection and retreat to prepare him for the next encounter.

Elijah came to the mountain called Horeb (or Sinai), the place where Moses had experienced his encounter with God. He spent the night in a cave, possibly the same cleft in the rock where Moses had stood as God passed by (Exodus 33:22).

'What are you doing here, Elijah?' (v9). Surely God knew Elijah's anxious thoughts and selfish motives, but he graciously listened as Elijah poured out his heart for Israel and his disappointment with God.

Then came the instruction: 'Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord.' Yet before he could leave the cave, a mighty wind, a strong earthquake and a raging fire occurred in quick succession, and those sudden, earth-shattering events seemed to hold nothing of the presence of God at all.

Have you waited for God, only to find yourself in the midst of turmoil?

Then came a gentle whisper, or as one translation says, 'the sound of sheer silence' (1 Kings 19:12, NRSV), and in the sound of that silence was the presence of the living God. Humbled and awestruck, Elijah went to the mouth of the cave, covering his face. 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' came the question again, and once more Elijah voiced his sorrow and his own sense of isolation in remaining



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faithful to God. But now that still, small voice spoke clarity and direction, and Elijah knew he was not alone.

Conclusion

The silence of God is an invitation to a deeper trust, a calling to be still and listen. When fatigue, anxiety, stress and depression affect us in body, mind and soul, may we learn to hear the still, small voice. As we live through the turmoil of a global pandemic, with all the grief, anxiety and uncertainty it can bring, may we know that we are not alone.

In this season of living through a global pandemic, we are so grateful that expert medical care is available when required. We also recognise our God-given responsibility to take care of ourselves and others, learning much in these strange and challenging days that can renew our hearts.

A truth to hold on to

‘In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength’ (Isaiah 30:15).

Challenge

- What is your response today as God says, ‘What are YOU doing here?’

WATCH

This month we hear Stories from Meshiel Brown and Jonathan Munn. They've both been learning how to live well and trust God in the midst of mental health problems. They tell us what they've learnt in the wilderness places, and how they're encountering the presence of God in the midst of inner turmoil.

(Content warning: Meshiel's story contains references to sexual abuse, self-harm and suicidal thoughts.)

[Watch their stories here](#)



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DISCUSS

- What resonates most for you in Elijah's varied experiences: Celebrating success? Coping in a crisis? Listening to God's still small voice?
- How do you manage your work/life balance to keep your body, mind and spirit healthy?
- Have you ever been ministered to by angels - have you experienced miraculous provision when you've been at your lowest ebb, or are there particular friends or family who've brought you just what you needed in those dark times?
- What advice would you offer to a friend or leader who you observe is overloaded?
- How can we best support people in our church families who are living with mental illness?
- Have you ever lived through an experience when God felt entirely absent?
- What most helps you still yourself so you can tune into the still, small voice of God in the silence?

PRAY

1. 'Be Still' meditation

Read these familiar words aloud slowly and take time to listen to what God is saying:

Be still and know that I am God.
Be still and know that I am...
Be still and know...
Be still...
Be.

2. A prayer of surrender

Charles de Foucauld, a French priest, wrote this classic Prayer of Abandonment which has helped many people to draw closer to God and express a desire to live a life of faith and surrender to his will and way.



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Father, I abandon myself into your hands; do with me what you will.
For whatever you may do, I thank you:
I am ready for all, I accept all.
Let only your will be done in me, as in all your creatures.
I wish no more than this, O Lord.
Into your hands I commend my soul;
I offer it to you with all the love of my heart,
For I love you, my God, and so need to give myself,
To surrender myself into your hands,
Without reserve, and with boundless confidence,
for you are my Father.

3. Make a retreat

40 days, like Elijah, may not be an option, but a few days each year in a rural retreat centre following a pattern of corporate prayer, teaching and silence can be spiritually and physically enriching. If you can't manage that, even taking a day to get away and be alone with God is a life-giving thing to do.

A retreat is not simply a rest; it is a challenge, because there is space and time set aside to meet with God. He calls us into encounter with him and speaks into our lives if we are willing to listen.

4. Be an 'angel'

Who needs your prayers at the moment? Who needs a coffee, a treat or a kind word? As you pray and listen to God, ask him to show you if there is anyone who is in that desert place of fear, loneliness or depression whom you could encourage today. Rather than thinking up your own ideas or solutions, why not ask him to tell you exactly what they need.

WEBSITE AND CONTACT EMAIL

For resources and sign up: www.salvationarmy.org.uk/resources/into-the-wild

Email Prayer Network: saprayernetwork@salvationarmy.org.uk



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