

Elijah's Spiritual Crisis 1 Kings 19:1-18 Sunday 22nd June 2025

The story of Elijah's life is found in just 6 chapters of the Bible, 1 Kings 17,18,19 and 21 and 2 Kings 1 and 2. He lived over 700 years before Christ and was a prophet in the northern kingdom of Israel. Ahab was the king at the time. Ahab had married the foreign princess Jezebel and had begun to worship and serve the foreign god Baal.

We are told in 1 Kings 16:32-33 that Ahab *set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. Ahab also made an Asherah pole and did more to provoke the God of Israel to anger, than did all the kings of Israel before him.* An Asherah pole was an image of the Canaanite goddess, Asherah who was a god of the Sea.

As God's special prophet Elijah was in conflict with Ahab and his wife Jezebel. At one point Ahab referred to Elijah as *you troubler of Israel.* Because Ahab and the people of Israel had turned to the Baal gods, Elijah announced that a drought would befall Israel for a period of time until Elijah decided otherwise. Throughout the drought he found safety, shelter and food in a region outside Israel. While the drought was occurring Queen Jezebel oversaw the killing of many who were the Lord's prophets. During the third year of the drought Elijah met with King Ahab and organized a challenge to be held on Mt Carmel. The challenge was to determine who is the true God- the Lord or Baal. People from all over Israel who had been unfaithful to the Lord and turned to Baal were summoned to watch the proceedings where Elijah competed against 450 prophets of Baal and the Lord God competed against Baal. The competition was this: Two altars were built. On each altar was placed a sacrificial bull. Both Elijah and the 450 prophets of Baal called on their respective gods to send down fire to light and burn their sacrificial offering. When the prophets of Baal did this, nothing happened. When it was Elijah's turn, he prayed that God would let it be known that He was the God of Israel and that Elijah was his servant. He prayed this so that these people would know the Lord, and know that He was turning their hearts back to Him again. The Lord answered Elijah's prayer and the altar and the bull were set on fire. The result of the competition was an overwhelming victory for the Lord and Elijah. Referring to the victory, in 1 Kings 18:39,40 we read, *When all the people saw this they fell prostrate and cried, "The Lord – he is God. The Lord -he is God!" Then Elijah commanded them. "Seize the prophets of Baal. Don't let anyone get away!" They seized them, and Elijah had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and had them slaughtered there.*

Soon afterwards, the drought broke, relations with Ahab seemed to become amicable and Ahab returned to his palace in Jezreel, with Elijah running before him.

Bible Reading: 1 Kings 19:1-18

Let me pose some questions to you.

Do you ever get discouraged or depressed? Do you ever find yourself in the grip of despair? Does fear ever possess you? Do you ever experience loneliness and a feeling that no one

understands? Do you ever seem to be at the end of your tether? Do you ever go to sleep and would be happy if you never woke up again?

If you were able to answer yes to any of these questions then you will surely have some sympathy for Elijah.

But why did this man of God, feel it necessary to flee and why did he no longer want to live?

After the miracle on Mt Carmel and the heartfelt response of the people of Israel to the power of the Lord, Elijah must have felt that Ahab and the Israelites would have wholeheartedly served and worshipped the God of Israel. But he hadn't counted on the ferocity of Jezebel. She was a foreign queen who had grown up in a land where Baal was unchallenged as god. Baal was her god. It was because of Elijah that her 450 prophets, had been slaughtered. Ahab had witnessed and could testify to Jezebel of the power of the Lord on Mt Carmel, and of the fact that the people of Israel had apparently renewed their commitment to the Lord but this proved fruitless in preventing her from seeking revenge. She swore vengeance on Elijah. Although she didn't send her bailiffs to arrest him, Elijah received a verbal message that his life was in danger and this prompted him to take flight. Foremost in Elijah's mind would have been the memory that during the recent drought, for which he was responsible, Jezebel had many of the Lord's prophets slain.

Fearful, he ran for his life. From Jezreel which is to the west of the southern most part of the Sea of Galilee he ran south to Beer Sheba the southern-most town in Judah, which is to the west of the southern part of the Dead Sea. This is a distance of excess of 160 km. After a further day's journey into the desert he layed under a tree and prayed that he might die. *"I have had enough Lord," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep. (19:4)* He had gone from being fearful to now despairing of life itself.

So why was he so desperately despondent?

1) He was physically exhausted. He had travelled a long distance, fearing he was a hunted man and it would appear only now did he lay down to rest.

2) He had a great sense of failure. It was very clear that Elijah and thus the Lord was responsible for the drought. It was very clear that Elijah and thus the Lord was responsible for the miracle on Mt Carmel. It was very clear that Elijah and thus the Lord was responsible for the breaking of the drought, yet, in spite of all this, Jezebel was refusing to recognize the Lord is God and wanted Elijah's hide. Ahab was not going to stop his wife, so she was the dominant force in the palace. Her fury and intransigence caused Elijah to question what he had achieved. He felt he was no better than his ancestors. Whether by this comment he means his physical ancestors or whether he meant his spiritual ancestors, i.e. prophets we can't be sure. Maybe he identified with his physical ancestors and wished to join them in death. Perhaps he identified with his spiritual ancestors, prophets like Moses who, in the wilderness, complained and also asked the Lord if he could die (Numbers 11:14,15). Elijah was frightened of being in conflict with authority. He was tired of being an opposing voice to what seemed like no avail.

3) He seemed to have forgotten the power of God. The God who not only overcame Baal on Mt Carmel but also who had protected his servant. When Elijah first foretold that a drought would now commence in Israel the word of the Lord was with him and ensured his safety and well-being throughout this time. He had experienced God's loving care and seen his mighty power but he was reluctant to trust the Lord anymore. His faith was overcome by fear.

4) The fact that the angel brought him food suggests that he was undernourished. He hadn't eaten the sustenance necessary for him to be in a good physical state and this may have contributed to his depression.

Failing to trust the Lord, fearful for his life and feeling to be a failure, physically exhausted from the journey, and undernourished, he had reached a crisis point in his life and so he prayed for his life to end.

At this point in Elijah's story we become aware of the hand of God again at work in his life.

Ever so gently, the Lord moves. He hears Elijah's prayer but answers it but not how Elijah hoped. He doesn't give Elijah what he wants but nor does he rebuke him for his failure to trust in God. Through the angel, God provides him with food and drink to nourish his body and company to remind him he is not alone. And then God leaves him alone to rest and sleep. Most of us have had visits to the doctor where we have been told that part of the recovery process is rest. And this appears to have been important for Elijah too.

God's angel returned for a second visit and instructed Elijah to eat more for although he had travelled far he had much further still to go. This time he was eating and drinking in preparation for the journey ahead.

WHEN WE ARE AT OUR LOWEST POINT AND WE PRAY FOR ESCAPE BE IT THROUGH DEATH OR SOME OTHER WAY GOD OFTEN CARES FOR US IN A WAY THAT IS UNANTICIPATED AND MAKES NO SENSE AT THE TIME.

God's healing hand was at work in Elijah's life but he was not yet ready for what the Lord wanted to reveal to him. More distance needed to be put between him and Jezebel's reach and more time was needed for him to try to make sense of what had been happening in his life. In front of Elijah was a journey of 40 days and 40 nights to Mt Horeb, the mountain where God appeared to Moses in the burning bush.

Modern health experts extol the benefits of a sensible diet and regular exercise. Water, some bread and 40 days of trekking seems a bit extreme but anyone who has undertaken a long walk with simple nourishment knows just how spiritually refreshing this can be. **SOMETHING DIFFERENT AFTER A CRISIS CAN HELP US RECOVER AND ENABLE US TO FACE THE NEXT STAGE OF OUR LIFE.** One thing is for sure the time spent travelling alone would have given Elijah time to think. Time to regain a degree of composure such that he would be less panicky, less fearful, more spiritually open to God. I assume he spent time each day in prayer but there appears to have been no significant response from God to those prayers, otherwise it would have been included in the story.

When Elijah arrived at a cave on Mt Horeb God's presence becomes much more apparent.

Throughout the story of Elijah the expression “the word of the Lord“ is used to describe the times when God communicates with his servant or when his servant speaks a message from the Lord. (17:2, 17:8, 17:16, 17:24, 18:31). At Mt Horeb the word of the Lord comes again to Elijah, for the first time since he fled from Jezebel. In 19:9 we read, *And the word of the Lord came to him: “What are you doing here, Elijah?”* The implication being: you are my servant, this is not where I would want you to be, please explain what is going on.

In his reply the first thing to notice is that he no longer speaks about wishing to die. However, while Elijah upholds his own faithfulness he blames God’s people for his predicament. In 19:10 we read, *He replied, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left. And now they are trying to kill me too.”* He obviously feels personal rejection. He is suffering from feelings of hurt, a strong sense of failure and perhaps shame. However, parts of Elijah’s reply are somewhat unexpected. The victory of the Lord over Baal on Mt Carmel renewed the faith of the Israelites in the Lord, so their faith more recently has been revived. He blames the Israelites for trying to kill him when it was Jezebel who threatened his life.

Also, in an earlier encounter with Obadiah, a devout believer who was in charge of Ahab’s palace, Obadiah told Elijah that he had hidden 100 of the Lord’s prophets in two caves, so Elijah knew he wasn’t the only prophet left.

His answer doesn’t quite match up with what we know from the earlier part of his story, but this is his perception perhaps revealing that through the prism of fear he can only remember all that was wrong in the past. He has blocked out the great things that God has done through him. Fear has induced self-pity. In spite of the time that has elapsed since Jezebel’s threat and the distance he has put between them he remains frightened for his life and despairing from his failure to turn the Israelites back to the Lord God in any permanent way. The real issue to Elijah is that the Lord is the God of Israel and Israel should have remained steadfast in their worship and service of the Lord.

The Lord instructs Elijah to go out of the cave and “stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” This instruction is followed by a mighty wind, an earthquake and a fire but the presence of the Lord was not in these natural events. They were followed by a gentle whisper and this prompted Elijah to cover his face and stand at the entrance to the cave. The Presence of the Lord is reminiscent of the times when God appeared to Moses. It was on Mt Horeb, when in the burning bush, God called Moses to lead the Israelite people out of Egypt. (Exodus 3) And also the time when the Lord appeared to Moses on Mt Sinai and issued the Ten Commandments. On Sinai the Lord descended in fire. (Exodus 19:18). *Smoke covered the mountain, then there was thunder and lightning and the sound of a trumpet and the people were afraid.* (Exodus 20:18).

Once again, when Elijah stood at the entrance to the cave the voice of the Lord repeated the question, *“What are you doing here Elijah?”* And Elijah replied with exactly the same answer as before. It would seem nothing has changed since the word of the Lord came to him. But no, something is different. Elijah has experienced the mighty power of the Creator God in a way similar to Moses, in a way different to any other living person. Elijah must have been

aware of the great privilege and honour afforded him. He must have now realised that he held a place in God's purpose comparable to Moses. At no time had God rebuked him. God had patiently met his physical needs, allowed him to put a great distance between himself and the source of his anxiety. And now God had demonstrated some of his awesome power to reawaken Elijah's trust in the king of kings. It must have been evident that the power and the authority of God far outweighed the vindictiveness of Jezebel

This time the Lord graciously recommissioned Elijah for further service. Although Elijah saw himself as a failure the Lord saw him differently. God gave his servant a new mission. He was to anoint Hazael and Jehu as kings and Elisha as the prophet to succeed him. These men would have the roles of continuing to bring God's people back to worshipping and serving him. The Lord also dealt with Elijah's concern that he was the only faithful servant left by reassuring him that there are in fact 7,000 Israelites who have not bowed to Baal. He was not alone. God sent Elijah back the way he came, through the desert to Damascus. Whereas on the outward journey he was full of fear and depressed, his thoughts on the return journey would surely be much more courageous and hopeful. The extraordinary experience of being in the presence of God, the reassuring knowledge that there were many more faithful people in Israel and the renewed sense of Godly purpose for his life, would have given him confidence to face the future. His spiritual crisis was over.

The threat on his life by Queen Jezebel sparked a time of testing for Elijah. Fear overcame faith and the courage of the Lord's servant vanished.

ALTHOUGH OUR CIRCUMSTANCES ARE NOTHING LIKE ELIJAH'S OUR FAITH, IN TIMES OF TESTING, CAN BE FOUND TO BE WANTING. THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF EACH OF OUR LIVES ARE DIFFERENT AND SO THE TIMES OF TESTING ARE DIFFERENT BUT SADLY LIKE ELIJAH WE CAN BE FOUND WANTING.

The way God dealt with Elijah during his time of spiritual crisis has a message for us.

When we are faced with a crisis it helps if our basic needs are met. Healthy food, drink and rest are important. Exercise makes us physically tired so that we sleep more soundly and our rest is more refreshing. Rest can help clear our heads.

It helps if we know we are safe. Safety is a priority if we feel threatened in any way. This why there are refuges for victims of domestic violence and why bullying is now treated seriously.

It helps if we hold onto God as our loving Father. It is important to remember, that when we feel overwhelmed and perhaps wondering how and why did God ever allow me to get to this point, that he is there for us. He hasn't deserted us. He is listening to us and willing to let us to off load our darkest thoughts on him. Remember Jesus' words in Matthew 11:28-30, *Come to me all who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart for you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*

It helps if we feel not alone. We need to feel supported. We need to know that there are like-minded people out there who understand our plight, who are experiencing the same issues.

That our situation is not unique. But also we need to be given space; to grieve in our own way, to resolve any mental conflict we may have; to process the change that is taking place in our life and how that is altering our understanding of our sense of identity.

It helps if we realise that in a crisis we may not have a balanced view of our life and situation. The “terrible” has come to the fore in our life, it is dominating our thinking and taking precedence over all in the past that may have been good.

It helps if we remember that throughout it all, God is compassionate. At the appropriate time he will intervene in our lives in a more special way. Unlike Elijah we can’t expect an extraordinary display of God’s power to mark the occasion. But generally, he will make his presence known to us through the quietness of prayer, reading the Bible, reading Christian literature, the preaching of the gospel, the worship service etc. Through these means the “word of the Lord” will come to us. He will reveal to us his will for our lives in the future. The outworking of his will may or may not be exactly the same as before but whatever, it will still be valuable for the kingdom and we will remain precious to God.