

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church
April 14, 2019, Pastor Jeff Harrison
Elijah: Finding God on the Hard Road
Depression on the Hard Road (1 Kings 19:1-19a)

Introduction:

A. A job search shows we can get depressed on the hard road

Wasn't that great seeing the next generation sing praises to God? Amen. Let's ask God for help as we come to His Word...

When Stephanie and I graduated college, we then served as full-time interns with our church. And there I felt a growing desire to serve as a pastor, and our pastors affirmed that calling, encouraging me to next go to seminary. Meanwhile, a romance was blossoming between Stephanie and I, and she also wanted to serve the Lord and for me to pastor. So after our church internship, we moved to Dallas, married, and got jobs to save for seminary.

After a year and half at as an auditor, I quit, got a part time tutoring job, and started on a 120 hour Master's at Dallas Theological Seminary. Then my last year of seminary, I began to search for a pastoral position, praying, networking, and applying a bunch.

But graduation day came and I still didn't have a pastorate. Stephanie was supportive, but I was feeling pressure. She was seven months pregnant with Grant and about to go on unpaid maternity leave. She had been working a job she disliked to put me through seminary, a job that didn't pay well and she hoped never to return to. And my part time tutoring job was not going to cut it financially, so it was time to put on my big boy pants and find a pastoral job. On top of that, I was very ready to serve after being in a classroom for the last nearly four years.

But the job market was pretty bad for seminary students. The placement office told me some churches were receiving 100s of applications for a single position and were just screening out new graduates. After months of searching, I had already networked with everyone I could think of, so now I was mostly just filling out applications for pastoral positions.

Most pastoral applications have pages of unique questions, so you're spending hours on each one, and then most churches didn't respond to my application at all. And if they did, it was only with a form email saying they aren't interested.

When I graduated, we had to leave our on-campus housing, and not knowing where we were going, didn't want to sign a lease. So we moved in with some friends and paid them rent. Our friends were 25, and I was 31. They were very gracious to invite us into their home for an

undefined time, especially with a newborn on the way, they were great. And unlike us, they stayed on the path we started in college. They didn't intern at a church for two years and spend almost four years in seminary. They both got jobs related to their degrees, and now had a few years of dual income with no kids. They both drove newer cars, his was a nice Infiniti sedan, and they already had a nice four-bedroom house and were saving for retirement.

Our financial picture was a little different. The months continued to pass, Grant was now born, Stephanie was on unpaid maternity leave, and I still had no pastoral job. And I found myself getting more depressed. I read the Psalms a lot, typically on our friends' back porch, which of course had an awesome deck and large tree for shade. There I thought lots of unhelpful things that fed my depression. Like if I had never gone to seminary and just stayed at my accounting job, between the years of lost wages and thousands spent on seminary, we could not only have nice cars and house like our younger friends, but they could be totally paid for.

And I thought of all the churches I applied to, and how their actions were essentially saying, "We need another pastor, but we don't even want to talk about the possibility of it being you." In my depression, like many authors of Psalms, I complained to God, asking why He led us to seminary, which required many sacrifices, only for me to be stuck working my same tutoring job while having all these churches say I'm unworthy to be one of their pastors.

Sometimes, as we journey through life, we find ourselves on the hard road. And sometimes the hard road is much harder than financial pressures and a struggling job search and feelings of failure.

And on the hard road, we're more vulnerable to depression, which makes things even harder. Some of us are on the hard road and struggling with depression this Easter season, feeling this tension of our pain and questions as we prepare to celebrate Jesus' resurrection.

God's Word has much to say about our depression on the hard road as we learn from the prophet Elijah's depression on the hard road. Of course this passage is not everything God's Word says about depression, so keep that in mind, but this passage has a lot to say to us.

So if you've got a Bible or Bible app, open to the Old Testament book of 1 Kings. If not, we'll have the verses on the screen. 1 Kings is the 11th book in the Bible, so more towards the front; if you get to Chronicles you've gone too far. And if you're new to reading the Bible, and the big numbers are chapter numbers, and the little numbers are verse numbers, and we're in chapter 19 of 1 Kings.

As you're turning, I'll say a word about depression medication and professional Christian counseling, since those resources didn't exist in Elijah's time. As broken people in a broken world, our minds, like the rest of our bodies, sometimes don't work as they ought, even if we make good choices.

A runner who eats healthy and manages stress well may have hereditary factors that still lead to high blood pressure. And similarly, some people have chemical imbalances that lead to depression no matter how well they're living. And so things like medication and Christian counseling are sometimes a blessing from God.

B. Refreshing Elijah's story

Okay, now let's get up to speed with Elijah's story. It takes place about 2,900 years ago. The northern kingdom of Israel was on its seventh straight evil king, a man named Ahab, who married an evil foreign queen named Jezebel. Together they led the northern kingdom in worshipping the false god Baal, which sometimes included things like child sacrifices and orgies; and they also murdered all the prophets of God they could find, prophets like Elijah.

So Elijah was on the hard road, which was made harder as God calls Elijah to confront King Ahab and say, "Drought is coming." Baal was said to be a sky god with power over the weather and fertility, so the drought was to show the people that Baal can't provide rain, God is the rain-giver.

So Elijah is a wanted man, and over the next few years, as the drought continues, Elijah continues on the hard road. First God sends him to a wilderness, where Elijah is totally isolated. But there God breaks through as He provides Elijah with water from a brook, food "beak-delivered" by ravens, and time alone to deepen his relationship with God.

Eventually though, the brook dries up, what Elijah depended on is now gone. And God calls Elijah to travel over 100 miles as a wanted man and stay in evil queen Jezebel's homeland and get help there from a destitute widow. But God breaks through, providing safety and supernaturally providing food for the dirt-poor widow, her young son, and Elijah. Eventually though, the son dies, the widow thinking her sins led to her son's death.

On the hard road, Elijah has seen God show up, not in all the ways Elijah wants, but with everything he needs to accomplish God's purposes. And so Elijah has been learning faith on the hard road, and that faith leads to him praying for something that's never happened before, for the

young son to come back to life. And God breaks through, returning life to the son and showing the widow her sins are forgiven.

Having cultivated deep faith on the hard road, God now calls Elijah to confront King Ahab again. In the third year of drought, Elijah boldly tells Ahab to summon everyone to Mount Carmel. The people of Israel have been wavering between Baal and God, and Elijah tells them it's time to choose.

Everyone agrees that whoever can make fire come down from the sky and set his sacrifice on fire is the true God. So Baal's false prophets call to Baal for hours, dancing and frantically yelling and slashing themselves, but Baal never responds.

Elijah then prays a simple prayer, and God shoots fire from the sky and burns His water-soaked altar and sacrifice. And the wavering Israelites fall to the ground and worship, crying out that the Lord is God, and the murderous false prophets are killed.

Then Elijah prays for rain, and God ends the drought with a huge rainstorm. Then God empowers Elijah to win a half marathon race against King Ahab's chariot to the capital city.

What an incredible day, before His people had turned to Him, God graciously shows up in fire and then ends the long drought as the people worship. And now Elijah is back in the capital city ready to lead the people, and hopefully Ahab and Jezebel, in living out their newfound commitment to God. We begin in verse 1 of chapter 19.

I. Learning from Elijah's depression in the wilderness

A. A threat and ministry "failure" lead to depression (19:1-2)

19 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."

Here Elijah's hopes for Israel get a crushing setback. The religious revival Elijah has been spending years praying for and sacrificing for is still not happening, even after God showed up with fire and ended the drought. Ahab and Jezebel won't repent, and the people, who are now supposedly following God, aren't willing to overthrow them. The evil status quo continues, as a furious Jezebel tells Elijah he'll be dead in 24 hours, ironically swearing it on the gods Elijah just showed to be frauds. So let's see how bold, faith-filled Elijah responds to this mere queen's threat in verse 3.

B. Elijah's fatigue and isolation feed his depression (19:3-4)

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."

There's two possible translations for the beginning of verse 3. One is that "Elijah was afraid". The other, which the NIV translation footnotes, is "Elijah saw."¹ So it's possible, despite how God just showed up on the mountain, that Elijah became afraid at the queen's threat. And even if Elijah wasn't afraid, verse 4 makes it clear that Elijah's sense of failure and sadness over the nation leads to a depression so great that he asks God to kill him.

In our lives we can think the problem is that God hasn't shown up enough. That if God brought us the miracle we need, then we'd never fear or despair again. But like Elijah, no matter how much God shows up, we're vulnerable to fear and depression on the hard road, looking at our circumstances rather than at God. Even fire from heaven and the ending of drought wasn't enough to guarantee Elijah would be good just a little while later.

In verse 3 Elijah flees from the northern kingdom all the way to the southern edge of the southern kingdom. To the town of Beersheba. So it's probably not helping Elijah's depression that, after a draining showdown on the mountain, he's now fatigued himself by fleeing so far.

It's probably also not helping that Elijah has isolated himself, telling his prophetic servant in these verses to stay in Beersheba while Elijah journeys into the wilderness alone. There, as both Elijah's spirit and surroundings are wilderness, he asks God to take his life. Some of us know what it's like to be in that kind of wilderness, feeling like we can't live one more day. Let's see how God responds to the suicidal prayer of his depressed prophet in verse 5.

C. God graciously provides replenishment (19:5-8)

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.

Notice God's doesn't condemn Elijah as a lousy prophet for getting so depressed after God has done so much. No God sends an angel to minister.

¹ Depends on the vowel points added to the Hebrew consonants - *wayyirā*, "he was afraid" or *wayyar* "he saw".

When we're struggling, we may feel like God is a million miles away, but He's still right there, with Elijah, and with us. If you're struggling with a deep depression, even suicidal thoughts, it doesn't mean you're ungodly. Elijah was one of the greatest prophets of all time, and yet he fled and asked for death.

Elijah and Moses were the only prophets who later joined Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. And one thing these "top two" prophets have in common is that both asked God to take their life. So when we struggle, let's not add to that burden by wrongly telling ourselves, "I must be ungodly." No godly people, even great prophets, can get very down.

So in verse 5 God sends an angel. First the angel touches Elijah, maybe there's something restorative about the angel's touch. Then the angel gives him food, which of course was angel food cake. And then Elijah rests. The process repeats in verse 7.

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.

Sometimes our depression is made worse by depleting ourselves, like Elijah did fleeing so far away. What we need is to refuel with good food and rest. And then do the hard work of getting into better eating and sleeping habits that help us mentally. When it's time for bed, let's put the phone down, or the Xbox controller down. Let's not stream just one more episode. It's hard to do, but adequate sleep is so important for our mental health.

II. Learning from Elijah's depression on the mountain

A. Elijah's perspective feeds his depression (19:9-10)

Now that Elijah's body is right, he is sent to Mount Horeb, or Mount Sinai. Here God will minister to Elijah's soul. Mount Sinai is an important place in Israel's history, it's where Moses received the Law and saw God's glory pass by. Elijah arrives to the sacred mount in verse 9, where he laments Israel breaking the Law where God first gave it. Verse 9:

⁹ There he went into a cave and spent the night. And the word of the LORD came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?"¹⁰ He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn 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."

Elijah is in a cave, a dark place, and his mind fills with dark thoughts. In the cave, Elijah's perspective is off. Elijah only talks with God about the Israelites' sin, saying nothing of

their worship on Mount Carmel after fire came down. And Elijah says he's the only prophet left, when just one chapter earlier Obadiah told Elijah he successfully hid 100 prophets. So Elijah is not the only one, but when we're depressed, it's easy to think in that overly negative kind of way, that I'm the only one, that no one else cares.

And notice Elijah only talks about the human circumstances in these verses. Elijah says nothing about God's spectacular work on Mount Carmel or about currently having a chat with God Almighty. Like Elijah, when we only look at the circumstances, it's easy to get depressed. There are things that don't look good in our city, our nation, other parts of the world, perhaps things don't look good in your home now. But there is always more going on than our circumstances, as God continues to show Elijah in verse 11.

B. God graciously provides invitations

i. To hear His quiet voice (19:11-13)

¹¹ The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. ¹² After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. ¹³ When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

So Elijah is in the cave, which may be the same "cleft of the rock" where Moses saw God's glory pass by. And there Elijah experiences this huge wind, and then an earthquake, and a fire, but God is not in those things. Rather, God comes in a gentle whisper.

I think God wants to show Elijah that His work is often quiet. Miracles are the exception, not the rule, even for a fiery prophet. While the spectacular fire from heaven and rain on Mount Carmel did impact the people and Elijah, it wasn't enough to get the people to overthrow evil Ahab and Jezebel or for Elijah to avoid this deep depression.

So as God calls Elijah out of the dark cave, and into the light of God's presence, He has Elijah listen to His gentle whisper. What the King James Version calls the "still, small voice."

For us, and even for Elijah, most of our days are ordinary ones, sometimes boringly so. And so we can't expect our mountaintop experiences of God, as wonderful as they are, to sustain us. We must learn to serve God in the ordinary and boring days of life.

Not only serving God, but finding Him as we learn to attend to His gentle whisper and the quieter ways He works. Listen to how seminary president Craig Barnes describes Elijah here, saying, “When you’re burned out, a miracle isn’t going to do anything for you. It doesn’t matter if God makes it rain fire down from the heavens. That isn’t going to help, because what you need is fire in your heart. For that, you have to listen to the God who prefers to speak through the silence.”

To find God in the silence, and in His still, small voice, and in the quiet ways that He works. In verse 13, God asks again, “What are you doing here?” And Elijah, still not getting it, responds as before in verse 14.

ii. To keep working because God is working (19:14-17)

¹⁴ He replied, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn 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.”

Elijah again brings accusations against the people, perhaps lacking hope to pray for them. Perhaps Elijah even thinks God has let him down since the fire from heaven and the rain weren’t followed by a lasting revival and overthrow of Ahab and Jezebel.

I heard another pastor say here that God has not let Elijah down, Elijah’s revival ministry plan has let him down. But perhaps Elijah made the mistake of identifying God with his revival plan. That surely God must bring revival after Elijah was so faithful and God brought the fire and rain.

Now I would never put that kind of expectation on God. I’d never assume that God leading me to seminary meant God would definitely provide me a pastoral position as soon as I graduated. That’d be silly, to expect that was the only way God could work. And when we mistakenly assume God will definitely provide a good desire that we’ve worked hard for and prayed for, it can set us up for depression. And so God clarifies things for His struggling prophet in verse 15.

¹⁵ The LORD said to him, “Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. ¹⁶ Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. ¹⁷ Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu.

Interestingly, God doesn't rebuke Elijah or baby Elijah or thank Elijah for his service, He just tells Elijah to get back to work. In international politics, he is to anoint Hazael as king of Aram. In Israel, he is to anoint Jehu as the next king and train Elisha as his prophetic successor.

In these verses God clarifies to Elijah that He is still at work behind the scenes. God sees the continuing evil of Ahab and Jezebel, and He's going to eventually bring a righteous judgment on them and those who follow in their evil if they don't turn to God. That will come over time through new leaders Hazael, Jehu, and Elisha.

Because God continues to work, Elijah can resume his work with renewed hope, even in the ordinary and boring days where nothing seems to happen. And so God is working as we faithfully work on a boring homework assignment or fill out job applications or work a dull job or do chores or keep at a marriage that isn't going so great, or lead a ministry effort just going okay. Like Elijah, we can find God in these places, learning to hear His quiet whisper and the quiet ways He is at work. And in verse 18, God gives Elijah one more help.

iii. To spiritual community (19:18-19a)

¹⁸ Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him.” ¹⁹ So Elijah went from there and found Elisha...

To further encourage Elijah, God sets the record straight. You're not alone, you're part of a spiritual community of thousands. And I want you to connect with it Elijah, so go find Elisha and train him.

God ministered to a depressed Elijah in the wilderness through an angel. And on the mountain God brought Elijah out of the cave and ministered Himself as God renews Elijah's purpose. But that's not everything Elijah needs, God also provides Elijah with Elisha. If Elijah can't go it alone, then neither can we. We need the support of our brothers and sisters to keep taking next steps with Jesus, especially on the hard road when depression comes.

Conclusion:

A. Let's wrestle with God and receive from Him

In his depression, Elijah did a lot of things not so well, even though God just brought fire from heaven and rain for the land and before that provided Elijah food miraculously and raised the widow's son.

Despite all this, Elijah fled at the queen's threat. And even if Elijah wasn't fearful in his fleeing, he did exhaust himself, and isolate himself, and ask God to kill him, and focus too much

on the circumstances and not enough on God, and twice say he was the only prophet left when he wasn't, and twice bring accusations against the people instead of praying for them, and likely put inappropriate expectations on God.

But we credit Elijah for one huge thing. Even in the depth of his depression, Elijah kept bringing his struggles and even his ugly parts to God. Elijah kept wrestling with God. And as Elijah wrestled, it gave room for God to provide and for Elijah to be transformed.

God had to provide Elijah a lot of things before Elijah turned it around, but God is gracious like that. He was gracious as He provided for me in many ways as I wrestled poorly after seminary about not having a pastoral position. And in the end, to Elijah's credit, after God provided, Elijah responds in obedience as he finds Elisha in verse 19.

And so our next step this morning is to keep wrestling with God and receiving from Him. Like Elijah, God may not provide everything we want as we wrestle. Elijah didn't see a lasting revival break out, Ahab and Jezebel weren't immediately removed from power, and God didn't immediately remove Elijah's depression.

But as Elijah kept wrestling with God, often poorly, God graciously provided. God provided through the angel's touch and food and rest. God provided Elijah with His presence. God provided Elijah fresh understanding of how God often works through the still, small voice. God provided Elijah with renewed hope and purpose in his work. God provided Elijah with spiritual community.

B. Jesus took the ultimate hard road to end depression

And God provided for Elijah's sins, and ours, by sending His Son Jesus on a rescue mission for us. This Easter week, we celebrate Jesus taking the ultimate hard road, dying on the cross for all our sins, and then rising from the dead. Jesus taking that hard road so that depression and even death won't have the last word.

Things can be so sad here on the hard road, but God continues to be with us and work, and in the end, depression won't prevail. Jesus will: making all things new, righting all wrongs, healing every broken thing in our hearts.

He's worth wrestling with and receiving from in the meantime, even on the hard road. As you wrestle, think of Him on that day, when He wipes every tear from your eyes, as your Savior saves you from ever walking the hard road again. Let's pray...

Dismissal – Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.