

Adult Teaching Resources

August 9, 2020



What the World Needs Now...

Genesis 32:22-32—"The World Needs Engagement"

1 Kings 19:9-18—"The World Needs Faith"

Isaiah 56:1-8 (RCL 1, 6-8)—"The World Needs Justice"

Isaiah 51:1-8 (RCL 51:1-6)—"The World Needs to Remember"

Jeremiah 15:15-21—"The World Needs Mercy"

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The World Needs Faith

1 Kings 19:9-18

FIT Teaching Guide

by David Woody

This adult teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Bible Background

Key Text: 1 Kings 19:13b —“Then there came a voice to him that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

It's natural to have a breaking point. We all have one. We have a moment where we want to throw in the towel, give up, and take our ball and go home. We have those points with hobbies, with work, and even with relationships.

Today, we'll spend some time with Elijah, who was at his breaking point. He had been at the highest point in his life and then came crashing down.

Opening

After everyone arrives, ask each person to find a partner. Ask each person to think of a time in their life when they reached a breaking point.

Point out that some breaking points are deeper and more significant than others. For example, giving up on a coach and team because of a lack of playing time is a little bit different than finally realizing that alcohol was destroying your life and the lives of those you loved. So, as you ask folks to share, make sure they are comfortable sharing the breaking point of their choice. It doesn't have to be a “big” one.

As each person shares, have everyone consider these questions:

- What contributed to you reaching the breaking point?
- What was the final event, or moment, that broke the camel's back?
- How did you feel before, during, and after the moment?
- What did you learn about yourself from this experience?

Give everyone time to think and share with their partner. As time allows, and if you feel the environment is safe, open the floor for volunteers to share with the larger group.

Reading the Bible

Where did Elijah spend the night? (in a cave)

What did Elijah say to God about being in the cave? (“I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.”)

What did God want Elijah to do? (go stand on the mountain because the Lord was about to pass by)

How strong was the wind? (so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rock in pieces) Was God in the wind? (no)

What came after the wind? (an earthquake) Was God in the earthquake? (no)

What came after the earthquake? (a fire) Was God in the fire? (no)

What came after the fire? (sheer silence)

What did Elijah do in the silence? (he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave)

What did God say? (What are you doing here, Elijah?)

How did Elijah respond? (“I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.”)

Where did God want Elijah to go and what did God want Elijah to do? (he wanted him to return on his way to Damascus; then he was to anoint Hazael as king over Aram, anoint Jehu as king over Israel, and anoint Elisha as prophet in his own place)

What would happen to whoever escaped from the sword of Hazael? (Jehu shall kill)

What would happen to whoever escaped from the sword of Jehu? (Elisha shall kill)

What would God leave? (seven thousand in Israel, all knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that had not kissed him)

Making Connections

What has been a highpoint moment of your life or professional career? What happened for you to get there? What happened in the immediate aftermath? Did you experience any kind of downfall or disappointment after your success?

When have you done the right thing and then had to pay the consequences for your actions because others did not like what you did? What was their reasoning for not appreciating what you did? What happened to you? What lesson did you take from that experience?

Where is your “safe place” where you get away and can totally be yourself and not be

Making Connections *continued*

troubled by the burdens of the world? How often do you go there? How does that place help you?

When you are hurting, what is your prayer to God?

When have you wanted to give up? What pushed you to that point? What pulled you back?

Share with the group your most memorable pity party. Why did you throw it? How did it affect you?

How has God been revealed to you when you are in moments of distress? How did you know it was God? How did you respond?

Do you embrace silence or do you avoid silence? What comes to you in silence? How often are you in silence?

When you are in a funk or in a place of self-pity, what usually helps bring you back to life?

Our Lesson Writer says, “One potential blessing of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting social isolation is that we’ve had more opportunities for silence and for listening to God. While some have called it “the Great Interruption,” others think of it as “the Great Pause.” What has been a positive outcome for you because of the COVID-19 pandemic? How has the pandemic affected your relationship with God?

So What?

Tell your group that you are going to lead them through a guided prayer exercise that will have a lot of silence. Most of our days are filled with noise, and sitting in silence is not something we usually do. Today, though, you will give your class the gift of silence with God.

Ask everyone to find a seat in the room where they are not close to each other and won't be distracted by someone else.

Ask everyone to sit still, close their eyes, and breathe.

Once the room has settled, ask these questions for reflection, giving a good amount of time between questions. Make sure there is more silence than questions during this exercise.

As you sit in silence, what do you not hear?

(pause)

As you sit in silence, what do you hear?

(pause)

What right now are you struggling with that has you close to a breaking point?

(pause)

What do you want to do about it?

(pause)

What do you need from God?

(pause)

So What? *continued*

What does God hear from you?

(pause)

What does God need from you?

(pause)

Give your group time to sit in silence and have the time of prayer they need. When you feel the group is ready, ask them to open their eyes and then share these words from our Lesson Writer:

“It doesn’t matter how low we may feel, how battered and bruised, how fierce are the storms that surround us: God is there, speaking in the silence, if we are willing to become quiet enough, open enough, vulnerable enough to hear.”

Ask for volunteers to share with the larger group what they heard God speak to them? What message of mission and hope did they hear? What message and mission of hope does God have for each of us?

The Challenge

This week, when you get stressed and to the breaking point, go to your safe space and sit in silence, and listen for God.

Prayer

Loving God, like Elijah, we hit a breaking point where we want to give up. Fortunately, you aren't done with us yet. Help us to be still and silent long enough to hear you. You have something important for us to hear. Calm us. Still us. Give us peace and quiet to listen. Amen.

Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartledge

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. Watch for the “shovel” icon in the THE BIBLE LESSON, and then reference that item in this Digging Deeper resource. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

The text—The Revised Common Lectionary text for the day is 1 Kings 19:1-4 (5-7), 8-15a, but there’s no need to skip any verses, so we will study 1 Kings 19:1-15, stopping at the point where Yahweh sends Elijah on a mission.

Curses—Jezebel’s warning was in the form of a Hebrew oath, which consisted of a curse followed by a promise. Literally, it would read: “Thus may the gods do to me, and thus add more if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like the life of one of them.” The self-imprecation of calling upon the gods to punish her if she didn’t keep the promise added serious emphasis to the threat: she meant business. A paraphrase could be “May the gods do whatever they want to me, and even more, if I do not make you as dead as one of the prophets of Baal by this time tomorrow.”

From Dan to Beersheba—Beersheba was so far south that it was commonly cited alongside Dan, the northernmost city, to indicate the whole of Israel. The expression “from Dan to Beersheba” can be found, for example, in Judg. 20:1; 1 Sam. 3:20; 2 Sam. 3:10, 17:11, 24:2 and 15.

Elijah must have been quite a runner. Near the end of the previous chapter, we are told that Elijah had outrun King Ahab from Mt. Carmel to the city of Jezreel, 20 miles away, even though Ahab was in a horse-drawn chariot. Now we are told that—presumably leaving on the same day—he “fled for his life” to Beersheba—another 95 miles south as the crow flies, and undoubtedly longer by road and path—a true ultra-marathon.

Seeking solitude?—Jerome Walsh notes that Elijah’s actions reflect “a series of abandonments” as Elijah leaves his homeland for Judah, leaves settled land for the wilderness, and finally leaves all human companionship behind to venture on to Mt. Horeb alone (*1 Kings*, in *Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry* [The Liturgical Press, 1996], 266).

Broom tree?—The tree in question, called a “broom tree” in Spanish, is a variety of juniper, more of a large shrub than an actual tree. It can tolerate dry conditions, and it continues to grow in many parts of Palestine.

Note that the shrub is described as “one tree.” Elijah’s own loneliness is emphasized by his attempt to find shade beneath a solitary shrub that probably offered little comfort.

Touched by an angel?—The Hebrew does not specifically identify the visitor who brought Elijah food as an angel: the word used is *malak*, which means “messenger” (for example, the prophet Malachi’s name means “My messenger”). The word could be used of human messengers, but it was also used of angelic messengers. The NRSV, based on the context, translates the word as “angel,” for the appearance of a provision-bearing messenger in the

Digging Deeper *continued*

middle of nowhere seems to suggest divine providence, and the second mention describes him as a “messenger of Yahweh.”

In either case, the Hebrew grammar indicates a level of surprise, for the messenger’s touch apparently woke Elijah, who may not have expected to awaken at all. The NRSV has “All at once an angel touched him . . .,” while NET has “All of a sudden an angelic messenger touched him . . .” A closer translation would be: “And look here . . . a messenger is touching him!”

Word play—The Hebrew contains an interesting word play. When Elijah collapsed beneath the broom tree and asked God to take his life, he began by saying “I’ve had enough!” (v. 4). When the angel provided food for Elijah the second time, he told him to get up and eat, “for the journey is more than enough for you,” (v. 7), using the same word (*rab*, which means “a great many,” or “enough”). The NRSV has “too much for you,” which gets the idiom but misses the repetition of “enough.”

The angel’s repetition of Elijah’s own word provides God’s answer: God is not through with Elijah: it’s not yet enough.

Elijah and Moses—The astute reader will note several parallels between Elijah’s experience and that of Moses. Both met God on Mt. Sinai/Horeb. Moses fasted alone on the mountain for 40 days, while Elijah ate nothing for 40 days during his journey to Horeb. Both Moses and Elijah complained to God that they were left alone to carry the burden of Israel’s recalcitrant people, and both were granted a theophany in which Yahweh appeared to them by “passing by.”

Silence—Mother Teresa of Calcutta once spoke of our need for silence this way: “We need to find God, and God cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence. See how nature—trees, flowers, grass—grow in silence; see the stars, the moon, the sun, how they move in silence . . . The more we receive in silent prayer, the more we can give in our active life. We need silence to be able to touch souls. The essential thing is not what we say, but what God says to us and through us. All our words will be useless unless they come from within—words which do not give the light of Christ increase the darkness” (Quoted in James Roose-Evans, *The Inner Stage* [Cambridge, Mass: Cowley Publications, 1990], 130).

Prayer—Here’s a suggested prayer to use in closing the class, perhaps asking members to spend some moments in silence, as each one seeks to hear the gentle whisper of God’s voice to us:

*“God, grant that we may be silent before you, that we may hear you . . .
let us be open to you, that you may enter . . .
empty before you, that you may fill us . . .
let us be at rest in you, that you may be at work in us . . .
let us be still, and know that you are our God . . . (silence) . . . Amen”*

(Adapted from Sir Paul Reeves, as quoted in *Homiletics* 4[April-June 1992], 49.)

The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartledge

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What was Elijah doing there?

Elijah's long journey south had to have a greater purpose than simply escaping Jezebel's murderous threats: the frazzled prophet traveled a day's journey south of Israel's southernmost city, then 40 days more into the desolate Sinai Peninsula.

It is unlikely that Elijah had traveled all the way to Mt. Horeb (an alternate name for Mt. Sinai) unless he had a purpose in mind. Some optimistic interpreters have suggested that Elijah made a pilgrimage to the root place of God's covenant with Israel so he could renew and revitalize his commitment to Yahweh, and to service as God's prophet.

If that is the case, he didn't act like it.

Others have suggested, perhaps more accurately, that Elijah traveled to the mountain so associated with Moses in order to renounce his calling and throw in the towel. On the journey south, he asked God to put him out of his misery (19:4), which is one way of being released from his obligations. "I am no better than my ancestors" (19:4b) carries the sense of "I've been no more successful than the prophets before me" at persuading Israel to follow God faithfully.

When Elijah reached the mountain, he was full of complaints, suggesting that his efforts had been fruitless (19:10, 14). It is as if he were saying, "I give up." Jerome T. Walsh suggests that "The pilgrimage is an act of defiance, not devotion; the prophet does not seek renewal, he demands release; and the deity seems indifferent to Elijah's ultimatum" (*1 Kings*, Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry [The Liturgical Press, 1996], 281).

It's also possible that Elijah didn't have any particular agenda, that he was simply lost and searching for hope in this midst of a stormy career that had left him feeling like a failure.

In any case, God's question, twice offered, was most appropriate: "What are you doing here, Elijah? (19:9, 13). The Hebrew construction puts emphasis on the word "here," as if God expected Elijah to be somewhere else and is asking "What are you doing *here*?" Some scholars have noted that, when God sent provisions to Elijah under the broom tree, the angel said he would need it for his "way" (*derek*), perhaps to fortify Elijah on the way back to his work in Israel. This would suggest that Yahweh was frustrated by Elijah's insistence on diverting from "his way" and continuing southward to Sinai. Thus the question: "What are you doing here?"

Elijah gave every appearance of wanting to give up and resign his office, but Yahweh refused to accept the resignation, instructing him to return to his "way" (using *derek* again). As a compromise, perhaps, God instructed Elijah to anoint Elisha the son of Shaphat to serve as his successor, showing the prophet that there was light at the end of the tunnel. (For more

The Hardest Question *continued*

on this, see Walsh, 271-278).

In our prayers, it might be worthwhile to imagine that God is asking us what we are doing here—in this place, in this job, in this stage of life—and if there are situations in which we might be avoiding the way God has in mind for us.