

5 Things We Need When Everything Sucks

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[0 : 00] Well, good evening, good morning, good day to you, Table Church. Hello, friends. My name is Anthony Parrott, and it's my privilege to serve as the lead pastor here at the Table Church.

And I am just so honored and so glad to be able to be here and to be able to talk about Jesus and the gospel and God's word and to be able to be blessed by this worship team and to lift up God's praises, to lift up the truth that God is the God that can turn bones into armies, graves into gardens. That is good news, and that's what we're here to talk about. So if you have a Bible, I encourage you to power it on, flip it open. We're going to be in the book of 1 Kings chapter 19.

1 Kings chapter 19. It's in the Old Testament. And we're in between series right now. For the past four or five weeks, we've been talking about the Table Church's values, about what it means to be thoughtfully and authentically following Jesus.

I'd love for you to go back to our website, see some of those values and what those mean for our church. In the coming weeks leading up to the election, we're going to be talking about what it is to be the church of us versus them, and rather how not to be the church of us versus them, how we can fall prey to the enemy-making machine, and how we need to stick a big stick in the middle of that cog and stop the enemy-making machine that we can all find ourselves caught up in.

[1 : 27] But today, I waited a long time to figure out what was the word I was meant to bring to you all. And it took a long time to just sit before God and to hear, what are you up to?

What do you want your people to hear? And I have my own Bible reading plan that is separate from what I use to plan for sermons and stuff. And my Bible reading plan had me in the book of 1 Kings, reading through the story of Elijah.

Elijah is this great prophet of the Old Testament. And he had some failures, and he had some setbacks, and he had some victories, and some stories that would seem amazing.

And we're going to take a look at 1 Kings 19 today, because I think it might hit us where we're at. So we're going to go through this kind of verse by verse, chunk by chunk, and see what it has to say for us.

This is the word of the Lord. It says, Now Ahab told Jezebel, this is a husband, wife, king, and queen, everything Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword.

[2 : 34] So in the chapter previous, there was this big scene where Elijah, the prophet of Yahweh God, gets all the prophets of Baal, this false idolatrous God that Israel had.

And they have basically a contest to see which God is real. And big surprise, God shows up, Yahweh shows up, and burns up the sacrifice, throwing fire down from heaven.

And because of the sign that Yahweh was real, the prophets of Baal are put to death. Okay, so this is the scene that we're waking up to. How Elijah had done, how he had killed all the prophets.

And so Jezebel, this queen, 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.

Which is basically a really long-winded way of saying, I'm going to kill you. Now Elijah was afraid, verse 3, and ran for his life. And when he came to Beersheba and Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness.

[3 : 38] So Elijah gets this message from the queen that, hey, you know how you put all the false prophets to death? Well, I'm going to do that to you. I'm going to put you to death. And so Elijah is afraid for his life and runs for the desert, runs for the wilderness.

And so what I want to talk about today is these five things that I noticed in the story of Elijah as we keep reading, and how we can respond to this, and what are the five things that we need to do, and how we need to respond when everything sucks, and everything has fallen apart, when our lives have caved in on us.

And, you know, Elijah is a lot like us, where oftentimes the valleys come right after the mountaintops, where we can have the big celebration where it seems like there is literally fire falling down from heaven, revealing God, and then we immediately fall into the valley of, oh, no, something has gone deeply wrong.

I can relate to this, because we moved here in March. We moved to the city. We moved to Washington, D.C. We were going to be the, I was going to be the lead pastor of this amazing church that I had looked at for years, and I thought it was the coolest church ever.

This was going to be great. I got ordained. I got installed. And then I shut it all down, because there was a pandemic out in Tops and Valleys. I think many of us can relate to a feeling like this, of feeling like the world is caving in on us.

[5 : 06] My life is caving in on this. This was not the year I thought it was going to be. This was not the life that I had imagined. A feeling that we all can relate to. And what I want to say to us all today is you're not alone.

You're not imagining this. You didn't make this up. This was happening. So, let's keep going. Elijah is afraid. He runs to the wilderness.

He comes to a broom bush, sat down under it, and prayed that he might die. This is his prayer. He says, I have had enough, Lord.

Take my life. I'm no better than my ancestors. And then he laid down in the bush and fell asleep. So, the first thing I think we need when everything is terrible, everything sucks, is I think we need honesty.

I love the honesty of Elijah's prayer. Elijah said, prays that he might die. I have had enough, Lord. And I think honesty is the first step to any sort of breakthrough, any sort of progress, any sort of forward motion in our lives.

[6 : 17] There is a very nasty and wrong theology out there that says, like, no matter what you're feeling on the inside, that's sinful. You need to shove that down, put on a happy face, and fake it until you make it.

It's that theology of positive thinking that if you're positive enough, if you can think about it, if you can dream it, you can do it. If you can just, if you just have enough positive energy in your life, then your life will just get better automatically.

And if your life is going to pot, well, you must have been something you did, something that you didn't think about correctly. That's the theology of positive thinking, the theology of the prosperity gospel.

And it forces us to tell ourselves lies. It forces ourselves to tell ourselves things that aren't true about, well, maybe, you know, things aren't that bad. Well, I got to find the silver lining.

Well, I got to find, you know, at least this. At least there's a bright side. We all probably have people in our life that, like, when we want to bring a complaint and just say, like, hey, I'm not doing great. Things are kind of down right now.

[7 : 21] Well, at least think about something positive. Like, we've had people in our lives like that. And that feels corrosive and like a straitjacket put on us because we can't be honest with ourselves.

We can't be honest with God. And so we see this example of Elijah. I wish I could die. I've had enough. So let's begin number one. That's point number one, if you're taking notes, with honesty. That's the first thing we need. We need to be honest about where we're at. Again, I want to say, whatever it is you're feeling, you're not alone.

So if you're watching, if you're in the live chat right now, I'd love for you to respond to say, you know, if you have felt alone sometime in the past, like, six months, say, that's me.

Just type that in the chat. If you have felt depressed, say, that's me. If you have felt anxious, if you have felt like a crazy person because you feel like you're imagining this and the world has moved on, say, that's me.

[8 : 22] If you have felt like, maybe this is my fault because I did something wrong and God's punishing me, say, that's me. If you have had thoughts of, I'd be better off dead, say, that's me.

You're not alone. You're not imagining this. And the first step that we all need to take is honesty because we can't be honest with each other. If we're all just pretending that everything's okay, if we're all just pretending like everything is going to be fine and plaster on the smile and pass ourselves six feet away in the hallway and say, I'm okay, you're okay, we're all okay, right?

Then we'll always feel more and more alone. And I love the fact that Scripture has a story about a guy who has seen a literal fire fall down from heaven and says, God, I wish I could just die. I've had enough. Let's keep going. Point number two. So Elijah, he lays down under a bush. He falls asleep. And all at once, an angel touches him and says, get up and eat.

So Elijah looks around and there by his head, this is verse six, with some bread baked over some hot coals and a jar of water and he ate and drank. And then, this is what I love, he literally gets poked by an angel to get reminded to eat and then lays down again.

[9 : 38] Verse seven, the angel of the Lord comes back a second time and touches him and says, get up and eat for the journey is too much for you. So he got up and ate and drank and he was strengthened by that food.

The second thing we need when everything seems terrible, when everything sucks, is we need means. M-E-A-N-S means.

Now let me explain what that means. There can be this idea, again, in some kinds of theology, some kinds of ways of talking about God, that if God is going to do a miracle in your life, it's going to be zap, boom, done, the miracle has happened.

But when we look at the story of scripture, that is very rarely, if ever, the way that God performs miracles. The number one way that this shows up in very unhealthy forms of theology is mental illness and depression where someone says, you know, you don't need therapy, you just need the gospel.

You don't need antidepressants, you just need Jesus. And I would suggest that when we look at the miracles of scripture, God always uses means to accomplish those miracles.

[10 : 49] He doesn't just zap people well. For instance, Elijah is famished. He has ran into the wilderness, he's hungry, and God just doesn't zap him with calories.

He says, get up and eat something. Jesus feeding the 5,000 and the 4,000. Jesus doesn't just zap them all and they're all filled with food. No, there is some loaves and some fishes that are multiplied.

When the Israelites are, they've got the Egyptians on their back and they've got a wall of water in front of them, God doesn't just like magically beam me up, Scottie, teleport them across the sea.

God uses Moses and the wind blowing all night long. Go back and read the story. The wind blows all night long and the lake, the sea becomes dry land and then the Israelites walk across it.

In the miracles of Elijah, there's a story about a widow with a little bit of flour and a little bit of oil and Elijah asks for something to eat and the widow says, look, I don't have anything.

[11 : 49] I'm going to make this little meal and then me and my son are going to die because that's all we got. There's a famine, there's a drought, that's all we have. And Elijah says, use what you have and God will provide the rest. And so God doesn't just zap them with calories, he uses some means.

And so in the same way, when someone says like, hey, God wants to heal you from your depression, God wants to heal you from your anxiety, God wants to heal you from your mental illness, God wants to heal you from your sickness, your disease, whatever it is that ails you, but don't see a doctor, don't see a therapist and don't take an antidepressant, I don't know what they're talking about.

Because God wants to bring healing, God desires to make you well and God does those kinds of miracles through normal, ordinary, everyday means from bread and oil and water and wind and even some, so a lot.

That's how God works. God uses the good things of this world and God uses the talents and the abilities of the people that he put in it to bring about the means of healing.

And so Elijah's provided with what he needs, but he has to be poked awake by an angel to say, hey, dude, there's some food here, why don't you eat it? And Elijah takes that faithful step of eating it.

[13 : 04] And so for any of you who you're struggling with something, sickness, illness, depression, anxiety, loneliness, God does want to heal you, but I'm sorry if anyone has ever told you that like, yeah, you can't, you don't have enough faith or you can't have therapy or you just have to like think and pray hard enough and God will bring healing.

Yes, God does turn graves into gardens and bones into armies and he does it through means. He does it through the normal, ordinary, everyday stuff here on planet Earth.

Number three, what is the third way that God wants to bring healing when everything sucks? We continue on, verse seven.

The angel of the Lord comes back, tells Elijah, get up and eat, the journey's too much, Elijah is strengthened by food, and then he travels 40 days and 40 nights, so over a month, until he reaches Horeb, the mountain of God.

And in the Old Testament, there are two names for this single mountain, Sinai and Horeb, the place where Moses and the Ten Commandments and all of that, Mount Sinai, is also called Mount Horeb. [14:18] So Elijah travels for 40 days and 40 nights until he reaches Horeb, the mountain of God, and there he went into a cave and spent the night. Now, here's thing number three.

We've talked about honesty, we've talked about means. Thing number three is healing takes time. The thing that we need when everything sucks is time. Again, firmly, absolutely believe that God desires healing, God desires to make us well and the world well and to make everything reflect the kingdom of Jesus Christ where God's rule and reign is coming to fruition everywhere and in everybody and in everything and it doesn't happen instantaneously.

And again, there are dangerous forms of theology that say, hey, if you asked for healing and it didn't happen, it must be the sin in your life. If you asked for healing and help and it didn't happen, well, then you just didn't say the right words, you didn't say the right prayer, you didn't say the right magic incantation to get God to do your will.

Whereas, what we see time and time again in the story of Scripture is that that healing and that reconciliation and the work that God does to make graves into gardens is time.

And so, God knows that Elijah needs some healing. God knows that Elijah is in a dark place where he's wishing death upon himself. And so, he gives them some food and he gives them some time to journey to a mountain.

[15:45] And he journeys 40 days and 40 nights and he shows up at this pilgrimage site of Mount Horeb, the mountain of God. This is the place where God's presence had come down and some saw it as beautiful gemstones and some saw it as lightning bolts and fire, but it was where the law, the Torah, the Ten Commandments came.

This is where Elijah shows up and again, what does he do? He takes a nap. He went into a cave and spent the night. And that's okay. The healing that God wants to bring into our lives, the healing that God wants to bring when everything is awful, sometimes requires a nap or one or 40.

It's going to take some time and if it's not instant, it's not a sign of your failure. It's not a sign of God's failure. It's not a sign that like you didn't say the right thing or do the right thing or God is displeased with you.

It's a sign that we are mortal human bodies and flesh and bone and that we can't always take healing instantaneously because it might break us. So the word of the Lord comes to Elijah in verse 9 and God says, what are you doing here, Elijah?

And he replied, I have been very zealous for the Lord, God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant. They have torn down your altars. They have put your prophets to death with the sword and I am the only one left.

[17:09] And now they're trying to kill me too. So the Lord says, go out, stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord for the Lord is about to pass by. By the way, this is a different sermon for a different time.

I love the progression of how God reveals himself to Elijah. Verse 4, an angel touches him and says. Verse 7, it's an angel of the Lord that comes back and touches Elijah. Verse 9, it's not an angel, now it's the word of the Lord and personified.

And then verse 12, it's the Lord, the Lord's self. So God is revealing God's self in this progressive way over time.

So the Lord says, go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord for the Lord is about to pass by. And so 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.

And after the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. what some translations call the sound of the fire, Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

[18:21] And a voice said to him, what are you doing here, Elijah? I think the fourth thing we need when everything sucks, we need honesty, we need means, tangible objects, we need time, not

instantaneousness, and the fourth thing we need is ordinariness.

very often we shape God into our own image and want God to show up in the whirlwind. And again, I know this is like a controversial take, enough of you have told me this, I think the God in the book of Job that shows up in the whirlwind probably isn't the true, real God.

I think the God that shows up here in the gentle whisper is much more accurately reflecting what God is actually like. it's not the wind, it's not the earthquake, it's not the fire, it's the sound of sheer silence and a gentle voice.

What are you doing here? We want God to show up in the extraordinary and the supernatural and the amazing and the astounding. But I think God also shows up with naps and cozy blankets and health food and junk food and exercise and Netflix.

I think God shows up in the quiet moments and in the still moments and in the moments when we're alone crying out in desperation and all we hear is nothing. I think God's there too.

[19 : 55] God shows up in all sorts of mundane, ordinary ways. It's not all parted seas and resurrections and I will again remind you that the parted seas was the result of a night's worth of wind and the resurrection happened after a couple days wait.

God shows up in the ordinary and the mundane. Now, some of you might ask, that's the case. If it happens through honesty and time and means and antidepressants and therapy and cozy blankets and stuff, some of you are going to ask, why bother with God?

Aren't we just telling ourselves a fairy tale now? And this is my response and I think this is like the classic orthodox response to this question. James 1.17, every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights.

What Scripture says is that like if it's good, it's God. Very simply. if we can identify it with like moving towards overall well-being in the world, towards health and wholeness and justice and righteousness and the world being put back in place and the things within our souls being healed and the scars being healed and the dryness being quenched, if it's good, then it must be God's work and no one else's.

And so I believe in God, even in the ordinary and the mundane and even if it takes a long time and even if God uses very ordinary means to accomplish God's purposes, I believe in God because I believe it's the only source in the universe that can accomplish healing and good.

[21 : 44] And if it's bad and it brings disorder and injustice and sorrow and harm and wrong, then it's something else. And so my goal in my life is to align more and more closely with what James calls that heavenly light, that source of good.

And changing our awareness to God's constant good can dramatically change the way we see the world. Not God as some outsider who occasionally deigns to like enter into our affairs and mess with us.

Not God who only shows up in fires and earthquakes and hurricanes and amazing displays that we can put on TV. No, like our, if we can change our perception to God who shows up when we feel warmth and when we can feel something clicking into place during a counseling session, when we can feel our heartbeats accelerating with a really good song, when we can feel the connection between a friend and a loved one, if we can decide and believe and have faith and hope that that's God's presence too, then we'll see burning bushes everywhere.

We'll see God's presence aflame in the world and not just far off. Story continues. Elijah says, I've been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty.

The Israelites have rejected your covenant. Verse 14, torn down your altars and put your prophets to death with the sword. And this is what Elijah says. This is for the third time. I am the only one left.

[23 : 24] He says it in chapter 18, verse 22. I'm the only one of the Lord's prophets left, but blah, blah, blah. He says it again in verse 10. I am the only one left.

Here he says it again in verse 14. I am the only one left and now they're going to try to kill me too. And so the Lord says to him, go back the way you came to the desert of Damascus. When you get there, you're going to anoint this guy, also anoint this guy, and then anoint Elisha, son of Shaphat, from Abel-Meholah to succeed you as prophet.

Skip ahead to verse 19. So Elijah went from there and found Elisha, the son of Shaphat. And Elisha was plowing with 12 yoke of oxen. He was driving the 12th pair.

And Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak around him. So Elisha left his auction and ran after Elijah. Let me kiss my father and my mother goodbye. Elijah says, okay.

So Elisha left, goes back. He takes his yoke of oxen, he slaughters them, makes a meal out of them. He burns the plowing equipment to cook the meat, gives it to the people they eat, and he sets out to follow Elijah and becomes his servant.

[24 : 30] The fifth thing we need. We need honesty. We need time. We need mundane, ordinary things. We need people. The story begins in verse 19 with Elijah running for his life, verse 3, and he leaves his servant somewhere else.

And Elijah goes into the wilderness all by himself. He meets God face to face in the sound of sheer silence. And God's first instruction to him is go find some people.

Now, this is a two-way street because, again, I've heard this sermon. Hey, if you want everything to be okay with your life, like go find a community, go find some friends. And like in the middle of a pandemic when it's really hard to meet people and like we're all stressed out and we're all just trying to deal with our own lives, that's really difficult advice, right?

And like if you're somebody who deals with like shyness or social anxiety or like you just don't like people very much, that can be a really, very hard thing to do. This is a thing that takes two to tango. This doesn't just require like people who are lonely to go out and say like, hey, can you help me not be lonely anymore? It also requires like those of us who are not so lonely, who have like good social groups and social interactions and friend groups and dare I say cliques to get out of those cliques so that we can help those who are alone and desperate and feeling the weight of it all to say like, hey, can I be your friend?

[25 : 54] We need both. We need people to show that willingness and people to show like, hey, I'm open for friendship. This is a two-way street. So I don't want to put the burden on those of you who are feeling lonely right now to like find another burden to go out and find some friends.

There's also the work that has to be done of like, hey, if you're in a place where you're feeling all right, because I know some of you are, have an open door, have an open line, have an open ability to connect with folks.

So we need it. We need people in our life to find healing. And I love what Elisha does. Like Elisha gets called by Elijah and literally Elisha burns his former life down so he could be with Elijah, this prophet of God.

It's one thing for me to tell you, like go make friends, go be social. There's the second part of that too that you have to open up whatever social circle you have already. You've got to make space for more.

Loneliness can't be fixed by just one person wishing they weren't lonely anymore. So as we continue in a really difficult season, thinking about really difficult things, wearing a lot of heaviness and just weights and weariness, I want you to avoid whatever tells you like this is going to get fixed instantly.

[27 : 24] This is going to get fixed by like lightning bolts and hurricanes and Red Seas parting. Friends, this is going to take faithfulness, what Eugene Peterson called a long obedience in the same direction.

It's going to take like a 50-year mindset of what direction are we going as individuals and as a community, as a family, as a church. What direction are we going and we go there together and can we find God not just in the big moments in the so-called supernatural, but also in the quiet moments, the still moments, the ordinary moments.

are the only moments. We can just then touch with God and don't see thease of God and let's do all the kilometres. Thank you so much.