

**Intro:** Garrison. Pastor. 1 Kings 19. **Pray.**

**50 million people.** That's how many people are estimated to have a diagnosed mental health disorder in the US. The National Institute of Mental Health states that about half of those cases are depression.

These numbers have been increasing year over year since the early 2000s and really skyrocketed during COVID. In 2021 the CDC put out numbers that 12.1 million American adults thought about suicide, 3.5 million planned one and 1.7 million people attempted. And the numbers are even scarier when you look at those under 18.

Those numbers are startling and I'm sure you could rattle off more and more. Now in a culture that's so deeply affected by depression and other mental health issues, it would be no surprise to see the impact:

- 5500 podcasts with the word 'trauma' in the title. Trauma recently labeled the word of the decade by Vox.
- Billions spent by consumers on counseling services every year.
- The US has the highest key word searches of 'mental health' of any country in the world per year. Almost 20 times higher than the second closest country.
- #selfcare videos have over 62.7 billion views on TikTok
- 1/10 Americans ages TWELVE and up are on antidepressants.

**Which is to say, we know there's a problem. And I know for many of us, this is not a hypothetical issue for you.** It's your life. Which I get.

Many of you know me well enough to know this has been a part of my story too. For long seasons in my walk with Jesus I've found myself in deep, deep despair. Time's you could label as depression. Times I couldn't get out of bed in the morning. Times where I literally remember thinking, I'd be okay if I didn't wake up tomorrow. They were unbearable times.

Sometimes I could trace my feelings to specific things. Sin in my life that I was deeply grieved over. Past wounds in my family or relationships. Tragic deaths of friends and family members due to addiction. Disappointment. Both over how my life wasn't turning out but also in the ways I'd hoped for God to move that he hadn't.

Sometimes they've come without rhyme or reason, where I've found myself telling people, I don't know what's happening. I just feel hopeless. Lost. Like I don't even know who I am anymore.

By God's grace I'd say that's not where I'm at today. But I've spent a lot of time (and money) with counselors and friends working through all of that. And I know many of you have too.

So this morning, as we're continuing our series on how God seeks different kinds of people, I'm very hopeful that what we're going to talk about today will be extremely helpful to you.

We're going to talk about **God and the Downcast.**

Now downcast is more of a biblical wording of what many of us experience as being grieved, dejected, miserable, heartbroken or depressed. And it should be no surprise given the series that my goal is to show you that:

**God Seeks the Downcast.**

I'm hopeful that wherever you're at you will find this story to both be very relatable and also extremely comforting. We're going to zoom in on a story of a man who found himself in utter despair. Hoping for it all to end.

But before we get to his story, let me give you some background.

Fast forward from last week to 1 Kings. Judges no longer rule God's people. Now it's the kings who rule. And the book of 1 Kings is a detailed account of how each and every king ruled.

**Where we're going to be today is at the back half of the book during the reign of a king named Ahab.** Ahab was a king in the northern kingdom of Israel and is really important to our story.

- He's known as an absolutely terrible king. The author is very clear that Ahab is more wicked than any king to come before him.
- Big part of that is because of a woman he married. Ahab marries a woman named Jezebel. Which if you were around in our Revelation series we talked about Jezebel. She's a wicked and ungodly queen. SO much so her name becomes symbolic of wickedness and idolatry.
- Because of her influence on Ahab, all sorts of idolatry and wickedness are introduced into Israel. They worship a god of the Canaanites, Baal. In order to worship him you'd have to sacrifice your first born son, among other horrible practices. Ahab's rule over Israel was a time of godlessness and rebellion.

**Which is where the man we're focused on this morning comes in. Elijah.**

Elijah was a prophet in the time of kings. Scholars often think of him as a bit wild. He lived in the desert and became enemies with Ahab and Jezebel—as he should as God's prophet. Which is key to the story we're about to read in 1 Kings 18. Leading up this story:

- God calls Elijah to go to Ahab and pronounce a severe drought that will last 3 years because of the northern kingdom's wickedness. Immediately, this drought takes place. No rain for years. Jezebel responds by having all the prophets of the true God killed.
- Elijah is now on the run. And God feeds him miraculously through ravens dropping him off food.
- He then goes and ends up staying with a poor widow and her son, who are on the verge of death due to starvation. They only have enough oil and flour for one more meal. But God multiplies the bread and oil so that it doesn't run out for days and days.
- The widow's son dies and Elijah raises him from the dead.

**Elijah has experienced God's miraculous power multiple times.** And now Elijah is called by God to return to the northern kingdom. God tells him the drought is going to end. But first, Elijah must confront Ahab. Which gets pretty crazy:

- Elijah returns to a very not warm welcome. So he challenges Ahab and Jezebel to bring out all the prophets for the false god Baal. All 400+ of them.
- The text says the whole nation gathers around Elijah vs these 450 false prophets of Baal. And he challenges the nation to choose a side. Believe in God, or your false gods, you must pick a side.
- And then he turns to the prophets and says let's go. Me and the one true God vs 450 of you. Let's take two bulls, one for you, one for me. Prepare them as a sacrifice to our gods. Let's see which one shows up. Which offering is lit on fire, wins. So all 450 get together, prepare their sacrifice to Baal, and call upon him:

- So the false prophets try and get no answer. They wait for hours and hours calling on Baal. And Elijah mocks them. Cry louder guys. Maybe Baal is just playing with you, he just needs a little more. Or maybe he went to the bathroom, or he's sleeping, or maybe he's out of the office. Keep trying!
- So they do. But there's no answer
- **And then it's Elijah's turn.** He builds an altar. And then gets 4 multiple-gallon jars of water to be poured all over the altar and sacrifice. And then he fills them up again and pours them out. And then again. There's a mini pond where this altar is now. 12 multiple-gallon jars of water poured out. He's stacking the deck against himself.
- He finally calls on the Lord. And fire falls and consumes this altar. It's so hot it consumes the cow, all the water and even the stones that he built it with. Elijah has won. God has shown how great He is. The prophets of Baal are then seized and killed. He then goes to the Lord and prays for the rain to return after 3 years and it does.

**What an incredible run for Elijah.** All of those amazing moments with God, seeing how He has moved, finally peaking with this huge victory. Lets see how this impacts the king and queen. 1 Kings 19:1:

*19:1 Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. 2 Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." 3 Then he was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life*

Jezebel gets word. And promises to kill Elijah. And although this isn't the first time Elijah has been threatened or has to go on the run, it hits Elijah way differently than just a couple chapters before.

After all he'd been through, Elijah was convinced that God was calling him back to Israel in expectation that Ahab would repent. Which isn't that crazy of an assumption. God brings a drought, symbolizing the spiritual state of the king and nation. And now the drought is ending, so that must mean that God is also restoring the king and nation.

But that's not the case at all. He's back on the run and this time he's afraid, because it did not play out how he expected. And he's probably wondering, if that didn't play out how it was supposed to, what's next?

*3 Then he was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. 4 But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he asked that he might die, saying, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers."*

He flees to the southern kingdom. And journeys into the wilderness. There's an emphasis on the fact he leaves his servant—it means he's quitting. He's saying I'm done with ministry. I'm not coming back to this. He sits under this tree. And He says God, take away my life.

Elijah is in complete despair. He is downtrodden.

**Now I just want to pause there and address something going on here.** I want to be careful about overlaying our own experiences with emotions and mental health and putting that on this story. A lot of people like to say about this story, that Elijah was suicidal. I just think you have to be careful with that, because I think if you go there I think you might be projecting something onto this story that isn't meant to be seen.

Although I totally understand how you get there and certainly there are similarities to what you could label suicidal ideation. I just want to show you the key difference.

Even though Elijah is at a very very low point and does desire death, he in no way presumes that he has the right to take his own life. He asks God to, yes—and that's not a nothing, still a big deal— but not going to do it himself. And that matters bc the bible does not condone in any way, suicide.

That being said, I do still think Elijah is a very relatable character if you have ever found yourself in that type of place. Because what is clear is that Elijah is so hopeless and in such a deep place of despair, he is asking God to let him die. To take away his life. And if this is where you're at, please come to talk to us. Don't wait. You're not a burden. Pull me or Tim aside today.

And I just want to say, this story is confirmation that you can be a person of faith— A christian, and still find yourself in a place like this. It's funny, there are commentators—bad ones in my opinion— that argue this story is problematic because it's edited badly. They say this story is out of place. Because they say no one could ever go from such a high to such a low so fast. And I would say if that's your view then life is about to shock you.

The Scriptures are full of people who doubt God. And although God never celebrates doubt, and that's important to remember, He does welcome it.

Which is what makes Elijah even more relatable. His faith evaporates as he wanders into the wilderness.

*5 And he lay down and slept under a broom tree. And behold, an angel touched him and said to him, "Arise and eat." 6 And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. And he ate and drank and lay down again. 7 And the angel of the Lord came again a second time and touched him and said, "Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you." 8 And he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God.*

An angel shows up. And the angel doesn't really do what we'd think. Doesn't show up and say 'Do not be afraid!' Or 'I bring good tidings' or 'Repent!'. The angel shows up, touches Elijah and says 'arise and eat'. The angel shows up and cooks for Elijah! And Elijah eats and goes back to sleep.

The angel shows up again and repeats the process, saying, this journey is too much for you.

The angel touches him, meets his needs, allows him rest and acknowledges what he is feeling.

Now the treatment Elijah just got from God was real nice. We probably really like that. A nap, a hug and a nice meal. For some of us, this might be your new favorite passage. The tone is about shift though when he gets to Horeb.

*9 There he came to a cave and lodged in it. And behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and he said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 10 He said, "I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away."*

Elijah comes to Mount Horeb and God asks Him, why are you here? Reminder God never asks a question to get new information. Not like He's showing up and like Elijah?? Small world man! What are you doing here? No. It's not for God to get new information. It's for Elijah to get new information.

Elijah's finally expressed why he's so low. He had some expectations for his life and of God that did not pan out. He's mad at God. He says, I've been jealous for the things of God. I've done all these things for You. And look at

your people God, they don't care about you. And they want to kill me. What are you doing?? He's frustrated that after all he's done, the nation is still godless. And he is the only godly person left. Why is God letting that happen?

**Crucial to note, even though Elijah's feelings are understandable, Elijah is wrong.** We know that from just his story. Multiple other prophets survived Jezebel's persecution. Even when he beats out the priests of Baal, the whole nation declares the Lord is God! It's just that Ahab and Jezebel, who do have the power, do not repent. His perspective is marred by his despair.

And it's not despair because of anything necessarily bad. In fact it's pretty good. Elijah is depressed because he wanted God to move and bring the king and the nation into repentance. What a great thing to want! And in doing so, his life is threatened multiple times. This isn't because he chose sin or rebelled.

But the problem is Elijah's desires for God weren't in God's plan. He thought for sure it was going to play out a certain way, and it did not. Yet God hears him out, acknowledging his frustration and doubt. Let's see how He responds.

*11 And he said, "Go out and stand on the mount before the Lord." And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. 12 And after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper.<sup>[a]</sup> 13 And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.*

This must have been so frustrating to Elijah. Here God says go stand out on the mountain. And a wind passes by. And then an earthquake. And then a fire. These are not random things God is choosing to show Elijah. These are all ways He's shown up in the past to Israelites.

- God sends a wind to dry the earth with Noah. He sends a great wind to part the seas in Exodus.
- God descends on the mountain to meet with Moses and the earth quakes
- God appears to Moses via the burning bush. He sends a fire to guide the Israelites as they leave Egypt.

These are all the ways that Elijah would expect God to show up but it says, He's not in any of these things. It's as if God is showing Elijah, I'm more than you could ever understand. I don't just appear and do what you expect. I can't be contained. In the words of CS Lewis, I'm not a tame God.

**Now listen to what's really interesting about what's going on here.** Just like Elijah thought he knew what God's plans were for Ahab and Jezebel, he also thought he knew how this interaction would go down at Horeb.

**Here's what I mean.** Does anyone know the other name for Mount Horeb? Mount Sinai. And do you know what happened at Mount Sinai? Mount Sinai is where Moses meets God. It's where he finds the burning bush. It's also where he receives the 10 commandments. And possibly most important to this story. It's where he goes to see the glory of God.

In Exodus 33 Moses is frustrated with God's people so he says to God, show me who you are. Show me your glory. And God says come up to Sinai and I'll put you in a cleft in the rock. And I'll pass by you and you'll see my glory. Now this word for cave in 1 Kings 19 is very similar to that word for rock. Many scholars think that what Elijah is doing here is he's going up to the mountain to find the exact spot that Moses was hidden in the cleft of the rock. Because that's where God will be!

But God flips it on Elijah. You thought I'd be fire. A windstorm. An earthquake. You thought you would hide in the cleft and see me. You really thought you knew how it would go up here on this mountain. But He appears as a whisper.

**Which is so important to this story. Because if you don't catch that you might think this story is primarily about Elijah seeking God.** You could think, this seems like the story of the Downcast Seeking God, not God seeking the Downcast! And certainly, Elijah is seeking God. Elijah goes out into the wilderness, rest, fasts, takes the journey to Mount Horeb. Tries to find God.

But that's a miss on what's really going on here. Elijah could not seek God here if God had not sought him first.

Elijah goes into the wilderness, leaving his assistant. Most likely not to seek God. God finds him in the wilderness. God seeks Him out. God cooks Him a meal. God acknowledges his despair and tells him to rest. And it's THAT time with God that gives Elijah the strength to seek God at the mountain.

Elijah gets to the mountain and God is still seeking him. But now He's working on Elijah's heart.

Elijah had expectations of how God should be showing up. God doesn't show up how he expects. He hears a voice telling him to go stand on the mount. And then a great wind tears through the mountains. And then an earthquake. And then a fire. But God was not in any of those things. He whispers to Elijah. And He peels back the curtain to show Him, this is what I'm like. This is who I am.

Elijah is depressed because he thinks God has let him down. That God didn't do what He obviously should have done. And God is graciously trying to pull that out of Elijah. Elijah you need to remember who I am. I'm the one in control. It's my power that you've been displaying. You're MY prophet. I'm not going to adhere to your agenda, however good it is.

And although it is probably the opposite of what Elijah wants, it's what He needs. And God is so committed to helping Elijah see this, He repeats the same exact interaction He just had. Look back at v 13

*And behold, there came a voice to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 14 He said, "I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away." 15 And the Lord said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus. And when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Syria. 16 And Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel, and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place. 17 And the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death. 18 Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."*

The still small voice repeats the question. Again, God knows what Elijah's answer will be. He's giving Elijah a chance to see. And he still doesn't. He lays out his complaint again.

This time though, instead of God showing Elijah who He is. He's showing Elijah what He's doing.

God says okay. Here's what you've been missing. I do have a plan, just not your plan. He says going anoint this pagan king—certainly out of Elijah's wheelhouse. Go anoint this new king, Jehu over Israel. And go anoint Elisha, who will be your successor as a prophet. And by the way, there's actually 7000 of my people in Israel, faithful to me, you are certainly not alone.

We know Elijah then leaves, he goes and does as the Lord says. We Don't get a clear resolution to this specific story in his life. Not like it's a 'and then Elijah was happy again!' no. But we do know that he continues in ministry. Faithfully. And eventually is taken up into heaven by God.

What we see is that Elijah had wished for death because he couldn't see how God was working. And the very thing he wished for, he is actually spared from-- never dies, and is taken up into heaven instead. He couldn't see that God had a much richer vision of what was to come.

**Now that was a lot. Let's talk about what this means for us. I think we should have 3 responses to this story.**

**1. Some of us, like Elijah, are downcast because of what we hoped God would do.**

So you've sought the Lord. You're disappointed in what He's done, or isn't doing. You've been praying about godly desires. A desire for justice, a desire for healing, a desire for children, a desire for godly relationships, redemption in your family, salvation for someone you love. And He's not answering. It's not playing out how you want. And you're exhausted. Personally I get it, there's stuff I've been begging for God to do here in our church, for and in some of you, and He hasn't answered those yet. And it's very hard

And just a word to us. If you know someone here, or are yourself here, **lovingly**, please stop with the Christian platitudes. 'Well this didn't work out because God just has something better!' That sounds nice. I didn't get this job, but it's because God's got something better. It didn't work out with so and so, because God's got someone better.' I appreciate the optimism. That's just not true Christian hope. That's still putting your hope in a certain outcome and consigning God onto it. Yes, God works all things for the good of His people. But your good, honestly MOST of the time, is not what you want. It's what God wants. What God wants is for you to be more like Jesus. And that means the 'good plans' he has for you might be more hardship and difficulty. That's the win.

And that type of thinking, along with disappointment, is something we have to be careful with. I mean right now there's a whole movement with exvangelicals and deconstructing and so much of that comes down to people being disappointed with God. Not knowing what to do with that. And I don't want that to be true of any of us.

See this story. Disappointment is part of Christian life. Don't walk away from Jesus because you were shocked by this or think it's all fake because you can't make sense of it.

But also God seeking you. Even as you seek Him. See the dazzling display of God's kindness in this story. I can't think of time God does more to get someone's attention. See how that applies to you! How approachable He is. How He invites you to rest. How He's willing to hear you out. And How He's graciously inviting you to trust Him. To see your plans are not His, but He loves you.

He's trustworthy, regardless of circumstance or outcome.

**2. For some of us, we are downcast because of our sin.** So we can't and shouldn't be relating to Elijah. We're downcast because of sin.

I want you to see that those two are different. And that's not to shame you. That's to help you. You need to know where you're actually at and have some clarity. It can actually be a really dangerous thing to think you're like Elijah when really you're more like Samson. Your sin has caught up to you and is bearing poor fruit in your life.

Now be encouraged, God also seeks you. He loves you. The reason doesn't make your feelings of being downcast any less valid, or that God is unwilling to seek you or hear you. It does mean, as you see God seeking you, you should also seek God. Repent and follow Him.

### **3. Some of us, like Elijah, need more of God.**

Let me explain what I mean by this. I see a lot of people are downcast, for whatever reason, and are handling it in fairly helpful ways, but way differently from Elijah because God is removed from the process. And I see this constantly in our church and in Christian circles everywhere.

So I just want to address this for us because I don't know of anything right now that is both so pervasive, yet no one sees it.

Right now, our culture is fairly obsessed with therapy, self help and self love. I mean I read you some of the stats. There's even a name for it. Therapy culture. Self love movement. Sure, some of that might be good bc of how bad the problem is. But the problem tends to be that when it comes to mental health, there's a divorce from the spiritual.

So we say, this problem is our mental health, which is both a physical, brain chemistry issue as well as an emotional issue, negative thoughts etc—so the solution is to fix your diet, fix your brain chemistry, get someone to talk to, get a journal and get a nap.

And Christians have bought into this. Largely in part to 1990s Christian culture that said if you're depressed, shut up and read your Bible. Which isn't great advice. But the problem is we've actually swung completely opposite of that, thinking we're in the middle.

One example, anecdotally, is something we've noticed as pastors is that it's becoming way more common for people to ask a pastor for recommendation for a therapist than actually meet with a pastor. But it is interesting to me that someone would rather pay to meet with a stranger than meet with who the Scriptures say is the primary means of care that God has put into your life as a member of a church. Again, divorce from the spiritual. In that mode of thinking, Pastors are supposed to be executives and public speakers.

**This is all divorce from the spiritual.** There are many of us in the room that are in a state of despair, and our focus is solely what culture would tell us to focus on. We're going to counseling, we're changing the diet, getting naps, exercising. You've got resources. Podcasts, medication, books, blogs, influencers dedicated to this.

#### **And as a pastor, I'm just asking, where is God?**

I think many of us were listening to this sermon and thought 'man I love the first part of the story. Elijah was depressed, God gave him food and a nap.' But we miss the whole second part and really what the first part was leading to—going to the mountain of God to be confronted by God's presence.

Now please don't hear me as frustrated or annoyed. This grieves me so deeply because we are cutting ourselves off from the source of real healing.

As a Christian, any time you see something that our culture is head over heels for something we should look at it critically. Even if it's a good thing.

Take justice. We've talked about this before. Yes there's a good desire in our culture for justice now, but we also see that the world wants the kingdom without the King! They want all the peace and justice and flourishing He offers in His Kingdom, just without the King of the Kingdom. And we do the same thing with depression and mental health. **We want health without the Healer.**

You know, I don't think this is a crazy statement but I think it's going to be offensive— if a depressed Christian and a depressed non Christian are handling depression the same way, that's a problem. And I think it's a pervasive one, but we convince ourselves it's not because, well I'm going to a Christian counselor. But that doesn't mean you're actually addressing something spiritual. Does your Christian counselor push you towards Jesus? Like explicitly? They tell you to pray? Fast? Repent? Remind you of the Gospel?

Now I'm not trying to pick on counseling. I am pro counseling! I'm just saying that counseling should be like step 5 if you're a Christian struggling with depression. The first and foremost thing that we should be looking at when you're depressed is your relationship with God. What's your time with him look like? How are your disciplines? Any unconfessed sin? And then if you're doing all the right inputs and think adding on a therapist would be a helpful idea, then do that!

So like Elijah, we need to seek God. I'll be the crazy pastor that says hey, Elijah was depressed so he fasted for 40 days seeking the Lord in the wilderness, and I think there might be something there for us. I'm not saying that's exactly what you should do, I'm just saying in well over a decade of following Jesus in deep community I've never met someone in a state of depression that thinks 'I'm going to push into spiritual disciplines for the next 40 days like never before'. Not once.

Like Elijah, I think we need to be willing to take the journey. Keep God at the center. Seek God. But also remember God is seeking you too. In your sin. In your lack of discipline. In your despair and hopelessness.

We know that from this story. But also because of the story this points us to.

### **Gospel Conclusion:**

Ultimately Elijah's story is just a glimpse of God's commitment to seeking the downcast. Elijah had to go to the mountain of God. To ascend to the heavens to find the presence of God.

**But years and years later the presence of God would descend from the heavens.** Jesus puts on flesh and comes down to be with the people. Again serving the people, just like He served Elijah. Listening to the people. Living with the people. And eventually dying for the people.

Raised to life. And now the Spirit that raised Him lives in us, His people who believe. Downcast or not.

You do not have to go into the wilderness or to Mount Sinai to find God. As a believer, His spirit dwells within you. Even when you can't see it or feel it, He is with you. He sought you out to save you. And is seeking you still wherever you're at.

Jesus came to seek us. To seek us at our lowest. To seek the downcast.

**Practice.** Bible Reading? Self Care Saturday?

**Pray.**