

Group Study: The Crisis of Faith (1 Kings 18–19; Luke 7:18–23)

1. What does Elijah's story reveal about the expectations we place on God?
2. Why do moments of great spiritual victory sometimes lead to deep despair?
3. How does God respond to Elijah's crisis of faith? What does this teach us about divine compassion?
4. Why might John the Baptist have questioned Jesus from prison?
5. How does Jesus affirm John's faith even amid doubt? How does this speak to the way we might respond to others (or ourselves) going through a crisis of faith?
6. Have you ever experienced a crisis of faith like Elijah or John the Baptist? What caused it and how did you navigate through it?
7. How can we support one another through spiritual crises in our own communities?
8. What scriptures, spiritual practices, or words of wisdom have helped you persevere through seasons of spiritual discouragement or disillusionment? How can you share these with others?

Good Faith Bible Study

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"The Crisis of Faith"

1 Kings 19

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In this podcast, I'd like us to spend some time in 1 Kings 19, exploring Elijah's crisis of faith—his emotional and spiritual despair. What leads Elijah here? What happens when Elijah is at the end of his spiritual rope? And what in Elijah's story might be helpful to us, in our own times of faith crisis?

The truth is, even the most faithful Christians can feel utterly undone. Elijah was a prophet, for crying out loud. He had "done everything right"—and yet he still has doubts and very real fears. Have you been here before? By all accounts, everything should be great ... but it's not. Or

maybe circumstances demonstrably are not great. And our prayers are hitting the ceiling, and though you desperately look for God in all the right places, God is nowhere to be found.

Let's join Elijah after he has defeated the prophets of Ba'al on Mt. Carmel—you can read that story in 1 Kings 18.

King Ahab and Elijah have, more or less, raced back to the royal city of Jezreel. Elijah arrives first—which is actually surprising, because Ahab was in a chariot!—but when Ahab gets there, he goes straight to Queen Jezebel.

One of my favorite Hebrew Bible translators is Robert Alter, who is now professor emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley. His remarkable ability with ancient Hebrew combines with his deep appreciation for how words form narratives to give us careful and creative translations of the Old Testament. If you have a chance, check out his three-volume translation and commentary on the Old Testament. It was published in 2019. The reference is in the podcast show notes.

So all that to say, in Alter's translation, 1 Kings 19:1 takes on a kind of breathless quality, as Ahab reports to Jezebel. Here's what the text says: "And Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done and all about how he killed all the prophets by the sword."

But Jezebel is not intimidated. She responds with a clear, direct threat—she vows to repay Elijah in kind.

And Elijah flees into the wilderness when he hears Jezebel's threat.

Elijah's success on Mt. Carmel, and even the downpour of rain that breaks the long drought in the land, is not enough when the queen's attention turns to the prophet.

It's interesting that Elijah's public success—his very public and proven faith in God—does not necessarily mean that he has the same level of confidence in private.

Elijah's words express his despair: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life."

Despite Mt. Carmel, the king and the queen are still determined to lead Israel away from God. Elijah doesn't see any way forward—his mission as God's prophet has failed. This is a deeply human and a deeply spiritual moment. Elijah is being honest before God even when it's not "proper." This is Elijah saying, "Look, I'm done."

So what does God do? Well, God lets Elijah take a nap. And then God gives him a snack and some water to drink. And then Elijah naps again. Maybe we should pay attention here to the power of a nap and hydration and a snack!

Then, when Elijah's physical needs are met, God leads Elijah on a journey. He walks south, through the Kingdom of Judah, into northern Egypt, until he comes to a familiar mountain. 1 Kings calls this mountain Mt. Horeb. This is Mt. Sinai, where God met Moses in the burning bush and later established the Mosaic Covenant.

Like Moses, Elijah stands on this holy mountain, seeking an encounter with God.

Now when Moses stood there, he was leading a newly freed people through the wilderness as they learned to trust God. And now, Elijah serves this same people, generations later. And the people are still, in fact, struggling to trust God. While they aren't wandering in the wilderness anymore in Sinai, or in the Jordan Rift Valley, they are in a wilderness of the heart.

And so, in some sense, is Elijah.

Maybe Elijah is desperate to be a prophet like Moses. Moses, who led God's people to the Promised Land. Who talked with God and faced down Pharaoh. Who was trusted by the people (mostly). And who had faithfully fulfilled the daunting task given to him by God. Now Elijah was on the mountain. And God is about to show up.

But that's where the similarities end. When Moses received the Law, the presence of God is marked by lightning and thunder, and fire on the mountain.

Elijah experiences these things, too—a terrible wind, smashing the rocks; an earthquake, shaking the roots of the mountain; a fire, ripping down the slope. But God is not there.

Perhaps God is showing Elijah that he is not Moses. And yet he is still called by God. God's presence will come to Elijah a different way—through a whisper. Alter's translation is "a sound of minute stillness."

In the face of Elijah's greatest fear and doubt, when Elijah says, "God, I am done," God doesn't correct Elijah's theology. God meets him.

Faith crisis doesn't mean faithlessness. Burnout, grief, exhaustion—maybe we should see these not as failures of belief, but as invitations to be met by God in a different way.

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MAGAZINE

Episcopal priest and celebrated author Barbara Brown Taylor left full-time parish ministry after experiencing exhaustion and spiritual dryness. Though widely admired for her preaching and her pastoral care, she described her departure as a necessary retreat to rediscover her spiritual center.

Like Elijah, Taylor had done “everything right” but she had reached a place of exhaustion. She writes about this experience in her first memoir, [Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith](#).

Taylor recalls words that she once heard from Walter Brueggemann: “The world for which you have been so carefully prepared is being taken away from you by the grace of God.”

In seasons of fear and doubt, when it feels like everything you have prepared for, everything you have dreamed of, everything you have worked for is being taken away from you, when you’re in despair—especially then—bring your honest emotional truth to God.

Sometimes in those moments we naturally end up in a cave, like Elijah, when the threat is too great, when our sighs are just too deep, and when our own rope is too short.

Barbara Brown Taylor shares that finally, God met her not in a pulpit, but in the quietness of her garden, long walks, in new rhythms of life.

For Taylor, for Elijah and for you, the cave is not the end of the story. One of the FAQs on Rev. Taylor’s website is, “Did you really leave church?”

Taylor responds: “I’m in churches all the time. The title of my first memoir, [[Leaving Church](#)], was a sleight-of-hand, meant to help all of us explore what we mean when we say, ‘church.’ In my lifetime, the answer is that ‘church’ includes more people than I ever imagined, leaning into the Divine from vastly different angles that all sound familiar to me.”

No, the cave is not the end of the story, because wherever your cave might be, whatever circumstances might have led you there, [God meets you there](#), with an open invitation to rest and be restored.