

I. Set Up

A. Today we begin a three week series on mental health with a sermon – by Mike - based out of I Kings 19. He is going to make some observations about anxiety, burnout, depression and other challenges based on the way Elijah’s life crashed.

B. It is suggested that between twenty and twenty-five percent of people suffer from some sort of mental illness at some point in their life. The Bible has lots of language the suggests this is not altogether new. Especially the Psalms, where we hear a lot of anguish.

C. In 2 Corinthians 1:8, Paul writes, “We do not want you to be uniformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself.”

D. Some of you had a week like that. And you are here looking for some relief – and even more than that, a sense of hope. Father, I pray for those who need encouragement – who need some wind in their sails, a sense of your care and favor. Meet with them today.”

E. Right now...

II. Introduction

A. In I Kings 17, God has the prophet Elijah inform the King and Queen of Israel – Ahab and Jezebeel – that because they are so evil and idolatrous, God is going to withhold both the rain and the dew from the land. And then, He instructs Elijah to disappear.

B. I Kings 18 picks up a few years later, when the drought has brought Israel to her knees.

C. This sets up the epic battle – with 850 prophets of Baal on one side, and Elijah (and God) on the other. I’ve been on that mountain. It’s not that hard to imagine the cosmic duel that unfolded there - Elijah calling down the power of God. God showing up, the prophets of Baal being wiped out, and then – after years of drought - the sky opening up and the rain coming down.

D. It’s a great story. Full of glory for the good guys. Elijah looks like a remarkable leader. Strong. Faithful. Principled. Fearless.

E. But then we read on. In the beginning of the next chapter, Ahab tells Jezebell – his foreign-born wife (the person credited with bringing idolatry into Israel) what has happened. He recounts how thoroughly Elijah and God had out-dueled the prophets of Baal, and she gets mad and threatens Elijah. In fact, she sends him a message saying that she is going to kill him in the next 24 hours.

F. And Elijah runs. This guy – who was trash-talking 850 men a couple days earlier, suggesting that:

1. The reason Baal wasn’t answering them was because he was taking a nap or had stepped away to use the bathroom. He had been so calm and self-assured – is now undone.

G. He melts. He buckles. He turns and runs he doesn't stop running until he gets to Beersheba in Judah. And then he goes on an additional day into the wilderness, sits down under a broom bush, and... prays to die. He says – vs 4, “I have had enough, Lord. Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.”

H. And then in verse 5 we are told that he lies down under a bush and goes to sleep. It is as if he pulls the covers up over his head.

I. This is quite a change from the last time he spoke. The big, bold pronouncements of faith and courage he had been making. By the time we get to I Kings 19, Elijah has lost his courage, confidence, faith and will to live.

J. It appears as though Elijah is depressed. We know from our own experiences and medical science that physical exhaustion can lead to burnout and depression. Elijah is a candidate – a 2 year fight with Ahab, a big showdown with the prophets of Baal, a 25 mile fear-fueled run. That would make any of us tired, so his comments - his lethargy, his anger, his “I don't care anymore. I'm done. I can't go on. I'm ready to die.” – maybe more exhaustion and burnout (more of a situational depression) than a clinical one.

K. I am not psychiatrist. I do not play one on TV. I do not diagnose mental illness in people I can talk with. I am not going to do so for someone who lived 3,000 years ago. Some suggest he was depressed. A therapist I asked about this said you would never diagnosis depression in someone who has had a major event in their life in the last six months.

L. Over the last few months a team from Christ Church has been meeting around the topic of mental illness and they were not convinced I should launch this series around Elijah – thinking there were other biblical figures more likely to be mentally ill:

1. Much has been written suggesting that King Saul was depressed.
2. In Daniel 4 we read about a season where Nebuchadnezzar acts like an animal for a few years.
3. In the Gospels we are told enough about Herod the Great – who was a brilliant, brilliant builder, but who had such massive insecurities that he had his wife and several of his children killed. When you factor in his obvious megalomania, it's clear that he was not well.
4. The Psalms are full of the cries of people who sound depressed.
5. Paul counsels Timothy on how to deal with anxiety

M. And of course there are many other more recent places I could turn. In preparation for this series I read a number of books. One – *Wrestling with my Thoughts* – was the first hand account of Sharon Hastings, who becomes severely depressed during her final year of medical school and suffered horribly for ten years under a parade of different diagnoses. Her situation – and that of many others – cannot be fixed by kindness or sleep. It is a chronic health issue.

N. Elijah is not in that camp. Mental illness is a spectrum. But Elijah helps us get into the topic. And there are things important for us to note. If you read on in I King you see that God will care for Elijah. He provides him with food and water and lets him sleep

1. He does not give him a pep talk, point out how irrational his fear are or scold him for his lack of faith. No, he sends an angel who prepares him a warm meal and then lets him go back to sleep.

O. Strengthened by the food, he will get back up and keep walking – all the way to Horeb (also called Siani), which means he has walked basically the length of Israel. And there he goes into a cave.

P. And there, God speaks to Elijah again. And He asks him the same question: **“What are you doing here?”**

1. Remember, when God asks a question it’s not to get information. He knows. He is asking Elijah a question to help Elijah gain some perspective.
 2. Based on what he says, it’s clear Elijah is still overwhelmed - frightened and depressed.
 - a) He sounds a bit like Eyeore. He describes how very, very bad things are. Forty days of solitude have not helped.
 - b) And he sounds like someone who doesn’t have much of a perspective. What Elijah says comes off like, “What am I doing here? Hello. I am single-handedly trying to save the world.
 3. God tells him to go stand outside the cave. And then we have this wonderful passage in which God sends a powerful wind that shatters the rocks. And then He sends an earthquake. And then a fire, but the text says, **“The Lord is not in the wind, the earthquake or the fire.”** These are just very small displays of God’s power. And then Elijah and God talk some more. And it is obvious that Elijah is still very low. And God asks him the same question: what are you doing here?
 4. I Kings 19:14 reads: **“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.”**
 - a) Which translates, “What does it look like I am doing? I am trying to hold everything together. I have been zealous for you. Fighting this battle on my own. They have killed everyone else. Now they are after me. I am all alone. I am trying to stay alive.”
 5. I Kings 19:15: **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.**
 - a) This is interesting in that it establishes God’s claim over a nonIsraelite nation.
 6. **16: Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel.** Which symbolically brings the 10 northern tribes back to God
 7. **And anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet.** Which suggests that God’s work is bigger than Elijah and will carry on after him.
- Q. And then, verse 18: **Yet I reserve 7,000 in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him.”** In other words, the sky isn’t falling.

R. There is a lot more going on than you understand. When we are overwhelmed or depressed we often lose perspective as well hope. We think things are worse than they are.

1. God says, “Elijah, you are not alone. Not only am I with you, but there are 7,000 others who follow me.”

S. You can read more in I Kings. Or you can read some commentaries about it. Almost all comment on his lack of resilience. As I noted, some suggest he is suffering from exhaustion.¹ Others suggest more than that.

T. Some of the books suggest that Elijah is suffering from stress and anxiety. And many can relate to that. In our COVID world, there are people who are overwhelmed by the bad news: the down economy, the toxic political rhetoric.

U. If you study I Kings with the idea that what is happening is burnout, exhaustion or anxiety then a few things emerge. Pastors thinking this way note:

1. That the problem is that Elijah took his eyes off God and put them on his problems – his circumstances. (Which they will note, is what Peter does a few hundred years later when he is walking on water out to Jesus and then starts to sink).

2. Or you might hear that Elijah hadn’t fully counted the cost. He dropped his guard too soon.

V. But a few commentators will ask if Elijah struggles with some kind of mental illness.

III. Let me stop here to apologize. Those who struggle with mental illness – and those who live with and care for and love those who struggle with mental illness – have gone undernoticed and under supported.

A. I heard from one Mom who said, “when your child has surgery people ask how he or she is doin, or they bring a meal. But when your child is diagnosed with a mental illness. Crickets. No one brings a casserole to the house. It’s radio silence.” That is wrong and some of you have been wronged. And part of the reason for this series – and the whole task force – has been to find ways to do better.

IV. Mental illness is a big issue that seems to be getting bigger.

A. According to Gallup, Americans – and this was preCOVID Americans, you can imagine that it has gone up. But according to Gallup, Americans are among the most stressed people in the world.²

B. This year, one in four US adults will suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder,³ and we will spend sixty billion dollars on healthcare for mental health concerns.

C. In spite of this, the US death rate from suicides is up 36% since 2000,⁴ and when you combine deaths by suicide with deaths from alcohol and drug overdoses (the three of these are now bundled under the term –“Deaths of Despair”) it appears as though these kind of problems are at all-time high.

D. I am a bit skeptical. I am not sure we have the data needed to make these kinds of statements. However, we can say that in recent years, even though other leading causes of death (cancer, heart disease and car accidents) are declining, life expectancy in the US has dropped every year for the last three years.

E. Alongside of this, a record number of people report being depressed or anxious.

1. According to a *New York Times* piece, 40 million Americans now suffer from some kind of anxiety disorder.⁵

2. You may be aware that anti-depressants and anti-anxiety meds are among the most popular drugs sold in the US.

3. If you were doing much flying before things shut down, you probably noted the spike in therapy animals on board.

4. And it seems impossible that you would not have read all the talk about resilience and grit, which is prompted by the fact that many appear to have less resilient and grit.

F. And all of these reflected our Pre-Covid world. Whatever the level of stress, anxiety and depression a person was wrestling with before the pandemic has likely spiked.⁶

1. I read a report about a mental health hotline that went from 22 calls in February to 1,800 calls in March, an 8,000% increase.⁷ Likewise, ABC News reported a 891% increase in calls to a suicide hotline.⁸

2. Again, this makes sense – not only because the global situation has become more stressful and our finances have taken a hit, but because a lot of ways we deal with stress have been taken away. We cannot hang out with friends as before, a lot of the structure of our life is gone, exercise may have been disrupted.⁹

V. I could go on with more statistics, but you get the point. And that is all a bit safe. Let me bring it a bit closer to home, first by talking about my experiences as a pastor.

A. When I was in seminary, I would go to the College of Lake County to talk with students there about the Gospel. One of the students I met – we'll call him Rick – was interested. We talked a few times and eventually he made a decision to follow Christ. At that point we started to meet every week for basic follow up. And then I was gone for a few days and when I came back, he was gone. I kept calling. Nothing. Eventually I went to his house. His mother said, "He's in the hospital." What happened? She said, his brother had the car. He was going to be late to work, so he tried to walk. And I asked, "Was he hit by a car?" She said, "No, we just called an ambulance and had them take him to the hospital." It took a while, but eventually I realized, what she was telling me was that he had had a breakdown.

B. That was my first interaction as a pastor, but hardly my last. When I began serving in college ministry:

1. There were several homeless people who hung around the church because we operated a soup kitchen. And when I got to know them, I learned that many were vets who were struggling with various fears - who were trying to cope with PTSD before we called it PTSD.

2. I also came to realize that the holidays were stressful times for many because many had family members who were not just a bit odd or a some bit disruptive – many families have those. But people who were not doing well and there was not just some social drinking going on, but a lot of drinking and stress and tension.

3. All of this was very new, surprising and confusing to me.

C. And then:

1. I remember leading a mission trip a few years later and realizing how many students were taking some sort of anxiety medication.

2. And then eating disorders became more prevalent and more public.

3. And then the wife of the senior pastor of the church where I was serving started to cause a lot of problems, before being diagnosed as suffering from bipolar disorder.

4. And then, about a year later, the senior pastor had a mental breakdown – from which, twenty years later, he has largely not recovered.

D. And then a few years later, I showed up here, where the numbers of people I interact with who struggle with depression or anxiety, eating disorders and addictions – is often less visible but I suspect just as prevalent.

E. It is my take that the number of people who are cutting themselves or who are self-medicating in some manner has been climbing.

F. And as an aside, the more I read biographies, the more I met people who seemed to have mental health challenges:

1. The Reformer, Martin Luther who wrote “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” suffered with depression. In 1527 he wrote: “For more than a week I was close to the gates of death and hell. I trembled in all my members. Christ was wholly lost.”

2. The famous English preacher Charles Spurgeon who ignited the fires of the 19th century revival movement struggled so severely with depression that he was forced to be absent from his pulpit for two to three months a year! He told his congregation, “I hope none of you ever get to such extremes of wretchedness as I go through.”¹⁰

G. A while back, I told someone that I had just come through a week where every day seemed to involve interacting with someone who had a mental health issue – and that it left me wondering, has this always been the case and I just didn’t know it? Or are things getting worse?

VI. But talking about other people is still safe. Let me make this more real by talking about how mental illness has effected my family.

A. And then there is my diagnosis - shortly after I turned forty, I went in for testing to see if I had Adult ADHD. It turns out I do.

1. The diagnosis did not surprise Sheri, who had reached that conclusion many years earlier. But it surprised me.

2. If you haven't heard this story, the long and short of it is, I went to talk with a therapist about the possibility that I had ADHD and he said that I did not. And I said, "Great. Write that on one of your scripts and I will take it home as proof." But we kept talking, and at some point he started to furrow his brow and sit up a bit straighter and ask more pointed questions. And then he had me take a twenty minute computerized ADHD screening test. A letter would show up on a screen and if it was an X I was supposed to hit the space bar. And if it was any other letter, I was to do nothing.

3. And this goes on for twenty minutes – somewhat randomly. And after it was over and he scored my test, he asked me if I was surprised to learn that I had scored in the first percentile. I misunderstood what he was saying. By first percentile I understood him to mean the top percentile. I said that did surprise me a bit because I knew I had messed up a bit.

4. It was only after he said that he was required by law to tell me that I could never – and then he started naming professions, like being an air traffic control guy – that I clued in. I said, "Wait. Do you mean the top first percentile or the bottom first percentile? And he said, the bottom. And I said, "So, if 99 people and a chimpanzee take this test," and he said, "The chimp and you are battling it out for last place."

5. I share that because, there are not too many opportunities to laugh when it comes to mental health.

B. There is a line in the movie – I can't remember which one, but a character says: "Mental illness runs in my family. It practically gallops." I do not think that is particularly true for us. But as I have noted in the past, my grandfather was mentally ill. I was too young to be told that that is what was going on. But after I grew up and looked back, I figured it out. He had some paranoia issues, was a hypochondriac and though he was not institutionalized, he was unemployable.

C. Depression has also been an issue in Sheri's family.

D. My broader point is, if we are not facing mental health issues ourselves, most of us know someone who is in counseling, on prescription medication, self-medicating or struggling.

VII. So when I look around and then look back at I Kings 19 – at what is going on in Elijah's life – I find myself wanting to say two things:

A. First, we expect life to be hard but that doesn't mean you are doing things wrong. Many think, "If I am good, God will ensure that only good should happen to me." No. That is called Karma. It is not what the Bible teaches. We should not expect to live on the mountain top. Not in this broken world. Bad things happen to people who are seeking to follow God.

1. Elijah not only led the charge against the 850 false prophets
 2. He was a prophet who God used to raise a widow's son from the dead.
 3. He is swept into heaven by a chariot – in other words, he does not die
 4. While in heaven he is sent down to appear with Jesus and Moses in the Transfiguration.
 5. In other words, I am not sure what your spiritual resume looks like, but it doesn't match Elijahs. And yet, he faces really hard times.
- B. And the second thing I want to say is, we need to be alert to mental health issues.
1. I think they may have been in play here.
- VIII. There is much more in I Kings 19. It is so wonderful to read and realize:
- A. God is for us. His care for Elijah was so kind. He sends an angel to bake bread and tuck Elijah into bed.
 - B. He displays his power so Elijah can relax, but also speaks words of mercy and grace.
 - C. It is also worth noting that we are vulnerable after big wins.
 - D. But while I think his response – his lethargy, anger, despair, desire to die – might be more of a situational depression than a more clinical depression or other, more serious mental illness, I want to focus there.
 - E. These conversations are complicated for a variety of reasons.
 1. Tight and universally agreed upon definitions of mental health and mental illness are hard to come by.
 2. Mental illness can be hard to recognize and diagnose. It's not always clear what the root problem is.¹¹ It's not always clear what the best path forward is.¹²
- IX. It is for these reasons and more, that for the last few months ten of us met to talk, read, interview people about mental health, and about what we – as a church – should do.
- A. The team included a practicing psychiatrist, a neurosurgeon, a volunteer with NAMI – the National Alliance on Mental Illness - a pharmacist, a few pharma research scientists, a theologian, an ethicist and a few pastors.
 - B. It sounds like I am about to say, they all walked into a bar – and then tell a joke. No. We all met at the Lake Forest campus to talk about mental health. We read books, we prayed. We looked at what some other churches were doing, we brought in some experts to coach us. And out of these sessions a few things have emerged.
 - C. Our goal was to better understand how – as Christ followers – we better love and care for those who are struggling with mental illness, and those who are trying to care for those struggling with mental illness. It's our assumption that we need to work to lower the stigma around these challenges and also to create some practical ways to help. I think we also need to do some training on how we can help those who struggle with mental illness, because telling someone with anxiety issues to trust God more, or pray more, is not very helpful. We are far better prepared to support someone with an acute illness than with a mental illness.

- D. Next week, Dr. Phil Ryken, the President of Wheaton will be preaching out of Psalm 142. The title of his sermon is “No One Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen.” And it is about his struggle with depression.
- E. The following week, I will lead us through Psalm 13, reflecting on how we can and should respond.
- F. Today I want to help you step into this.
- X. The Bible is a guide here as it is in so many other areas of life.
- A. Along side it – and alongside popular, contemporary reports about mental health – we also have the writings of the last two thousand years, where some really helpful things have been noted. I am thinking of things like the poem by John of the Cross *Dark Night of the Soul*. But we have the Bible. And it offers us some help.
- XI. My goal for this series is three fold:
- A. I want to raise awareness about mental health issues – and in so doing I want to lower the stigma so more people can get help.
1. I wish everyone knew how many issues everyone else has.
- B. I want to push you towards some resources
1. Of course at one level there are some common spiritual practices that can help with common levels of stress and anxiety. We need to be more attentive to our psychological health and hygiene than we often are.
 2. And we need each other. Some people do not need a therapist, they need friends.
 3. But some need more support than that, and access to resources and support groups. We will be profiling those.
- C. I also want to provide hope

¹ Moses’s situation in Exodus 18 also comes to mind.

² By Niraj Chokshi, Niraj Chokshi, “Americans are among the most Stressed People in the World, Poll Finds,” *New York Times*, April 25, 2019.

³ Matthew Stanford, “When Sickness is called Sin.” According to the World Health Organization, one in five Americans live with a mental health issue and one in four people worldwide will experience mental health issues. (Four Encouraging Truths for Christians with Mental Health Illness, The Gospel Coalition,

⁴ ???, Ian Lovett, “It’s Like I Got Kicked Out of My Family: Churches Struggle with Mental Health in the Ranks,” *The WSJ*, Jan. 20, 2020.

⁵ Lee Siegel, “Why is America So Depressed?,” *NYT*, 01/02/2020

⁶ Most feel that COVID and the economic-challenges related to it are causing stress to spike, but there is a counter argument. Some are suggesting that we will not see a spike in mental illness because events like this help move people out of vain pursuits into more substantial ones. Perhaps. For more on this see Sally Satel, Coronavirus Pandemic: Mental-Health Crisis Looms, But We Can Contain It, *National Review*, 5/6/2020.

⁷ Deepa Bharath, “Suicide, help hotline calls soar in Southern California over coronavirus anxieties,” *Orange County Register*, April 19, 2020.

⁸ Mike Levin, “Calls to US helpline jump 891%, as White House is warned of mental health crisis” *ABC News*, April 7, 2020.

⁹ See, Eric Geiger, Covid-19 and a Pastor’s Concern for Our Mental Health, April 26, 2020.

¹⁰ Taken from *Spirituality and Mental Illness*, Dr. Chris Summerville D.Min., CPRP

¹¹ A couple weeks ago I interviewed Dr. Nii Addy, the director of a Yale Neuroscience lab – and a man of faith – and I asked him this. How do you decide what the problem is? When are people drinking, or smoking pot, in an effort to address problems and when is the drinking or the dope the problem? And he said, “it’s often very hard to tell.”

¹² How should Christians treat mental illness? With counseling? With medication? With prayer? With just prayer? When we look at the Bible, it seems as though many of those who were not mentally well ended up being exercised of a demon. What do we do with that? (In the margin let me note that this is a bigger topic, but mental illness is not demon possession by another name).