



Hope in a time of crisis

A reflection on Elijah

*My days are dark,
Overwhelmed by the
thoughts of my mind.
I sink into the shell of
my despair,
Not knowing how to
resurface back into the
LIGHT.*

*Righteous Father,
your Word gives me
LIGHT.*

*As you reach out to me
in the darkness of my
despair,
Help the eyes of my
heart to be opened
to the truth of your
LIGHT.*

In the middle of a sleepless and restless night, I woke up and wrote the words above in italics. The trials and hardships, which are part of the journey of faith, were evident in my life, and the reality of fear and despair had dawned upon me. The plethora of threat messages on the impact of Covid-19 were beginning to take their toll. I needed to hold on to the truth that God is divinely and consistently faithful to see us through, in spite of humanity's unfaithfulness. I was reminded of this expression: 'Every trial consists in a temptation to lose faith; and every temptation consists in a trial of faith'.

These feelings of despair are not uncommon. It is estimated that 1 in 4 people will experience a

mental health problem of some kind each year in England; and 1 in 6 people report experiencing a common mental health problem (like anxiety and depression) in any given week. These figures, quoted on the Mind website, were sourced before 2020. Since then people have faced challenging and troubling dark days as a result of Covid-19, and the pandemic continues to negatively affect the lives of people, young and old. We are in a wilderness experience where our souls have been downcast and experienced despair, our hearts have been disturbed, and our minds depressed. In the depths of our despair we have found it difficult to articulate the words to describe how we are feeling. We continue to have days when clouds are thick and

the challenge seems so impossible that we cannot see the light at the end of the tunnel.

This all-consuming despair is not uncommon to God, and we certainly see it in the Bible. Elijah is but one example of someone who experienced helplessness, yet he continued to be sustained and used by God. Is there anything we can learn from his story?

After confronting the evil King Ahab, we see in 1 Kings 19 that Elijah is now running for his life, frightened by the threats of Ahab's wife Jezebel. These spoken words of threat affected and interrupted his ability to focus on God. We read in Isaiah 26:3 'You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you'. In losing focus on God, Elijah lost his peace. The significant distress he experienced impacted his ability to do anything for himself, even the ability to take basic self-care, and he just wanted to die.

Yet, as the story continues, we see God providing for his physical needs, speaking to him, and giving him direction. Elijah losing the ability to trust in God's protection did not mean that God stopped protecting him. One aspect of the Elijah story was that he heard God in a whisper. How are we making space to hear God today?

When we read the account of his depression, we see that Elijah responded in a very human way. Can we learn something about ourselves that enables us to see the humanity in others when faced with our own faith failures? Believers in Christ need to proactively endeavour to gain awareness, knowledge and understanding on how to recognise - in others and ourselves - signs of trauma, anxiety, distress; that 'it is ok not to be ok'; and to respond graciously and compassionately.

Like Elijah, we will face problems, trials and difficult situations, all of which test our faith. When our faith is tested, is it our tendency to lose our focus on God, or to lean into him? The pandemic, its threats and impact on life as we are experiencing it, has been one of those trials in our time. It has tested our faith, our sense of strength, our sense of security. Covid-19 has brought loss and people are grieving and angry. It is very easy for that anger

to manifest itself as bitterness and resentment, and result in blaming and complaining. Yet a wrong focus will affect our capacity to function, to love, to extend grace and show patience towards others and ourselves. How can we retain our focus on God in a time of trial?

We have a resource Elijah wasn't aware of. In the midst of the storms of life, we need to be reminded of the promises of Jesus. Jesus said "I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid" (John 14:27 NLT). We can put our hope and trust in the righteous Father of our Lord Jesus Christ for protection



and provision. Remember, Jesus understands all that we go through, the threats, the betrayals, the lies said about us, the unkind criticism, the oppression, including the despair and distresses. We can put our trust in God who will never let his loved ones perish. The Lord never asks us to bear more than we are able to handle; moreover, he gives us the strength we need through each trial. (1 Corinthians 10:13)

Under pressure from this pandemic, our faith in God has been forced out into the open and into action, showing its true colours. We are not to panic, God is in control, God is sovereign. We are to trust God and not be afraid, for God is our strength.



God desires his people to come to the knowledge of truth and understanding of his eternal faithfulness. People need to realise the majestic power of God, the power that spoke the world into being, and the power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead - this is the same power that has been given to those who believe in him. However, the challenge is: do we really believe that what God says in his word he will do? God says that he heals the sick = do we believe he can do it? God says he will heal the brokenhearted - do we believe he will do it? Oh, that God would help us not to fear or doubt the truth of his word.

As I faced my own sleepless nights, I began to grasp how the amazing presence of God's peace

is evident in the wilderness of an unknown end. The following words from a book by David Adam, *Fire of the North: The Life of Saint Cuthbert*ⁱ, have resonated with me and helped me.

FOOD IN THE WILDERNESS

*When our way is weary
And the going tough,
When life is dreary
And things get rough,
When spirits weaken
And the day turns dark,
When sorrows deepen
And the pain finds its mark,
Strengthen us, keep us true,
Save us, Lord, as you can do.
Lord, when troubles oppress,
Feed us in the wilderness.*

We have a God whose provision and protection will always be with us whatever wilderness we find ourselves in. May God's grace be sufficient for you today and always, to enable you to stand firm and put your hope in him.



Charmaine Mhlanga is a Minister in Training at Sundon Park Baptist Church, Luton, Bedfordshire. She is currently studying for a Masters in Christian Thought and Practice at Spurgeon's College