

Experiencing & Responding to Dryness in Prayer

Dr. Scott Powell

Well, hi, everybody. My name is Scott Powell, and today I want to talk to you about the concept of dryness in prayer. What it feels like, those moments where we're praying, we're trying to do the right thing, we're trying to chug along in the spiritual life, and we just don't feel anything. And you don't necessarily hear or feel that voice back from God. Maybe you've experienced that. Maybe you haven't, but maybe you will experience that, because unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, it's kind of inevitable the deeper we go into the spiritual life. The deeper we enter into life and relationship with God, sometimes we have to go through those hard dry spells. It's like any relationship. The deeper you go into a relationship with your spouse, with a friend, with a family member, we inevitably get to those hard times that we have to get through because that's what true relationship is. It's being together through thick and thin in a certain sense.

One of the great figures, who in a certain sense embodies what to do in these situations for me is the figure of Elijah, one of the greatest of the Old Testament figures. The greatest, it's been said, of the prophets of the Old Testament. And he's got a wonderful story about what it looks like when we don't feel anything back and we don't always hear God speaking into our lives. What do we do in those moments? I want to talk a little bit about the story of Elijah, but before we do that, let's open on a prayer.

Opening Prayer

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen. Lord Jesus, thank you so much for the gift of this retreat. Thank you for this time together. Thank you for all the people who have put so much work into making this retreat possible and for all the participants from all over the world that are taking part in this. Please help us as we enter into this Lent, as we prepare to enter into your Passion and to celebrate Easter and to live in the light of your resurrection.

Please open to us the story of your servant, Elijah. Help open your scriptures and let the scriptures illuminate our minds and our hearts, and let them bear fruit in our lives. We pray through the intercession of your Mother and for all of your saints through Christ our Lord, Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

The Story of Elijah

Good, well, the story of Elijah. Elijah is a great Prophet who shows up in what is called the Northern Kingdom of Israel. You've probably heard of Israel, right? The 12 tribes of Israel eventually grew into a great nation. Maybe you remember King David, this great kingdom, this great nation that was thriving until a moment where the kingdom turns on itself and there's a great civil war. And after the civil war, not too far off from our own history in this country in the United States, 10 of the 12 tribes broke off, and 10 of the 12 tribes formed their own kingdom,

the Northern Kingdom, with a new capital, with a new temple, with a new liturgical life, with new priests, and new gods that they begin to worship. It's a very dark moment in Israel's history. The Southern Kingdom remains down in Jerusalem with the temple and worshipping Yahweh, but we find out as the biblical story goes on that they actually become pretty corrupted as well in a lot of ways.

But Elijah comes to us from the Northern Kingdom, this place and this group of people who were a part of the nation of Israel, the family of God, are a part of the family of God, but who have strayed very far and who have wandered and turned their back on God in a lot of ways. And Elijah appears in the midst of this culture as a faithful voice, a light in the darkness proclaiming the truth of the one true God and trying to call people back to Him.

Part of Elijah's job is preaching against an evil king who is seeking to undermine the ways of God and corrupt the people by leading them in all sorts of weird spiritual directions. And Elijah is called by God to go and speak truth to this power, to call him back into the light and to pronounce real judgment and real consequence if the people don't turn back to what is true. And so, Elijah's job is to speak truth in this really difficult, really hard circumstance. And as Elijah goes back and forth with this evil king and all the people surrounding him, he finds himself both literally and spiritually in a desert.

The Drought that Elijah Faced

One of the things that happens through the hands of Elijah, or through the working of God operating through his servant Elijah, is a great drought that falls on the land. One of the gods that the Northern Kingdom had been worshipping is a god named Baal. and Baal was known as rain god, a fertility god. And he was in charge of the rains. And so, one of the consequences that falls on the Northern Kingdom is that they enter into a profound drought. No rain falls in this part of the world for three years. And even though he is the voice of truth and even though he's God servant messenger, Elijah still lives in the midst of this, and Elijah will bear some of the consequences of that drought.

And a lot of Elijah's time is spent out in the wilderness looking for water, being fed by the scraps of what he can find and what ravens occasionally bring him, dealing in a real dryness, which leads him into a real spiritual dryness where he is asked or he is led to question, God, are you really there? Are you there, do you have my back? Are you actually behind the things that I'm doing? Am I totally alone in this? Am I the only one faithful, and God, are you really there supporting me? Maybe you've been there. Maybe you've come to that point in your life. Maybe 'cause of where you are in your faith, maybe there's people in your family that think you're a crazy religious person or maybe there's people in your neighborhood or your community or your school that think you're weird for the things that you believe and the ways that you practice your faith. Maybe you've felt that feeling of, am I totally alone? Is there nobody else to support me? Where's my community, and God, where are you?

The Challenge to Worship God

Sometimes it feels like God doesn't have our back. God's not showing up. He always does and He's always there, but He doesn't always show Himself to us in the ways that we want Him to. There's an amazing moment in the story of Elijah as he's going through a lot of this darkness where he is called to go back to the king, back to the palace, and create a challenge for the priests of the Northern Kingdom. And he says, "All right, here's what we're going to do." It's this great scene where he says, "All right, I am going to worship my God "and you guys worship your gods, "and we're going to have a challenge." So, he says: Let's both build an altar. We'll both build an altar to our god, me, Yahweh, the one true God, you guys, whatever gods you want to make it to. Baal, presumably. And we will ask and pray for our god to call down fire onto these altars.

And so, Elijah builds his altar, and he drenches it in water just to make it super obvious. If this fire really does come down, it's not just because it was really hot out and there was a spark, right? He drenches it, douses it in water. And God shows up, and miraculously the fire comes down. In the sight of everybody, they see this miraculous thing. The priests of Baal, the priests of the Northern Kingdom, they fail. They scream, they shout, they do all these things to try to get their attention of their gods, and nothing happens. And there's this really interesting moment where it sure seems like Elijah is victorious. And he's like, "Look, everybody, my God showed up!" Everybody saw there was a great miracle that was visible to everybody who could see that God is God, and He shows up, and all this other stuff is a bunch of baloney. It's not real, it's all fake.

And guess what happens to Elijah? Nobody cares. Nobody believes. There is not a massive conversion. Everyone gets angry. Elijah's life is sought, and he has to flee once again to the wilderness, which puts Elijah in a really deep, dark spiral. And he says: Wait, what the heck, Lord? I did everything you asked me to do. I did this great miracle. You showed up, everybody saw it! How come no one believed? How come none of this is working the way that it's supposed to work?

The Whisper from God

Which enters us into this really interesting part of the story where Elijah again goes off into the wilderness and he goes into a cave. Actually, it reminds us of a little bit of Moses in the wilderness years and years before. And it says the Lord cares for him. He feeds him while he's there. And there's three great movements. And as Elijah's in the cave, he says there was a great wind, but the Lord wasn't in it. And then there was a great earthquake that shook everything, but the Lord wasn't in it. And then there was a great fire, but the Lord wasn't in it. And we're told each time the Lord was not there. Now, the Lord is everywhere, of course. But Elijah experienced this wind, this fire, this earthquake, and none of it seemed to be a place where he could find the voice of the Lord. And then after all this chaos, in a very real sense, there's a still, small voice, a whisper. And that is where Elijah heard the voice of the Lord.

The Lord speaks in the whispers. It's hard to read that story apart from the story that just came before, where Elijah was with the priests of Baal and with the king and doing all of these

wondrous miracles that everyone could see. Fire literally rained down from the sky. And during the course of it, Elijah is mocking the priests of Baal. He's talking trash, there are miracles happening. And guess what? Surprise, surprise, it doesn't really convert anybody, because I'm not convinced, we live in a world where, well, and maybe you've thought this. I've certainly thought this. Man, if God would just show himself in this really big, miraculous way, if there was just some great miracle where Jesus made himself known to everybody, then everybody would believe. And the story of Elijah, among others, shows us that that might not be the case because that's not really how God works.

Now, God can do great miracles and in the case of Elijah, He does. But it didn't have the effect that Elijah wanted it to. Now, God can work through anything. But in this moment, after all of this stuff, all of this chaos, this yelling, mockery, big, dramatic fire coming down from heaven when Elijah's in the cave, seeing big dramatic things, and then hearing the voice of the Lord in the whisper, we get an insight into how God really works. Now, again, God can work through whatever He wants to. But what's sustainable in the life of Elijah is the still, small voice.

God doesn't often work through the big, dramatic miracles. Maybe you've experienced a big, dramatic miracle in your life, and God does those things. But that's not how he typically works for the long haul. God's long game is the whisper. And in order to hear the whisper, what do we have to do? We have to be quiet because it requires a certain amount of silence. We have to be quiet. We have to quiet the voices of all the yelling, the noise, the social media, the cell phones, the ringing, the beeps, the updates on our phone that are always coming at us, 24/7 that are constantly bombarding our minds. We need to get away from those things in a way that sometimes hurts. It hurts when Elijah goes off to the wilderness to this dryness, to this quiet, to this desert, in the same way that it might hurt us a little bit to put your cell phone aside for a little while, turn it off. Don't check social media. Don't check your email. Don't see what's going on. Go into the silence a little bit. Silence, if you're not used to it, can be really difficult. It can hurt a little bit.

God Will Always Show Up

But God wants us to know that that is where He is most often found. That is where He is best heard. God says to Elijah in this moment, in this whisper, "Elijah, what are you doing here?" And Elijah goes on a tirade. He gets angry. He's very honest with God. And he's like, "How come you didn't show up? Why am I the only one faithful? How come none of this stuff worked? Why are you treating me so badly?" And God, through that silence, but also through Elijah's real honesty with him, says, "You know what? You're not alone." He reveals to Elijah in this moment that there are 7,000 more who are faithful like him. He also reveals to Elijah in this moment that he's going to give him a disciple, a companion, someone to go with him named Elisha who he's going to be able to not only accompany him, but then pass the baton of his work and his ministry along to. God's going to show up. God's faithful. Elijah needs to go through a little bit of darkness, a little bit of chaos, a little bit of dryness, a little frustration before he begins to see what God has been doing the whole time and come out the other end.

The key and the point to this story is that, as dark as the world looks, God's always there. Sometimes I think we have this image of God, I do, of a God who comes in and picks up the

pieces, a god of silver linings, right? Well, there's all these bad things that happen in the world and these bad things that happen in our lives sometimes, but God is a god of silver linings, and He can always bring good out of it. But quite frankly, I don't want to merely believe in a God who can bring good out of it. I don't want to believe in a God who merely picks up the pieces. And that's not the God who is revealing Himself to Elijah. The God who is revealing himself to Elijah, who is our God, is a God who says: No, I was there from the beginning. I didn't just show up in the last minute to try to bring a silver lining or to pick up the pieces of your brokenness or your sin or the baggage that you carry. No, I've been there with you all the time. You just couldn't see me. You just couldn't hear me because you weren't quite enough. You weren't listening hard enough. And even if you were listening hard enough, maybe you still couldn't have heard me, but I was there.

The Darkest Moments have the Greatest Light

God also reminds us through the story of Elijah that it's often during the darkest moments in history, the darkest moments in the church, the darkest moments of our own lives that He brings the greatest light. Elijah, to come out of the culture that he comes out of, to come out of the world that he comes out of with the insights and the lessons for the likes of us thousands of years later that he comes with, is nothing short of a miracle.

God loves to use the darkest times, the emptiest times, the seemingly driest times to bring His greatest good. The question is, are we willing to quiet ourselves, to quiet all of those voices, that chaos around us, to try to put that aside for a moment to listen to his voice? Because if we can do that, and that's something we have practice. We have to practice silence. We have to work at silence. Maybe it's five minutes today. You're like: I'm going to put my phone down for five minutes and I'm not going to look at it, and that's all I can do today. And tomorrow I'm going to do 10. And then the next day I'm going to do 20 minutes. And then the next day, I'm going to do a whole holy hour where I leave my phone out there, I don't deal with any of my email, I don't think about work. I just spend it with God. It takes some practice.

It takes some work to get to the point where we can actually hear. Hearing, our ear, it's a muscle. We have to work to build that muscle up because that is where God wants to meet us and that's where God wants to do the absolutely miraculous out of the darkness and dryness of our lives. Not to pick up the pieces, but to remind us and to show us, ***"I've been here the whole time, and now look at where I'm leading you."***