Elijah

A prophet under a broom tree, bread for the journey, and the whisper that sent him back

SPEAKER	José Cruz
DATE	Sunday, October 3, 2021
PASSAGES	1 Kings 19:1-15; Exodus 33:14-15; Luke 22:43; Luke 22:54-62; James 5:17
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:03:25 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Even Elijah, days after Mount Carmel, fell apart under a death threat and asked to die. God met him first with sleep, bread and water, and then with his presence in a low whisper and a question — "What are you doing here, Elijah?" — that sent him back to his calling. In our crises God provides tangibly, but what we need most is his presence and his direction, because the story is about him, not us.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Life is not one plus one equals two. It is "a box of surprises," and some of them threaten our lives and push us into crisis.
- Elijah had just seen fire fall from heaven, and one threat from Jezebel undid him. He was hearing her voice more than God's.
- The Bible does not hide the failures of its heroes. Christians have no immunity to pain, and pastors do not either.
- God's first answer to a holistically exhausted prophet was practical: sleep, fresh bread, water, and a touch — twice.
- God was not in the wind, the earthquake or the fire, but in a low whisper, and it was powerful enough that Elijah covered his face.

- God's question went to the heart of the matter; Elijah's honest answer was, in effect, "I'm afraid." God answered with a command to come out and go back.
- God's presence is the most important thing in a believer's life — more than a job, money or health — and it is his rest.

▶ 1:01:53

For the series on major figures of the Old Testament, Matt welcomed back José and Betsy Cruz, longtime friends of Hope who came down from Dallas on the day of the evening party honoring Gino.

A box of surprises

▶ 1:04:55

José began with the last two years. Hope had embraced the Cruzes when they came back from Turkey with six bags, and then God seemed to open the door to Dallas. They expected to continue their ministry among Muslims and raise support. January and February went well — and then COVID came, everything closed, and money ran short. "We pray like never before."

▶ 1:07:22

He had told the Lord the last thing he wanted was to become a pastor again — he had planted and pastored churches in El Salvador and Turkey, "and dealing with people is one of the hardest things there is" (Hope, of course, being the exception). But things got tough enough that he went knocking on church doors anyway, qualified on paper, and doors shut in his face.

▶ 1:09:08

"Life is not that way. It's a box of surprises." Only weeks earlier their daughter Camila had called with alarming blood work — perhaps cancer, perhaps lupus. Betsy cried all weekend; José "was braver, of course — I was just dying inside." It turned out to be a lab mix-up. But from one day to the next, he said, we can be thrown into situations that are unknown and life-threatening.

1. A life-threatening situation can drive us to crisis

▶ 1:10:46

> "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.' 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. 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.'"
>
> 1 KINGS 19:1–4 ↗

▶ 1:12:11

The Elijah of Sunday school is a man of victories. He prayed and the rain stopped for three years (James 5:17). Ravens fed him at the brook. He multiplied a starving widow's flour and oil and raised her son (1 Kings 17). On Mount Carmel fire fell and consumed the sacrifice, the water and the stones, and he killed the 450 prophets of Baal — "this is not allegorical, it's a fact" — and then prayed the rain back (1 Kings 18). His name itself proclaims that Yahweh is God.

▶ 1:14:22

Yet one threat from Jezebel — a woman of faith, José observed, in the wrong object — and he falls apart. It is a contradiction: a prophet running south to save his life, then sitting under a desert shrub asking God to take it.

▶ 1:16:36

José dwelt on the last phrase, "I am no better than my fathers." The commentaries agree: like the prophets before him, Elijah felt he had failed to turn Israel back to God. Even after Carmel, he believed his ministry had failed, his calling had stalled, his life had no purpose. One commentator says he had taken his eyes off God and placed them on Jezebel and her threat. "He somehow in his ministry was hearing more the voice of Jezebel than the voice of God."

▶ 1:19:03

Fear, José said, has never been felt more widely than in these two years. And there is a limit to what any of us can withstand. It was Peter's experience by the fire, denying Jesus and then weeping bitterly (Luke 22:54–62). Intense emotion over a long time wears the body down into depression. "Elijah was depressed. He had lost focus. He wanted to die."

▶ 1:19:51

> *"This is what I love about the Bible: it tells it as it is. Life was real for them, just as it is for us today. It doesn't try to cover the failures."*

▶ 1:20:42

As a pastor in El Salvador, José once met a church member at the supermarket who admired how pastors "just seem not to have any problems." He thought: lady, where have you been? He quoted David Jeremiah: Christians have no immunity to pain and suffering, whether new convert or spiritual giant; we are imperfect people in a fallen world. "That is soothing to me."

▶ 1:22:42

And we are all headed the same direction. Healthy food, exercise, spinach shakes — "I have news for us: one day, sooner or later, we will face death." COVID shoved that in our faces, and a threat to life touches a person's very identity. On Maslow's pyramid of needs, Jezebel struck Elijah at the bottom two: survival and safety.

2. God meets the crisis with tangible provision

▶ 1:25:36

> "And he lay down and slept under a broom tree. And behold, an angel touched him and said to him, 'Arise and eat.' 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. 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.' 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."
>
> 1 KINGS 19:5–8 ↗

▶ 1:27:21

Elijah was worn out, disoriented, stressed and depressed, and God provided naturally — rest — and supernaturally, through a messenger. Not just any messenger: the angel of the LORD, whom many take to be the pre-incarnate Christ, touching the prophet and saying, "Elijah, wake up, eat and drink."

▶ 1:29:03

How bread and water sustained a man for forty days, José couldn't say: "Don't ask me how, please." We are so reliant on science "that we forget that there is the God who made the science." From Beersheba to Horeb is about 200 miles of desert. God met every level of Elijah's pyramid: food, water and rest at the bottom, but also security, presence, love, approval and direction.

▶ 1:30:24

José told of college in El Salvador during the civil war. One noon he and a friend, Memo, walked back from the pool with backpacks — the bag of choice for anyone carrying grenades — through streets that were strangely empty. The U.S. Embassy nearby had just been attacked, and military tanks began closing in behind them.

▶ 1:33:49

"If we run, we're dead," so they kept walking, trying to look calm. At the corner a tank stopped right in front of them, a soldier aimed, and a shot hit the corner beside them. Memo lifted his hands. They kept walking, the tank pulled away, and they ran into an office. "If not, I wouldn't be here telling you the story." Then he had everyone tell a neighbor one place they had seen God's provision.

3. God meets the crisis with his presence

▶ 1:38:17

After forty days Elijah came to a cave, and the word of the LORD asked, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered that he had been very jealous for the LORD, that Israel had forsaken the covenant, torn down the altars and killed the prophets, "and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life." Then:

▶ 1:39:06

> "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. And after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave."
>
> 1 KINGS 19:9–14 ↗

▶ 1:41:27

The passage divides in two around the same question, asked twice. God was going to the heart of the matter, and Elijah was going around it. "I have selflessly served" — that wasn't the question. "The people have broken your covenant" — not that either. Only the last part resembles an answer: I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me. "In other words, I'm afraid. Honestly, that is the most accurate answer to the whole question. I am afraid and I don't know what to do."

▶ 1:43:43

God has spoken in mighty things before, but here the passage is emphatic: not in the wind, not in the earthquake, not in the fire. He spoke in the whisper, and it was so powerful that Elijah covered his face: this is God, and I have left the way.

▶ 1:44:28

After each question comes a command. First: get out of the cave and stand before me. "We need to get out of our caves," José said — bring our fears before him and deal with him. Second: go back. Anoint kings, and anoint your successor (1 Kings 19:15–16). "Elijah, you're not your own, to say this is my time to go, take my life. I'm taking you in my time, says the Lord."

▶ 1:46:08

> *"This whole story is not about the prophet. The story is about God and God's plan."*

The real danger in a crisis is missing God's direction — his plan to make his people a blessing to the nations. It brings us back to our calling as a church and as individuals.

His presence is our rest

▶ 1:46:48

We think what we need is clothing, money, a car, a job. "No. We need most of all God's presence and his direction. God's presence is the most important thing in the life of a believer." José was not talking about salvation or the Spirit's indwelling but about needing God's approval and direction, "knowing that what we are doing pleases him."

▶ 1:47:57

> "And he said, 'My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.' And he said to him, 'If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here.'"
>
> EXODUS 33:14–15 ↗

"God's presence is God's rest. God's presence is God's peace." Everyone who believes in Jesus has the Spirit permanently, José affirmed. We walk by faith. But there are moments when we need the assurance of his presence — for Elijah, a threat to his life on the eve of a change in his calling; for Jesus in Gethsemane, facing the cross, when "there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him" (Luke 22:43).

▶ 1:50:07

After moving to Dallas, the Cruzes had dinner with Andrew Brunson, imprisoned in Turkey for two years. He told them of deep fear and depression, of being unable to get out of his cot, even of contemplating suicide. José read from his book *God's Hostage*: what broke him most were unmet expectations. He had wanted a sense of God's presence and felt abandoned.

▶ 1:52:26

But Brunson concluded that God's faithfulness is never what is tested in our difficulties; it was his own faithfulness being tested. God was teaching him "to stand in the dark." He doubted, complained and fought with God, but never stopped talking to him: "I don't need an answer to my questions in order to follow you, because I have a relationship with you." Six nations pressed for his release, but "it was not about me. It was God enhancing a greater plan, because the church of Christ was praying for Turkey."

▶ 1:53:52

Then José closed the loop on his own story. Betsy found work in refugee ministry where she is fulfilled. José was offered a coordinator role at Dallas Theological Seminary and told God it wasn't his calling — he wanted cross-cultural work. Betsy said, "Go for it, we need it." Now he serves pastors across Latin America and Spain, and the programs have reached the Arabic-speaking world and graduated a first Hebrew-speaking cohort. God had put it on his heart: you will encourage them, so they can go to the nations.

▶ 1:57:07

> *"God's plan is his plan, and it's not about us at the end. It's about him. What does he want to do through you, through me? That's the important thing."*

He prayed that the church would stop and look for God's fingerprints in what lies behind them, and not deviate from his purpose: "We are your servants, not your masters." Matt thanked him "for the focus on where it belongs — on God and what he's doing, no matter our circumstances."

FOR FURTHER STUDY

SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE

- 1 Kings 19:1–4
- James 5:17
- 1 Kings 17
- 1 Kings 18
- Luke 22:54–62
- 1 Kings 19:5–8
- 1 Kings 19:9–14
- 1 Kings 19:15–16
- Exodus 33:14–15
- Luke 22:43

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. José called life “a box of surprises.” What surprise in the last two years pushed you closest to crisis?
2. Elijah heard Jezebel’s voice more loudly than God’s. Whose voice tends to drown out God’s for you when you are afraid?
3. God’s first response to Elijah was sleep, bread and water. Where have you seen God provide in tangible, practical ways?
4. If God asked you “What are you doing here?”, what would your honest answer be — and what cave might he be calling you out of?
5. What would it look like this week to seek God’s presence and direction above the job, money or outcome you think you need?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

José Cruz and his wife Betsy have been part of Hope Chapel’s leadership and overseas teams off and on since the 1980s. José grew up and went to college in El Salvador during its civil war, and was a church planter and pastor there and in Turkey, where the Cruzes worked among Muslims. They now live in Dallas, where he serves at Dallas Theological Seminary with programs for pastors across Latin America, Spain and beyond.

Watch the full message:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZY-BNoUqwWs&t=3805s

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.