

# FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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**SERMON:** *Emotional Pain*

**SERIES:** *Pursing Wholeness*

**SCRIPTURES:** *1 Kings 19:3-19*

**SPEAKER:** *Shaun Kipe*

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*\*Credit to Bible Gateway; Scott Scruggs, Jonathan Wolfgang, John Ortberg, Craig Groeschel, Mary Poplin*

Well good morning and welcome to Five Forks Church, to everyone here in the room and also to those of you tuning in to the livestream.

Today we are coming to the end of this journey, “**Pursuing Wholeness**”, that experiencing wholeness involves the coming together of various aspects of our lives. Our physical health, our spiritual health, but also our mental health.

We’ve been camping out in **1 Kings 19** soaking in and unpacking Elijah’s experience. In some ways Elijah’s story is startling to read. Here is one of God’s all-star prophets battling, struggling with his mental health.

We’ve talked about the shame he experienced, the anxiety that became overwhelming for him and last week the loneliness that overtook him.

And along the way I hope, you’ve been able to acknowledge some of those same experiences in your own life. It’s never easy but as we bring our suffering to the cross of Jesus, we find one who understands and who wants healing and wholeness for us. And Jesus helps us to find that courage to get up and get moving. Take the steps we need to take in order to deal with some of this pain.

Today, in the final message in this series, I just want to talk a little bit about what might be called **emotional pain**.

And emotional pain is a little harder to define in concrete terms, than some of the other issues related to mental health, because emotional pain is that internal pain that you feel in your soul. Sometimes we might use words like grief or sorrow or anguish. People will say things like “my heart aches.” That’s emotional pain.

In fact, in the New Testament the word often used for “**worry or anxiety**”... is the word **merimnaw** and it literally means “**to be anxious in your soul.**” It’s the pain you feel when you are hurt, rejected or unloved. When you feel discouraged, depressed, grieving a loss, when a relationship ends or a dream dies.

Teacher Scott Scruggs talks about the renowned painter Vincent Van Gogh who actually struggled with this kind of deep emotional pain, severe depression in his own life. So overwhelmed by his sorrow many believe he took his own life at the age of just 37.

And just two months before he died, he painted a famous picture called “the sorrowing old man” **(IMAGE)**. This picture, in an image, seems to capture the heart of emotional pain.

The pain of a miscarriage. The pain of a loved one passing. The pain of a broken relationship. A lost job opportunity. A home. A pet.

I just did a funeral service a few weeks ago for a young man, 22 years old, who was tragically killed in a car accident. I remember sitting down and talking with his parents. They said the worst part in all of it, is that “*Each day, when they wake up, they have that realization all over again...he’s not calling today, he’s not texting, he’s not dropping by today...*”

They are experiencing that deep emotional kind of pain.

And I think that this emotional pain is often at the heart of much of our mental health battle. And though the Bible may not use that kind of terminology, it seems to be the kind of pain that Elijah was dealing with in that cave. So for the last time in this series let's see if we can identify...

## **I. Elijah's Emotional Pain**

**1 Kings-19:4 – he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, LORD," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors."**

Now, notice in this moment Elijah is not crying out to God about being in danger. Though there is danger. (Ahab and Jezebel have threatened to kill him.) He is not crying out about some kind of physical pain that he's experiencing...rather it is an internal, emotional kind of pain. So let me just highlight a few characteristics of emotional pain to help get us a better grasp on this.

First,

### **A. Emotional pain is real.**

It's important to acknowledge as you walk through some of this mental health battle, that your emotions are valid.

So often in church settings we give the impression that you shouldn't trust your emotions because they may lead you astray or that somehow you can just change your emotional state and think differently. But that is often a form of denial and dishonesty.

We have a hard time with the vulnerability necessary to acknowledge our emotions. We are emotionally immature.

Elijah is simply expressing what he is feeling. **“I’ve had enough. Take my life.”**

I remember when Landon was little and he was learning to walk on his own, out in the driveway. And his little legs got going too fast and he wiped out. And brush-burned his knees and hands. And my immediate response was, “*Buddy you’re ok. You’ll be fine. **You don’t need to cry. You’re tough.***” Maybe you heard that said or you’ve said that before...and there’s a part of that that is true. He was going to be just fine. And learning how to deal with pain and uncomfortable feelings is important. Sometimes our emotional expressions are not in proportion to the situation. There are appropriate times to say thing like that.

But in that moment, Landon’s little knees and hands were hurting. He was experiencing pain and the tears where the expression of that pain. And by telling him not to cry, because he needs to be tough, I was essentially telling him...not to express his emotions. Rather than helping him to learn how to express them appropriately.

I love this one story that author Anne Lamott tells when her cat was dying from lymphoma. She writes, “*This must sound petty to those of you facing the impending loss of people, careers, or retirement savings. But if you are madly in love with your pets, as any rational person is, you know what a loss it will be for both me and my three-year-old grandson, Jax. My cat, Jeanie, has helped raise him, and it will be his first death. I told him that she was sick, and that the angels were going to take her from us. I tried to make it sound like rather happy news – after all vultures aren’t coming for her, or snakes – but he wasn’t having any of it. “Angels are taking Jeanie away?” “Yes, because she is old and needs to go live in heaven now.” He said, **“I’m mad at the angels.”***”

One of the keys to healing and dealing with emotional pain and really growing in emotional maturity is learning to acknowledge your feelings.

Elementary school teachers still try to help their students with some of this. Remember the **feelings poster (PIC)**, you used to use many years ago, to help you express your emotions appropriately.

I am feeling happy.

I am feeling sad.

I am feeling angry.

I am feeling scared

I am feeling anxious.

I am feeling lonely.

I am feeling stuck.

This week, just allow yourself to acknowledge how you are feeling and consider whether it is in proportion to the situation.

Some of you in here this will be no problem at all, you wear your emotions on your sleeve don't you? Others of you in here this is gonna be a hard step. Expressing your emotions doesn't come naturally and so it will be a little harder.

But in general, the principle here is...your emotions are valid.

Second,

### **B. Emotional pain feels permanent.**

Elijah says to God, **"I've had enough Lord"**... *"I'm at the end of my rope. I can't take anymore."* Because it feels like what he is going through is here to stay.

Whenever you are grieving, whenever you are battling shame, depression, anxiety, loneliness...it can feel like it's just gonna last forever.

**It's important to remember while emotions feel permanent, they are not.**

There's a great passage of Scripture in the book of Lamentations. Prophet Jeremiah, in this book, just opens up about his emotional pain at the downfall of God's people. He says things like...

**All her people groan, as they search for bread; they barter their treasures for food to keep themselves alive. "Look, LORD, and consider, for I am despised." (Lam. 1:11)**

**"This is why I weep and my eyes overflow with tears. No one is near to comfort me, no one to restore my spirit." (Lam. 1:16)**

That emotional pain can feel permanent. But right in the middle of this book **Lamentations 3:22-23** he writes these powerful words...

**Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. <sup>23</sup> They are new every morning;**

Today life feels overwhelming. Today, you woke up on the wrong side of the bed. Today, the car won't start. Today, you got called out at work. Today, the kids just aren't cooperating. Today, you received bad news. Today, the pain of your past loved one, hurts just a little deeper. Today, feels permanent. You have had days like that. But God's compassions never fail...they are new every morning...tomorrow is new day...a fresh start. It can be good again. You will laugh again. You will experience joy again. Emotions feel permanent, but they are not.

**So you shouldn't make any permanent decisions based on temporary emotions.**

Third,

### **C. Emotional pain feels hopeless**

Again, notice Elijah's language... **"I've had enough Lord. Take my life."**

There are moments in our deep emotional pain, in this mental health battle, where we may find ourselves asking *“Why is this happening and what good can ever come of this pain.”* It feels like hopelessness.

Teacher Jonathan Wolfgang talks about Martin Luther King Jr. Great leader of social reform and who is renowned for battling segregation and inequality in our nation. But, what you may not know is that at a young age, King Jr. battled the hopelessness that deep emotional pain can cause.

As a young boy around the age of 12/13 he was so overcome by grief for the loss of his grandmother, that he attempted suicide. He tried to jump from the second story window of his home...in what he describes as an effort to hurt himself and end his life. And later in life, he spoke openly about the despair and hopelessness he felt amidst the horrible resistance that he and others faced in their battle for civil rights.

That deep emotional pain can make us feel hopeless.

So...

## **II. What do we do with emotional pain?**

First,

### **A. Ask for help**

I've been reiterating this throughout the series, because there is such a stigma in churches about asking for help with our mental health struggles. And so one final time, I'll just encourage you if you've reached that deep, dark cave of despair...ask for help.

There are a bunch of reasons why we don't ask for help. We don't want to look weak. We don't want people to think we have a weak faith. We don't want someone else trying to solve our problem. We don't need someone else's two cents. Deep down we're just embarrassed to admit we need help.

In fact, I was reading about this. Men seem to have a harder time asking for help than women.

One study revealed that even in the age of GPS, the average man drives 276 miles a year lost as a goose because he is too embarrassed to ask for directions. But you see, the danger is that what often starts out as a little problem in our lives, turns into a crisis if we're not willing to ask for help.

What starts out as negative thinking leads to deep emotional pain.

What starts out as grief over the loss of a loved one, can turn into depression.

What started out as unresolved conflict in a marriage ends in tragic divorce.

What started out as problem behavior ends in addiction.

The truth is it takes way more courage to ask for help than it does to hide and pretend and deny and act like you don't need help.

Second, remember that...

### **B. God is present in our pain.**

When we're experiencing deep, emotional pain it can feel as if God has abandoned us.

I think I've share before, but C. S. Lewis the great Christian theologian talks about his own personal experience of this. Lewis did not marry until late in his life. And when he finally did find the love of his life it was a short-lived relationship. His wife died slowly and painfully of cancer shortly after they were married. And it prompted Lewis to write these words: He starts off by talking about how when life is good and things are going your way, you feel like God is blessing you...smiling down upon you but he says...

***But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become.... What can this mean? Why is He so present a commander in our time of prosperity and so very absent a help in time of trouble?***

This may be how it feels. But one of the powerful lessons we've learned in Elijah's story and one of the principles you discover throughout Scripture is that while God doesn't eliminate pain and grief from our lives, but he does promise to meet us in our pain.

**“he traveled forty days and forty nights... 9 There he went into a cave and spent the night....And the word of the LORD came to him...**

God found him in that desert cave.

In the Bible, “my help” or “my helper” is one of the most used names for God. For example the book of Hebrews says, **“So say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper. I will not be afraid.’”**

In **Psalm 34:18**, we read, **"The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."**

In **2 Corinthians 1:3-4**, we are assured that God is the **"Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles."**

Third and finally, as we walk through those difficult experience of emotional pain life...it's important to remember that...

**C. God can redeem our pain.**

Even though, in the moment, it can feel as if emotional pain is hopeless, with God it is not. And that is the heart of the gospel. God takes our stories of pain and shame and brokenness and despair and he redeems them.

There is something powerful about how God meets Elijah in the midst of his pain. It's the only thing God says twice in the entire story.

### **“What are you doing here, Elijah?”**

Initially might sound somewhat rude of God. Give Elijah some time. He's been through a lot.

Notice what God doesn't say:

- **Do you know why this happened Elijah?** Do you know why you are suffering? Do you know why you are ashamed? Do you know why you are lonely? Do you know why you are depressed?

Often in the midst of our deep, emotional pain...

#### **1. God doesn't address the why question.**

even though that is often what we would like for him to do.

I mentioned earlier about the young man who was killed in the tragic car accident. I'm left lots of why questions. Why didn't you keep him from getting in the car? Why didn't you keep him from traveling on that road? Why didn't you keep him from steering out of control? Why didn't you stop this?

I guess in our humanness we think that answers to those questions will bring some kind of relief to the pain. But I suspect even if we knew the answers to those questions, the pain would still linger.

God doesn't redeem Elijah's pain by giving him intellectual answers to all of his why questions. Instead he redeems Elijah pain by

## 2. Giving Elijah a purpose.

There's been a lot of information throughout this series, but this might be the most important part of the series. What God is interested in, as you walk through your own mental health struggles is a changed life.

**“What are you doing here, Elijah?”<sup>15</sup> ...“Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram.<sup>16</sup> Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat to succeed you as prophet.**

*“Don't you know that I still have a plan for you Elijah? Don't you know I'm not done with you yet Elijah?”*

God's plan in the middle of Elijah's suffering was to give him work to do. Go, anoint a new King. Go invest time in Elisha. Because one day he's going to succeed you. I need you train the next generation of leaders. Don't sit and wallow in your sorrows.

Ortberg writes, **"God isn't at work producing the circumstances I want. God is at work in bad circumstances to produce the me he wants."**

He redeems and uses our painful experiences. You don't just overcome mental health struggles by “trying really hard to overcome mental health struggles. Instead, you begin to reorient your life...focus the attention of your life around something else.

Don't sit here Elijah and wallow in sorrow, focus your attention on something else.

For example, when Jesus is preaching his Sermon on the Mount and he is encouraging his followers not worry... he doesn't just say, "Don't worry..." Rather he says, <sup>33</sup> **But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.**

In other words, give your attention to something else.

One of our Sunday school teachers in youth group, many years ago, used to use this analogy. He would say, if I tell you not to think about purple elephants (**PIC OF PURPLE ELEPHANTS**). Try really hard to not think about purple elephants, what do you think you're going to think about? Purple elephants. Instead, you think about something else. If I don't want you to think about purple elephants, I might tell you to think about blue cars (**PIC OF BLUE CAR**). Ever seen a blue car? See how that happens.

In other words, rather than focusing all of your attention on your mental health struggle, start chasing after God and his righteousness. Get in on what God is doing in this world.

*"Study God. Love God. Follow God. Serve God. Think about God."* (Ortberg) Build your life around "knowing, loving, and following Jesus."

Mother Theresa used to say, **"When you give your life to God you become a pencil in God's hands...belonging to Jesus and doing his work."** (Poplin 29)

Focus your attention on God's purpose in your life...as a parent, as a spouse, as an employee, as a volunteer. Could be serving at church. It may mean teaching. It might mean serving in the food pantry. It might be signing up for the children's ministry or the greeting team. It might mean praying for the sick. Taking a meal to someone in the church. Helping a single parent family. It might mean stepping out of your comfort zone here at church and introducing yourself to someone you don't

know. You could make that your goal, each week introduce yourself to someone you yet know. Focus your life on following Jesus.

And then also notice this... the way God redeems your pain is often by using it for the benefit of somebody else. Yes, part of the journey is about finding relief from our pain...through community, and counseling and serving. But it's not just about healing your pain, it's about using your story, your journey, your experience...to help bless...teach...encourage somebody else. Elijah, go train Elisha.

Scott Scruggs says, **“Often your greatest ministry comes from your deepest pain.”**

God can use your experience, your struggle to help you, help someone else. He redeems it.

We actually witness this in Jesus. His greatest ministry was the road to that painful cross. We know the anguish he experiences on this road. In the garden of Gethsemane, Gospel writer Matthew writes...

**Matthew 26:37-38 - <sup>37</sup> He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. <sup>38</sup> Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.**

And the prophet Isaiah writing about Jesus experience in going to the cross says, (Isaiah 53): **He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.**

Jesus was familiar with grief. In the same way that Jesus takes on our shame and then takes it to the cross. And he takes on our anxiety and takes that to the cross. He takes our loneliness and takes that to the cross. He takes our grief, he takes our

struggles, he takes our deep emotional pain and even in those moments when we feel helpless and hopeless...he redeems by walking through the experience of the cross.

**What do we find God “doing about” this business of sin and evil? God did not abolish the fact of evil; He transformed it. He did not stop the crucifixion; He rose from the dead.”** (Dorothy Sayers – Poplin 242)

And I believe that gives us a sense of hope as we walk through our mental health battles. He can do the same with your story...your pain. He will step into your life and he will use that experience, for his Kingdom work...in your own life and in the life of someone else.