

# *Caring for One Another*

## *God Meets Us in Times of Suffering*



### **Opening Questions** (select 1 or 2 questions)

- Tell about a time when someone did something nice or unexpected for you.
- Tell about a time when you were in difficult weather or a flood, hurricane, tornado, earthquake...
- What is one of your comfort foods?

### **What Does the Bible Say?**

*We worship a God who sees our suffering and enters in. In this story, one of God's faithful prophets is on the run. His life has been threatened and he is running away. As the story is read, notice the different ways God enters in.*

#### **1 Kings 19:4-13**

But [Elijah] himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.

Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces 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 a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

**Think About...** *(optional, depending on time)*

- How was Elijah cared for?
- What were the unexpected surprises for Elijah?
- What are the emotions you sense in this text?

**What Do Others Say?**

Several years ago, I had to go through chemotherapy to treat breast cancer. For me, chemo had a very distinctive cycle. Days three through six after each infusion were the worst. I had to be super attentive to what I ate and drank to stay ahead of the nausea; but the fatigue would hit my body so hard that it would be hard to rouse myself enough to eat. My husband was wonderful support during this time, but he also had a job and couldn't always be there. During one cycle, Andrew had to go on a business trip. We thought it would be okay because it would be at the end of the dreaded days, but this time the nausea lingered longer. Nothing tasted good. I didn't need food to taste good. I needed something to calm my stomach. I was sick of saltine crackers. The answer was mashed potatoes, but I didn't have mashed potatoes--or the energy to make them.

Enter Leslie. I called my friend Leslie and told her what was happening. Less than two hours later she showed up with mashed potatoes and Eggo waffles. "Eggo waffles?" I asked. She replied, "When my kids have stomach stuff, Eggo waffles always do the trick. I thought you probably needed some Eggo waffles." I didn't know it, but I did need Eggo waffles. It's not an overstatement to say Eggo waffles got me through chemo.

We don't always know what we need in times of suffering. In a season where my body and my illness hijacked my life, I thought I needed mashed potatoes but, apparently, I really needed Eggo waffles. I also needed funny cards and words of encouragement and people that created safe space for me to be really real about what I was feeling and experiencing. These were some of the gifts from the larger community that made me feel seen, cared for, less alone.

We worship a God who sees our suffering and enters in. Elijah was in a tough spot. He had been working so hard, so faithfully, but his life was under threat. He was afraid. He was overwhelmed by the circumstances of his life. Notice how God tends to Elijah and provides what he needs. There is sleep and food and more sleep. There is time and space away from what threatens him; and, finally, there is the gift of standing in the presence of the LORD with an invitation to be really real with the One True God.

This is not a one-time thing. The Bible is filled with stories and passages that testify to the ways God meets us in times of suffering, providing what we need—whether we know we need it or not. Early in the book of Exodus, the LORD says to Moses, "I have observed the misery of my

people who are in Egypt . . . I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians (3:7-8).” The story of the Exodus—the story of deliverance from slavery—is the defining narrative for the Jewish people.

As Christians, our defining story is also a story of deliverance from suffering. It starts with the incarnation. It starts with Jesus--as Emmanuel, God with Us (Matthew 1:23), as the Word who became flesh and lived among us (John 1:14). It starts with God entering into the brokenness and suffering of the world as Jesus and later taking that brokenness and suffering upon himself on the cross. Through the cross, we remember that the God we worship knows what it means to suffer and does not back away.

God knew that what a suffering world needed was not a great military leader, but a Savior who could show the world the heart of God and the depths of God’s compassion and love. In Jesus that love and compassion is on full display. Again and again throughout the Gospels, we witness Jesus touching and changing the lives of individuals who are suffering. In life we get to experience firsthand Jesus’ power to comfort and heal, to restore and to make new. God meets us in times of suffering and challenge and leads us forward to new life.

—Reflection written by Jeanne Hartfield

### **Think About...** *(select one or more questions)*

- How have you experienced God in silence, music, the voice of a friend, or some unexpected way?
- Tell about a time when you took a chance to reach out to someone in a difficult time.
- What is your version of the Eggo? Who could you bring an Eggo to?
- What things did you experience in a time of suffering that you later realized were great blessings?
- How have you been cared for? How has God helped you in times of suffering?
- What are the things that hold you back from reaching out to someone else?
- What would make you more likely to reach out or respond to someone in difficulty?
- Who could you ask to go with you to care for someone else?

### **Prayer**

Loving Creator, you are the God of the Universe but that doesn’t mean that you are far off. Thank you for seeing us, for paying attention to the goings-on in our lives. Thank you for rejoicing with our celebrations and for meeting us in times of suffering. In all seasons of life, lead us forward into new life shaped by your love and grace.

Amen.

***Connecting Faith with Daily Life...*** (for individual reflection & action)

- Who is someone who can call you for help in the middle of the night. Find a way to let them know how much you care about them.
- As a group, build a list of creative or unusual ways to reach out to someone in a difficult time.
- Follow-up with someone who has told you about a difficulty in their life or in the life of someone close to them. Tell them you've thought of them and ask how it's going.
- Tell a friend about a difficulty you are facing.
- Make your own "go-to" list of ways you can help someone. Include things that you are good at and do easily. Also include some things that might be a stretch for you. Place the list somewhere that you'll remember to check in a time of need.

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