

The Sanctity of Life, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 8: When Life Feels Unbearable: Despair and Hope

1 Kings 19:1–18

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally and pastorally, this lesson addresses despair, depression, and the longing to die, holding together the worth of every life and the reality of deep anguish. The account of Elijah in 1 Kings 19 shows a faithful servant of God sinking into suicidal despair, and God responding not with rebuke but with tender care: rest, food, presence, honest speech, and renewed purpose. Psalm 42 models honest lament that turns again toward hope in God, and 2 Corinthians 1:8–11 shows even Paul despairing of life yet delivered by God. The teacher's aim is to help the class treat mental and emotional anguish seriously and kindly, not as mere weakness or sin.

This is among the most sensitive lessons in the study, and it must be taught with the utmost compassion and hope. It is very likely that someone in the class has struggled with depression or thoughts of suicide, or loves someone who has, or has lost someone to it. The lesson should affirm the worth of every life and the reality of hope and help; encourage the struggling to reach out to God, to fellow Christians, and to qualified help; and avoid simplistic or fearful pronouncements about the eternal destiny of those who die by suicide, leaving such judgment to a merciful and just God. Include no description of methods. Write and teach so that a hurting person feels seen, loved, and pointed toward hope.

Formationally, the lesson aims to do two things: to minister hope and compassion to those who are themselves struggling, and to equip everyone to care well for the hurting. The class should leave knowing that despair is not beyond God's tender reach, that they need not hide their pain from God or His people, that reaching out for help is wise and good, and that they can be part of God's care for others. Teach this lesson gently, prayerfully, and with great warmth, trusting the God who is near to the brokenhearted.

Question 1

Student Question:

Read 1 Kings 19:1–4. After a great victory, Elijah collapses into fear and despair, even asking to die. What does it tell us that a great man of God could sink so low, and how does this guard us against treating despair as mere weakness or lack of faith?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with the shock of the timing. Elijah's collapse comes immediately after his greatest victory on Mount Carmel. A man who had just seen fire fall from heaven is now under a tree asking to

die. The juxtaposition is deliberate and instructive: even great spiritual heights can be followed by deep valleys, often through exhaustion, fear, and the crash that follows intense strain.

Use this to guard the class against a damaging misunderstanding: that despair is simply weakness or a lack of faith. Elijah was a mighty prophet, and yet he despaired. Scripture does not present his despair as proof that he was faithless; it presents it as a real human and spiritual struggle that God met with compassion. Believers can and do suffer from depression and despair, and it is not a mark of spiritual failure.

Acknowledge the many threads that can contribute to despair. For Elijah there was physical exhaustion, fear of Jezebel, the let-down after great exertion, isolation, and a sense of futility. Despair often has many causes at once, including bodily and circumstantial ones. Treating it as a purely spiritual failing both misreads the text and wounds the sufferer.

Set the compassionate tone for the whole lesson. The first thing the class should learn is to stop treating despair as shameful weakness. If a prophet of God could sink this low and be met with such tenderness, then no struggler in the room need feel that their anguish places them beyond God's care or the church's compassion.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Despair as a real struggle that can afflict even faithful servants of God (1 Kings 19:3–4).
- The error of treating depression and despair as mere weakness or lack of faith.
- The many causes of despair, including physical, emotional, and circumstantial.
- Compassion rather than shame as the right response to anguish.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that a great prophet like Elijah could sink into such despair?
- How does this guard us against treating despair as simply weakness or faithlessness?
- Why does it matter to recognize the many causes of despair?

Question 2

Student Question:

Have you, or someone you love, ever reached a place where life felt unbearable? How does it help to see that Scripture does not hide or shame Elijah's despair, but records it honestly and meets it with compassion?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This first self-examining question gently opens the door for honesty, acknowledging that despair touches many lives, whether our own or a loved one's. The aim is to create a safe space, modeled on Scripture's own honesty, where struggle can be named without shame.

Draw attention to how Scripture handles Elijah. It does not hide his despair, edit it out, or scold him for it. It records his words honestly, even his prayer to die, and then shows God meeting him with compassion. The Bible's candor about the despair of its heroes is itself a ministry to the hurting.

Help the class see what this means for them. If God's Word does not shame Elijah, then the struggling need not be ashamed before God. The hiding, the pretending, the fear of being found out, all of these can be laid down. God already knows, and He comes near with kindness, not contempt.

Be especially tender here, aware of who may be in the room. Some are carrying anguish right now; some are grieving a loss; some love someone who struggles. Let the question minister, not merely inform. The goal is that each person would feel that their pain, or their loved one's, is met by a God and, ideally, a church that does not look away.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Scripture's honest, unashamed record of the despair of its faithful (1 Kings 19).
- The freedom to name our struggle before a God who does not shame us.
- The laying down of hiding and pretending in the presence of God's kindness.
- The church called to reflect Scripture's compassion toward the hurting.

Discussion Prompts

- How does it help that Scripture records Elijah's despair honestly?
- Why is it freeing to know that God does not shame us in our pain?
- How can we make space for honesty about despair among believers?

Question 3

Student Question:

Read 1 Kings 19:5–8. God's first response to Elijah is not a rebuke but rest, food, and gentle care. What does this teach us about how God deals with His exhausted and despairing servants, and about how we should care for the struggling?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Move to God's first response in verses 5–8: not a rebuke, but rest, food, and gentle care. An angel touches Elijah and says, "Arise and eat," twice, with the tender observation, "the journey is too great for you." God tends to His servant's body and exhaustion before addressing anything else.

Draw out what this reveals about how God deals with His despairing servants. He is gentle. He recognizes that we are embodied creatures, and that exhaustion, hunger, and depletion are real

factors in despair. Sometimes the most spiritual help is sleep and a meal. God does not despise our frailty; He cares for it.

Apply this to how we care for the struggling. We are often quick with words, advice, and correction. God begins with presence and practical care. Caring well for the hurting often means meeting basic needs, offering rest, and showing gentle kindness, before, and often instead of, offering explanations or exhortations.

Affirm the legitimacy of practical and bodily help. This passage gives warrant for attending to physical health, rest, and care as part of ministering to despair. It also opens the door, by extension, to encouraging appropriate help for the struggling, recognizing that God works through such means. God's gentleness with Elijah is a pattern for our gentleness with one another.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's gentle first response to despair: rest, food, and care, not rebuke (1 Kings 19:5–8).
- The recognition of our embodied frailty in the experience of despair.
- Caring for the hurting through presence and practical help before words.
- Warrant for attending to physical health and appropriate help in ministering to despair.

Discussion Prompts

- What does God's gentle care for Elijah teach about how He deals with us?
- Why does God tend to Elijah's body before addressing his despair?
- How should this shape the way we care for struggling people?

Question 4

Student Question:

When you are at your lowest, how do you tend to treat yourself, and how do you treat others who are struggling? What would it look like to extend to yourself and others the same gentleness God showed Elijah?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question asks students to examine how they treat themselves and others in the lowest moments. Many people, when struggling, turn on themselves with harshness and self-contempt, adding self-condemnation to their pain. Others are quick to judge those who struggle.

Hold up God's gentleness with Elijah as the pattern. God was not harsh with His despairing servant, and we are not required to be harsh with ourselves or others. Self-compassion here is not self-indulgence; it is treating oneself with the same kindness God shows, recognizing our frailty and our need.

Be careful to keep this healthy and God-centered. The point is not a shallow self-affirmation but receiving the gentleness of God. The struggling person is invited to stop berating themselves and to receive care, from God and from others, as Elijah did. And the observer is invited to lay down judgment and extend kindness.

Move toward a concrete practice. Invite students to identify how they treat themselves or others in low moments, and to choose one way to extend God's gentleness this week: speaking kindly to themselves, resting without guilt, or showing patient compassion to someone who is struggling rather than rushing to correct them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The tendency toward harsh self-contempt in seasons of despair.
- God's gentleness with Elijah as the pattern for treating ourselves and others.
- Receiving God's kindness rather than adding self-condemnation to pain.
- Laying down judgment and extending compassion to the struggling.

Discussion Prompts

- How do you tend to treat yourself when you are at your lowest?
- How do you treat others who are struggling?
- What would it look like to extend God's gentleness this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

Read 1 Kings 19:9–14. God invites Elijah to speak honestly, twice asking, “What are you doing here?” and letting him pour out his complaint. Why does God make room for Elijah’s honest lament, and what does this teach us about bringing our true feelings to God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Move to verses 9–14, where God twice asks, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” and lets him pour out his complaint. Elijah says the worst of it: he has been zealous, he is alone, they are seeking his life. God does not silence the lament; He invites it. This is a profound model of honest prayer.

Help the class see that God makes room for honest lament. He is not threatened by Elijah's raw complaint, even when it overstates the case (Elijah was not, in fact, the only one left). God lets His servant speak the truth of his feelings. The Psalms are full of this same honest crying out, and God receives it.

Draw out the lesson for our own prayer. Many believers feel they must clean up their feelings before bringing them to God, presenting only tidy, acceptable prayers. Elijah and the Psalms

teach otherwise. We may bring our anguish, our anger, our despair, our questions, honestly to God, who can bear them and who meets us in them.

Note the gentle interplay of honesty and truth. God lets Elijah speak, and then gently corrects his distorted perception (he is not alone). Honest lament is not the last word, but it is a necessary and welcomed word. God meets us in our honesty and then leads us toward a truer view. Encourage the class toward this kind of honest, God-directed lament.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's invitation to honest lament, even raw and overstated (1 Kings 19:9–14).
- The Psalms as models of bringing our true feelings to God (Psalm 42).
- Freedom from the need to tidy up our feelings before approaching God.
- Honest lament welcomed by God, who then leads us toward truth.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does God make room for Elijah's honest complaint?
- What does this teach about bringing our true feelings to God?
- How does God meet our honesty and then lead us toward a truer view?

Question 6

Student Question:

Where have you felt that you must hide your darkest feelings from God or from other believers? How does God's gentle invitation to Elijah free you to be honest with Him about your pain?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question addresses the common feeling that we must hide our darkest emotions from God and from other believers. Many people, especially in church settings, learn to mask their pain behind a composed exterior, fearing judgment or misunderstanding.

Use God's dealing with Elijah to dismantle this fear toward God. God already knew Elijah's heart and invited him to speak it. We cannot shock God or lose His love by being honest about our despair. Hiding from God is both unnecessary and harmful; He invites our honesty and meets us in it.

Address the harder question of honesty with other believers. Ideally the church is a place where pain can be shared safely, but sometimes believers have been wounded by harsh or simplistic responses. Encourage the class both to be honest with trusted, safe fellow Christians and to become the kind of safe people with whom others can be honest.

Move toward a step out of hiding. Invite each student to consider where they have been hiding their pain, and to take one step toward honesty, with God in prayer, and, where wise, with a

trusted believer or counselor. Bringing pain into the light, before God and safe others, is part of the path toward hope and help.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The temptation to hide our darkest feelings from God and others.
- God's full knowledge and welcoming invitation as the end of hiding from Him.
- The church called to be a safe place for honest sharing of pain.
- Stepping out of hiding toward God and trusted, safe believers.

Discussion Prompts

- Where have you felt you must hide your darkest feelings?
- How does God's invitation to Elijah free you to be honest with Him?
- How can we become safe people with whom others can be honest?

Question 7

Student Question:

Read 1 Kings 19:15–18. God meets Elijah's despair by giving him renewed purpose, fellow servants, and the assurance that he is not alone. How does God lift Elijah not by minimizing his pain but by reorienting him toward hope, community, and calling?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Move to verses 15–18, where God lifts Elijah not by minimizing his pain but by reorienting him toward hope, community, and calling. God gives him a renewed mission (anoint kings and a successor), the gift of Elisha as a companion, and the assurance that he is not alone: seven thousand have not bowed to Baal.

Draw out the threefold lift. First, renewed purpose: God gives Elijah something to do, a reason to go on, a place in His ongoing work. Second, community: Elisha will come alongside him, ending his isolation. Third, the correction of his despairing lie: he is not the only one left. Hope, community, and calling are God's means of lifting the despairing.

Note carefully what God does not do. He does not scold Elijah for his feelings or demand that he simply cheer up. He meets the despair with concrete realities that give hope and reconnect Elijah to others and to God's purpose. This is a model for how hope is restored: not by denial of pain, but by reorientation toward God, others, and a future.

Apply this to the struggling and to those who care for them. Hope often returns not through a single moment but through reconnection: to God, to other people, to purpose. Isolation deepens despair; community and calling help lift it. Encourage the class to seek and to offer these God-given means of hope.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God lifting Elijah through renewed purpose, community, and assurance (1 Kings 19:15–18).
- Hope restored by reorientation toward God, others, and a future, not by denial of pain.
- The role of community in countering the isolation of despair.
- Calling and purpose as God-given means of renewed hope.

Discussion Prompts

- How does God lift Elijah without minimizing his pain?
- Why are community and purpose so important in restoring hope?
- How does isolation deepen despair, and how does God counter it?

Question 8

Student Question:

If you are struggling, what would it look like to reach out, to God, to fellow Christians, and to qualified help, rather than carrying your burden alone? If you know someone who is struggling, how might God use you as part of His care for them?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question gently presses toward action, in two directions: reaching out if one is struggling, and coming alongside if one knows someone who is. The aim is to make concrete the truth that we are not meant to carry such burdens alone.

Encourage the struggling to reach out, to God, to fellow Christians, and to qualified help. Make all three explicit and good. Turning to God in prayer and His Word is essential; opening up to trusted believers breaks the isolation; and seeking qualified help, including medical and professional care, is wise and God-honoring, not a failure of faith. God works through means, including the care of others.

Be clear and unembarrassed that seeking help is good. Some believers fear that needing counseling or medical help signals weak faith. The lesson should dismantle that lie plainly. Just as God fed Elijah's body, He provides help through people and means, and using them is an act of faith, not a denial of it. If anyone is in crisis or in danger, urge them gently and directly to reach out now to someone who can help.

Turn the question outward as well. Those not currently struggling can be part of God's care for others: by noticing, by being present, by listening without judgment, by gently encouraging a hurting person toward help. Invite each student to take one concrete step, either reaching out for themselves or coming alongside another.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The call to reach out rather than carry the burden alone.
- God's provision of help through prayer, fellow believers, and qualified care.
- Seeking help, including professional and medical, as wise and faith-honoring.
- Being part of God's care for others through presence and gentle encouragement.

Discussion Prompts

- What would it look like to reach out rather than struggle alone?
- Why is seeking qualified help an act of faith rather than a failure of it?
- How might God use you as part of His care for someone who is struggling?

Question 9

Student Question:

Scripture affirms the worth of every life and is honest about the reality of deep anguish and even the longing to die. How does the gospel hold together the truth that every life is precious, the seriousness of despair, and the assurance of real hope and help, so that the hurting are met with compassion rather than with simplistic or fearful pronouncements?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block, and it must be handled with the greatest care and compassion. The question asks how the gospel holds together three truths: the preciousness of every life, the seriousness of despair, and the assurance of real hope and help. The teacher's task is to hold all three without letting any collapse into harshness or denial.

Affirm the worth of every life, including the life of the one who feels it is unbearable. The despairing person may feel worthless or that others would be better off without them; these are the lies of despair. The truth of the whole study stands: every life bears God's image and is precious to Him, including theirs, right now, in the depths. This worth does not depend on how they feel or function.

Take despair, and the longing to die, seriously and kindly. Scripture is honest that godly people have despaired of life itself (Elijah, and Paul in 2 Corinthians 1:8). This is not treated as contemptible weakness but as real anguish that God meets with compassion. At the same time, the hope is real: God delivers, God is near to the brokenhearted, His mercies are new every morning. There is genuine help, in God, in His people, and in the care He provides. The lesson points the hurting firmly toward that hope and help, never leaving them in the dark. (If you sense anyone is in immediate danger, respond personally and gently, and help them reach appropriate care right away.)

On the eternal destiny of those who die by suicide, refuse simplistic or fearful pronouncements, and leave such judgment to a merciful and just God. Do not declare that those who die this way are automatically lost; Scripture does not give us that verdict, and such claims have heaped

needless terror and grief on suffering people and bereaved families. Nor should we treat the matter lightly. The faithful posture is humility: we entrust the eternal destiny of every person to a God who is both perfectly just and rich in mercy, who knows each heart fully as we never can. Keep the focus where Scripture keeps it: on the worth of every life, the seriousness of despair, and the certainty of hope and help in Christ. Teach so that the hurting feel seen, loved, and pointed toward hope.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The unchanging worth of every life, including the one who feels it unbearable.
- Despair and the longing to die taken seriously and met with compassion (1 Kings 19; 2 Corinthians 1:8–11).
- The reality of hope and help in God, His people, and the care He provides.
- Refusal of simplistic or fearful pronouncements on the eternal destiny of those who die by suicide.
- Eternal judgment entrusted to a God who is both merciful and just (Psalm 34:18).

Discussion Prompts

- How does the gospel hold together the worth of life, the seriousness of despair, and real hope?
- Why must we avoid simplistic pronouncements about the eternal destiny of those who die by suicide?
- How can we point the hurting firmly toward hope and help?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over 1 Kings 19 and Psalm 42. Name one specific way God is meeting you, or calling you to meet someone else, in a place of discouragement, and one concrete step you will take this week toward hope, whether reaching out, caring for another, or turning your soul again toward God.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone question gathers 1 Kings 19 and Psalm 42 and asks for a personal, hope-directed response: how God is meeting the student, or calling them to meet someone else, in discouragement, and one concrete step toward hope.

Press for one specific way God is at work. For the struggling student, it may be receiving God's gentleness, laying down hiding, or resolving to reach out for help. For another, it may be a call to come alongside a hurting friend with presence and patience. Let each name it honestly.

Then ask for one concrete step toward hope. This might be reaching out to God in honest prayer, confiding in a trusted believer, seeking qualified help, caring tangibly for someone who is struggling, or, with the psalmist, deliberately turning the soul again toward hope in God: "Why are you cast down, O my soul? Hope in God."

Close with warmth and hope, especially for any who are hurting. The God who came so tenderly to Elijah under the tree, who is near to the brokenhearted, whose mercies are new every morning, is near to each person in the room. Send the class home assured that despair is not the end of the story, that they are seen and loved, and that there is real hope and help, and that no one need walk this valley alone. (This is a tender subject; if you or someone you love is struggling, please reach out to God, to trusted believers, and to qualified help, and offer to help them find the right support.)

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Personal appropriation of God's tender care in discouragement.
- Concrete steps toward hope: prayer, community, qualified help, caring for others.
- Turning the soul again toward hope in God (Psalm 42:5, 11).
- Assurance that despair is not the end and no one need walk the valley alone.

Discussion Prompts

- How is God meeting you, or calling you to meet someone else, in discouragement?
- What concrete step toward hope will you take this week?
- How can we, as a class, be part of God's care for the hurting among us?