

When the Strong grow Weary

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 March 2026

Preacher: Emily MacArthur

[0 : 00] Let's go to the series on Elijah. And when John began this series in Elijah, he had a reflection! on the book of James that Elijah was a human just as we are. And sometimes it's difficult to believe that! as Elijah confronts the king or as he raises the widow's son or battles with the prophets of Baal on the top. But I think in this passage, it's a little bit easier to believe that Elijah might be like us.

As Elijah cowers in the wilderness and declares that he has had enough, Elijah feels most like me, or perhaps to be most accurate, like me at a point in mid-February when it had rained seemingly for 40 days without ceasing. And Jacob, when he preached a couple of weeks ago, drew our attention to the mountains in One Kings. And really, without that theological knowledge, I thought of mountains when I designed the graphic for this series. But this week, Elijah is not on a mountaintop. He is between two mountains. He is between Mount Carmel, where God brought the fire and vanquished the prophets of Baal. And now Elijah is fleeing towards Horeb, also known as Sinai, the mountain of the Lord, where God revealed himself to Moses. So this week, we don't have a mountaintop experience, but a wilderness. But I believe God has much to say to us today, not about mountaintops, but about those places that we find ourselves in between. So how is Elijah doing at this moment? Well, he's frightened.

He's fleeing for his life. Jezebel has solemnly vowed to kill him at the beginning of that reading. And he's been involved in this big spiritual battle on Mount Carmel. So perhaps he is struggling under spiritual attack. Some commentaries see this as Elijah dealing with a mental health crisis.

He is clearly in despair, and he prays that he might die. But essentially, what I think, and I think when I was preparing that this is perhaps what God wants to speak to us about today, is Elijah is really tired.

[2 : 43] He has been on the go since God called him. He has been living an itinerant life, sleeping in strange beds, relying on food handouts. And the first thing he does when he arrives at this really hospitable place in the desert is to fall fast asleep. So I'm going to look at tiredness.

And I'm going to look at rest. Tiredness is part of the human condition. And rest is God's given solution. I'm going to look at retreat. Sometimes we need to withdraw or remove distractions in order to get the rest we need. And I'm going to look at reset. How can we be intentional about getting rest going forward?

So Elijah has left Bathsheba, which is in the southern end of the fertile part of the Israelite territory. I know this map is really hard to see, but Mount Carmel is right at the top of that blue line.

So he's come down to Bathsheba and he's going to go right through the wilderness. And the southern point on the map is Mount Sinai. So that's where he's going to go, across the wilderness. He leaves his servant behind. He's totally alone. I wonder had he had companions, what they might have said to him.

And I've often wondered how I might respond to Elijah in this moment. Elijah has seen God bring the fire to the water-drenched altar in the face of his enemy. I think I'd maybe want to remind Elijah of that.

[4 : 41] Look what you've just done. There have been times in my life, and I thought particularly of the late night arguments I had as a student with people who thought religion was a waste of time, when I really wanted God to just set fire to something. I don't know if you've ever had those experiences. So firstly, I'm interested that God doesn't say anything to Elijah in this moment.

He doesn't counter his despair or his complaint, his declaration that it's too much. I really love a pep talk, but God doesn't give Elijah one. So I don't think there's evidence here that God thinks Elijah is acting badly or sinfully. Instead of talking, God sends an angel twice to feed him.

And I think this is because God knows something that we often forget, and that is that ministry is costly. And for some reason, now physics is my worst subject at school, so you have to bear with me, this made me think of Newton's law of the conservation of energy. Energy can't be created or destroyed, it can only be transferred. And of course, this isn't really Newton's law, is it? It's God's law that Newton merely observed. It's part of God's creation design that when we expend energy, we need to refuel, we need to re-energize, and therefore Elijah doesn't need talk, he needs food, and he needs sleep. As humans, we are subject to this law, and yet we often see the need for rest as weakness. Tiredness and the need for rest isn't a consequence of the fall, it's not a consequence of sin. And I think we see this in Genesis 2 verse 21, God actually puts Adam to sleep before he removes the rib, sleep, and rest occur for man before sin enters the garden. Margaret Thatcher, the former

Prime Minister, famously boasted of needing four hours sleep a night. Well, beware the man or woman who thinks that they are too powerful, too important, or too good to rest. Ministry is costly, it requires physical, emotional, and spiritual exertion, and to be tired afterwards, is because that is how God created us, and we need to pay attention to it. And the result of not paying attention to that is burnout.

It affects us, and it affects those we are closest to. When I am tired, I know I take it out on my family first. The girls, my girls, have this wonderful, I think it's a bit of a Gen Z phrase for this, it's called crashing out. A few months ago, Kate and I were walking to church one day, and we bumped into Tim, who asked us how we were. And Kate said in the way young people do, I'm fine, but mum's been crashing out. Just to give you a bit of context, I was crashing out because someone had left Nutella smudged on the sofa, and I had sat on it wearing my white jeans. But I know I overreact to things when I am tired because my nervous system is dysregulated. I'm afraid my family get the brunt of that.

[8 : 31] Tiredness is part of the human condition. Ministry is costly, whether here on Sundays, here in the week, in the workplace, caring for family and friends. It's all tiring, and we need to pay attention to it.

So in response to tiredness, part of God's creation, God gave us rest. Rest is not, however, the consolation prize. It is a divine blessing. God is not subject to his own laws of physics. He is all-powerful. Isaiah 40 says that God will not grow tired or weary, and yet God still rests. On the seventh day of creation, we are told that God rested. I love that it's part of the seven days. We don't think of creation as six days plus an extra bit. I think sometimes I think that rest is what I can do in the time I have left over. It gets pushed to the margins. Sometimes we run out of time to do it properly. God's seven day of rest is an important part of creation and his creative purpose. It's planned for, it has the day, it has a boundary, and it's a holy day. When I was training to be a counsellor, my tutor at Spurgeon said you need to put rest into your diary as if it were sessions with your clients.

If you leave rest as the thing you will do after you have done everything else, you will burn out. That was excellent advice, but it's hard to follow because I'm self-employed, so no one pays me to rest. In a way, perhaps that's the beauty of it. We can't outsource rest, and therefore it cannot be commodified. It remains a sacred thing. I'm also aware that resting in the modern world is a privilege.

[10 : 45] How do you rest in a war zone? How do you rest as a refugee or as a homeless person? How do you rest if you are working multiple jobs to provide food for your family? But that wasn't God's plan for us. God's rest is for all his people to enjoy.

So Elijah is tired. He's had this kind of mini rest under the bush, and he's been fed, and he's about to go on a 40-day and night journey across the wilderness to Sinai.

40 is an important biblical number. I'm very grateful that Richard covered this in his quiz last week, and despite preparing for this sermon, I still got most of the answers wrong.

So if you missed it, here is a reminder of some of the 40-day mentions. The flood, the rain that fell for 40 days and nights, and Noah waited another 40 days after the mountaintops appeared.

Moses on Mount Sinai. Moses spent two separate 40-day periods on Mount Sinai, receiving the law, often without food or water. The spies. Moses sent the spies to Cana for 40 days, and their lack of faith resulted in 40 years of wilderness wandering, one year per day.

[12 : 22] Jonah and Nineveh. Jonah warned Nineveh that it would be overturned in 40 days, leading to the city's repentance. And Goliath's taunt. Goliath taunted Saul's army for 40 days before

David defeated him. And it's Lent. So of course, we think of Jesus's 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness, which is what we remember during Lent. 40 days is also where we get the word quarantine from, from the Italian word for 40, quarantina, the length of time that ships would wait in the port of Venice before unloading their cargo. So 40 days, it's a time of testing and also a time of preparation.

40 days is enough time to change a bad habit. It can be a behaviour or a period of spiritual cleansing, as represented by the Israelites in the wilderness and Noah on the ark. And in association with Mount Sinai specifically, it's a period of preparation so that we can encounter the holiness of God on the mountaintop. I think when we think of rest, when I think of rest, I don't necessarily think about a long journey unless it's perhaps going on holiday. But I feel that maybe this journey for Elijah is in some way restorative. It represents an emotional and spiritual rest from recent events. He is on his own with God's provision. Jezebel can't pursue him. Giving things up for Lent is less fashionable than it used to be. But in the modern world, I wonder if we need to think hard about how we can remove distractions that get in the way of our relationship with God. The world will tell us that we need more things in order to rest well. One more streaming subscription, a comfier sofa, some lounge wear.

There's a really brilliant advert at the moment. I think it's for Uber Eats. I don't know if you've seen it. It says, when you've done enough, you've seen that advert. And I think it's very clever because it speaks to that overwhelm of modern life when you feel like you've done enough. Of course, the solution to having done enough isn't to buy more things. To rest as God intended, sometimes we have to remove things because the Bible tells us. Because the Bible tells us that all we need in the wilderness is God's presence. Jesus said that the Sabbath was created for man, not man for the Sabbath. We need Sabbath rest.

It's intended to be a blessing rather than a burden. I was aware writing this that Sunday rest is something that I think I've lost in my lifetime. Growing up, Sundays were about church, Sunday lunch, which was amazing. But the afternoons were without much activity or entertainment. If you were lucky, there was the Grand Prix, but otherwise there was Little House on the Prairie. Sometimes in my house, you were so bored that you ended up going for a walk. And to be honest, I miss those long, lazy days because in modern London, I'm not sure how different Sundays feel. After this service, I'll probably go to the shops because I don't know what we're having for lunch. And then I'll probably go again at some point because I don't know what anyone's having for pack lunches tomorrow. I've had all the ideas for this sermon at four o'clock in the morning. And the irony of waking up in the middle of the night to have ideas for a sermon about rest isn't lost on me. I think four in the morning is the only time that God can get hold of me. I need emptier days if I'm going to hear God speaking clearly. So how do we do it? How do we reset? Maybe you find rest easy and maybe, like me, you find this harder? And if you find it difficult, then can I just point you to the masterclass, which is, of course, the life of Jesus. Jesus had so many demands on his ministry. He knew it would be short. Many people wanted to hear him or wanted him to heal them. But Jesus was fully human as well as fully divine. And the Gospels record examples of Jesus taking rest seriously. I know I don't have time to go through all of these in great detail, but I just wanted to give you a flavour. Maybe you can do your own research and let me know.

So there's the idea of spiritual reset. And I think the best example of this, of course, is Jesus in the wilderness. Time to reset. That might be a pilgrimage, a retreat, a sabbatical. It might be how you use your annual leave allocation. Physical rest. Jesus is famously asleep on a boat during a storm when the disciples are fearing. He's also rests by the well in Samaria, which brings him into that incredible conversation with the Samaritan woman about the living waters of life. Are we taking responsibility for our physical and human needs? We have Jesus getting emotional rest, often withdrawing to solitary places? There's an example in Mark and one in Luke. Jesus frequently withdraws from crowds to lonely places to pray, rest and escape the noise and constant demands of ministry.

[18 : 50] He also rests. He goes away in a boat after he hears the news of John the Baptist's death, Matthew 14.

Maybe you need to rest because you are grieving. And he also role models and enables his disciples to rest, as he does in Mark 6. This is just before the feeding of the 5,000. After a time of intense ministry where they did not even have time to eat, Jesus told his disciples, come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.

I am grateful for the provision at this church that has helped me rest well over the years. Thinking of church lunch, which means I didn't have to go to the shops. On Sunday, Nitta Nata, creating space for others to rest. And sometimes though our expectations of other people are too high. I'm aware that it's three years as a church without a pastor. Do we expect church to operate in the same way all the time?

Is that realistic? Are we putting too greater burden on each other? And finally, Jesus self-regulates. I think this is the hardest, all the things to master. It can be the most impactful, how to remain calm. And this example is from John 8, verse 6. It's when the woman is caught in adultery. And Jesus bends down and draws in the earth with his finger. And I don't know what he was writing, but it feels to me like it's a grounding activity. He takes a moment because of the anger around him to calm himself.

[20 : 45] So we need rest, don't we? Because that's how God created us. And rest is a blessing from God. It's good enough for God, so it's good enough for us.

And we need to have a plan for us. And we need to have a plan for how we are going to practice it. Can we strip back some of the distractions, the entertainment, the urge to pay or consume more, in order that instead we can prepare to encounter God on the mountain?

Because no spoilers for next week, but it's worth it for Elijah. The mountaintop is worth the wilderness. And as we journey through the deprivation of Lent towards Easter Sunday, it's worth it for us too, as we ready ourselves to meet the risen Lord in the garden.

So let's pray. Dear Lord, thank you for your gift of rest. Thank you that we don't need to earn that. It's freely given to all of us. And it's part of your creative plans for your people. This Sunday, Lord, may we find a moment to rest in your presence, away from the demands of modern life.

[22 : 13] May we enable each other to rest well. May we protect and promote rest in this church and in our lives.

Amen. Amen.