

Cases of Anxiety in the Bible (Part 1)

Anxiety is not a modern invention. Though our vocabulary and psychology may be more sophisticated today, the human heart has wrestled with fear, uncertainty, and inner turmoil since Eden. Scripture gives us more than just commands like “Do not be anxious” — it gives us people. Real people, with real fears, who faced real threats. In this next part of the series, we will examine various people in the Bible. From Elijah’s exhaustion under the broom tree to Paul’s daily pressure for the churches, the Bible paints anxiety in all its shades. We’ll explore how Elijah, Saul, Herod, and Paul each encountered anxiety in different “degrees” — from despair and torment to control and compassion — and how God responded to each with both truth and tenderness.

1. Elijah: A Prophet in Distress

The account of Elijah’s encounter with the prophets of Baal is found in 1 Kings 18:16–40. Israel, under King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, had turned to worship Baal, the Canaanite god of fertility and rain. God sent a severe drought as judgment. Elijah, God’s prophet, challenges Ahab to a public confrontation on Mount Carmel to reveal who the true God is. *“How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.”* (v. 21) Elijah sets the terms: Two bulls are prepared for sacrifice — one for Baal, one for Yahweh. No fire is to be used; each side will call upon their god to send fire from heaven. The **God who answers by fire** will be acknowledged as the true God. 450 prophets of Baal cry out from morning until evening: *“O Baal, answer us!”* They dance, shout, and even cut themselves with knives — but **no one answers**, and **no fire comes**. Elijah mocks them: *“Shout louder! Perhaps he is deep in thought, busy, or traveling.”* (v. 27). Their god is silent — exposing the emptiness of idolatry. Elijah repairs the **altar of the LORD**, using **twelve stones** (one for each tribe of Israel). He then drenches the offering, wood, and trench with **twelve jars of water** to make it humanly impossible to ignite. He prays simply:

“Answer me, LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.” (v. 37)

Immediately, **fire from the LORD** falls and: Consumes the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, the soil, and the water in the trench. The people fall prostrate and cry out,

“The LORD—he is God! The LORD—he is God!” (v. 39)

Elijah orders the false prophets seized and executed at the Kishon Valley. He then prays, and rain returns to the land after years of drought — signifying restoration and God’s mercy.

After defeating the prophets of Baal, Elijah receives a death threat from Queen Jezebel. This type of thing often happens after we have experienced great victories. Many men and women of God talk about how they have to be extremely vigilant after some of their ministry victories. (He was now operating from his amygdala). Overwhelmed, Elijah flees into the wilderness, collapses under a broom tree, and prays, *“It is enough; now, O Lord, take my life.”*

1 Kings 19:1–18 Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. ² So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, “May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them.” ³ Elijah was afraid and ran for his life.

Many of us flee when we are afraid. Where do you flee to? You can run to God or to other strong towers.

Often the source of anxiety in our lives is the words of those we perceive to be powerful.

Elijah had just witnessed the power of God, yet he still fled. Past victories, even recent past, are no guarantee that we will be free from anxiety.

When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, ⁴ while 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." ⁵ Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep.

He left his servant. His servant might have spoken hope into his life, but he left him. **Isolation can be dangerous.**

The enemy loves to play with our self-esteem, "I am no better than my ancestors". One of the greatest prophets to ever live, who had just had his greatest victory, was now saying that he is no better than his ancestors. **What lies are you believing that are deepening your levels of anxiety?**

All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." ⁶ He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again.

Despite how downcast he was, God's strength is made perfect in weakness.

⁷ The angel of the Lord came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." ⁸ So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he travelled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. ⁹ There he went into a cave and spent the night.

Elijah needed practical sustenance to survive.

And the word of the Lord came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

The words of Jezabel had caused anxiety, now Elijah needed the words of God to regain perspective.

*¹⁰ He replied, "I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too." **How factual is this really? Can you hear the victim stance?***

¹¹ The Lord said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by."

Despite his self-pity and cognitive distortions, Elijah's breakthrough lay in his obedience to the proceeding word of God. Sometimes the word comes first as a question. God asks this question twice, "what are you doing here?"

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. ¹² After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. ¹³ When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

¹⁴ He replied, "I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."

¹⁵ The Lord said to him, “Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. ¹⁶ Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. ¹⁷ Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. ¹⁸ Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him.”

God knew how to minister to Elijah at the time. He reminded him that he was not alone. He also got him to a place of action and purpose where he had been paralysed with fear.

The symptoms of anxiety in Elijah were

- Fear, panic, and flight
- Emotional exhaustion and despair
- Isolation and hopelessness

God Addressed this through

- **Physical care first** – God sends an angel with food and water twice, showing that spiritual renewal often begins with physical restoration.
- **Gentle presence** – God reveals Himself not in the earthquake or fire, but in a *gentle whisper* (v.12). Sometimes God’s voice is not loud. Elijah was learning another dimension of God’s voice. This is the voice we ought to know and recognise. **What would have happened if Elijah had heard this voice earlier, maybe just after he heard Jezebel’s threats?**
- **Reframing mission** – God reminds Elijah of his purpose and that he is not alone (“I have reserved 7,000 in Israel”).