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## Episode transcript

### Week 2 | “Elijah and Hagar”

“Our time reflecting on the wilderness this week continues with two figures from the Hebrew scriptures. His wilderness experiences both physical and spiritual, are transformed by their encounters with God.

We start in the first book of Kings in chapter 19. Unlike many, Elijah at first sees the wilderness as a place of safety. He flees there out of fear of Jezebel who has threatened to kill him in revenge for his own slaughter of the prophets of Baal. He runs for his life, leaves his servant behind, and alone enters the wilderness. For him, the danger lies in remaining in his old life in civilization. He prefers this wasteland, the land that the Israelites passed through on their flight from Egypt, the land in which they went hungry and thirsty, where they would've perished without God's providence.

But even as Elijah seeks sanctuary in one wild place, another wilderness surrounds him and threatens to overcome him. This is the wilderness within, the wilderness of his fear and desperation in which even hope cannot survive. An inner wilderness that is so debilitating, so overwhelming, that he despairs. There, under a solitary broom tree, he offers to God all that remains to him, his life.

And it is here in this place where he has relinquished so much, not only the trappings of daily life and his servant, or the familiar landscape of Israel, but also his courage and even his will to live, that he encounters God. And he encounters God, first of all, as someone who gives, someone who provides the basic necessities of life, food and drink.

As happened before when God sustained the Israelites through this desert wilderness, Elijah is given a cake of unleavened bread, the same as the cakes which the Israelites had made with their unleavened dough as they fled the Egyptians, the same as the cakes they had made with the manna God provided to sustain them through their sojourn here.

And Elijah is given water, the basis of all life. Water in the desert, a symbol of the new life that God will bring, here made real in the gift of the angel. And this gift of God, small though

it may seem when surrounded by the vast emptiness of the wilderness, sustains Elijah on his journey.

But it's not a journey out of the wilderness. It's a journey further in. 40 days and 40 nights further into the desert, to Mount Horeb at center. And further into his own fear and trembling, as there the wind grows, the mountains shake and the rocks split. Now he is in a different kind of wildness. Even the stability of the ground on which he stands has forsaken him, as the earth trembles and quakes, and fire rages all around. And it's at the heart of this rage and fear that he again meets God in the sound of silence.

Here in the absence of everything, having lost even his certainty in the ground on which he stands, at the heart of the wilderness of emptiness, Elijah hears the voice of God. Perhaps it's taken this journey through deprivation, through fear and through despair to prepare Elijah for the quality of this encounter. Perhaps it's only in this wasteland, in the absence of everything else, in the silence that he is at last able to hear God's message, not words of reassurance or rescue, but words which send him on and back. Not back to his old life, but back into another wilderness. The wilderness of Damascus. Because for Elijah, the wilderness is not a place to escape. It's the very place of his work for God. And God has given him the strength to continue that work.

For our second character, we turn to the book of Genesis to chapter 16 and 21. Our second character who faces the wilderness of fear is Hagar. Like Elijah, she at first flees into the desert for safety, to escape the harsh treatment she's receiving from Sarai and her husband Abram. They have abused her and slighted her.

In her despair, the wilderness appears a safer place for her and her unborn child. Like Elijah, she encounters the angel of the Lord, but unlike him, she is not given physical nourishment, but is sustained instead by a promise. This promise of a son gives her enough to journey on. Forbidden by God to return to a place which is for her a wilderness of being despised and disregarded, abused and marginalized. Like Elijah, sustained for a journey of 40 days and nights by a single gift of cakes and water, Hagar must find sustenance in the Lord's promise for her ongoing wilderness of servitude through pregnancy and early motherhood.

The second time she enters the physical wilderness, it is not through choice. Unlike her first flight, she finds here no spring of water beside which to rest. She must be sustained by the gifts of her abuser and banisher, since it is Abraham who has given her food and water, though little enough to live on, and these provisions have run out. She has nothing. Alone in

this wilderness, no food, no water, and no apparent future for her or her child. Alone with her fears, with no means of navigating them and nowhere to seek refuge from them. 'Do not let me look upon the death of a child', she cries in her wasteland of fear and despair, of abandonment and solitude. But she is not alone. God hears and responds, and his response brings her a glimpse of the water of life she will need to sustain her and her son. Though much of the wilderness remains – its unfamiliarity, its discomfort and hardship, its vastness – it is no longer parched and dry.

For here in the wilderness, God has spoken again, and through God's opening of Hagar's eyes to the life-giving water of God's presence, she and her son can learn to live again. They can remain in the desert wilderness, but to them it is wild no more. It's become for them a home in which to grow. To learn not only to survive, but to thrive and ultimately to flourish and found a new family community.

Both Elijah and Hagar encountered God in the wilderness, not just in the physical wilderness in which they ended up, but in each of their personal wildernesses of fear and pain and despair. God didn't rescue them and take them to a land flowing with milk and honey. But each time what he gave them was enough for the moment and more. Not only enough to survive, but enough for a transformation. To give Elijah renewed purpose from a closer encounter at the heart of his struggle, to give Hagar an escape from the abuse of servitude she had endured and a new life with her son as matriarch of many.

In our wildernesses of fear and pain and despair, can we receive what God gives us? Can our hearts be open to the still small voice? To the spring of water? And can that be enough to give us hope and new purpose? The stories of Elijah and Hagar show us that even the smallest gift can sustain us when it comes from God and can transform our wilderness experience, and lead us onward into new life.”