

The Lord Corrects Elijah by Question and Revelation

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Date: 13 March 2011

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[0 : 00] Let's turn back then to 1 Kings 19. We've been looking at the life of Elijah, and I want us to consider the passage from verse 9 through to verse 14.

And we may just think about this in terms of how the Lord corrects Elijah by question and revelation. The Lord corrects Elijah by question and revelation. Most of us, I think, were well acquainted with this passage from our childhood.

We were brought up to know the great characters of the Bible. And what we've been discovering in this particular study is that the going for Elijah was difficult, to say the least.

And, in fact, we can say that the going was really tough for him. So tough that even a tough man like Elijah wanted out of the work of God.

[1 : 23] And the last study we had, we saw that he had come to that conclusion. He wanted out. He had enough. The fact of the matter is that in Elijah's day, as we've been seeing, the cause of true religion was low.

It was extremely low from Elijah's point of view. There was idolatry on every hand. And we saw how that Elijah, in a sudden fit of depression, fled south to Beersheba.

And then he left his servant there and went on to the Negev, into the desert. And he wanted to die. I've had it, he said. I've had enough, Lord. I want out.

And we sought to see how that was relevant in our own day and how we, in Scotland, need to recognize that when church life is low and the cause is weak, the state of interest in gospel things is poor, that there will be times when people will try every new thing to try to recover the work and promote the work.

And to some extent we're passing through that just now. But whatever else we do, we're not to simply desert our post, as Elijah did and the Lord corrected him.

[2 : 53] As we'll see in a moment. We're to redouble our efforts. We're to contend all the more earnestly for the faith that was once delivered to the saints. It seems to me that is one of the eminent points that the Lord made to Elijah.

Albeit in an unusual way, but the point was made both by question and by revelation. And so what we want to do is, we want just to remind ourselves how it was that Elijah got to Horeb, Mount Sinai in the first place.

And what he was doing there, you know, having taken off into the Negev. We saw that things didn't go as Elijah wanted them to.

And we saw that once God kept him from dying, God brought him, as it were, back to a fit state of mind and health.

He sustained him, he fed him, he caused him to sleep. He fed him again. He slept and he got up and went on his way. And of course, God was wonderfully accommodating in a sense because he took Elijah onward down to Horeb, 40 days and 40 nights we're told.

[4 : 18] But he took him there to correct him. And to, as it were, turn him around and set him going again. And there's so much in this that is relevant to ourselves and helpful to us in our own spiritual journey.

So I want to begin simply by looking at the divine question and to think for a moment about the location where that question was put and then at the question itself.

And we're told in verse 9, and he went there, that is to Horeb, to Mount Sinai, the Mount of God, and went into a cave.

And sometimes, and we say this and we've said it before, sometimes a translation doesn't just capture all that is there.

And we've talked about it and you've talked, those of you who are native Gaelic speakers have said it's hard to get one English word to express the meaning of a Gaelic word.

[5 : 28] And that's very much the Hebrew way of it too. It's hard to get an English word just to cover the whole thing. But sometimes a simple little thing is missed. As simple as the definite article.

And where our translation says, verse 9, and he went into a cave, the original says, and he went into the cave.

And commentators of a balanced judgment have been quick to point out that this was not just any cave, but it was a specific cave.

And some of them have suggested with a fair good weight of argument that what was being said here is that he went to the place where God had revealed his glory to Moses long before.

You remember the reference in Exodus 33, 22. God said he would let, as it were, his back, the back of his glory pass before Moses.

[6 : 35] And he said, I'll put you into a cleft in the rock. And commentators suggest to us that what is being said here when it is said he went into the cave.

Is that he went into that cleft, that cave in the rock that had sheltered Moses, that God had sheltered Moses in all those years before.

I wouldn't be dogmatic about saying that's definitely the understanding. But I think there's fair wit in the point that it's not just he went into a cave randomly, but that he went into the cave.

And there was a point in that being specifically mentioned. Anyway, there the word of the Lord came to Elijah.

And it came to Elijah to bring about a change in the prophet's life. The question itself is well known to us. What are you doing here, Elijah?

[7 : 40] Now, of course, interpreters suggest that this question contains rebuke or reproof to the prophet.

As if to say, what on earth are you doing here? You're a prophet of Israel. You belong in Israel. Get back to Israel. I wouldn't discount that at all.

I incline towards that understanding. But is it all about rebuke? I don't think so. But the point, I think, is fair that God was probing him here, making him think.

God was saying to him, well, did I instruct you to move, to leave your post? Am I condoning this move? You see, sometimes in providence, God allows a thing to happen.

It's part of his decretive will. It comes to pass. But the question may be asked is, is this consistent with his revealed will? Well, the answer may be no.

[8 : 43] There may be something that is part of his decretive will. It whatsoever comes to pass, miss. But did the person make a judgment according to the revealed will?

Sometimes not. And it seems to me that there's an element of this in it. God didn't say to him, desert your post. God didn't say to him, go down all the way from Israel to Beersheba to the Nager and want to die.

God didn't say to him, we saw last time. That was an unlawful prayer. And we might push it a bit further and say his desire to be at the mountain of God was not according to the revealed will either. God had made him a prophet. God had given him a commission and expected him to carry it out in a way that was in keeping with his will.

And so, therefore, we emphasize that the key element here is not so much the reproof as the probe. What are you doing here, Elijah?

[10 : 04] What's this about? And sometimes the Lord does that with us. He speaks to us in a way that we're not anticipating.

He brings something to us that maybe makes us feel a bit uncomfortable. But it's deliberate. He wants to probe us in the morning, folks who weren't able to be with us.

We're looking at how the Apostle Paul was reminding the Thessalonians that he and his fellow missionaries had come there with a fatherly concern to exhort them, to comfort them, but also to admonish them, to adjure them, to charge them, to prick their conscience with the word.

And so to move them on in the faith. And sometimes the Lord does that to us. Makes us think about what we are doing at this particular time with our Christian life.

And it may be that we are faced with difficulties in Providence which make us want to change direction.

[11 : 22] Now, that's clearly what happened with Elijah. We saw last time that Elijah saw a wonderful change there on Mount Carmel.

He saw the false gods rubbished. And he saw the priests of Baal put to death. He saw then next how after seven times interceding for the rain to return after all these years, three and a half years or so, he saw God answer his prayer wonderfully.

He was on a high there. He was on what you call a real mountaintop experience. And then he runs down to Jezreel. In fact, we saw he outran Ahab in his royal chariot.

Aye, but then he gets a message from Jezebel. You're going to die just like they died. I'll fix you. And instead of recognizing that the Lord who was with him on Carmel and who was with him to outrun the chariot was with him still, he gave up.

[12 : 47] I've had it. The change he saw on Mount Carmel in the people. The Lord, he is God.

Or if you like, the Lord, he is the God. Suddenly, all that's gone. He sees it as temporary.

And he saw that Ahab and Jezebel and Baal still ruled okay. And he became disillusioned. And he quit his post.

And so it is here at Mount Sinai, at Horeb, the mountain of God, the living and active and word of the Lord is working in him, questioning, probing and covering, laying bare the very secret and personal thoughts and intentions of his heart.

What are you doing here? I'm sure that our student pleasant with us has heard in the college how to work on a sentence in an exegetical, helpful way and put the weight here or there or there.

[14 : 10] What are you doing here, Elijah? What are you doing here, Elijah? Elijah. You move the emphasis to bring out some aspect of the depth of the question being asked.

It's not that the Lord didn't know why Elijah was there. God wasn't asking this question because he was ignorant. Clearly, the Lord knew why Elijah went to Horeb but in fact carried him safely on his way as we saw.

But the Lord required Elijah to face up to his reasons for being there and if you like the ramifications of those reasons.

What was involved in him being there? And there are those of us here tonight who know very well Elijah in our own experience.

We can identify with it. We've taken on something and it's been difficult. The going has been too difficult for us and we've felt the weight of it. We know about other people too along the way who found it easier to quit their task or the commitment they made.

[15 : 40] Ministers know very well and no reflection on all of you here tonight but we know very well what it's like when folk take on something and maybe a commitment to do some work in the church and they go fine for a while then they get either fed up but it's not going all that well.

What's the point in doing it? And they quit it. And it leaves fewer to do it. It's easier you see to give it up.

And with the greatest respect to the name of Elijah that's what he did. He gave it up. I've had it. I've had enough. Lord, take my life.

I've discovered I'm just no better than any of my ancestors were. Well, we saw that wasn't a true assessment of himself.

And what we're saying here is we need to let a question like this probe ourselves just as the Lord probed the prophet.

[16 : 47] Made him think about himself. Made him think about his reasons for being there. Could he say they were entirely God-honoring?

No, he couldn't. Could he say they were being he was being a bit selfish? Yes, we can.

We saw why he went to Beersheba and beyond. We saw what he went there for. We saw how the Lord had mercy on him and took him on his journey in order to correct him.

In order to send him back to the work he gave him to do. And you see in a general sense we in the Christian life have to do this very thing.

We have to ask ourselves where we're at in the will of God. And try to give an honest assessment of our thinking about ourselves.

[17 : 48] having spent time over the years both in a small congregation in Sellafield or at least relatively small and in an incredibly difficult work among the Jewish people one knows it's very hard

to get folk involved in that kind of situation.

Because there are too few willing to get stuck in in difficult situations. And sometimes that happens with people maybe professionally they go to a place where the congregation is small and don't think I'll hang around here and they move on they think about career improvement and prospect and so on and they move on.

the general point we're making in this that it's important for us to be robustly honest in our assessment and the old saying of Paul is relevant Lord what will you have me to do?

in another general reference perhaps not so relevant here tonight but it may be relevant to family members we have to other younger Christians there are Christians taking liberties nowadays that decades ago they'd never have contemplated that I thought I don't belong there there are pubs and clubs and wild parties that they go to and try to justify what are you doing here?

some of you will remember the story of the missionary lady who went to a dance hall and thought she could convert people there and she was told by a male partner she was dancing with you don't belong here and it was like a slap on the face bringing it into reality she didn't belong there it wasn't the place for her to be to do what she was doing there's all sorts of ways in a general sense we can apply the principle of this great question to the servant of God to the follower of the Lord what are you doing here Elijah and what comes out of this as we shall see later on is that the challenge to Elijah to the man of faith was to do what the Lord gave him to do however difficult that was and secondly we want to consider the obvious the prophet's answer to the question verse 10 so he says [20 : 49] I have been very zealous for the Lord God of hosts for the children of Israel have forsaken your cabinet torn down your altars and killed your prophets with the sword I alone am left and they seek my life to take it the first thing we notice here in this verse is where the emphasis lies it lies with I and me it lies with I and me I have been very zealous I alone am left and they seek my life to take it now here's a man as we've seen who had been honored by the Lord in his work and he's been put under the spotlight of the word of

God for the action he has taken the desires he entertained the prayer he made and the way he went and God is now wanting an answer out of him and the answer that he gives shows he's just like ourselves he seeks to justify being at Horeb all that way down into the south and he's doing it on the basis of all that he has done in I have been very zealous for the I alone am left and they seek my life to take it there's a contrast here that is obvious and a contrast that's less obvious the contrast that is obvious is the comparison or contrast of you between himself and Israel.

I've been very zealous. The children of Israel have forsaken your covenant. I alone am left, and they seek my life.

But in his response to the question of the Lord, in his answer, in his almost self-justifying answer, who's missing?

The Lord is missing. The Lord who had done so much through the prophet. And if you think about it and weigh it, there is implicit in his answer a complaint.

[23 : 45] Elijah is saying to the Lord, after all the mighty miracles, and after all my mighty efforts, the cause is lost.

And I've been left in the lurch. Actually, what I've said there is substantially what B.B. Warfield said on this very subject. He is suggesting, and I agree heartily with it, that it's as if Elijah is saying to the Lord, after all the mighty miracles that were demonstrated implicitly by me, and all the mighty efforts I made in the cause, the cause is lost.

I've been left in the lurch. He's blaming the Lord. Lord, it's your doing. And if you think about it, we've been there.

We've been there ourselves. We have gotten ourselves to that stage too. We've put forth our best efforts, prayerfully, with the energy we've managed to summon and so on, the time we've committed.

For what? There's little to show for it. The cause is seemingly lost.

[25 : 08] And the truth of the matter is that Elijah's own words condemn him, and they instruct him, but only when they're spoken. I have found this painful but helpful, in my own experience, sometimes it's only when we hear what we think, hear it, when we say it, that the hearing of it tells us we're wrong.

You may not have had that experience. Perhaps you need to have that experience. But Elijah had that experience. Sometimes we need to hear audibly what we think about the Lord and his dealings

with us.

Then we realize we've said too much. The book of Job is about that, isn't it? Although Job, it's true, was in a very special way tried, very severely tried, yet Job was righteous over much, and it was only when he said the things, he thought that he was instructed, and little by little corrected, until eventually when Elihu said something to him, the convictions began to change him.

And so the point I'm making is simply that sometimes we need to hear what we actually think about the situation the Lord has put us in.

Then we realize we're saying more than is right. And I'm saying that because ministers and the Lord's people, we can utter these things, and they're so relevant to us in this very day.

[26 : 51] We question inwardly why God hasn't done this or that, why hasn't he prevented this happening, and so on. But it sometimes takes us to actually say it for us to realize that we're blaming the Lord.

And although Elijah said, back there in the Negev, I'm no better than my fathers, it's clear that the real heart of the matter was, and is found in the verse here, in his answer to the Lord.

Verse 10. It's all about what I've been. Let me ask you a question. Who's more zealous for the Lord God of hosts kingdom?

As for him. Sometimes we all must behave as if we are more zealous than him. As if we have more a burden for the conversion of sinners than he has.

That was Elijah. He expected a wonderful national change that never happened. at least not in his ministry.

[28 : 15] And he saw it as if he were left in the lurch by the Lord. And he was almost justified in giving up.

But the truth of the matter is, Elijah's view of it was mistaken. God had his people, and we read it there in the passage.

I wonder what Elijah thought when he heard, I have 7,000 in Israel who have not bowed the knee to Baal or kissed the image.

Wasn't as Elijah thought it was. And it's not as we think it is either in our present day. Certainly not what we would like it to be.

It certainly wasn't what Elijah wanted it to be. But it wasn't at all as bad as he thought. And so, having heard his answer to the Lord's question, he's now ready for the divine revelation and that lesson.

[29 : 34] And it's there in the last part of it from 11 to 14. And the revelation is in terms of terrifying signs. He's told to go out and stand outside the cleft, outside the cave, and to watch a spectacular display of divine power.

This is a sort of almost reminiscent of the earthquake and the fire is reminiscent of Mount Sinai when the law was given in Exodus 19.

verses 16 to 19. When the earth shook and the mountain was on fire and God came down. And so awesome was that sight that Moses said, I am shaking to pieces.

I'm terrified. But when the great hurricane hit the rocks and smashed the rocks, ripped into them, smashing them, doing what explosives would do, we're told the Lord was not in the hurricane.

And then the earth shook and the Lord was not in the earthquake. And there was a consuming fire that was awesome, but the Lord was not in the fire.

[31 : 07] And in that threefold experience, one after another, the emphasis came through, but the Lord was not in. the hurricane or the earthquake or the consuming fire.

It's true that in God's judgment upon the impenitent, upon sinners, that the fire and the storm and the earthquake symbolize God's presence.

Great storms shall go before him, Psalm 50. Fire shall go before him, he shall burn up his enemies in his wrath, and so on.

But the singular point that the prophet was to take from this, the Lord was not in the hurricane, the Lord was not in the earthquake, the Lord was not in the fire, was simply this, that he must not equate those outward spectaculars displays of power with the Lord himself.

There's more to God than that. The Bible tells us that judgment is his strange work. And you see, Elijah was molded in a way by his ministry.

[32 : 38] He was a thunderer. He wanted the demonstrations of judgment. That's what Carmel was about. That's what the drought before it was about.

And he had lost sight of what was going on. And there's a relevance in that for us. Sometimes we get snarred up, you know, in church, in discussions over God as the God who is a judge, a just judge, who will condemn the wicked eternally, and so on. And others who say, well, God's a God of love, as if the two were mutually exclusive, as if you've got to believe one or the other. And Elijah had to learn God is both, a God who is a God of judgment, but he's a God of mercy, he's a God of covenant live. Yes, he exhibits his wrath, but there's more to it than that. He is able to turn idolaters from the idolatrous ways.

[33 : 52] We saw in Thessalonians in our study there, that the wonderful truth about the Thessalonians is that they turned to God from idols.

God can do that. When his word comes in power and in the Holy Spirit with much assurance, he can do that.

And Elijah had to learn this important lesson. There's a biblical balance we have to keep, we have to see the whole picture about God.

God He is the God who is long-suffering. How thankful we should be that He's long-suffering with us, that He's so abundant in goodness and faithful in His covenant land.

He doesn't deal with us according to our sins. And whilst it's true that He will not clear the impenitent, He will not let them off the hook, it's also clear that He can turn the most hardened sinner to Himself.

[35 : 11] And that's why after these great demonstrations of God's power, we hear about the small, still voice.

The original is the sound of crushed silence. And look at the reaction of the prophet when he heard it.

See what it says there, verse 12, and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire, and after the fire a still small voice, the voice of crushed silence, of crushed silence.

Verse 13, so it was, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out a bit further, and stood in the entrance of the cave, and suddenly the voice came to him, and said, what are you doing here, Elijah?

Elijah? The silence could be heard. Warfield calls it the awesomeness of gentle stillness.

[36 : 29] And it's a gentle stillness we've had in our congregations, haven't we? We've been sitting there, and there's that sense that the air is thick with a silence.

You can feel it, and you can hear it. God is in the place. Sometimes we hear it more, sometimes we hear it less. But the point is that the prophet was wrong in his assessment.

There's more than one way for God to work. It's not all about judgments. It's about his presence in power, in transforming power.

And I'm not saying in what I'm about to say that there weren't many converted as a result of two world wars, but comparatively, how many were converted as a result of the wars that our nations passed through, compared with times of revival.

Agreed. There's a difference, you see. Judgments don't equal conversions. People cling, I don't want to say too much, but we saw it with reference to the floods in Australia.

[38 : 04] people cling to what they can do for themselves. When they're faced with horrendous difficulties, the human spirit rises up in defiance.

We will overcome. Judgements don't affect the kind of changes that the human heart needs.

Not saying they never do, they do when God applies. But when you look back over the history of revival, you can't account for the tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, and yes millions, in the great awakening.

You can't account for that by judgment. But in the Lord exhibiting his love, and mercy to sinners. I once remember reading somewhere that it was advised to preachers by an old preacher that you don't convert the hardened sinner by hammering him with judgment and wrath and hell.

You convert him by showing him the wonderful love of God to sinners that deserve the worst.

[39 : 36] You focus on the love of God in Christ Jesus. And the point I think is well made to us. That melts under God's blessing of course.

It melts the sinner's heart. it makes the sinner feel ashamed that he had despised the goodness and the mercy and the kindness of God.

And so if we think about the occasions when we ourselves have been very aware sensible we say of the Lord's presence those times when you could hear a pin drop it was the sound of hushed or crash silence.

It was awesome and we said the Lord was here. You could sense his presence. And so Elijah was taught to view things differently.

He was instructed by the Lord that the Lord has his set times for blessing people with salvation. And for Elijah it was a case of not yet but get back to the work I've given you to do.

[40 : 59] And that's what happened as we will see when we come to it. So that we're not as it were to be tempted to seek after the dramatic the awesome demonstrations of judgment or even of miracles of the past.

But we're to seek the Lord's voice of gentle stillness of crash silence in our congregations and in our own experience.

We can I think take something from the way the Lord taught his prophet and recommissioned him. And we can cry out to him to allow that voice of gentle stillness the ministry of the Holy Spirit to be among us powerfully bringing forth to us the love of God in Christ and enabling us to embrace that all the more.

We were thinking just there last Lord's Day at the communion in Downvale about the great text of the Bible John 3 16 you will never fathom it we're always left feeling we've just been on the surface of it well maybe we were a wee bit below the surface but we've stood amazed at the love of God the height the depth the length the breadth of it that he should so love sinners as to give his son to such a death the sacrificial lamb of slaughter the wrath bearing lamb and so on that sinners might be set free and have peace with God no Elijah you don't belong at Horeb you belong where I put you you belong doing the work you were given to do do it and leave the outcomes to me and so as has been well noticed that when

Elijah repeated his words of answer the second time it was a different Elijah he was ready to go back and that's what comes in the next section he was ready God had taught him and God was ready to send him back well humbled and instructed well may there be something in that for us tonight amen again