

The God who won't give up

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: 25 October 2020

Preacher: Rupert Evans

[0 : 0 0] Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.

Then he was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life, and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom tree.

And he asked that he might die, saying, It is enough. Now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my father's. And he lay down and slept under a broom tree.

And behold, an angel touched him and said to him, Arise and eat. And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water.

And he ate and drank and lay down again. And the angel of the Lord came again a second time and touched him and said, Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you.

[1 : 1 6] And he arose and ate and drank and went in the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God. There he came to a cave and lodged in it.

And behold, the word of the Lord came to him. And he said to him, What are you doing here, Elijah? He said, I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts, for the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword.

And I, even I only am left, and they seek my life to take it away. And he said, Go out and stand on the mount before the Lord.

And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord. But the Lord was not in the wind.

And after the wind an earthquake. But the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire. But the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper.

[2 : 3 4] And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him and said, What are you doing here, Elijah?

He said, I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword.

And I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life to take it away. And the Lord said to him, Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus.

And when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Syria. And Jehu, the son of Nimshi, you shall anoint to be king over Israel. And Elisha, the son of Shaphat of Abel-Mahola, you shall anoint to be prophet in your place.

And the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu put to death. And the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death. Yet I will leave 7,000 in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.

[4 : 06] The spacing doesn't quite reflect how much time we'll be spending on each heading. The third of those headings is shorter, so don't panic when we get to that point that there's still half the page on the outline to go.

I'm going to lead us in prayer as we begin. We pray, our Father, that you might speak to us this morning through your word.

That we might know you more really, love you more dearly, follow you more nearly, and proclaim you more clearly. Amen. Well, William Wilberforce is rightly considered one of the greatest men of English history, responsible for the abolition of the slave trade.

But for Wilberforce, who was of course a committed Christian, the path to success was littered with discouragements and apparent failures. Indeed, his abolition bills were defeated 11 times in Parliament before finally passing.

On one occasion, he almost gave up. In March 1796, seven whole years after beginning his campaign, he thought he finally had the numbers in Parliament to succeed.

[5 : 19] His opponents panicked, and in their craftiness, arranged free tickets for a number of Wilberforce's supporters for the premiere of a leading opera in London that night, to stop them from voting.

In their absence, Wilberforce's bill was defeated by four votes. He was utterly crushed. The cause to which he'd given everything looked dead.

And in his despair, he suffered a severe fever, followed by a nervous breakdown, leading him to consider retirement from public life. Failure and disappointment can be crushing, especially when in the pursuit of a noble cause, and when we see evil triumph instead.

And it can so easily happen in Christian ministry. Perhaps some of us here know that experience. We've invested deeply in someone who isn't a Christian, praying for them and answering their questions.

And it looks like they're about to start following Jesus. All their questions have been answered. They appear interested. And then they come to the clearest gospel talk imaginable. And we're convinced that finally they'll now start to follow Jesus.

[6 : 33] But they don't respond. And before long, they've lost all interest in Christian things. Or we've stood firm in contending for Christian truth in a particular church where we've served for years, only to see that church turn away from the Bible under new leadership.

And when we speak out, we're dismissed as a troublemaker and feel all alone. Or we've experienced the heartache of seeing a child we prayed for every day during their childhood and to whom we taught the gospel turn away from their Christian faith.

Christian ministry can be full of disappointments and discouragements. And they can easily lead us to despair. And so it was with Elijah in our passage today.

We left things at the end of 1 Kings 18 on a great high. The God of Israel had proven beyond any doubt he was the true God, defeating the false God of Baal in their contest on Mount Carmel.

And if ever there was a time when the people and their leaders would turn back to God, surely it was now. After all, they hadn't simply heard the clearest gospel talk imaginable, but had seen God send down first fire from heaven, and then rain to bring an end to three years of drought.

[8 : 00] Imagine the elation and optimism Elijah must have felt. He'd been in hiding for three years, dismissed as a troublemaker, seemingly standing all alone in serving God, but now had finally been vindicated.

Surely revival is just round the corner in 1 Kings 19. Well, look at verse 1. Ahab, the evil king of Israel, told Jezebel, his wife, all that Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword.

Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.

Then he was afraid and he arose and ran for his life. So what happens? Jezebel repents of her hard-heartedness, signs up for the Women's Christianity Explore course, and turns to the Lord?

No. She doubles down on her opposition to Elijah, and puts a fatwa on his life. Elijah's great victory becomes his lowest moment.

[9 : 16] Triumph turns to tears, and he has to run for his life once more. It seems like such an anti-climax. But in the rest of 1 Kings 19, God meets with Elijah and gives him and us three reasons to keep going amidst the discouragements and apparent failures of the Christian life.

And we're going to consider each in turn. So here's the first. God's faithfulness endures. God's faithfulness endures. Elijah's on the run for his life, probably not out of fear, as the ESV translation suggests, but despair.

He didn't want Jezebel to have the pleasure of killing him, but he did want to die. Let's pick up the story of verse 3. Jezebel has issued Elijah's death warrant, and we're told, Then Elijah was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life, and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there.

But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom tree, and he asked that he might die. Elijah is utterly deflated and depressed.

Like William Wilberforce, he's tempted to give up. His life's work seemingly a failure. Because if even Mount Carmel wasn't enough to bring repentance and revival, why bother to carry on?

[10 : 44] He might as well pack up his bags and go home. In fact, he might as well die. And so he walks for a day into the hot, barren desert, and prays he might die.

Verse 4. Take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers. Despite all his labors, he'd fared no better than the prophets who'd preceded him.

The nation seemed as far from the Lord as ever. Elijah had not only had enough of ministry, he'd had enough of life. But Elijah hadn't reckoned on God's faithfulness.

And the way God deals with him here is very moving. How wonderful that when we're at a low ebb, tempted even to give up, not only on ministry, but life itself perhaps, we have a God of such tenderness and compassion and faithfulness.

In verse 5, we're told Elijah falls asleep, probably hoping he'd never wake again, when suddenly an angel rouses him. He looks around, and there in the barren desert lies food and drink.

[11 : 57] It's too good to refuse, so Elijah eats and drinks and then goes back to bed. But the angel won't allow him to slumber and wakes him up again. Elijah may have given up on ministry, but God hadn't given up on him.

There's more food, and the angel tells Elijah to set off on a long journey, a trip that was to last 40 days and 40 nights. And we'll only grasp the significance of this journey, and indeed this chapter, a chapter the Bible commentator, Dale Ralph Davis, describes as one of the most important chapters in the whole Old Testament.

If we notice the clear parallels with the people of Israel earlier in the Old Testament. Do you remember the last time God's people had been forced to run into the desert for their life?

Back in Exodus, the people had crossed the Red Sea and then travelled through the wilderness, and they roamed there for 40 years, just as Elijah journeys for 40 days. And like Elijah, the people in Exodus grumbled, preferring to die in the desert rather than trust God's promises.

But God, in his faithfulness, miraculously fed the Israelites with heavenly bread, just as he feeds Elijah here and had done in chapter 17 with the ravens.

[13 : 18] Do you see the parallels? But they don't end there, because in both cases, they eventually end up at Horeb, Mount Sinai, the mountain of God. God was dealing with Elijah in exactly the same way he dealt with his people all those years ago when he'd first called them.

He was reminding Elijah he was still the same faithful God who'd provided for his people and preserved them through hardship. Despite appearances, he was still in control.

I guess what's going on here is a little bit like a couple going back to the place they first met. You know how it is a couple return to that special place where they first got together or where they got engaged perhaps to remind themselves of where it all started and perhaps to pledge themselves to one another afresh.

Now at this point, you'd expect me to continue the illustration with some romantic story about how I've taken Patasha back to the idyllic location where I proposed. But I haven't done that so the illustration will have to end there.

But you get the point, I'm sure. And in the same way, God was taking Elijah back to the place where it had all started, to the place he'd first pledged himself to Israel, the place he'd made his covenant with them.

[14 : 43] And the lesson for Elijah and us is clear, I think. Despite all the setbacks and discouragements and appearances to the contrary, God's covenant, his promises to his people held firm.

The God of Sinai was still in control. He hadn't forgotten his people or Elijah. The promises made at Sinai still stood.

There was no need to despair. And I think this is a great comfort for us as we reflect upon our own experience of serving God.

Because it reminds us that disappointments and opposition are normal, even for the most loyal of God's people. And even amidst the heartaches, God remains faithful and will sustain us as he sustained Elijah in the wilderness.

He won't forget his promises or his people. I don't know where we need to be reminded of this at the moment. Maybe like Elijah, we've had to take a very lonely stand lately and feel ostracised among our family or a social circle because we've stood apart from them in some way for being a Christian.

[15 : 55] And the opposition has led us to wonder if it's still worth serving God. Or maybe evangelism just seems such hard work at the moment and like Elijah, we feel like the only one in our office who serves God.

Well, let's take heart because God is faithful and his promises stand firm even when appearances suggest otherwise. Of course, it's not Mount Sinai to which we need to return, but the Mount of Crucifixion, our meeting place with God, the better mountain where the new covenant was sealed in Jesus' blood, where God has most clearly revealed himself to us.

If we're tempted to despair, let's turn our eyes afresh to the cross of Jesus where his love is displayed and his promises guaranteed beyond doubt. So that's the first lesson Elijah was to learn.

God's faithfulness endures. But what was Elijah to do now? Okay, God's covenant promises hadn't failed, but if Elijah had called down fire from heaven and the nation still hadn't repented, what was he to do now?

Well, this brings us on to our second lesson. God's methods don't change. God's methods don't change and this is verses 9 to 14. And just as the key to understanding the previous verses was to notice the parallels between Elijah and the Israelites, so it's important here to spot the parallels between Elijah and Moses.

[17 : 37] Look at verse 11. Elijah is in a cave or cleft in the rock like Moses at Sinai and we're told, And the Lord said, Go out and stand on the mount before the Lord.

And behold, the Lord passed by. Should ring bells with Exodus 34 where the Lord passed before Moses and revealed himself to him.

That experience also on Sinai was accompanied by an earthquake and fire as it is here. And Moses had to hide his face from the Lord to survive the experience just as Elijah does in verse 13.

Do you see what's going on? Once again, God is revealing himself to his messenger to reassure him and commission him for ongoing ministry. In Moses' case, he'd just seen the Israelites he'd guided out of slavery worship a golden calf and in his anger had lashed out.

He had been tempted to give up. So too was Elijah when a rebellious people had once again turned to other gods. And yet God still wanted to use Moses and Elijah.

[18 : 51] He wanted them to persevere and so he reveals himself to them to reassure and reinvigorate them. Have a look down near these verses because they're often misunderstood, I think.

If you look closely, you'll notice verses 10 and 14 are basically identical where Elijah answers God's question, what are you doing here? Which incidentally isn't a rebuke as some have suggested, after all, the angel had told him to go on this journey, but an expression of concern and compassion.

And the key is what lies in between those verses where God answers Elijah's complaint and reminds him what faithful ministry was all about, what God's methods are, we could say.

Look down with me verse 11 again. And he said, go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord and behold, the Lord passed by and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire and after the fire the sound of a low whisper, or more literally perhaps a voice, a low whisper.

And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. God reassures Elijah, but not how we might expect, because notice the Lord wasn't in the wind or the earthquake or the fire, though he controls those things as the previous chapter shows us, but he was in the low whisper or voice of verse 12, the same voice which begins to speak at the end of verse 13, God's word in other words.

[20 : 53] God demonstrates his presence here not through the spectacular or the visible or the miraculous, but through his simple word, word, a word which can seem so insignificant and weak, faced with the opposition of a hostile world and the power of kings like Ahab.

But Elijah had to learn that it is there, in God's word, where true power lies. God's methods don't normally involve the miraculous fire from heaven stuff of chapter 18, nor do such miracles guarantee success, and Elijah wasn't to view success in ministry as necessarily being marked by widespread revival.

And of course it's a lesson we also need to hear today. In commenting on this passage, Dale Ralph Davis writes, Christians may crave signs, but will seldom find Christ in the wind, earthquake, and fire.

It is Baal worship that works up orgasms. Biblical faith is content with the word. Biblical faith is content with the word.

Gospel ministry involves persevering in simply trusting and proclaiming God's word. In fact, some argue that the low whisper or voice of verse 12 was actually a silence.

[22 : 15] The ESV footnote uses that word. If so, what seems to be going on is Elijah experiences everything Moses experienced of God's presence at Sinai, but then, unlike Moses, receives no word.

The point being, God had nothing more to say. By taking Elijah back to Sinai, God was reminding him that the same covenant and the same word given to Moses was still in operation, so no further revelation was needed or would be given to Elijah.

He was to carry on in exactly the same way as before, like the sailor who won't allow himself to be blown off course even amidst wind and choppy waters. what God had already revealed at Sinai was still sufficient.

And of course, we could say the same today about the Bible, the place where God has fully revealed himself to us. God doesn't need to give us some new word or revelation of himself for our ministry to be effective in the 21st century or to succeed against the Jezebels of our world.

what we have in the Bible is sufficient and we're to stick with it and have confidence in it even when it's rejected. And for us, this means holding on to Jesus' words because Moses and Elijah, of course, both went up onto a mountain a second time where they were again engulfed by a cloud.

[23 : 47] But this time, do you remember, it was in the company of the Lord Jesus when he was transfigured. This time, it was Jesus' glory they saw and this time, the voice from heaven which they heard simply said, this is my son whom I love.

Listen to him. And it's no coincidence that episode happened just after Jesus had told his followers the cost involved in following him.

Like Elijah, they needed to learn following Jesus isn't easy. But if we listen to his words and hold onto them, then we have all we need to keep going.

When we've had a discouragement in ministry, the temptation is to think we need something different. Perhaps our friend who didn't respond to a Bible talk needs to see miracles. Or the 21st century church needs to move with the times to reverse its decline in numbers.

But do we see how misguided that is? God is rarely in the spectacular, the earthquake, wind or fire. Nor does his words need updating for a new era.

[24 : 54] God's methods don't change. But the question still remains. If God was being faithful to his covenant promises, why was Elijah's ministry seemingly characterised by so little success?

Why was the queen plotting to take his life? Why wasn't there mass revival? Well, this brings us on to our final lesson from this passage. God's faithfulness endures, his methods don't change, and finally, and more briefly, God's purposes are guaranteed.

God's purposes are guaranteed. If God was present in the voice of verse 12, then it was essential Elijah listened to that voice. And the same word is used of the voice of God, which begins to speak at the end of verse 13.

So what did this voice have to say to Elijah? Well, look on to verse 15. And the Lord said to him, Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus.

And when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Syria. And Jehu, the son of Nimshi, you shall appoint to be king over Israel. And Elisha, the son of Shaphat of Abel-Meholah, you shall anoint to be prophet in your place.

[26 : 16] And the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu put to death. And the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death. Yet I will leave 7,000 in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.

Elijah had complained to God that he was the only faithful prophet left in Israel. But he wasn't to despair. God would raise up another after him, Elisha.

And he also reassures Elijah that his enemy, Ahab's reign, would be short-lived. Elijah was to anoint new kings in place of Ahab, kings who would destroy those who opposed the Lord.

And although both kings were far from perfect, God's promise comes true. If we were to read on into two kings, we'd see Ahab eventually falls at the hand of Hazael's men, while Jehu kills Jezebel.

God's purposes are guaranteed. So 40 days on from wanting to die, Elijah's ministry was about to begin again.

[27 : 28] God still had plans to use him. But this time, Elijah's expectations were to be different. If you think about it, it's an extraordinary word for God to have given Elijah at Sinai, the place he had first pledged himself to Israel.

Rather than promising to bless the nation, God now promises destruction, including the death of the anointed king. And it reminds us God's purposes include judgment as well as salvation.

This voice in which God was present was a word of judgment. When Jezebel's heart became even harder after the miracles of chapter 18, Elijah thought he'd failed.

But God's word divides. Just as the sun brings life to some and droughts to others, so God's word brings destruction and life.

Elijah's ministry wasn't a failure. God would use him to bring judgment on Jezebel and the prophets of Baal. And yet it wouldn't all be doom and gloom for Elijah.

[28 : 36] Look at verse 18. God had reserved a remnant, a chosen few, 7,000, possibly a symbolic number, who'd remained faithful to him.

What a spur that must have been for Elijah to begin afresh with renewed confidence. All was not lost after all. William Wilberforce didn't give up in the end.

He kept going. He actually did say because of the words, not of God on a mountain, but of his friend John Newton in a letter. It's a great letter. Do read it all at some point.

Newton wrote to him, you have no claim to my pity. Like God with Elijah, he wouldn't let Wilberforce indulge in self-pity. Because I believe you are the Lord's servant and are in the post which he has assigned you.

I know that he who called you to it can afford you strength according to your day and I trust he will, for he is faithful to his promise. Wilberforce also needed to know God's purposes hadn't failed.

[29 : 47] God was still with him and had put him in parliament. And 11 years later at his 12th attempt he succeeded in his goal of abolishing the slave trade just as Elijah was promised his labours wouldn't be in vain.

You see God's promises are guaranteed and what an encouragement that is for us when we're discouraged. Even when some reject the gospel there'll also be those who respond by turning back to the God of Israel in repentance and faith.

God's word brings salvation as well as judgment. And I think that's a great motivation to keep going in serving him. Shall I lead us in prayer?

We thank you our father that your faithfulness endures. We thank you that even when it appears like things are not going well and our ministry might feel like a failure that we can be sure that you are still with us.

And we thank you that your methods don't change that even at such times the simple word of the gospel that you've given us is still all that we need to continue to serve you.

[31 : 05] And so we pray that you'd help us to remember those things and to remember that because your purposes are guaranteed we are ultimately on the winning side and that you will work out your purpose of salvation as well as judgment.

We ask it all in Jesus' name. Amen.