

Elijah on Mt Sinai

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[0 : 00] This is the AM service on the 30th of August 1998. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled Elijah on Mount Sinai and is from 1 Kings chapter 19 verses 1 to 21. Almighty God we pray that you will move powerfully in this place as you write your word on our hearts. For Jesus' sake. Amen. As I said at the beginning we're preaching through the prophet Elijah.

You may like to have open the Bibles at page 284 so that you can follow this chapter, chapter 19 of 1 Kings. More and more people today suffer from depression.

More and more antidepressants are being prescribed by doctors. More and more depressed young people are attempting or taking their lives.

[1 : 18] More and more people finish up their working life so stressed and depressed that their life expectancy is measured in months not years.

And to top it all off it still seems that depression is a social stigma, something of which to be ashamed or embarrassed. And doubly so for the Christian.

Doubly so because for many Christians they think that Christians ought never to be depressed.

That depression is a sign of lack of faith. A sign of the loss of Christ's victory in our life.

A sign of failure as a Christian. But the truth is that all of us, whether Christian or not, are vulnerable to depression. And even Christian leaders, even powerful Christian leaders, suffer from depression. Great preachers of the last century like Spurgeon were depressed. Great missionaries of the last century like Brainerd were depressed. And even centuries before that, the great servant of God, the great prophet, Elijah, was depressed.

[2 : 31] Elijah, a man just like us. It's hard to believe that it's the same man in this chapter whom we saw last week with great courage and great power call down God's fire from heaven on the sacrifice on the top of Mount Carmel and then put to death the prophets of Baal who worshipped the idols.

Is it the same man? Can it be the same man? So soon, within hours or just a few days after that great success on Carmel, who's now in the pits of despair and fleeing for his life.

But Elijah's depressed. He shows many of the symptoms. We have to be careful because some commentators and preachers on this passage just treat it as a psychological handbook.

Elijah is depressed and God tells us how to deal with depression. He feeds him. He gives him sleep. He talks to him and then he gives him a new job to go on with, to keep him busy. But this chapter is in the end about God, not about depression nor about psychology.

It is about the character and nature and power of God. There are several triggers for depression.

[3 : 48] Some people have a clinical depression, a chemical imbalance in their life. Sometimes it's drug or alcohol-impaired, other times not. Elijah doesn't seem to fit that category.

For others, they seem to have a temperament that is prone to depression, prone to pessimism, often feeling downcast without explanation. Elijah doesn't seem to reflect that sort of category either.

For other people, and perhaps for the majority, depression is caused by circumstance, a major crisis, disappointment, loss or grief or shock.

And the fourth category is that many times people are depressed through fatigue, exhaustion, stress or pressure. Elijah seems to reflect those latter two categories.

He's just come from the elation of the successful sacrifice and the fire from heaven on the top of Mount Carmel. A great, splendid display of Elijah's faith in a powerful God who has acted and heard that prayer and brought fire from heaven on his sacrifice.

[5 : 02] And we are never more vulnerable to depression than after a high, after a success, after the elation of a victory or a high time. How many of us get depressed immediately coming home from holidays or coming home from a camp or coming home from some exciting event and all of a sudden our world returns to reality and we feel the pangs of despair and depression?

That seems to be part of what's happening to Elijah perhaps. Especially as he realised that this great success was perhaps not so great after all as we'll see. But also perhaps he's suffering from tiredness.

He's had a busy few days. He's been striving against the prophets of Baal and then we read at the very end of the last chapter that he runs all the way in the spirit of God admittedly before Ahab's chariot to Jezreel.

He's been exerting himself under pressure, under stress, one man against many in the sight of the whole nation. And moreover, at the beginning of this chapter he ends up on his own.

Despair and depression so often seek solitude but solitude does nothing but exacerbate the depression. What's caused the depression also it seems is the threat to his life from the queen, Jezebel.

[6 : 23] Never was there a worse or more evil woman in the Bible than Jezebel. And she wasn't persuaded by the fire from heaven. The nation seemed to acknowledge that God was God when this fire came and consumed Elijah's sacrifice and the Baal gods, the false gods, the idols seemed to be silent in their heaven.

The king it seems acknowledged that God was God but his queen didn't. Not a bit of it. And she sent a messenger to Elijah to tell him that his life was under threat.

Why she didn't just go and kill him we don't know. Maybe it was calling his bluff. Now Elijah of the last chapter we might have expected to front up to her and speak boldly to this messenger Elijah but not this Elijah.

Not after his success. Not in his despair. He flees for his life. And we're told in verse 3 that he flees south. He came to a town called Beersheba which is in the country of Judah.

Judah and Israel, Israel in the north which is where Elijah was from. We're talking about the 9th century BC was under this bad Ahab and Jezebel king and queen. He's fled out of that country through the southern neighbour Judah to the very south of that nation.

[7 : 32] Sort of to the Wilson's promontory of Judah if you like. To Beersheba. All that lies beyond that is just desert. The Sinai Peninsula desert. And he comes to Beersheba but not only there he leaves his servant there and then by himself alone he heads off for another day's journey into the wilderness and sits under a solitary tree.

You can picture it can't you? Just a sweep of sand dunes and desert and one tree and one Elijah all on his little lonesome. Israel's superhero of the previous chapter is still Israel's most wanted man. There's a bit of irony in this because the reason he's fleeing is to escape being killed by Jezebel. But when he gets to where he is here by this tree he says in verse 4 it is enough.

Now oh Lord take away my life for I'm no better than my ancestors. Take away my life. He's actually fleeing for his life. But it seems in his fleeing he's given up hope and he asks God to take his life. I'm no better than my ancestors he says. Maybe I'm no better because they're dead and I may as well be dead or I'm no better than them because they also failed to reform the nation to bring it back to spiritual truth and I have failed as well.

[8 : 58] He lies down and he sleeps at the beginning of verse 5. One of the things depressed people need is sleep. Shakespeare acknowledged that when he describes sleep as sore labours bath the balm of hurt minds.

The difficult issue of this passage is is Elijah doing the right thing or the wrong thing? And the people who write about Elijah seem divided on this point.

Some say that Elijah is in the wrong. That he's fleeing from God. He's rejecting what God has told him to do and he's heading as far away from God as he can possibly get.

But there are others who give more acknowledgement to Elijah's depression. What he's gone through. Certainly the chapter seems to have a little bit of tension about how God responds to Elijah because he doesn't just say snap out of it Elijah.

Come on you know that I'm God. Go and fight Jezebel. But nonetheless the chapter does have a little bit of mild rebuke. But the way that God first responds to Elijah is full of tenderness and compassion.

[10:10] Full of gentleness and grace. God deals touchingly with Elijah. He sends him a messenger while he's asleep in verse 5 under this tree.

It says here an angel but literally it's just a messenger. We don't know who this messenger is at first and presumably Elijah wouldn't have known where he's from. He's just had a messenger from the queen to try and kill him and now another messenger comes.

But this time this messenger says to him get up and eat. What am I going to get up and eat? I mean there's no McDonald's in the desert. But of course God has provided food.

As he'd done earlier on in Elijah's life as we saw two weeks ago. The God of great power is the God who provides food miraculously even in a desert and famine and drought. And he provides food.

Notice what verse 6 says. Elijah looked and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. Notice where food was. At his head. Not like hospital nurses who put it on a little trolley at the foot of the bed and say have a nice meal.

[11:11] And you're all bound up and stretched and sort of in traction and you've got stitches across here and you think yes I'd like to have a nice meal but I can't reach it. No God's not like a hospital nurse.

God's kind. He places the food by his head just where he needs it. Minimum energy to expend. And Elijah eats and he goes back to sleep.

Notice how tenderly God is dealing with him here. Giving him food, allowing him sleep. Same thing happens in verse 7. This time we're told it is an angel of the Lord.

And this angel again provides food. Elijah again eats. But this time he doesn't go back to sleep.

Notice what the angel says to him in verse 7. Get up and eat otherwise the journey will be too much for you.

What journey? Elijah's come here to die. Or am I going on a holiday? No, not a bit of it. God has a journey in mind for Elijah. He's not told there where this journey will be.

[12:08] Maybe God's going to send him back to Jezreel, back to the queen, back to confront her and her pagan idolatry. But the next verse tells us that Elijah got up, ate, drank and then he went in the strength of that food for 40 days and 40 nights to Horeb, the Mount of God.

Now some people who try to read into this chapter that Elijah is all the time doing the wrong thing and being rebuked by God suggests that really what God is saying about a journey is well you've got to go back to the queen.

But Elijah actually decides no I'm not, I'm heading in the opposite direction down into the desert. But I think actually that this chapter suggests that Elijah is going where God is leading and God is leading him down further into the desert, further away from the king and queen who are so evil and out to get him to Horeb, called here the Mount of God.

I think he leads him here to teach him an important lesson. You see Horeb is also called Sinai. It's a significant place in the Old Testament.

Sinai is the place where 600 years before God had appeared with fire and thunder and earthquakes and loud noises and cloud from heaven and there Moses who was then leading the people of Israel was given the Ten Commandments and the rest of the Old Testament law.

[13:30] there God had revealed himself 600 years before in Old Testament history and there for 40 days and 40 nights Moses was on the mountain.

Notice how long it takes Elijah to get there, 40 days and 40 nights. It's a long time to do that journey. You should be able to do it in about two weeks. But 40 days and 40 nights is meant to draw Elijah's attention and our attention to the place that he's going and its significance in Israel's history.

In fact verse 9 says the same because literally it says and at that place he came to the cave. What cave? The cave that Moses was in. Because 600 years before when Moses was on the mountain he was in a cave in a cleft of the rock and there he saw the glory of God pass by him.

It's to the same place, the same cave that Elijah is taken and led by God to teach him a lesson. Not to say you've been a bad boy Elijah but to teach him a lesson, a deeper lesson about the nature and power of God.

Elijah gets there, he sleeps and the next morning God asks him a question. Second half of verse 9, what are you doing here Elijah?

[14:49] Not a question of rebuke. What are you doing here Elijah? You shouldn't be here, you should be way up by the queen. No, not that sort of question. What are you doing here? What's the significance of here, this place, this mountain, this cave?

Why have I brought you here Elijah? Elijah's response in verse 10 is to say that I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars and killed your prophets with the sword.

I alone am left and they are seeking my life to take it away. Maybe there's some self-pity in that, maybe some exaggeration and self-justification.

He is after all depressed and depressed people exaggerate and don't quite see the right perception on things because we know that he's not the only one left. We know there are other prophets and so on.

God's response to Elijah's answer is famous. He sends him four things. He tells him to go and stand outside the cave and then firstly there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord.

[15:59] This is the sort of wind that definitely demonstrates the power of God. It's not just sort of a gentle spring breeze. The sort of wind that blows mountains down is terrifying, tornado, hurricane type wind.

Surely God's in this wind but no, the Lord was not in the wind. And then God sent an earthquake. Again a fairly disturbing sort of thing. And again the analysis is made and the Lord was not in the earthquake. And then thirdly a fire. Just like the fire that had come down from on top of Mount Carmel in the previous chapter and consumed not only the sacrifice but the wood and the rocks and the water as well.

But the Lord was not in the fire. And then fourthly marked contrast to the other three. After the fire a sound of sheer silence.

What's going on here? What are these things about? Often they're interpreted as just psychological things that God is just giving Elijah a calmness, a peace within him.

[17:11] But no actually he's teaching him about God. He's teaching Elijah about himself. You see when it says that God is not in the fire, the earthquake and the wind, it is saying something about the means by which God communicates himself.

God controls those things. God sends those things and he does so at different points in the Bible and the fire we've already seen in last week's chapter. But God is bigger than those things.

He's not in them in that they don't communicate what God is about. He's not like the Baals, the false gods and idols that the people of Israel had turned to. Their Baal in a sense would have been in the fire.

That's about the sum total of him. But God's bigger than that. It reminds us that God is not in nature in a pantheistic sort of way as though God's in the tree out there, let's go and hug a tree because God's in it.

Not a bit of it. But it's saying something bigger about God. The earthquake, the wind, the fire are limited in their ability to communicate what God is like.

[18:13] Not to say that he doesn't send them and control them, but he's not in them. He isn't them. We saw that even last week when Elijah didn't just pray for the fire to come but prayed that the people would understand what it meant.

You see, a fire, an earthquake, a wind, in the end they're sort of dumb. They don't quite tell us about God. They can be interpreted in different ways. A fire on Mount Carmel, we might all say, well, obviously God sent it, but Queen Jezebel didn't think so.

In the end, you see, it doesn't communicate God clearly and therefore it doesn't communicate God powerfully either. By contrast to the earthquake, the wind, the fire, what Elijah hears is this sound of sheer silence.

It's a gentle whisper, a little word. Contrast to the loud noise, it's going to be silent no matter how loud the word is spoken. But what he hears is God speaking, his word.

And God is in that. God communicates in his word. That's why Elijah has been brought by God to Mount Sinai, to learn that very thing about the nature of God and what's key and what's important.

[19:36] Back in Moses' day, there was fire, there was cloud, there was sounds of trumpets and loud noise and smoke and so on on Mount Sinai. It all demonstrated that God was there. But what did Moses come down the mountain with?

He didn't come down with a little bit of fire in his pocket or a bit of an earthquake. He came down with two tablets of stone on which were written God's word, the very word that the whole nation had heard.

That's what's important. Not the fire, the quake and the wind, but the word of God. And that's what matters for Elijah. That's what he's being taught here by God.

That in the end, the key to God's presence and power is his word, not fire, quake or wind. Jesus said as much as well. He condemned his own people by calling them a perverse and wicked generation who seek signs, miracles, demonstrations of power.

But he says, but my words are life and spirit and power. There's a bit more to it as well. Because the last time that anybody was up Mount Sinai in the Old Testament was Moses.

[20 : 46] But Moses actually went up twice. The second time he went up was because his people, the Israelites, had broken the covenant laws. They'd made an idol, a golden calf and bowed down and worshipped it.

They'd sinned and sinned badly. So Moses goes up the mountain again to plead for the nation in their sin and to plead with God.

And notice what Elijah says about why are you here? I'm here because Israel broke the covenant. Exactly the same reason Moses went up the mountain the second time, the last time anybody went up the mountain is why Elijah's here because Israel has broken the covenant.

They're sinners. Elijah is there because the nation is idolatrous and apostate. You see the fire that came down on Mount Carmel last week is not a lasting victory for God over Israel.

They acknowledge, oh yes, Yahweh is God. Clearly this fire demonstrates it. But there's no obedience. There's no reform in their life. It seems they've just carried on with their idolatry and their apostasy.

[21 : 54] The power of God is manifest by his word. And seen when people respond to that with obedience, faith and repentance. The fire on Carmel demonstrated the presence of God but it didn't reform the nation.

That's why Elijah can still say, your people are breaking the covenant. They haven't changed. The fire hasn't done it. It's impotent to do it in the end.

It is God's word that does that as lives are reformed under it. What you see God is teaching Elijah here is, Elijah, you haven't failed.

You brought fire on Carmel. You prayed in faith. I've done that, a miracle to demonstrate that I am God and not Baal. But I have a longer term strategy.

My word of truth is what's needed for this nation, not more fire or earthquakes or wind. Not spectacular miracles or signs. But my word of truth, that people may change under it and be reformed.

[23 : 00] You see, people still seek signs and miracles. People say to me from time to time, oh, I'll believe in God if he sends a miracle. If he heals my friend or does something so dramatic, yes, I'll believe in him. Rubbish.

What's needed is not a miracle, a sign like that, good though they may be, and sometimes God sends them. But it's his word that people need. His word to instill faith and engender obedience to it. And it's the same today. What people need is God's word, not lofty wisdom or eloquence or signs of great power and majesty, but a gentle whisper of the gospel, a quiet word by contrast that leads to faith and life in and through the Lord Jesus Christ.

For God has spoken. His word is power and life. And he calls us to live by it, study it and heed it. But Israel is still apostate, still idolatrous, still rebellious.

Because the fire on Carmel hasn't changed and that's why the task that's given to Elijah is one of judgment. God says to him in verse 15, go return on your way. And three things you are to do.

[24 : 14] You are to anoint Hazael king over Aram. That's modern Syria. That's a foreign king.

What an extraordinary thing for a prophet of God to do, to anoint a foreign king. But the reason he's going to do that is because God is going to use that foreign king to bring judgment on his people because they are breaking the covenant.

And then he's to anoint Jehu, son of Nimshi, to be king over Israel. Now that's a fairly treasonable thing to do. If Elijah's life is under threat by Jezebel now, imagine what it would be like to just walk up into the town and find some person called Jehu and say, you're going to be king over Israel.

If you were the king and queen, you wouldn't like that if somebody came and anointed somebody else. Imagine John Howard being told that a prophet of God has just come and anointed Peter Costello to be the prime minister.

I don't think John Howard would be all that impressed. Well, imagine what Ahab and Jezebel would have felt like. But again, you see, what it is is God's judgment being worked out.

That this dynasty of Ahab and Jezebel will come to naught and God will bring judgment on the nation through Jehu. And then thirdly, he's to anoint his own successor, Elisha. Not because he's failed or something.

[25 : 20] Oh, Elijah, you failed. I'm going to turn to another prophet. Here, here's Elisha. Anoint him. He can do my job. You can't. Not a bit of it. But God has a longer term strategy. Elijah's done his job to announce to the nation that God is God.

But Elisha will have a different job. As his name suggests, the name Elisha is God saves. It points to some final salvation beyond judgment for the people of God.

Indeed, in the end, it points a long way to one who 860 years later comes with, in effect, the same name, God saves. The one whom we know as Jesus, God saves.

The final salvation and victory that God brings the people of this world. And that Jesus is preceded by another Elijah, another forerunner, another one who points ahead, John the Baptist, calling people to repentance and looking forward to final salvation.

The chapter finishes with Elijah going and doing what he's told. Here is a man restored by God's grace and gentleness and tenderness. A man who's now prepared to go even into the lion's den of Jezebel and speak God's word again and do what God commands.

[26 : 41] And to this man, there is perhaps a gentle rebuke because Elijah has said a few times, I'm the only one left. The words of exaggeration of a man in depression.

But now, now that he's restored, God gently says to him, verse 18, oh, in effect, it's, oh, by the way, I will leave 7,000 in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal and every mouth that has not kissed him.

You're not alone, Elijah. I've kept 6,999 others. But notice again how gentle God is in this rebuke. Not, oh, come on, Elijah. Get real. There's lots of other prophets there. Pull yourself together. Snap out of it. None of that. But a gentle, gracious God dealing with a man, a servant of God in his despair and his depression.

This passage teaches us about where the power of God can be found. Not in great miracles primarily, not in fire from heaven as though somehow we could go out and call down fire and to devastate Doncaster and that would prove the power of God.

[27 : 54] The power of God in the end is found in that gentle whisper of his word. Quiet word of the gospel to bring faith in life through Jesus Christ through whom God saves.

That's where we find God's powerful word. That's where this chapter is inviting us to turn. Amen.