

1 Kings 19:9-21

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[0:00] The text we're going to be looking at is the Old Testament reading from the liturgy and the bulletin there from 1 Kings chapter 19. We're sort of firmly situated in sort of the rubble after the split of the kingdom of Solomon.

We've entered into the time of King Ahab, who earlier in the book of 1 Kings is described as the most wicked of all the kings. He had done more evil in the sight of the Lord than all the kings who had gone before him.

He and his wife Jezebel, who's the princess, the queen of the Sidonians, are in charge. And they've sort of plunged Israel into wholesale cultural, religious paganism and idolatry.

They've instituted Baal and Asherah worship among the people of God. The famous account of the defeat of Baal and the Baal prophets at Carmel came in chapter 18 of 1 Kings, where fire fell down upon Elijah's altar and the Baal prophets sort of danced around their altar and Baal was nowhere to be found.

So that's sort of the context of where we find ourselves. You'd think that Jezebel and Ahab would sort of go back. They'd turn to the Lord.

[1:30] All the Baal prophets have been slaughtered. But you can see at the beginning of chapter 19 that Jezebel really just doubles down, calling a curse upon herself if Elijah is not slaughtered like one of the Baal prophets in due course.

That's where we find ourselves. I'd love to say a brief word of prayer yet again as we turn to Scripture here. Our Father in Heaven, we join together in humility, asking that you would soften our hearts, you'd open up our eyes to behold wonderful things in your word.

For Jesus' sake. Amen. Well, it was in the late 18th century where Napoleon I, otherwise known as Napoleon Bonaparte, he launched this French military campaign in Egypt.

But it became clear that the campaign simply did not go according to plan. Napoleon's fleet quickly suffered defeat at the Battle of the Nile. And by the summer of 1799, Napoleon decided to leave 30,000 of his soldiers behind.

He abandoned them and he decided to sail back to France for more favorable political prospects. And in 1 Kings 19, things in Israel simply weren't going the way they were supposed to go.

[3:04] In Elijah's words, the people had forsaken God's covenant. The Lord had just won this decisive battle against Baal on Mount Carmel, but apparently the victory simply hadn't captured the people's hearts.

Because earlier in the chapters I just mentioned, Ahab and Jezebel appear to have regained their toxic stranglehold over Israel's religious life, as Baal worship seems to have prevailed yet again. And now by way of Jezebel's threat in verse 2, Elijah's life is at stake. So readers of this account are tempted, as perhaps they've been before, to wonder if the Lord might just pull a Napoleon.

We're tempted to wonder if he might abandon his salvation campaign and sort of turn to plan B. If he might set sail for a more promising people to save. If he'll finally file for divorce.

We're tempted to wonder whether this most recent setback, this vice grip of Jezebel, this surge of idolatry, whether this might just be the straw that breaks the camel's back in terms of the Lord's patience with them.

[4:17] So with Elijah depressed and then hiding alone in a cave, one wonders whether the Lord might finally just be ready to give up on his saving plan, whether he might just finally be ready to abandon and to reject his people once and for all.

And those are the kinds of questions, I think, that bubble and surface to the top of mind as we come to this text. But thankfully, what we discover is a reassuring answer.

In fact, it's a decisive answer from God. As this text presents three powerful signs that the Lord will never abandon his people.

The Lord will never reject his people, even in the face of idolatry. And the first one, the first sign there in verses 9 to 14, this first sign that he'll never ever abandon his people, even in the face of idolatry, is his repeated kindness toward his zealous but flawed servant.

His repeated kindness toward his zealous but flawed servant. The saying goes that those who fail to learn from history are destined to repeat it. And those who have some familiarity with the ministry of God's first great prophet, Moses, will see history repeating itself here in 1 Kings 19.

[5:38] In fact, there are a number of very explicit parallels between Elijah's encounter with the Lord here on Mount Horeb and Moses' encounter with the Lord on the same mountain in Exodus 32 to 34.

For one thing, the idolatry of God's people is the central concern for both of them. As the people of Israel in Moses' day had replaced the Lord with a golden calf, and here they'd gone after Baal.

So Moses prays for idolatrous Israel on Mount Sinai for 40 days and 40 nights. And Elijah flees to Mount Horeb, verse 8, for the same period of time.

Moses, in Exodus 33, hides behind a cleft of the rock to shield himself from the glory of God, while Elijah hides himself here in a cave, potentially even the same cleft of rock where Moses hid in order to flee from the wrath of Jezebel.

In verse 11, we're told that the Lord passes Elijah by, which is the very same language from the Lord's encounter with Moses. But the key similarity, the key textual parallel, is actually a contrast.

[6:48] It's the difference between how Moses prays on the mountain versus how Elijah prays on the mountain. In Moses' case, the Lord threatened to eliminate the Israelites and sort of start over through him.

He threatened to start over through a plan B to reject Israel and start a new nation through Moses. But what did Moses do? He interceded for them in spite of their guilt, in spite of their idolatry, appealing to the Lord's own promises to save them.

While Elijah, and here's the contrast, perhaps blinded by his pride or sort of clouded by his recent bout of depression or perhaps both, two times in the passage, verses 10 and 14, he boasts of his own zeal for God and he brings complaints of Israel's idolatry before him.

He doesn't pray for Israel, he prays against Israel. Moses says, remember all your promises, Lord. While Elijah says, look at all of Israel's failures, Lord. Three times repeating, verses 10 and 14, they've forsaken your covenant, throwed down your altars, killed your prophets.

And not only that, but he matches this threefold complaint with a threefold claim to be the only faithful one left. You can see it there. He says, I, even I only am left and they threaten my life to take it away.

[8:09] I, I, my. He's the prophet of me, myself, and I. But was it even true? I mean, it's certainly how Elijah felt and perhaps some of you will feel something of this right now, that you might be the only godly one left in your family or in your marriage, in your workplace.

And notice how the Lord doesn't condemn Elijah for feeling this way. In fact, he remains kind to him all along. But we know from the beginning of chapter 18, when Jezebel was trying to kill God's prophets, that Obadiah had hidden 100 of the Lord's faithful prophets in, you guessed it, a cave.

The very same place Elijah finds himself under the very same threat that those other prophets were under. So I do think we need to learn right away by way of application that amidst our zeal, and if you're here in a cold auditorium on a Sunday morning, you do have a zeal for God, or at least you long to have a zeal for God.

But in the midst of our zeal, even amidst something like holy jealousy, the jealousy that Elijah expresses in verses 10 and 14, the kind of holy jealousy that fills our hearts with pain and even anger when people around us turn away from the one true God, even in that place of godly passion, we absolutely have to guard our hearts from pride and self-pity.

We need to guard our hearts from thoughts like no one else knows what it's like to be me. No one else knows what it's like to be the only faithful one. No one appreciates me for my passion and for my jealousy for God.

[10:07] No one else knows what it's like to be the faithful one. Do you ever feel like that? It can be very tempting to sort of spiral into those kinds of thoughts.

Like you're the only one who can ever reach your unbelieving family for Jesus. You're the only one who can, you know, share the gospel faithfully in your workplace.

No one knows what it's like to suffer through the situation that I'm in right now. The Lord doesn't condemn us for having these thoughts. He certainly doesn't condemn Elijah.

But when we're tempted to think this way, I believe this passage calls us to remember that there is somebody who does know what we're going through. Daniel read about this at the beginning of the service.

We have to remember that we have in the Lord Jesus someone who does share in our weaknesses and in our pain. Someone who knows what it's like to be tempted in every way we are, yet without sin. Someone who endured such hostility against himself who for the joy set before him endured the cross so that we might not grow weary to the point of despair and pride, self-pity when we go through our own trials and temptations.

[11:28] But it seemed like Elijah had lost sight of this, so he expects the Lord to sort of turn to plan B. His zeal was commendable to be sure, but his understanding of the situation was incomplete and that's humbling for us because while it can feel like I'm the only one who can share the gospel with so and so or I'm the only one who can reach this person for Jesus, we simply don't have the full picture.

We simply don't know what the Lord is planning. We simply don't know who he might raise up to reach that person in a way that we can't. His zeal was commendable but his understanding of the situation was complete.

He sort of lost sight of the forest for the trees and so he wondered if Israel's clock had run out, whether the Lord is going to hit the restart button. He wondered if God would sort of come down with a new and decisive revelation, a completely different plan of attack.

He wondered perhaps that the fire was going to fall down this time on Israel instead of on the sacrifice. Perhaps a little bit like the disciples wondered when they asked Jesus if they should tell fire to fall down from heaven and consume the people of Jerusalem like he had threatened to do through Moses.

Perhaps the Lord would just start all over again through Elijah. That's not how things go. The Lord simply refuses to pull a Napoleon bone apart.

[12:50] He refuses to leave his people behind to die in the Middle Eastern sands. Which brings us to the extremely perplexing set of events sandwiched between Elijah's two complaints in verses 10 and 14.

In verse 11, the Lord tells Elijah to go out from his cave to stand on the mount before the Lord and behold, the Lord passed by. And there followed three great demonstrations of power that once again remind us of Moses' experiences on Mount Sinai.

Three mighty demonstrations of earth, wind, and fire. But unlike the fires of Sinai or the fires of Carmel, this time and each time, after the great and strong wind and after the earthquake and after the fire, we're told that the Lord was not to be found in any of it.

The emphasis on Mount Carmel had been God's spectacular ways. The emphasis was on this sort of decisive revelation. But not here.

Verse 11, the Lord wasn't in the wind, the Lord wasn't in the earthquake, and the Lord wasn't in the fire, but after the fire, we're told, end of verse 12, that there was the sound of a low whisper.

[14:01] Other translations render this whisper as a gentle breeze or a blowing sound. It was the sound of this thin silence, according to the footnote in the ESV.

It was this still quietness that ironically caught Elijah's attention. verse 13, it was the silence, if you like, that Elijah heard.

And some commentators take this to mean that we sort of have to cultivate this discipline of sacred silence in our lives so that we can open up our minds to God's whisper.

Maybe an aspect of what's going on here. Others say that while tremendous displays of power may be how God occasionally reveals himself, his normative way of speaking is by his voice, by his word, which is certainly true, but I think in this context, I actually think the silence, this gentle breeze, is an emphatic assurance that God isn't going to turn to a different plan.

It's this absence of new revelation. It was a sign that the Lord wasn't about to abandon ship for plan B. You know, perhaps Elijah wanted the Lord to reveal ten new commandments.

[15:19] A new set of marching orders, but instead he hears a low whisper, a thin silence, a gentle breeze, such that the Lord absolutely would not begin again.

He's not going to tear up his salvation blueprints. He wasn't about to turn to a new and more impressive people, or enter into a new, a different covenant with a more impressive group that had it all together, which I think is something, again, we need to consider ourselves because in our zeal, we can slip into thinking that we are all God has going for him.

That because our culture has become sort of thoroughly post-Christian and the moral sensibilities of Canada have sort of eroded underneath our feet, political pendulum has sort of swung in a direction we're uncomfortable with, or the economy is spiraling out of control, we might be tempted to think a little bit like Elijah that God might as well just start over.

Maybe he should just wipe the slate clean. Maybe we think things like, really Lord, the Bible? You know, you expect us to win my unbelieving neighbors or my hardened family members with the message from this dusty old book?

I tried sticking to it, but it's clearly not working. Nobody's listening. Why not just write your message in the clouds? Or sort of just upload a high-definition video experience of Jesus rising again from the dead?

[16:52] Why not come up with a new plan? Why not innovate? Why not try something else? And I think this is the kind of thing that Elijah slipped into thinking. Expecting God to pivot, to decisively reveal himself in a new way because it simply wasn't working.

The old commandments were out of date. It wasn't up to Elijah's standards. But like he has time and time again, just as the Lord was kind to sustain Elijah throughout his ministry at the beaks of ravens at Kareth, with water and cakes at the hand of the widow of Zarephath, with the same sustenance underneath the broom tree, now he shows his kindness again.

To his zealous yet flawed servant. As the whisper sort of calls him just to get back to work. To turn around. To head back into the wilderness. To keep at plan A.

And listen, if you're anything like me, it can feel very tempting to sort of be at your wits end in the Christian life or in the Christian ministry like Elijah.

And if that's the place you find yourself, this text does call us to take note of his repeated kindness toward you. His relentless provision in your life.

[18:17] To let the tangible examples of his provision and kindness in your life and throughout the history of salvation drive you to stay the course. To keep trusting.

Turn again to the ancient word. Turn again to God's thundering revelation at Sinai. to the wonders of Mount Carmel. To the reassuring voice of God on the Mount of Transfiguration concerning his son Jesus.

To the silence after Jesus Christ breathes his last. To his sure promises. To his black and white commandments.

Remember to keep going. To keep praying. To keep sharing the gospel with those around you who don't yet trust in Jesus. Don't lose hope even though idolatry continues. Because that's what he's doing.

He's still committed to saving his people. He'll never abandon them. He'll never reject them. He'll continue in kindness even though we are flawed in our zeal. And everything around us is crumbling into idolatry.

[19:22] Which brings us to the second sign in this passage that shows that the Lord will never abandon his people even in the face of idolatry. Verses 15 to 17 namely the sign of his ongoing determination to eliminate false worship.

His ongoing determination to eliminate false worship. You can see that Elijah repeatedly emphasized his jealousy for the Lord in verses 10 and 14 but it was on Mount Horeb where the Lord reveals to Elijah that he is the jealous one.

Many will know that throughout the scriptures the Lord presents himself as a faithful husband jealous for his adulterous bride. meaning that it breaks his heart to see his people run off with other lovers to devote themselves to other gods like we do and we make sacrifices for things that cost us in our relationship with Jesus.

It breaks the Lord's heart to see people like us devote more of the motivation more of the ambition of our hearts to anything other than him. It breaks his heart when people like us who are called to love the Lord our God with all our heart soul, mind and strength have our thoughts more captivated our time more consumed and our resources more devoted to other loves and other priorities.

And actually we should be reassured by this. It should reassure us that our idolatry actually offends God. Because imagine a husband sort of coming home to his wife after a long day of work and he

heads upstairs to greet her he opens up the bedroom door and he discovers her in bed with another lover.

[21:04] And imagine if his response was like oh excuse me I'm so sorry to interrupt carry on I'll make sure to knock next time and you know why don't you two finish up and I'll go downstairs and prepare some tea and we can all enjoy it together after you're done.

Would that be a loving response? It wouldn't be a loving response at all. A loving husband upon encountering something like this would be filled with anger filled with jealousy filled with rage. In the Ten Commandments the Lord forbade the worship of other gods on the grounds of his jealousy for his people's exclusive allegiance and love. And here we see that he loves his people so much and that he's so dedicated to their good and to the purity of their praise in spite of their repeated insistence on worshiping other gods he'll do whatever it takes to eradicate idolatry from among them and to judge those who push it on them.

And in so doing he plans to exterminate false worship like the parasite that it is. So in verses 15 to 17 he sends Elijah back into the wilderness of Damascus to anoint Hazei as king over Syria and it's sort of fun to imagine a period at the end of that sentence you'd sort of think okay he's going to enter into covenant with the people of Syria he'll ditch Israel but the sentence continues Jehu as king over Israel and Elisha as the prophet succeed him.

This isn't just a list of names and responsibilities it's a reminder that it has always been through the work of prophets priests and kings that the Lord went about accomplishing his saving work among his people and that wasn't about to change in the slightest and God's not so subtle way of driving that home to Elijah was by telling him to appoint a successor whose name Elisha means my God saves so God's salvation campaign wasn't only continuing it was in full force so by calling Elijah to anoint Hazei, Jehu and Elisha he doubles down on using them like axes in his hand to continue to chop away at the rotten tree that stands in the middle of his people namely idolatry and this will lead to the eventual demise of Ahab and Jezebel which he alludes to there in verse 17 when he says that the one who escapes from the sword of Hazei shall Jehu put to death the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elijah put to death and this just shows us it proves to us that the Lord is not the kind of homeowner who discovers that there's asbestos in the house and he just simply leaves it to poison his children he appoints people to contain it and bag it up and dispose of it which is what verse 17 is all about

[24:15] God's idolatrous people on the one hand are on a very very long leash you'll know this if you read your Old Testament and that's because of his mercy but those who plunge them into false worship must be dealt with and we see the Lord's heart through Jesus along these lines when he says whoever causes one of these little ones who believe to sin it would be better for him to have a great millstone tied around his neck and to be drowned in the sea Elijah's time was drawing to a close but the Lord would ensure that Israel would not be left without prophets priests and kings to care for them and to decisively judge those who push idolatry on them by way of extermination and we should be assured as Jesus says that false prophets and deceivers they're not going to be let off the hook either and finally we learn that the Lord will never abandon or reject his people even in the face of idolatry by way of his gracious preservation of a faithful remnant his gracious preservation of a faithful remnant verses 18 to 21

I'll never forget when one of my best friends his name was Ben had convinced himself that he committed the unforgivable sin to the point of refusing for months to eat or drink or sleep which led him to losing about 100 pounds he grew a beard down past his waist he ended up in a psych ward twice and I went on a special retreat with him I served as an advocate for him in the hospital I visited him in his home and I remember trying to minister to him taking him to verses like John 6:37 it was actually my favorite one to take him to over and over again where Jesus assures everyone who would come to him that he will never ever cast them out nothing worked nothing helped so I started to lose hope because I think deep down I was convinced that if I couldn't reach him who could but one sure enough one day Ben calls me he had been released from the psych ward and not only that but he started working again so I asked him what did it and he said well Tony came to visit me and through tears I said well what did

Tony say and he was like he shared with me John 6:37 which made me realize that I wasn't unforgivable and while I was certainly ecstatic that my friend was liberated my pride was certainly heard at the same time and in Elijah's zeal he's repeatedly convinced that he's the only faithful prophet left like I was prone to be in my ministry with Ben but the Lord humbles his servant here in

verse 18 as he raises up Elijah's faithful replacements!

promising to gather 7,000 prophets in Israel who have not bowed to Baal nor given him their idolatrous kiss! I read this week in the ancient Babylonian myth known as the Enuma Elish the tribunal of gods are sort of depicted as kissing the feet of Marduk the chief deity of Babylon because doing so was the very common act of submission offered to both kings and gods in the ancient world and it's safe to say there was a lot of idol kissing going on in the time of Jezebel but here the Lord assures Elijah verse 18 that he will keep for himself 7,000 in Israel 7,000 the perfect number who have not bowed down to kiss Baal at the whim and fancy of Ahab and Jezebel a sure sign that the Lord has not and never would abandon his people even in the face of idolatry and my friends you and I like this faithful remnant in Elijah's day in our own time and place you and I need to be the kinds of people who are willing to take a stand we need to be willing to establish this baseline pattern of obedience and abstinence from things that express allegiance to the pagan deities of our own day it's hard work we need to refuse to sacrifice our lives to sexual and individual autonomy to the whims and fancies of financial freedom and power the kinds of things our culture says you have to have in order to be okay can't bow down to these things even though the world says we have to have them we need them in order to be happy and is it not easy for that to sort of creep into our consciences and our desires others and if we refuse the Lord will raise up others to take a stand with us we won't be alone and he'll reassure us that there's a long tradition of faithful workers who came before us there's a faithful remnant among us who will take a stand with us and there will be a faithful number who he will continue to raise up after we're gone and sure enough even as that's what the church is all about today

God's appointed successor to Elijah verse 20 he might kiss his mom and dad before joining Elijah in the ministry but he's never going to be one to kiss the feet of Baal Elijah was among the Lord's 7,000 another sure sign of him continuing to stick with his sinful people and it's very interesting that verse 18 is cited in the book of Romans and chapter 11 along these lines because in Paul's day there was a very similar concern a similar concern to Elijah's day a similar concern that might bubble up in your hearts that the Lord might have just rejected and abandoned his people that he was starting over again with salvation plan B perhaps some in Rome have been asking what Elijah was likely asking here at the beginning of Romans 11 has God finally rejected his people has he finally abandoned them but Paul emphatically puts that concern to bed when he says no way by no means

[31:12] God hasn't rejected his people and he never will after all how did God reply to Elijah I've kept for myself 7,000 who have not bowed the knee to Baal and so too at this present time there is a remnant chosen by grace and it was the Lord Jesus Christ who assured his disciples the faithful few who had been hiding in the dark for fear of their lives thinking that the crucifixion of Jesus was the fatal blow to their hopes he rose again and assured them once and for all that the gates of hell would never prevail against his church but it can be tempting for us to sort of look at the financial world or the entertainment world or the political world and wonder if the church even stands a chance we can slip into thinking like maybe we're too weak maybe we're too fickle maybe we're too irrelevant in the eyes of the culture for the Lord to continue to work in and through us to achieve his purposes this side of eternity but that's exactly what he intends to do look he chose an obscure farm boy in Elisha to succeed the great and zealous Elijah he chose him to represent this faithful remnant in his day to prove that he has not rejected his people that he hasn't abandoned them to suffer in the sand like Napoleon left his soldiers to do in Egypt and then he decides to choose 12 bumbling disciples to commission with the worldwide task of discipleship and now he's sticking with us what a help it is to know he's not going to turn to another more impressive group he's a

God of grace a God who fulfills his promises the God who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead the God who sent forth his spirit to equip the church with gifts and teachers with clear marching orders until Christ comes again the idolatry of first Kings 18 brought Elijah here in first Kings 19 to the brink it made him think that he was all God had going for him and maybe you're tempted yet again to think something similar and perhaps God has rejected his people maybe the expiration date on God's plans for Canada has expired and because of that I think the temptation for Christians sometimes is sort of to just look inward to sort of white knuckle it pull our pull up our bootstraps self-reliance or to isolation from the culture just clinging to the way things used to be become proud of our own church's faithfulness amidst a world that's rejected God but that is just not the tune of the gospel it's not the tune that I hear from the gospel I mean

Elijah was convinced that he was the be-all end-all the only one the only faithful one left but it turns out that he wasn't all God had going for him he was just one in a long list of prophets leading to the Lord Jesus Christ himself the prophet the word of God who in his sinless zeal did whatever it took to free his people from idolatry and sin even if it meant going to the cross and then he rose again to prove once and for all that God will never ever abandon his people even in the face of idolatry you