

1 Kings 19

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 0 0] Well, at this point, I want to encourage everyone to take out the Bibles in front of them. We've got into bad Zoom habits of not picking up our Bibles.

Every Bible in this building is COVID-free. It's been specially treated. So it's good to follow along. It's usually good to follow along in case the minister goes off track. And there's no promise that he'll stay on track.

But we're in 1 Kings 19, page 301. And because it's such a long passage and there's so much in it, I won't have a lot of time to read the text and say your eyes will be better than mine to check it out. This has to be one of the most famous and fabulous and favorite passages in the Old Testament. Here God's prophet Elijah goes from the prophetic triumph of chapter 18 on Carmel to personal collapse and the edge of a breakdown in chapter 19.

It's wonderful, really, for all those of us who feel very weak. It's a very human and divine chapter together. Couldn't have a stronger contrast between last week and this week.

[1 : 1 0] In chapter 18, as Will told the children, and I just, every time I get up to preach, I feel like the children's ministry steals the punch.

You know what I mean? I'm hoping this would be fresh. Anyway. Here he is on the Mount of Carmel, defying the hundreds of prophets and the king. And he brings the fire and rain from heaven.

The fire first and then the rain and nothing can stand before him. Massive public vindication and success. Chapter 19. Afraid for his life. Runs away. God had not told him to run away.

In chapter 17 and chapter 18, they both begin with the word of the Lord coming to Elijah, telling him where to go. Chapter 19. There's no word from the Lord. It's only the word of Queen Jezebel. And he runs 175 miles south of Jezreel to Beersheba, which is out of Israel and down the bottom of Judah.

And then another 400 kilometers down to Mount Sinai. And he leaves his servant in Beersheba because he thinks his ministry is over. I'm out of here.

[2 : 1 8] And in verse 4, when he first speaks, it's a prayer to God. Take my life, he says. Not like take my life and let it be. The hymn of dedication. This is take my life. I'm no better than my father's.

Not sure who told him he was. He's exhausted, disillusioned, depressed, in despair, frustrated, terrified, close to breakdown.

And the old commentators on Elijah can't quite believe this is true. You know, they bend the story so he's still a hero. They describe this as a strategic retreat.

Time to get away for a little while to, you know, a bit of a refresher in the wilderness. Only they can't explain why twice on Sinai God says to him, what are you doing here, Elijah?

The newer commentators, it'll come as no surprise to you whatsoever, make it all about psychology. This is a passage about how to avoid depression. Or how to get through a breakdown and back to victory, back to the mountaintop.

[3 : 2 1] Some modern commentators even treat Elijah with sarcasm and contempt. Pull yourself together, man. I find it impossible not to be sympathetic with Elijah.

And we've got to be careful not to read our experiences onto him, particularly because the New Testament book of James tells us that Elijah was a man with a nature like ours.

So he wasn't a superhero above us, nor is he some weakling below us. But he has exactly the same human nature that we have. And so we need to pay careful attention to the text, which I'm going to try to do, which is why I want you to have your Bibles out.

And I'm going to ask two questions. Number one, why does Elijah run? And number two, what does God do? How does God respond? We'll spend most of the time on the second one. Number one,

why does Elijah run?

Now, I just got to say, don't you love how honest and realistic the Bible is? And I think this is one of the reasons why we need narrative so much.

[4 : 23] Because you may come one day to the same point as Elijah. You want to be finished serving God. You've had enough as well. And you turn here and you find this is the experience of a true man of God to whom God gave a very difficult ministry.

Right from the start, Elijah's role has been to declare judgment. Remember, first time he appears before Ahab, he declares, because you've openly rejected the God, the Lord of hosts in favor of the idol Baal.

And God is going to turn off the rain and dew. It's not going to rain. There's going to be drought for three and a half years. And I don't think that would have been an easy word for Elijah. He loves his country.

He loves the Holy Land. He's bringing economic calamity and collapse on the whole land. And no sooner does he say it than God says, you need to go into hiding. First into the wilderness, then over to Barlesville with a widow there.

It's a hard ministry for Elijah. And I think it's one of the things that most deeply distressed Jesus himself. The way the prophets that God sent to his people were treated by the authorities in Israel.

[5 : 36] Sent by God to turn his people back to him, to warn them of judgment, to turn them back. And no one felt the weight of judgment more than Jesus did.

And no one's more transparent about the reality of judgment than Jesus was. And it remains today such an unpopular ministry. And there are very few church leaders today who have the courage to warn about judgment.

And if the prophets are any indication, the prophets were treated viciously and violently, and it made Jesus weep. And then we come to chapter 18 last week, and for the first time in Elijah's ministry, it all changes.

He comes out of hiding with the word of God. He calls the Carmel contest between God, the Lord, and Baal, with the 450 prophets of Baal, and all the people turn up.

And Elijah takes all the water that's left over from the drought, I'm exaggerating slightly, and pours it over the altar and the sacrifice and the wood. And he prays that all the people there would hear and know that he is God.

[6 : 41] And God answers in the most spectacular way. The fire falls down from heaven and consumes the sacrifice, rocks and all. And the people all turn and they say that the Lord hears God.

The Lord hears God. It's like revival has broken out. And if that's not good enough, with Baal defeated and the prophets killed, Elijah finally gets to preach some good news.

Rain is coming. Goes to the king, get ready, rain is coming. And suddenly his ministry is super popular. He has the whole nation at his feet. He has the official ear of the king.

And when rain does come, Elijah himself runs before King Ahab's chariot all the way from Carmel to Jezreel. We read with the power of the Lord resting on him. Everything seems to have changed.

The ministry's gone positive. Apostasy looks like it's in reverse. Israel look like they're listening to the word of the Lord. Even Ahab seems to do what Elijah says.

[7 : 39] And then we come to chapter 19, verse 1. And Ahab tells Jezebel about the obvious power of God at Carmel. And you expect her to say in verse 2, Oh, I've been so wrong about Baal.

I've been a fool. Can God forgive me? No, she does just the opposite. Verse 2. Just as Elijah gets the chance to preach some good news, far from accepting the evidence of the mighty miracle at Carmel, Jezebel doubles down on her gods and she issues a death warrant for Elijah.

She is completely unmoved, unchanged, unyielding. And in a moment, Elijah's success becomes failure.

In verse 3, he's terrified and he runs. And of course, we learn that open and spectacular miracles like God's fire at Carmel, they remind us that we love the spectacular, but they don't always have the effect of faith on those who see them.

In fact, if you track through Jesus' miracles in the New Testament, sometimes they produce faith, but mostly they produce hatred, hostility and rejection.

[8 : 58] Because, of course, it has to do with the posture of heart toward God. Either I'm God or God is God. And if I'm determined to play God like Jezebel was, no amount of evidence is going to change my mind.

It's better to threaten the messenger. I must say, I'm sometimes tempted that if only I could have a bit of fire from heaven, everything would go a little more smoothly.

And there were particular times that I thought of that. I remember going to a clergy event a number of years ago for evangelical clergy, and the speaker got up and said, what we need to do in ministry is we need to find the thermals of the Holy Spirit, you know, the wind patterns that the birds ride on? We need to find what the Holy Spirit is doing, and then we just ride that thermal, and ministry will be effortless. So disheartening. And I'm so glad Jesus' view of ministry was not that view, nor is the Bible's.

And the fact that Elijah collapses in front of this threat from Jezebel shows just how brave he has been all along, and how hard the ministry was for him.

[10:05] And he goes to the desert after quitting the ministry. In verse 4, he says, praise this, I have had absolutely enough. I cannot take any more.

He says, Lord, right now, take away my life. I'm no better than my father's. And I should say, he doesn't see himself free to commit suicide.

The whole idea that it's my life, I can do with it what I want, is a modern idea. It's not a Bible idea. Elijah knows that his life is a gift from God, even though it's incredibly difficult.

However, Elijah would rather God take his life away than Jezebel. But whatever happens, I am through. I'm done. It's over. I've got nothing left. I've come to an end.

Question 2. What does God do? God does three things. He treats Elijah with grace. Then he treats Elijah with truth.

[11:05] And then he puts him back on the track. So let's look at those three things together. And first is the grace. And this I'm just tracking verses 4 to 8 here.

And what God does is, you see, God's heavenly care for the very human prophet here. Elijah prays for death, and God gives him the priceless gift of sleep instead.

And as he does with all his broken people, God takes care of his human needs. And it's so tender. It's so full of grace. God doesn't give Elijah a scolding.

You know, back up there. There's no hint of a challenge until we get to verse 9. He's much gentler on Elijah than the commentators are, and he's much gentler on Elijah than Elijah is.

Elijah is exhausted and overwhelmed and depressed and crushed. He's fallen down a hole. He's lost all perspective. And now for the third time in as many chapters, God provides for his physical needs by supernatural intervention, not by ravens or by widows, but now by an angel who comes down and bakes a piece of hot bread on hot stones.

[12:20] I don't know how the angel did that. And brings a jar of water. And he gently wakes Elijah, gives him to eat and drink, and he does it again. Elijah goes back to sleep, and then he repeats the action. And in verse 7, even though Elijah is heading in the wrong direction, on an unsanctioned journey, feeling very sorry for himself, the angel prepares him for the 40-day, 40-night journey, all the way down to Mount Horeb, the Mount of God, which is Mount, which is Sinai.

All the way down the Sinai Peninsula. Because the Lord knows we are but dust. He made us body and soul. And sometimes it's we who need to remember that we're human and weak.

And sometimes we need to learn how to enjoy the grace of God to us. And it's lovely here, because God deals with Elijah's physical troubles before he addresses his spiritual troubles.

However, all the food and rest and sleep in the world is not going to satisfy Elijah's heart or change his heart to return to the path God has for him.

So the first thing God does is treat him with grace. The second thing is he gives him truth. Verse 9 to...

[13:40] 18. 14, let's say. This is an amazing section. Very personal.

Just God and the prophet. This is not about the word that Elijah has to preach to others. This is about the word that Elijah has to hear and accept and obey. So, Elijah heads to Mount Sinai, to the mountain of God.

Verse 9. To the cave. It's not a cave. It's the cave. And I think it's likely we're meant to see it's the cave where God passed in front of Moses and revealed his name and glory.

You remember? The Lord, the Lord, and God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. Because it was at Mount Sinai that Israel was allowed to see the fire and the earthquake and the wind and to hear the word of God itself audibly in spectacular fashion.

It's where the people of Israel began and Elijah wants to go down there to have God pass by him again to have a sort of a restart. And God gives him fireworks in spades, but it's not what you think. [14:49] It doesn't work quite the same way. And if you look at the text, the word of the Lord does come to Elijah in this section, not in the wind or the fire, but in verse 9 and verse 13, both times with exactly the same words.

What are you doing here? Once before the fireworks, once after the fireworks, and before and after, Elijah's answers are completely and exactly the same word for word.

Verse 9, the word of the Lord demands the truth from Elijah. What are you doing here? Why have you come to this particular place?

And look at his answer in verse 10, which is repeated later. I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. True? True. Absolutely true.

The people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars. True? Absolutely true. Killed your prophets with the sword. And I, even I only am left. True? No, it's completely untrue.

[15:53] Remember back in chapter 18, verse 13? Obadiah, the Ahab's treasurer, had hidden at least 100 prophets away in caves and feeding them regularly. They seek my life to take it away.

Well, Jezebel, he's lost perspective. You can understand why. It's completely understandable. You know, the churches have been destroyed.

Apostasy has taken the heart of the rulers of God's people. Lord, can you see how bad things are? I've been doing my best out there. I've done everything you've asked me to do.

I've spoken every word that you've spoken, but nothing seems to really change. It's still falling apart. Oh, he forgets to mention the fire and the rain and the miraculous intervention and the raising of the boy back to life.

And although he doesn't specifically ask this, God knows exactly what he's asking, so the Lord passes by. That's the phrase for what God did on the mountain with Moses. Only this time it's different.

[16:54] As God passes by, there is a supernaturally strong wind. It's so strong it tears the mountain apart, rips rocks open. The Lord is not in the wind.

Then there's an earthquake, just like at Moses' time. The Lord is not in the earthquake. Then there's fire, just like Sinai and just like Carmel. The Lord is not in the fire.

Then in verse 12, after all three, our version says, the sound of a low whisper, fire, which is not a very helpful translation. The old King James calls it the still small voice.

If you look down, if your eyes are good enough and you've got enough light on the text, there's a little footnote there. It says, a sound, a thin silence, which is more literal. It's the sound of sheer silence.

And there are a lot of people who've built a whole spirituality out of this almost untranslatable expression. A spirituality of silence, solitude and stillness.

[18:00] They believe God must be in this silence because he's not in the other three. And there are a lot of Christian books teaching based on this idea, you know, wordless prayer is better than prayer in words, that we need to have techniques to find a way to let our thoughts fall away and just focus on one syllable and enter the silence of God.

And I think it's all completely understandable because our lives are so full of noise, phones and alarms and reminders and words and demands.

We could all do with a bit of silence, I reckon. And it's impossible to be dogmatic on it. But in the Bible, the silence of God is not a good thing that you should want.

In the Bible, God's silence always means judgment. So in Psalm 83, it says, O God, do not keep silence. Do not hold your peace or be still, O God.

And I think this takes us a bit deeper into what's really going on here. It's not that God gives some new revelation in the quake, wind, fire or silence.

[19:10] We know he's not given a new revelation because immediately after, he asks exactly the same question and Elijah gives the same answer. There's no change, no new word, no revelation.

The wind and the quake and the fire and the silence haven't given Elijah any answers to Elijah's questions and they haven't brought him any closer to God. But each of those four elements speak of God's judgment and God's holiness against sin.

And this is exactly what Elijah is struggling with. In fact, it takes us to the central tension of the gospel. The fact that God is abounding in steadfast love and mercy and that he is holy and stands

against sin.

That is the central tension of the Christian faith. That the Lord, who is full of grace and kindness, also is the God who will exercise wrath against sin.

And the tension leads us straight to the cross, of course. But the fact that God is not in those four things, wind, quake, and even silence, I think takes us to this place of saying God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked.

[20 : 31] And the judgment is, as Isaiah says, it's his strange work. That God's plan has always been to bring a people to himself, now by redemption and salvation.

And when people reject that message and reject him, it means a hard ministry of declaring a truth, the truth of judgment, to the very people who don't want to hear it.

And those of us who've been on morning prayer and compliment has been reading through the kings, as Will said this, and when the kings are a bad lot, and God keeps giving mercy, he keeps holding back judgment.

So I think the wind and the quake and the fire and the silence are signs of God's holiness. This is who God is. And every action of God we know is flawless and praiseworthy and full of light.

But we find this side of God very hard to see because we just don't like being accountable to him. but Elijah needed to see this more than anything else, to know the character of God, that although there is judgment, he remains the same God.

[21 : 39] And I think what God is doing here on the mountain is assuring Elijah that he has spoken the truth and that Elijah has not misrepresented him. So grace and truth, and there's one more step that God does for Elijah.

He puts him back on track, verses 15 to 21, putting him back together physically, puts him back together spiritually, and he puts him back on track. Verse 15, go north, young man, turn back, there's work to be done.

And then the Lord gives him just enough encouragement that he will go. He says, I want you to anoint your successor, Elisha. My plans don't stop with you, Elijah.

You know what the key to the work of God is? It's God's work. And it's such a relief, I think, for all of us, isn't it? We struggle with our own weakness and the weakness of others and the rejection of the good news and the gospel.

It's not all down to us. And these anointings, Ahaziel and then Jehu and then Elisha, God will continue his work of judgment. He takes responsibility for it.

[22 : 49] And God is saying to Elijah and he's saying to us, you don't need to carry all this on your shoulders. I have work for you to do it, but my plans, my purposes don't depend on you.

They are my plans. They never depend on any single human. Oh, and by the way, Elijah, you may feel like you're alone, but you're not actually. You may have to stand alone from time to time.

But I've got 7,000 in Israel, which is just about a perfect number of those who love me and serve me. They're never going to make the headlines like you do. They're never going to get to preach to the king.

They'll also never bow the knee to Baal and the work will continue through them. Amen.