

1 Kings 19 (PM)

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Preacher: Rev. Ben Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Good evening, everyone. It's good to see you. Let's pray quickly before we begin. Lord, I thank you that you are our God when we feel strong. You are our God when we feel weak.

We see this so clearly in the life of Elijah in this passage, and I pray that we may be encouraged by it this evening. Know your presence and your compassion and your faithfulness to your people. Amen.

Well, it's so great to be following Elijah on in 1 Kings tonight. And many of us know the story, probably from childhood or Sunday school, of fire from heaven in chapter 18.

But a lot of us are probably less familiar with chapter 19 and Elijah running away from his calling. But having them back to back, week to week, is really great because it gives us a more complete picture of the life of faith.

In the life of faith, there are mountains and valleys. There are victories and setbacks. There are seasons where everything is clear and where nothing makes sense.

[1 : 0 8] But through it all, the Lord is Elijah's God. He's also our God through it all. Now, last week was this literal mountaintop experience.

Fire from heaven on Mount Carmel. One prophet against 450. Elijah is just, I mean, he just comes across as fearless in his prayer of faith and fury.

But this week, we're not on the mountain. We're in the valley. And down in Jezreel, things don't look so promising anymore. Elijah is fearful. He's fleeing. He's depressed. He's distraught. He's in the wilderness.

God is just as present in the valley as he is on the mountain. I'm looking up from my map, but it's about to come up in a minute. It's down here. So, what we see here is that even in Elijah's doubt and despair, God is compassionate and he's in control.

And geography is really going to help us hear this story. So, tonight we're going to focus on four different places as a way to organize what we're looking at. So, the first one is Jezreel.

[2 : 1 7] Ah, got it right that time. Jezreel. All right, you guys see Jezreel? It's in the circle up there. Okay, so if you look up that little bump on the coast, that's Mount Carmel.

So, that's where we were last week. And if you move down a little bit, that's Jezreel. That's where we are this week. After last week's confrontation, Elijah runs about 20 kilometers in the strength of the Lord to Jezreel.

And that's where the story picks up in chapter 19. So, we don't know exactly how much time has passed between the confrontation on the mountain and Jezreel. But, we do know the importance of this city.

That is the capital of Israel. This is the location of Ahab and Jezebel's royal palace. So, this is the home base of Baal worship.

What I called the Baal worship power couple last week. This couple has led God's people away from him. They've provoked the Lord to anger. And they are all around bad news for God's people.

[3 : 23] So, Elijah arrives there in Jezreel. He's got a W on the board. God had answered in fire. He'd showed himself to be the Lord. Baal is nothing by comparison.

God had turned the people's hearts back. The Lord, he is God, they had cried. The prophets of Baal had been slain. To kind of show that their repentance is real. They're really changing their minds about who is God.

And King Ahab had watched all of that. He had seen it all. And that seems like a pretty decisive victory. God's supremacy is established, isn't it?

And so, I think on this run down to Jezreel, Elijah goes ready to see the job done. You know, show up in Jezreel, a few key policy changes, write a few memos to the right people, and everyone's going to be right back in Yahweh worship.

But what happens on the mountain doesn't materialize in the valley. And in fact, the slaughter of Baal's prophets just seems to entrench Ahab and Jezebel further in their resistance to God.

[4 : 29] So, Ahab reports all of this to Jezebel. And Jezebel's like, Alright, baby, I'm going to take it from here. You had your go? I'm going to take it from here. And we're going to issue a death threat.

And so she says to Elijah, May the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life as one of those by this time tomorrow. In other words, you're going to be as dead as the prophets of Baal.

Then he was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life. It's wonderful how the Bible doesn't present prophets as untouchable.

They're not really heroes at all. They're human. And the book of James says that Elijah was a person with a nature like ours. And so this is not actually a movie where, you know, he faces a little bit of setback, but scrappy Elijah always kind of finds a way, and he gets through it.

Because that's actually not what it's like to follow God. Sometimes we're brazen and brave. Sometimes we're discouraged and afraid. So Elijah, he sees the situation on the ground in Jezreel.

[5 : 37] He sees that Baal is still the god to those that are living in Jezreel. He sees that Jezebel has an army and she wants to kill him. And he runs away. He runs away 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. So, Beersheba. That's pretty good. Okay, so that's a little bit of a ways, isn't it?

All the way down from Jezreel to Beersheba. It's 173 kilometers to the south, all the way at the bottom of Judah's territory. So Elijah walks all the way out the bottom of the northern kingdom.

He walks straight all the way through Judah to the southern kingdom, to Beersheba, the very south of Judah's territory. He leaves his post as the prophet, as God's prophet in the north, and then he leaves God's people entirely.

Because once he gets to Beersheba, the bottom of Judah's territory, he keeps on going. He's like, he leaves his servant, you know, good luck. I'm going south. And he walks another day into the wilderness.

[6 : 44] And he sits under a broom tree. And I don't have a picture of a broom tree, but it's a very kind of dire picture. It's just a kind of a scraggly, solitary tree that grows alone in the middle of deserts.

And this is what he says under the broom tree. 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. Elijah says, I'm done. It's enough. I'd rather die than keep on with what I'm doing now.

I'm a failure. I'm no better than my father's. I'm another in the long line of prophets who can't turn Israel back to their God. He's exhausted.

And he sleeps. You've probably felt like this before. I know that I have felt like this before. And maybe you are under the broom tree right now.

[7 : 44] If you feel like you've failed, and you're alone, and you can't go on, you're in very good company in reading the Bible. Moses once told God, If you treat me like this, just kill me now.

The prophet Jeremiah curses the day that he was born, as does Job. The psalmist says, Darkness is my only companion. Jesus sweats blood in prayer as he asks for the cup to pass.

Paul says, We were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Isn't that a thing? Following God is not easy.

We will not always be happy. We will feel discouraged. We will question God's actions and his ability. And we will wish for another way. So, when you find yourself in that place, know that you are not alone.

Because Elijah isn't alone. God is still with him. This desperate, broken prophet. God is with him. God hears his prayer, and he answers him. And he sends a messenger of his own.

[8 : 52] So Jezebel sent a messenger saying, You're going to die? Now God sends an angel, his own messenger, bringing fresh cakes and water. He says, Arise and eat, Elijah.

He eats and he sleeps. Then the angel of the Lord comes again and touches him. Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you. I find this care, the care that God extends to Elijah here, very beautiful.

Because it's so tangible. God listens to him without correcting him. Without questioning him, at least not yet. He gives him food for his lost appetite.

He gives him sleep for his motivation that he's lost. He touches him to ease his loneliness. And he gives him a task to restore his purpose. And it says he arose.

He ate and he drank, and he went in the strength of that food, 40 days and 40 nights, to Horeb, the Mount of God. This is our third place. Horeb. Horeb is another name for Mount Sinai.

[9 : 57] And you can see that that circle is around an arrow, because we couldn't fit it on the map. So if you were to try to put this on the map, it would be like here by this candle.

It is really, really, really far away from where he started. It's almost 300 kilometers further from where he started in the wilderness. So he's at Sinai, Mount Sinai.

That's a significant place in the Bible, isn't it? Sinai is where the law was delivered. It's where the covenant was cut with God's people. It's where Moses saw God. It's very interesting that Elijah goes there out of all the places he could go.

But what is he seeking on the mountain? A new law, maybe. Maybe one that God's people can actually keep. A new people. Some people that are more faithful.

A little less stubborn. Maybe a new calling. Maybe a fresh word. Whatever he's seeking on Sinai, God meets him on the mountaintop. Although I would say that I don't think God meets him in the way that he's expecting or hoping.

[11 : 06] So he's at the top of the mountain. He's hiding in a cave. And God comes and questions him. What are you doing here, Elijah? Elijah? And I just tremble at the honesty of the prayer that Elijah prays after God asks him that.

This is my paraphrase.

God, I've been faithful, but your mission has failed. Your people have failed. I'm the only one left. And not for long. In prayer, we bring ourselves to God.

We bring our frustrations and our feelings and our resentments and our fears. And so this prayer is absolutely useful, I think. It's a very good prayer, even though it's completely wrong.

I mean, God's people have been faithless, but we already know there's a hundred prophets that Obadiah has sheltered. And we know that Elijah himself rebuilt an altar on the top of Carmel.

[12 : 25] Remember the fire and the rain? What about the widow's son that was raised back to life? I mean, God has been amazingly at work among his people. So Elijah's perception is actually wrong.

But he remains in dialogue with God. And I think in that he's absolutely right. He's absolutely faithful in bringing that to God. And God remains with him through what is essentially a tantrum.

He remains with Elijah in his despair. He doesn't cast him aside. He stays with him. But he doesn't leave him in that place. Our God is able to stay with us and to care for us in the deepest, darkest night of the human soul.

But he will always speak light and truth into that dark night. And what's happened here is that Elijah has become a little bit enamored with his own importance. He's become a little bit wrapped up in his own sense of loneliness and despair and his mission and what he's trying to do.

And God is going to actually call him out of that. So he says, go out and stand on the mount before the Lord. And then we have this wind and this earthquake and this fire. And it says, the Lord passes by, but he wasn't in it.

[13 : 39] And he sent the fire, but he wasn't in it. So there's this just raw power being unleashed on the top of this mountain. Just, I can't even really imagine what it would have looked like.

And all of it is spent. And then there's nothing left but a whisper. I think a better translation is probably the sound of stillness. Maybe like a light static.

What in the world does that mean? Why? It's interesting. After all of those elements, it says the Lord wasn't in it. The Lord wasn't in it. The Lord wasn't in it. And then there's silence. And it doesn't say that the Lord wasn't in it.

But it also doesn't say that he said anything. Wasn't clearly a voice. It's almost like this kind of pregnant pause or this meaningful silence.

I don't think that Elijah understands what it means immediately either. I don't think it's what he was looking for on the top of the mountain. It's almost like Elijah doesn't want to understand what is happening here.

[14 : 45] And you see him going back to the cave and covering his face. And it's almost like he doesn't want to listen or see what God is doing in this. And so he repeats his prayer after that in its entirety once again.

What's going on with all this? I think we have to go to our final location to see what is happening here. And so there's our final location. It's a bit of a contrast, isn't it?

It's Damascus. So if he's down here having this experience on the mountain, now God says, go to Damascus. It's pretty far to the north, all the way on the northern edge, almost outside of the kingdom of Israel.

Or I think it is outside, actually. And so this is further north than he started. And what we see in the final verses of this chapter are actually a commissioning. And it shows that beyond having compassion for Elijah in this broken place that he's in, God is actually still in control of the situation.

And so the instructions that God gives are very interesting. And I wonder, I don't know, the first time I read this passage, I was like really confused by what's happening. It's like Hazel and Jehu and all this stuff.

[15 : 56] So, but this is actually really important to understanding what's happening. So he says, anoint Hazel king in Syria. Syria is where it says, oh, it's not up there anymore. Okay.

Well, Syria is Baal country. It's in Phoenicia. That's where Jezebel comes from. So he's going to go to Hazel and anoint a new king there. Okay, that's weird. He's going to appoint Jehu a new king for Israel.

So Ahab's the current king, but Jehu's going to be the next king. And then he's going to find a replacement for himself in Elisha the prophet, which is what happens at the very end when he passes the mantle. And God says, I'm going to use Hazel's sword and I'm going to use Jehu's sword.

Okay. Well, if you read on in the book of Kings, this begins to make a bit more sense. You'll find out that Ahab, Ahab who had done more wrong than any of the kings of Israel, who had, who has absolutely just been leading people away from God.

Ahab is going to be killed by Hazel's army. So God is actually going to contract or anoint a foreign king in a foreign country to come and kill Ahab. And then he's going to put a new king in his place.

[17 : 06] And then Jezebel is going to be killed by Jehu. That happens in 2 Kings. And all of that is carried out by Elisha, who is Elijah's successor.

And God says, not only that, not only am I actually setting into plan motions beyond your understanding in which I will judge these kings and take them out of play.

But I'm keeping a remnant of 7,000 faithful Israelites because you're not the only one. In other words, he's saying something like, I'm not going to send another pillar of fire from heaven.

I'm not going to smite Ahab and Jezebel with a pillar of fire. I'm going to work another. I'm not going to. We're not doing Carmel again. We're not re-giving the law here on Sinai.

But I am in control. There's not going to be another shock and awe campaign.

[18 : 07] He's not in the earthquake or the wind or the fire. But he has a plan that is going to speak in the sound of stillness. His answer to Elijah is a whisper behind the scenes.

God works slowly and invisibly in addition to through columns of fire. So he's going to begin working through a political process and through these battles and through direct and indirect action to judge his enemies and preserve his people and to work out his purpose for the world.

In other words, Elijah, God is far from done. He always has a remnant and he's going to use that remnant to bring back all people and all nations, eventually through his son Jesus.

God works really far beyond our methods and our timelines. The majority of God's work is not loud and amazing. It's quietly fruitful.

And his answer to Elijah's prayer is essentially, trust me, obey me, and see if it doesn't work out. Now get back to work. His loss of faith and his purpose is answered by the steady presence and patience and plan of God.

[19 : 23] And just as our prayers of the valley are answered again and again when we trust God from that place. By the gospel, it's God who will turn back the hearts of all his people time and time again and through the power of his son.

As God was faithful to Elijah, he's faithful to us. He stays with us. He hears us and he calls us back to trust. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.