

The Wrath of Jezebel, the Mercy of Yahweh
1 Kings 18:41-19:8
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Read 1 Kings 18:41-19:8

"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

Introduction: Mountain Top Experiences Give Way To Pain in the Valley

How many of you have had the experience of going to a church retreat, camp, or conference where you were fed God's word in a mighty way, you felt close to the Lord, and you resolved to live "on fire" for Him from here on out – we called them "mountain top experiences" because you were on a spiritual high. I had many of those experiences growing up; I was a church kid, loved my youth group, went on all the trips. But at the end of those weekends, I got home and that spiritual fire died down, and I found myself going back to my old routines and ways. Our "mountain top" experiences don't usually stay long, and they don't always produce amazing life changes, though there is great value in having experienced them. So often they are followed by times in the valley, where we are challenged and hurting; and sometimes those times are worse because we had the great experience that we thought would carry on through. Spiritual and emotional crashes are tough. We pray and hope that the same God who was with us on the mountain will meet us in the valley.

Last week we read the account of Elijah's contest with the prophets of Baal in which God answered Elijah's prayer with fire from heaven that consumed his altar, while Baal was nowhere to be found. And those prophets paid with their lives. Today's text picks up the end of that story, where Elijah found what comes after a "mountain top" experience. After his great triumph on the top of Mt. Carmel (a literal mountain), we may be expecting other great things to follow - revival, people pushing for a return to God's laws and ways, perhaps Elijah appointed as the pastoral advisor to the royal court. But instead we find evil pushing back in a big way. And Elijah has to flee, and he experiences some of the lowest moments recorded in the Scriptures. The trajectory of this passage just goes down. How could God still use someone like him who was fearful and in despair? How does God handle His people who have lost their energy and their passion?

As we read the first 6 verses of this passage, we see the end of the 3½ year drought that showed Elijah's actions

I. When Victory and Blessing Came (vv. 41-46)

⁴¹ And Elijah said to Ahab, "Go up, eat and drink, for there is a sound of the rushing of rain." ⁴² So Ahab went up to eat and to drink. And Elijah went up to the top of Mount Carmel. And he bowed himself down on the earth and put his face between his knees. ⁴³ And he said to his servant, "Go up now, look toward the sea." And he went up and looked and said, "There is nothing." And he said, "Go again," seven times. ⁴⁴ And at the seventh time he said, "Behold, a little cloud like a man's hand is rising from the sea." And he said, "Go up, say to Ahab, 'Prepare your chariot and go down, lest the rain stop you.'" ⁴⁵ And in a little while the heavens grew black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain. And Ahab rode and went to Jezreel. ⁴⁶ And the hand of the Lord was on Elijah, and he gathered up his garment and ran before Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel.

There is no explanation in the text for why Elijah did not kill Ahab when he killed his 450 prophets. Ahab was still the king of Israel, a position that God had ordained and allowed Ahab to ascend to. Elijah was probably forbidden by God to take the king's life. For now, the prophet actually extended a little mercy to his humiliated foe: go get something to eat, the rain is coming back. And then when it was confirmed that the rain was coming, Elijah wanted to make sure that Ahab's chariots doesn't get stuck in the mud riding back to his palace. And then in verse 46 the Lord apparently gave Elijah the speed of a sprinter and the stamina of a distance runner because he outran Ahab's chariot. I saw different commentaries estimate that the distance to Jezreel was 13 to 17 miles away; whichever number, it was longer than a half-marathon. I'm not sure why this is included in the story, but there's a possibility that this is symbolic action, that Elijah is communicating to Ahab: "If you follow me, we can restore the way Israel is supposed to function."

Let's look at verses 42-44 a little closer. Elijah went to the top of the mountain and bowed down, putting his face between his knees. He was waiting for the rain to start. He was probably praying; it doesn't say that explicitly in the text, but James 5:18 says, "*Then he (Elijah) prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.*" He sent a servant to go spot if the rain had started, but the servant said, "there is nothing." Where was the last time we heard that phrase? Back when the Baal prophets were trying to get Baal to light their altar on fire. No one answered. Here Elijah's faith and patience were tested a bit. God sent fire on the altar immediately, but the rain came slowly. Seven times he sent his servant to check, and finally a great rain came on the seventh time. Seven is the Biblical number of perfection. But deeper than testing their patience, the rain signals that God has accepted the sacrifice on the altar as atonement for the people's sins. The drought is over because Elijah had made an offering on Israel's behalf that God had accepted, and God's punishment was over, the rain of forgiveness had come.¹

I think that the reason Elijah went to Jezreel was that he wanted to be outside the palace when Ahab went in and told his wife that they had been wrong and that really Yahweh was God, and either that he was going to force her to stop worshipping Baal, or divorce her, or have her killed, or something dramatic. But if that's what Elijah expected, as the old saying goes, "he's got another think coming." The next scene at the palace explains how he handled

II. When Unbelief and Threats Came (vv. 1-2)

¹ Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. ² 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."

Jezebel had stayed at the palace during the big contest that happened; remember that Jezreel is not in Israel, that's her homeland, this is probably a second home for the royal couple. But she got a full report from her husband of everything that happened, how Elijah had won the contest and killed her prophets. A rational, logical person would have said, "Wow, his God was able to do that amazing thing, sending fire down from heaven and lighting the altar on fire? That is a God that is real and powerful, maybe we ought to rethink this whole Baal worship, since that obviously didn't work at all." But not Jezebel. She is way too entrenched in her false religion to start over or rethink her whole worldview. All she sees is blood and vengeance. Elijah killed my prophets? His life is as good as over. In fact, she probably saw the heavy rains and said, "Look! See, Baal's not dead, he's sending the rain after all!" I'm not sure why she sent a messenger to Elijah as some kind of warning.

¹ This paragraph was suggested by John Woodhouse, *1 Kings: Power, Politics, and the Hope of the World* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), pp. 528-530.

Why not send a prison official to arrest him, or an assassin? She's already killed many, many of God's prophets - what's one more?

Have you ever heard the phrase "convince a man against his will, he's of the same opinion still"? I had an English teacher that used to say that. There's a lot of truth there. You can think that you've shown someone the error of their ways or of their thinking, but deep down, if you're just imposing that on them and they haven't really had a change of heart, they won't be acting or thinking any differently. We need to realize that as parents: the best Christian parenting books recognize that it's not the most effective parenting methods that just try to get your child to act right and outwardly conform to what you want from them. The true success in parenting is when a child inwardly buys into obedience and godliness. If you just have an outwardly compliant child, but you constantly have to correct them and tell them how to behave, as soon as they've left your house, they will start living by what they truly believe. Their outward behavior will show their inner commitments. And that explains, in a sense, Ahab and Jezebel's reaction to everything here. Not that they're children, but they have been shown as powerfully as Elijah can that God is in control, that He is the true God. But they don't want to believe it, they suppress the truth, they reinterpret the facts to fit their worldview. This is a good reminder when we're witnessing to unbelievers: you can have the best apologetic arguments for faith in God, but if the Holy Spirit doesn't change someone's heart, they will not leave their unbelief and follow the God of the Bible.

There was a man much later in time than Elijah who showed God's power in mighty ways. He raised people from the dead like Elijah, He healed people, He cast out demons, He turned water to wine. But John 12:37 makes the comment that, "*Though He (Jesus) had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in Him.*" And even more than not believing in Him, they sought to kill Him. The spiritual heirs of Jezebel were the Pharisees, who denied God's power through Jesus and refused to give up their own beliefs and powers, and so they took Jesus' life instead.

So Jezebel wanted to kill Elijah; the next 6 verses show his reaction to

III. When Fear and Despair Came (vv. 3-8)

³ 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. ⁴ 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 fathers." ⁵ And he lay down and slept under a broom tree. And behold, an angel touched him and said to him, "Arise and eat." ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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." ⁸ And he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God.

If you listen to Christian radio these days, you're going to hear a lot of songs that mention fear. And the gist of what you'll hear is "God takes away our fears." So if you're listening to channel 63 on XM radio, you might go from singing "I will fear no more" to "I'm no longer a slave to fear" to "Fear is a liar" to "my fear doesn't stand a chance when I stand in your love." Apparently, writers of Christian music feel like their listeners are a bunch of scared, intimidated wallflowers? There certainly is a lot to be scared about in life, but 2 Timothy 1:7 says, "*God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.*" That's easy to recite and sing when we're in our cars or at church with other believers. But what about if we're in Elijah's shoes, threatened by the strongest powers of the nation? And he's had a really long, exhausting day, right? Covered in blood, sweat, and mud after all he's done, he now had to run for his life. And he went from north of Israel all the way to Judah,

which is south of Israel. That's probably a 300-mile journey, it'd like running from Pittsburgh to Philadelphia. He went into the wilderness alone, sat down and said, *"It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers."*

Now, here's where the majority of preachers go with their application of this passage: Elijah was depressed and suicidal because he asked God to take away his life. So there's either this huge comparison between the iron-willed Elijah who confronted the wicked king and took on all those false prophets to this feeble, self-pitying Elijah who has curled up into a ball. Or they spend the rest of the sermon talking about the causes of depression and suicide and how we can avoid them and honor God with positive mental health. And that's fine, if you've heard a sermon like that I hope that you benefited from it and that you are working on having positive mental health. Listen, we all know that depression and anxiety plague a large section of society, and so we all have a lot to learn and think about in that area. There have been tons of studies showing that the more we live our lives through technology, the more anxious, separated, and depressed we become because we don't have real relationships. Anything you can do to have a flesh and blood conversation and relationship is going to trump online interaction any day. And even deeper than that, we have no idea what caused Robin Williams' depression and suicide, and we've heard about CTE that's affected all those football players and how it wrecks people's brains who have had repeated blows to the head. Post-partum depression and seasonal affectation anxiety, all of those things are real things, let's not be like Tom Cruise and deny them. If you struggle with these things, please get help, get counseling, see a doctor.

But I want to suggest looking at this passage a little differently. Maybe Elijah is not the depressed, suicidal, anxiety-ridden person that we can look at and learn from. What I see here is someone who is in between giant ministry tasks, accomplishing great things for the Lord, but he needs a break, he needs to recharge. Maybe we can learn a lot by how the Lord tenderly cares for His people when they are exhausted and at the end of their rope, but still have work to do.

Let's look at a few things that Elijah did when he sat down under that broom tree and bottomed out:

First, he prayed. And this is not a fake, "put on a religious veneer" prayer; this is gut-level honesty before the Lord: "I am ready to die, I don't measure up, I can't take any more." We should pour out our hearts before the Lord, He can handle our blunt-level honesty. The Psalms remind us over and over that the Lord is our rock and our salvation, He is where we should run to first.

Second, Elijah slept. Vince Lombardi, the famous football coach, said, "fatigue makes cowards of us all." When we're exhausted, we don't think right, we don't respond to people well, we don't make good choices, we're easier targets for despair and sin. We don't have the energy to think about the next thing the Lord has called us to. Sometimes the most godly thing you can do in life is go to bed early. And honor the Sabbath, truly rest on Sundays. Those who ignore the Sabbath and never rest, just go and go, will have their bodies revolt on them at some point in life. Embrace the Sabbath rest that God gives you; see it as a delight not a burden.

Third, Elijah ate and drank. I don't know about you, but I get "hangry" - angry because I'm hungry. It's actually become a family joke, "get Dad a sandwich, he's getting hangry." If I don't recognize that it's the physical hunger talking, I can confuse it with real anger (same thing with sleep). How beautiful that the angel prepared food for Elijah while he slept. He didn't scold him for being weak and whiny; he fed him. And the text seems to say that the angel actually prepared and cooked the food right there. God met His servant in the valley, at his low point, mercifully providing for him.

The bigger idea here is to address physical things that might be adding to anger, burn out, and depression. We are not gnostics, we are not those who believe that only the spiritual things are valuable while the physical body is part of the evil of this world. God gave you a body and in the creation account He declared Adam, his body, and the material things that He created to be good. Yes, the fall placed all of humanity under the curse of sin, but that does not mean that our bodies are necessary evils to be lived in and tolerated until we can finally die and go to heaven and be spiritual. Bodies are important, and God wants us to take care of them. 1 Timothy 4:8 says, *“for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way.”* That obviously puts the emphasis on being godly people - reminding us that we can run after weight-lifting and dieting and bodily perfection, but that is ultimately going to pale in comparison to developing your spiritual character. But you do need to take care of your body, there is value in that. If you don't take care of your body, you may not be able to complete the tasks that God has called you to.

This passage is ultimately an encouraging reminder to us that while God calls us to attempt great things for Him, we are physically and emotionally limited. We all reach a tipping point, we can't burn the candle at both ends, ignore our physical and mental health, and expect to keep pushing through things. There are times that we feel like we can't go any further and think thoughts like Elijah did, *“I'm a failure, I'm no good at this.”* Sometimes the most godly thing we can do is take a day off. We live in a time and culture that values maximum productivity and honors the workaholic and the person who is always super-busy. But that's not necessarily a picture of godly obedience. Yes, we should work hard, we don't honor God with laziness. But God gives us times of refreshing, times when we retreat and rest, and He provides for our needs. We all need time off. You need vacations mixed in with your work. Pastors need sabbaticals, Christians need times of stepping away from the ministries that they serve. And God sends angels into our lives to ministry to us - it may not be literal angels, but look for the people in your life who will take care of you; they are sent from God as much as the true angel that ministered to Elijah.

Conclusion: God's Servant That He Crushed

Turn in your Bibles to Isaiah chapter 53 (I'm going to jump around a bit). Verses 3-4 tells us about a man who *“was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief... he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.”* The language of Isaiah, written in the 7th century BC is past tense, but he's actually talking about someone who was still to come, a servant he calls Him. So we have this man who was like Elijah, beaten down, sorrowful, broken by the world and the things that have happened to Him. And so we might expect that, like Elijah, God let Him sleep peacefully and baked Him a cake, and said, *“rest up, eat and drink, there's lots more work for You to do.”* And yes, that happened earlier in His life, but Isaiah describes how God actually treated this servant:

Verse 7: *“He was oppressed, and He was afflicted”*

Verse 8: *“By oppression and judgment He was taken away”*

Verse 10: *“It was the will of the Lord to crush Him; He has put Him to grief.”*

Why? Why would God treat this servant who had pleased Him like that? Surely God saved Him from death, right? Nope; verse 9: *“And they made His grave with the wicked and with a rich man in His death, although He had done no violence, and there was no deceit in His mouth”* and verse 12: *“He poured out His soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors.”*

Why, Lord? Why do you treat Your people like that? Well, this wasn't just any person. This suffering servant of Isaiah 53 turned out to be God Himself, God the Son, Jesus.

Verse 10 tells us that *“His soul makes an offering for guilt,”*

Verse 12: *“yet He bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors”*

Back in verse 5: *“upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His wounds we are healed.”*

God did not give Jesus relief and rest from His sufferings because we needed Him to be broken, crushed, and crucified in our place. His wounds brought us healing, His intercession and offering brought us salvation and right relationship with God.

Like Elijah, Jesus had more work to do, but it would be accomplished in His death and resurrection. And then He would appear to hundreds of people before ascending into heaven, where He sits at the right hand of the Father, interceding for us, His people. And as we said in the Apostles Creed last week: “From thence (there) He shall come to judge the living and the dead.” What will He judge them on? Every one of us is wracked with sin and guilty in His sight. He will judge us on whether we trusted in His sacrificial, atoning death on the cross to save us. Thank God for His beautiful plan of redemption for His people. Amen!

Benediction

2 Peter 3:18

“But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.”