

## **1 Kings 19: 1-15**

### **Elijah Flees to Horeb**

**19** Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. <sup>2</sup> So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, “May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them.”

<sup>3</sup> Elijah was afraid<sup>[a]</sup> and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, <sup>4</sup> while he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. “I have had enough, LORD,” he said. “Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.” <sup>5</sup> Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep.

All at once an angel touched him and said, “Get up and eat.” <sup>6</sup> He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again.

<sup>7</sup> The angel of the LORD came back a second time and touched him and said, “Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you.” <sup>8</sup> So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. <sup>9</sup> There he went into a cave and spent the night.

### **The LORD Appears to Elijah**

And the word of the LORD came to him: “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

<sup>10</sup> He replied, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

<sup>11</sup> The LORD said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.”

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. <sup>12</sup> After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle

whisper. <sup>13</sup> When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

Then a voice said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

<sup>14</sup> He replied, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

<sup>15</sup> The LORD said to him, “Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram.

In this passage we see a downtrodden Elijah, a man who is deeply depressed and hopeless. It is hard to imagine this is the same man who has just come from a tremendous victory. Elijah has just come from Mt. Carmel where he has challenged King Ahab to a duel of the gods. Elijah’s challenge is simple. Both he and the prophets of the false and evil god Baal will build altars and make a sacrifice. Neither party is allowed to light the fires, however. Baal or God must do that themselves.

The Baal prophets try, and fail, despite spending an entire day praying and harming themselves in their frenzy. Elijah, on the other hand, makes the task harder for himself, putting a trench of water around the altar and drenching the wood three times. God, of course, sends fire from heaven which burns away the water and the wood. This sign leads

to all 450 prophets of Baal being put to death by the people, who realize how they have been led astray and into evil, evil acts, and the people restoring Judaism as the predominant religion.

Jezebel, however, did not like this one bit. She had made it her life's mission to kill all the prophets of God she could get her hands on and she was not too pleased at the fate of the prophets of Baal. So she issues this threat, and Elijah quickly takes it to heart.

Elijah flees. Gone is the confident prophet who trusts the Lord to light wet wood. I can barely start a fire with dry wood and lighter fluid, yet God had shown God's self to be faithful and powerful. But Elijah has spent many long years fighting for God, serving God's people, leading people who often would just as soon mock and scorn him as listen to his wisdom. Elijah is depressed, certainly. He is burned out. He has given all he can for the time being. So rather than staying in the fight, he flees. Such is his state of mind that Elijah doesn't even pray for help. Instead, he sees the enormous work before him, and prays for death. He has no hope for restoration, only for an end.

Sometimes it can feel as though we are also alone in modern times. Christianity in the United States is tolerated at best, and ostracized or even persecuted at worse. The current culture is very often at odds against Christian teachings. Churches everywhere are declining, and sometimes it can feel as though our faith is dwindling.

For those that are still active in the church, sadly the predominant emotion is exhaustion as churches maintain overloaded schedules from a bygone era, with an ever-smaller pool of people with an ever-smaller pool of available time.

When I was in Bible college, I briefly attended a very strict church, or at least strict about some things. Sunday was an all-day affair, with Sunday school, morning worship, and then a thirty minute drive to their secondary location for evening meal and worship. I'm not exaggerating when I say I couldn't even go home between services, there simply wasn't time. One Sunday I declined to go to evening service because I had finals. I was sharply reprimanded. Needless to say, I soon after stopped attending.

And my story is mild compared to most. Most churches have a full schedule, complete with men and women's bible studies, various groups such as singles groups and young mother's groups, Vacation Bible School, Bible and book studies, and mission outreach projects. And those of the next generation which will lead the church are struggling to balance this between work responsibilities, family obligations, and raising children. To keep all these ministries going takes people, often the same small core of people. The result is that everyone is tired. The volunteers are tired and the participants are tired. Something simply must give, and for most in the younger generations with families, that thing is church. They can't very well give up jobs and families, so the logical cut is church. When this storm of exhaustion hits, everyone suffers. The church suffers and God's children suffer, and instead of growing in the lord they stay stagnant or even regress.

Elijah was exhausted too. He had done so much, but he was only one person, and he was tired. His humanity was demanding rest and retreat. He acted a bit like a toddler, stomping his feet because he was just so tired. And yet God did not rebuke him, or demand he keep going

through the exhaustion. Instead, God told Elijah to rest, to eat, to take his time. When Elijah wakes from his nap, he's instructed to eat and rest some more! And having restored his soul, Elijah can face the future, but only after taking rest and nourishing his soul and his spirituality.

There can be a strong push back to the idea of taking rest when churches are declining. There is a sense that we must be all hands on deck all the time. Dr. Vance Havner, a preacher who had an influence on Billy Graham, once preached on the necessity of taking rest and vacations. One dear lady approached him afterwards and said "Well, you know the devil never sleeps! The devil never takes a vacation!" Dr. Havner responded, "Since when am I supposed to be like the devil?"

Rest and restoration are necessary for us limited humans. Even Jesus took time away to rest, to nourish his bodying to focus on his relationship with God. God rested from God's creative work for an entire day. Why should we expect that we require any less than this?

It is important to note the difference between resting intentionally, and withdrawing. Resting intentionally is a spiritual practice, it is the Sabbath rest that God made for humanity. It is done for a time, with

intention to renew and refresh. It is the difference between praying for death, and praying for rest and strength for journey.

The work of the church is never ending, but it cannot be done if we are worn to the point of exhaustion, if our own spirituality has been neglected, if we feel as though we alone are responsible for too much, and if the tasks before us are too many with too little reward.

Elijah was worn to the point of exhaustion, and so he rested. That was the very best thing he could have done for God at that moment. If you are exhausted, take rest. You cannot pour from an empty cup, and if you are exhausted the best thing you can do for the Gospel is to rest so that later you might be able to rejoin the great work. Elijah's own spiritual life seems to have been neglected, and so he needed that time alone, he needed to be ministered to, because he could do not effective for God until he his relationship with God was renewed. If you are neglecting your own spiritual life because of the never-ending march of church activities, please stop. Take a rest. Our first priority should always be our own spirituality, our own relationship with God, our own discipleship. Churches grow by multiplication, not by the menu of

activities. Churches grow when people see what we have, the relationship with God, the love and peace we have received, and they want that for themselves. If we are not working on our own discipleship, nothing we do will be effective. Much like the stewardship warns us on an airplane, we must first take the oxygen before trying to help others, or else neither one of us will be saved.

Elijah felt alone, like it all depended on him. Too often in the church we can feel the same way, when we see the same names coming up again and again and again. But we are not meant to do this work alone. If you are overwhelmed, ask for help. Ask for others to join you in your work. Sometimes we think of the Apostles as lone rangers, carrying the Gospel to the far reaches of the world alone, but the truth is they almost always worked with others, be it another Apostles, another follower of Jesus, or someone new they shared the Gospel with. We are not meant to do the work alone. Asking for help is not admitting failure, it is admitting that we are human.

Unfortunately, modern church programming is often a mile wide and an inch deep, leaving people burned out, tired and feeling guilty they



can't make every single thing. Modern life is complicated, and we are busier than ever. The modern church faces a catch-22. Most of the church members are older, often retired, and find themselves with more flexible schedules. No faith community can survive, however, without new people joining in. The new people the modern church would like to include, however, often simply cannot attend functions during the week due to work or school. Even if they have the time, they may not have the time due to other obligation or exhaustion. This dynamic has prompted some churches to get creative with programing, including things like zoom bible studies, or studies conducted asynchronously with the help of online forum and the like. Sometimes it is important to know what to do with what strength we have.

When Elijah despaired, when he was tired and overwhelmed, God did not rebuke him. Elijah was the bruised reed that God did not break. Instead, God red for Elijah in a time of rest, a time of sleep, and food and water, not once but twice. God tells Elijah to arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you. And having rested and eaten Elijah was renewed and went forty days on the strength of the rest he had so

desperately needed. Only after a rest, was Elijah able to see clearly, to listen for the still small voice of God, to answer honestly God's question, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Only after this holy rest was Elijah able to continue the great work again.

We are human, just like Elijah, and the work before us is great as we care for God's people. Just like Elijah, sometimes the best thing we can do for God's kingdom is to take a holy rest, to focus on our needs and our relationship for God for the journey is too great for us without rest, and then to arise again refreshed. The work is never-ending, but so too is our God. May we all find the rest we need in Jesus Christ.

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