

1 Kings 19:9-18

⁹ At that place he came to a cave and spent the night there.

Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁰ He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

Elijah Meets God at Horeb

¹¹ He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind, and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake, ¹² and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire, and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. ¹³ When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁴ He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." ¹⁵ Then the LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. ¹⁶ Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel, and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. ¹⁷ Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill, and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. ¹⁸ Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

I Alone

Elijah is one of the most well-known prophets, and is responsible for some of the most dramatic miracles. He prays and causes a drought over the land for three years. He prays again and the rains come. Many of his miracles foreshadow the coming ministry of Christ. Elijah multiplies a widow's grain and oil, whereas Jesus would feed five thousand. Elijah raises the widow's son from the dead, whereas Jesus would raise many from the dead.

The thing about prophets is that they're not usually popular. The most important part of Elijah's ministry was not the miracles, but speaking the word of the Lord and calling Israel to repentance. And the Lord had some not so great news for the evil doers and false prophets, and Elijah prophesied their destruction. That's all well and good when someone else's destruction is being prophesied. It's less good when it's your own, and really not good when a prophet finds him or herself on the other side of the powers that be. That is exactly where Elijah stood.

Elijah was active during the reign of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. Ahab and Jezebel are considered to be among the most wicked of all of Israel's rulers, if not the worst. Israel was, of course, meant to follow the one true God, but Ahab takes Jezebel, a Phoenician princess, as his wife. Her people worship Baal, the god of storms and fertility. In the worship of Baal, a powerful female was placed as the high priestess. So it was that we have a Jewish king marrying a Baal worshiper, and then building her an altar so she may be high priestess of Baal.

And lest we think that this was just a case of intolerance between Elijah, representing Judaism and Jezebel and Ahab representing Baal, lest we think this was just a matter of opinion, let us turn to archaeology. In an Introduction to Biblical Archaeology, Howard Vos writes "One may question that those ancient enemies of Israel were as evil as the Bible claims they were, but even a superficial glance at Canaanite religion alone ably demonstrates their iniquity. Base sex worship was prevalent, and religious prostitution even commanded; human sacrifice was common; and it was a frequent practice - in an effort to placate their gods - to kill young children and bury them in the foundations of a house or public building at the time of constructions." Vos goes on to cite a primary source that tells of one man murdering his firstborn to be buried in the foundations.

This was not a difference of opinion. This was not tomato tomato. This was an infinite chasm between good and evil, between truth and lies, between love and a callous disregard for life. The worship of Baal hurt

people. It hurt children, whose lives were taken to appease Baal's blood lust. It hurt women who were used as sex objects instead of valued as the beloved children of God they were. It hurt men whose souls and hands were dirtied by the sinfulness of this religion.

God calls to the people through Elijah and they begin to respond, killing many of the prophets of Baal. Jezebel is outraged. These are her prophets. This is her faith. She is the leader of this religion and so she vows to kill Elijah. I don't think it needs to be said that, should she catch him, his death would not be quick and painless.

Elijah flees alone into the wilderness. He is tired, and not just physically. He has stood alone to challenge the corrupt leadership of Israel. He has spoken when it seemed as though all others were silent. If David had stood alone to face Goliath the giant, Elijah is standing alone facing a dragon. The very leaders of his country are against him. They fully intend to silence him.

When God speaks to Elijah, Elijah says he alone is left. Elijah feels as though he is the only one still fighting for what is right. He has fought zealously for all that is good and true. He has fought with passion and conviction, and it seems to him as though he is getting nowhere. There does not seem to be a throng of people waiting to stand at his side and his very life is in danger.

Circumstances and technologies have changed, but our calling from God has not. We are still called to speak truth, to stand against evil, to point to the one true God in the face of a culture that worships many false gods. And it is still easier said than done.

The teachings of Christianity are just as counter cultural now as they were two thousand years ago, as counter cultural as Elijah's teaching were to the Canaanites. It can feel as though we are all alone when we spend long hours caring for the homeless and the hungry, when so many pass by. It can feel as though we alone are left, when we fight for life, when we speak God's truth in the face of those who disagree, when we follow God instead of humans, when we challenge the authorities in pursuit of furthering the kingdom of God.

One such example of this comes from Martin Luther. Luther was of course a Catholic priest who was plagued by the more works oriented teachings of the Catholic Church. He spent hours in confession, and was tormented in spirit both by his own sense of sinfulness and by the corruption he was witnessing in the Catholic Church. Important offices were given to friends and family, and the church sold indulgences which, for a price, gave people the ability to sin without penalty. Luther debate

convinced of the importance of the Scriptural teachings that we are saved by grace and not works and wished to reform the catholic church, nailing his 95 theses to the door of Wittenberg church.

Unsurprisingly, the corrupt leaders didn't care for being called corrupt, and certainly didn't take kindly to any threat of against their power, so Luther was excommunicated. That part of the story we generally know. What fewer people realize is that the edict of worms declared Luther an outlaw. He could be imprisoned or killed on sight. His very life was in danger. He spent a great deal of time in hiding. He, undoubtedly, felt alone in his fight.

God is faithful, however, and no matter how things seem, God promises us to always, always, preserve a faithful remnant. When Elijah, defeated and tired, tells God he alone remains, God tells him the truth; God has preserved 7000 faithful jews in Israel. All was not lost, it just felt that way. God invited Elijah to rest, to be nourished in the Lord, and then, to rejoin the fight, remembering that he was never truly alone, that it was not all in vain, that God fought with him.

Luther, too, found he was not alone. Important people, such as nobles and princes, also saw the corruption in the church. Soon, a movement began of faithful Christians calling the church to account. This movement has lasted these many years since, and we ourselves claim the title of protestant.

Today, we are no less called to stand for the truth of the gospel than Elijah and Martin Luther. Corruption and evil still plague human civilization, and we are called to hold our communities to account, to fight against injustices, to love one another, to work diligently to bring the kingdom of God ever closer. Sometimes, we can feel alone. We look around at empty pews, as the ever-growing population of "nones" - people who claim no faith at all, at the stress of bottom lines and the suffering children of God around us, and we wonder if we alone are left. But God promises us there will always be a faithful remnant. We will never be alone. God will always be with us, and there will always be brothers and sisters in the world, whether we see it or not, united in purpose with us.

Where is God calling you to speak? Perhaps God is calling you to speak against corrupt authorities, or maybe God is calling you closer to home. Perhaps God is calling you to preach hope to the homeless, or freedom to the addicted. Perhaps God is calling you to invite someone to church, to show them there is a different way to live, that they do not have to face the challenges of this life alone, that there is freedom and grace here. We know the secular lifestyle doesn't work; many of us have lived it

before we heard the Gospel, and we found only heartbreak, emptiness, and pain. Perhaps God is calling you to share the gospel with others, to help them break from the path that you know all too well leads to destruction.

None of these things are easy, and sometimes it feels as though we alone are left, but take heart, God calls us, and God goes with us, and God preserves a faithful remnant always. Rest here, in the company of your brothers and sisters on Sunday mornings, receive nourishment from the Lord, and then continue the work of your calling, preaching good news, and a better way, knowing that you do not go alone, but you go with God, and with us, united in spirit.

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