

1 Kings 19

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[0 : 00] And so to 1 Kings 19, a very great and very powerful story of Elijah. I don't know if you enjoy reading biography, probably next to detective thrillers it's my favourite type of reading.

I was reading a biography of Churchill recently, a very good biography, and one of the things that the biographer said was that Churchill was prone to sulk.

Very often he wouldn't get out of bed until almost midday because he was in a dreadful sulk. He was annoyed with people and he was extremely out of sorts.

And it's always interesting when you read biographies about the foibles of great people. But when we read that Elijah was just like us, we find that hard to believe.

If you were here this morning, or even if you've read 1 Kings 18, this titanic figure, this spectacular fire from heaven, and this wonderful proclamation that the Lord was God instead of the false god Baal, it makes it difficult to believe that Elijah was just like us.

[1 : 15] Probably reading this chapter, though, chapter 19, it's somewhat easier to believe.

Although this chapter is often misunderstood. And I want to suggest there's two wrong ways we can take this chapter.

One is to sentimentalise the story. To say that what Elijah needs to learn is not activism, not spectacular blessings. He needs to listen to what the authorised version called the still small voice.

And of those phrases in the old version that's entered into our language, here it's called a gentle whisper. Both translations are wrong and both are thoroughly misleading.

And we'll see that in a moment or two. Elijah needed to relax and listen to God. Now there is truth in that. There is some truth in that. I mean, one of the problems with Christians is we are terribly activist.

It's quite right to be active. But so often I think we believe in God for our salvation. We believe in grace for our salvation. But we really think that in order to keep in the Christian faith, we need to have good works.

[2 : 27] In other words, we don't believe in grace in our Christian life. So that's one way.

Sentimentalise the story. See, Elijah needed to slow down, listen to the still small voice, and all would be well.

The other is what I would call moralising. Some argue that Elijah is being cut down to size here. He's not the great figure you thought he was. He's very self-centred.

I'm the only one that's left. It's often said about some people in churches, there's no one faithful except my wife and me, and I'm not sure about her.

You get that kind of remnant mentality. We are the only ones. We are the Lord's people. No one else out there is. But that's just simply not true when we look at the story.

Elijah's story is not over. There are many things to happen, not least the wonderful story of Naboth's vineyard, and then in 2 Kings, Elijah taken triumphantly into heaven.

[3 : 31] That doesn't sound like somebody who is finished. That doesn't sound like somebody who has made a mess of it. Now let's look at the stories it develops, and it develops in four stages.

And I want us just to look at these stages, look at how the story develops, and see what we can learn from it. Because if Elijah is just like us, then we have many things to learn from him.

So let's call the first part, verses 1 to the first part of 5, then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep. Let's call that running away. Do you ever feel like running away?

I certainly do. Do you ever feel like just giving it up? Because this is where Elijah is. The classic story in the Bible, of course, of someone who ran away is the prophet Jonah, who went off to Tarshish.

And in spite of what some preachers will tell you, Tarshish is not in Spain. Tarshish means the open sea, in other words, Jonah didn't have a clue where he was going. That, of course, is what happens when we run away from God.

[4 : 34] There's nowhere to go. So Elijah is running away because a much more formidable figure than Ahab had emerged. Ahab, as we saw this morning, was weak rather than wicked.

His wife, Jezebel, is a totally ruthless and committed woman. And she's not been convinced by the miraculous fire.

She knows about the fire. Ahab has told her. But she's not been convinced. Some people will not be convinced by any miracle, however spectacular. Remember in John's Gospel when Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead.

We read after that, Jesus' opponents went away and say, oh, we'd better believe in him now. They did nothing of the sort. John says Jesus' opponents went away and plotted how they could put Jesus to death.

In other words, some people's prejudice is almost invincible. No amount of miracle, no amount of argument will convince them. And we are told, or at least this version says, verse 3, Elijah was afraid.

[5 : 41] Well, there's nothing wrong with being afraid. It's what you do with your fear. And in any case, you can probably see from the note, this verb could also be translated, Elijah saw.

In other words, Elijah saw exactly what was happening and he did not want Jezebel to have the public victory of killing him. But there's another thing. Jezebel is not so sure as she appears to be.

Verse 2, Jezebel sent a messenger. If Jezebel had really been sure of her ground, she wouldn't have sent a messenger. She would have sent an assassin and simply got rid of the prophet.

Jezebel was a religious woman, a superstitious woman, and in spite of her public bluster, she was undoubtedly rather afraid of this strange prophet. But at the moment, she seems to be in control.

So Elijah runs for his life, verse 3, when he came to Beersheba in Judah. Beersheba is the far south of the land. You often get the phrase, from Dan to Beersheba, the extreme north to the extreme south, as we would say, John of Groats, to land's end.

[6 : 49] But Elijah doesn't stop there. A hundred miles away from where he had been, surely far enough for safety. But he's going somewhere else.

He is going into the desert, and indeed he is going to Horeb, and Horeb is better known in Scripture as Sinai. In other words, he is either by design, or by God's providence, making his way to the place where Moses met God.

This is a pilgrimage, but he is exhausted. He went a day's journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree verse, sat down under it, and prayed that he might die.

Basically, Lord, Jezebel failed to be my executioner. Will you be my executioner? And in frustration, and exhaustion, and despair, he falls asleep under the broom tree.

That's the first part, running away. And it's so true to life. We never feel flatter than after a time of success, including spiritual success.

[7 : 51] The reaction follows. We swing from mood to mood. This is what's happening. Now the second part of the story, I'm going to call Food for the Road. And that's from the second part of verse 5 to the end of verse 9.

From all at once, an angel touched him in the middle of verse 5, down to verse 9, he went into a cave and spent the night. If this were a film, the music would be playing very loudly at this point.

There is something about to happen. It's a great pity we don't have in modern English a word which the older versions translated, behold, look, see. The NIV tries to catch it by the words, all at once.

But there's one thing that the translation doesn't make clear. Look back at verse 2. Jezebel sent a messenger. Verse 5, all at once, an angel. What the translation doesn't make clear is this is exactly the same word.

The word is the normal word translated angel or messenger in Hebrew. This is another messenger but this time from the Lord. Elijah had already experienced such messengers.

[9 : 03] If you know his story back in chapter 17, he had been fed by ravens. He had been fed by a widow. Now here is another angel, another messenger. Incidentally, angels are enormously important in Scripture.

If you take out of Scripture all the passages referring to angels, they have precious to the left. They're involved in all God's activities. End of Psalm 103, angels are God's mighty ones who do his

bidding.

I call this food for the road. Just as Moses and the Israelites in the desert receive miraculous food, just as later Jesus was to break the bread and feed the multitudes, so Elijah now receives bread from heaven.

And the point about this surely is that God cares for his servants' bodies as well as their spirits.

There is a kind of pseudo-spirituality, you know, that tries to be holier than God.

If we're trying to be holier than God, I think we're pretty certain we're on the wrong lines. There is an idea that if we trust God, problems simply evaporate.

[10:12] We'll never feel exhausted. We'll never feel hungry. We'll never feel weary. We'll never feel like giving up. We'll never feel like simply storming off. And that's it.

God does not ignore our physical needs. God does not treat us as if we were superhuman. And notice another thing, the angel is underwriting the journey.

Arise, get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you. In other words, God is saying, you're right to be on this journey, Elijah. He's not saying, look, Elijah, you ought to get back. You see the point? And that's why I'm so convinced that those who criticise Elijah here are getting quite wrong. This was the right journey because it's to Horeb, the mountain of God.

Moses met God there. Elijah is going to meet God there. Jezebel initiated the journey, so she thought that God overruled it for his own purposes.

[11:13] So then we have running away. We have food for the road. And the next part of the story, beginning in the middle of verse 9, and the word of the Lord came to him, to verse 14, God steps into the story.

Now God has always been in the story. But God now comes right down into the story. What are you doing here, Elijah?

Twice the question is asked, and twice Elijah answers. Now some think this is a rebuke to Elijah, rather like that rebuke long ago to Adam.

Adam, where are you? Or the words to Cain, where is your brother? And so on. Or to Jacob, what is your name? I think it's more of an invitation.

God is saying to Elijah, now look, you're here, let's take stock. Where have you come from? Where are you now? And where are you going? Now it's very important not to misinterpret this.

[12:22] There's this wonderful passage, there was a wind, but the Lord was not in the wind. There was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. There was fire, but the Lord was not in the fire.

But wait a minute, haven't we discovered in chapter 18 that the Lord is in the fire? Indeed, that fire is a symbol of God's presence. So what can this mean?

Some have argued that this means that we must not expect anything spectacular from God. We must never expect him to move miraculously. As you were here this morning, remember I emphasised that the importance of chapter 18 was not just that God answers by fire, but that God answers.

And when he answers, he speaks in such a way that he's going to be heard. And we're going to come to the voice in a moment.

Let's look first of all at what Elijah says in verses 10 to verse 10, sorry, and then in verse 14. I've been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty.

[13:36] No one could deny that. The Israelites have rejected your covenant and so on. Once again, no one could deny that. I'm the only one left and now they are trying to kill me.

Well, we'll come to that later on. The point is, Elijah is the only public witness at this moment. There are others, we have to learn later on, there are 7,000 who haven't bowed beneath a bow.

We read in chapter 18 of Obadiah, who was a kind of secret follower of God in Ahab's court. But the point is, Elijah is the only public messenger at this point.

What about the still, small voice then? Bad translation, it sounds wonderful, it's a glorious piece of Elizabethan English, but it's totally misleading.

Look at verse 12. After the earthquake came a fire, and after the fire came a gentle whisper.

[14:35] More accurately, after the fire there was complete silence. Nothing to do with the voice at all. When Elijah heard it, well, the silence was so intense you could almost hear it.

He pulled his cloak and went out to the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, nothing said about how loud that voice was or how soft that voice was.

See the point I'm making? It's not that in chapter 18 we've got a God who speaks spectacularly, who reveals himself in fire, in miracle, and in wonderful phenomena from heaven.

and then a God here who simply whispers. In both cases we have the voice of God. And in both cases it is the voice of God, the word of God which is powerful.

That goes right back to Genesis 1, doesn't it? Read that chapter again. See how many times God speaks, God said. And when God speaks, these are actions.

[15 : 40] We often say actions speak louder than words, and we know what we mean, but with God that is never true because God's words are also actions. It's not that God speaks and then something happens.

It's that the act of speaking itself is God acting. And when he speaks through his prophets, when he speaks through his messengers, above all, when he speaks through scripture, that is the living words.

That's so important to realise about scripture. The word of God is not something accompanied by the power of God. The word of God is itself the power of God.

As Paul says in Romans, the gospel is the power of God. The word of the gospel is the power of God to everyone who believes. Sometimes that will be accompanied by the spectacular, like the fire from heaven in chapter 18.

Other times it will simply be the voice. But the important thing is, when God steps into the story, when God speaks, everything changes. So God steps into the story then.

[16 : 46] And the final part of the story, verses 15 to 23, God speaks about the future. How do we recognise the voice of God?

We recognise the voice of God, surely, because he's always moving us on. He'll talk about the past, he'll talk about the present. One thing he'll always do is move us on.

What are you doing here? He may be saying to somebody tonight. He should be somewhere else.

That's what God may be saying. I don't know any of you, so I don't know what situation you're in in your walk with God, or even if you're still searching, whether you want to be a Christian.

But that may be what God is saying to some of us. What are you doing here? And of course, the answer may be, I'm here because you've put me here. Or the answer may be, Lord, I'm ready to go somewhere else, if that's what you want.

But the important thing is that God will, as I say, God will move us on. God will change us. And that's one way you recognise a true prophet. The one thing a false prophet will never do is tell people that they need to change.

[17 : 57] Because a false prophet wants to be popular. I usually find that in the various places I've ministered, that people say, oh yes, we want to change.

And mutter under the breath, as long as you don't actually change anything. Change is uncomfortable. Change is risky. But God wants us to change. And what's God, what's the Lord saying to Elijah?

First of all, he's giving him a new task. Verse 15, the Lord says, go back the way you came to the desert of Damascus. It's not just go back the way you came, but go back the way you came and I've got a new task for you.

Rather like in the gnarly stories of C.S. Lewis, stories which I love, in the silver chair, one character is told after having done a very difficult task and being given another one, didn't you know that the reward for doing a task well is to be given another and more difficult one.

And sometimes that is what the Christian life seems like. You see, the Lord is saying, the job I've got for you involves the destinies of nations.

[19 : 05] Hazael king over Aram or Syria, anoint Jehu king over Israel and anoint Elisha. Now, the point is, as we'll see in a moment, Elijah does only one of these.

But that doesn't matter because the important thing is, this work is going to be carried on by another prophet and that by anointing Elisha, these other things are going to be carried out.

once again, the importance of the word of God and its way of changing things. See, we've got here the hiddenness of the Lord as well as his presence.

And that's why when Elijah hears God, he hears him in this lonely place where centuries before Moses had hurt him. So there's a new task. Elijah, I want you to go back.

But I want you to go back to do something new and that new thing is going to affect the destinies of nations. It's going to be all about how world affairs are going to develop.

[20 : 07] But the second thing he does, and this is the last part of the story, is the emergence of the new prophet. We have here the call of Elisha.

So Elijah went from there and found, this is verse 19, Elisha, son of Shepheth. He was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen. Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak around him.

A symbolic gesture meaning, I want you to carry on the work. And Elisha says, let me kiss my father and mother goodbye and then I will come with you.

Now some draw unfavourable comparisons here with Luke chapter 9 where someone says he wants to follow Jesus but he wants to go and he wants to go back and fulfil family responsibilities. it's not really a very good comparison. Here, the man in Luke 9 wanted to evade the call of Jesus. Here, Elisha is following the call of Elijah and he wants basically to cut loose not to hold back and then I will come with you.

[21 : 16] And notice how in verse 21 he's very low key but he's really, he is really not burning his boats but burning the ploughing equipment.

Sometimes when God calls us to do something new we really have to do the equivalent not necessarily literally burning but sometimes you need to get rid physically of the things that speak of the old life and not to hold back.

And that's why this is so low key I think. We've had these spectacular stories of the fire from heaven of God appearing and speaking to Elijah and outlining this great program that's going to take place but this has got to be worked out in everyday life.

We're all familiar with that scenario aren't we? You may have been at some Christian meeting deeply moved deeply inspired ready to do everything then we get back to the normal routine of everyday living to the dull grey routines.

November is a bad time isn't it? I used to teach in college in Durham November and February were regarded as those low times in the year when people lost the will to live. That's why the Bible has these things worked out in the detail of everyday living.

[22 : 38] So what to sum up then is this story saying to us? Don't worry I'm not going to repeat everything I've said before I simply want to make two points just to reinforce and summarize.

First of all if we feel like Elijah at the beginning of the story if we're tired if we're exhausted if we're fed up if we feel we can't go another step and do what Elijah did run away take a rest don't feel you have to drive yourself away that the Lord is not going to drive you and then get up again and carry on.

The important thing for the child of God is not how often we fall or whether we get up again and the second thing is God is never taken by surprise.

Sometimes people look at Christian history contemporary life and say what will happen when so and so goes? What will happen? How can we continue?

The point is the work is not ours. God always has his people and at the right time they will emerge in the right place and for the right reason.

[23 : 53] Long ago Moses had complained Lord this isn't the job for me send my brother. And the one thing God will not allow us to say because God says to Moses then effectively Moses I never get the wrong person.

This is another illustration of it. Elijah says James and I can certainly believe it after reading this chapter Elijah was a person just like us but who's going to come after the but in our lives?

Let's pray.