

1 Kings 19:1-18

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] From the mountaintop to the dark, lonely valley, from the bold words at Carmel to the whining groans at Horeb, from the expectation of national renewal to the crushing reality of standing alone. The flight of Elijah from Queen Jezebel to Beersheba and then on to Horeb, as we have read in 1 Kings chapter 19, has provoked many responses from those, and we include ourselves, who enjoy the luxury of criticizing from afar, or indeed of indulging in amateur psychology at a safe distance.

Most, it would seem, are agreed that this journey of Elijah is, at best, far from being Elijah's finest moment, and at worst, a sorry episode that lays the prophet open to justified rebuke from God.

And why not the rest of us? How the mighty are fallen, we can sagely pontificate.

But is there more here than meets the eye, or more than we have been willing to recognize? I want to consider the flight of Elijah and his encounter with God at Horeb by means of questions we can pose surrounding the actions and indeed the emotions of Elijah and of God, and look for answers to those questions in the passage itself that we read earlier. And as I say, that our answers would come from the passage and not be influenced, difficult though that is, by our own preconceived notions as to what we think is going on before us. That is not an easy task, because if we're honest, we all come to a passage such as this, especially if we are in a measure familiar with it, we come to it with our already formed views and opinions. But we trust that with God's help, we can lay those opinions under the rule of God's Word. So, questions that we can pose to the passage. In the first question,

I'll just run through the questions I want to pose, and then we can consider them, seek to answer them. First of all, was Elijah afraid? And if he was afraid, is that a problem? So, it's two questions, really.

[3 : 0 6] Secondly, was Elijah dejected? And if he was, why was he dejected? The third question is, should Elijah have run away? Evidently, he did. It's stated explicitly, should he have done so?

The fourth question is the following, is Elijah telling the truth? When he has his encounter with God and he lays before him his complaints, is he telling the truth? What he says, is it true? Does it reflect the reality of the situation? Or is he putting his own spin on it, perhaps for his own advantage? And then there's a final question, but I'm not going to tell you what it is, because if I do, it will already prejudice the answer that we're going to be seeking to give to the questions I've already mentioned. That may sound a bit cryptic, but bear with me. Once we've answered the first four questions, I will reveal what the final question is. First of all then, was Elijah afraid? Now, of all the questions, this does seem the most unnecessary one, because after all, in the passage, it is explicitly stated that he was afraid. There in verse 3, following a description of how King Ahab had given an account to Jezebel, given an account to Jezebel of what had happened, of how the prophets of

Baal had been slaughtered, and we're told of the threat that Jezebel makes concerning Elijah's life, there we read, as clear as day, Elijah was afraid and ran for his life.

Seemingly then, an unnecessary question. However, just for a moment, bear with me as we ponder or ask the question, is that actually what is being said? You will notice in the church Bible that that first part of verse 3 is given an alternative reading. There in the body of the text, we read Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. But there at the bottom of the page, we don't often make reference to the footnotes, but we will on this occasion, there it says, Elijah saw and ran for his life. Now, we're not going to go into the gory details of why it is that there is some dispute as to what is the actual text on this occasion. Very seldom that in the Old Testament there are textual issues, but though we're not going to go into the gory details, suffice it to say that the Hebrew word allows for both possibilities, hence the reason for the alternative being noted at the foot of the page. Not surprisingly, given the context, the possibility that it means Elijah was afraid is the one opted for. And I say that because the context of the threatening of Jezebel, the following words, and he ran for his life, all would seemingly point very clearly in the direction that this is indeed so. Elijah was afraid.

But it is worth noting that it's possible that what was originally said is that Elijah saw and ran for his life. Now, why would it say that? What would that suggest? What did Elijah see?

[6 : 43] Well, what he saw, and we're going to be developing this a little more as we answer the further questions, what he saw was a remarkable thing and a very depressing thing. He saw that the fire from heaven, marvelous and glorious though it was, though it so clearly identified the Lord as the living and true God, despite that the fire from heaven has changed nothing fundamentally in the spiritual condition of Israel.

And it does seem a remarkable thing. The people of Israel had gathered, they had seen with their own eyes, how the prophet of the Lord had called for fire and fire had been sent. And yet, there seems to be no fundamental change in the spiritual condition of the nation. Jezebel certainly hasn't changed despite being given a blow-by-blow account by her husband, King Ahab. We're told there in the first verse of chapter 19. Now, Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done. Everything. She knew as if she had been there, what had happened. I'm sure she didn't doubt for a moment the accuracy of the account that Ahab brought her.

And yet, she doesn't change. She doesn't abandon Baal and embrace Yahweh. And what of Ahab? What of King Ahab? He was there.

But he hasn't changed either. He hasn't repented. He hasn't recognized the gravity of his idolatry and his apostasy. He isn't calling the people to a renewed commitment to the Lord. No.

He remains entranced by Jezebel. And what Jezebel says goes. Jezebel is his idol. Returning to the subject of idols that we were considering this morning, his life revolves around this entrancing woman. Now, he is guilty for that. But that would seem to be a fair description of his situation.

[9 : 01] But not only Jezebel, not only Ahab, but it would appear that the people also. Now, it may be that there were those among the crowds that gathered, those who genuinely not only recognized that the Lord was God. We're told in chapter 18 that they all recognized that the Lord was God. But that following on from that recognition, no doubt there were those who sought forgiveness for their idolatry and repented of their sin. We hope and we believe that there must have been some. But as a nation, we do not find any indication of national renewal, of national repentance, quite the reverse. And if we were able, and time doesn't allow, to read through the following chapters, that conclusion would be amply confirmed.

And so Elijah saw this. And can you imagine what it must have been like for Elijah to see this? How discouraging it must have been. And he sees also that as a result of this stubborn refusal to bow the knee to the Lord, his own life is in danger. And so we are told he ran for his life.

But is he afraid to die? Even if we accept, and it's reasonable to do so, that what most consider to be the reading, Elijah was afraid, let's take that as being so. Is he afraid to die?

I think there is at least good reason to suggest that he is not. Is it not the same Elijah who just a few days later is praying that his life would be taken from him? Death isn't the issue. Elijah wants to die.

What he doesn't want is to be killed by Jezebel. And he doesn't want to be killed by Jezebel, because that would call into question the honor of the Lord. If Jezebel, the arch follower of Baal, were able to get her way and procure the death of the prophet of the Lord, then for all it would appear that despite the fire from heaven, the final word was reserved for Baal and for Jezebel. And so that might it not be what Elijah is so concerned to avoid that he would not die at the hands of Jezebel.

[11 : 42] Death is not the main issue. Being killed by Jezebel, it certainly is. And so he runs for his life. But let's suppose he is afraid, if not of death, of dying. And that's a legitimate distinction.

Afraid of what is involved in dying. It is an altogether natural fear. And I think it is entirely reasonable to suppose that even if we were to understand verse 3 as actually saying Elijah saw and ran for his life, it's still reasonable to presume that he was afraid. Shall we condemn him for being afraid? Is it a sin to be afraid? Would Elijah not be less than human to be unafraid in the face of such a chilling threat as has been communicated to him? Was not our Lord afraid?

As he saw the cross loom large on the horizon. To be afraid is no sin. Some might respond, ah, but Jesus did not run. He may well have been afraid, but he did not run.

Is this not the difference? Well, we'll come back to that in a moment. Was Elijah afraid? I think we can conclude that very, very probably he was. But does such fear merit rebuke? I certainly will not be the one casting the first stone. And as we even meditate and ponder on that just for a brief moment, and as we would draw an application for ourselves, I would ask you this evening, are you afraid? Are there things in your life and on the horizon, perhaps indeed as you consider this week that is beginning, and you are afraid? It's okay to be afraid.

It's human to be afraid. In your fear, turn to the one who can grant you courage and comfort and company. But a second question I want to pose and try and answer is the following one. Was Elijah dejected?

[14 : 03] Was he dejected? Now to this question, I am very prepared to share the conclusion of most that he was indeed downcast and dejected. The whole account that he eloquently portrays this as being so. He was indeed downcast and dejected. Indeed, I think we can go further. We can say that before us, we have a broken man. This is a broken man who is presented to us in this chapter.

But the crucial question, the important question isn't, is he dejected? But why was he dejected? Let's be agreed that he's dejected, that he's downcast, indeed that he is a broken man. But why?

Why is he downcast? Why is he broken? Was it a lack of faith in the Lord? Was he, as some have freely suggested and criticized him, is it that he's wallowing in self-pity? Is he too proud to recognize that he is not the only faithful one in Israel, as he seems to claim? Is this the reason for his dejection? Most would seem to conclude in that direction. But can we not at least suggest another possibility, another reason for his dejection? Might it not be the continued idolatry of King Ahab? Might it not be the stubborn and continuing apostasy of Israel? Might it not be the knowledge that the prophets of Baal massacred at Kishon will soon be replaced by others? Might it not be that his dejection that is true and profound? Might it not be that it is born of his zeal for the name of the Lord? His despondency a reflection of his love for the people of Israel, as he sees them in such a pitiful condition? He is broken, yes, but by the hardness of heart of a stiff-necked people. And do we not see in this a glimmer of our Savior who looked over Jerusalem? And he too felt that brokenness and that dejection as he saw the idolatry of a people who did not embrace their

Messiah. And would we criticize our Savior for that dejection? And as we consider this possibility, does it not also give us the opportunity to ponder for a moment at just how hard is the human heart? How spiritually blind the sinner's condition? If we consider Ahab as a test case, the man who has seen with his very own eyes the fire fall from heaven, and yet he will not repent. And it is a salutary reminder of our utter dependence on the Spirit of God to convict and to convert sinners. Signs and wonders, however marvelous they might be, will not bring a single soul to faith.

A big-name preacher is likewise impotent in the face of the hardness of the human heart. A multimedia musical extravaganza as our service won't do the trick either. Only the Spirit of God doing the soul work that only He can do as He applies the Word of God to a man's heart, only the Spirit of God will draw a sinner to the Savior. And He will draw a sinner to the Savior. And He will draw a sinner to the Savior. And He will draw a sinner to the Savior. Was Elijah dejected? Elijah sees the sorry panorama, deeply pained by the rebellion of the people, grieved by the idolatry that surrounds him, perhaps confused by the hardness of heart of the people. And he can take no more.

[18 : 40] Enough is enough is his understandable cry. You see, the hope of change and renewal that he had harbored stubbornly and faithfully, that hope of change and renewal, at least in his lifetime, quite ironically, has been quenched by Mount Carmel.

You see, Elijah reasons, and reasonably so. He says, if they're not persuaded by the fire from heaven, if they're not persuaded by the rain quenching the drought-afflicted panorama, if that doesn't convince them, if that doesn't draw them back to the Lord, what can this poor prophet do? And so I ask, shall we condemn Elijah for his dejection? Rather, should we not be convicted by his dejection? Should we not be instructed by his zealous dejection? We who look at our nation in the depths of sin and rebellion, and yet so often it has so little effect upon us, so few tears that are shed, so little dejection produced by the sorry panorama that surrounds us? Should not Elijah rather be our instructor in this matter? But there's a third question, should Elijah have run away? We're agreed, he's afraid. We're agreed, he's dejected. And we've already suggested that neither condition is culpable. But should he have run for his life? Elijah's afraid and ran for his life. Here surely, Elijah is at fault. And be clear, it's not my concern to whitewash

Elijah or to suggest that he's not capable of sin or of fault. Of course not. But simply to ask the question, was he at fault, even in this matter of running for his life? Before we precipitately come to a conclusion, at least let us consider three considerations. One thing I would say, just as a general point, and I won't develop, is that running away can be, on occasion, the right thing to do.

And if we chose to go through the scriptures, we could find, and time doesn't allow, occasions when it was the right thing to do. So just at least bear in mind that possibility. But also consider the possibility that we've already hinted at, that he is seeking to avoid death at the hands of Jezebel, due to his concern for the honor of God. Death is not what preoccupies him. But being killed by Jezebel, most assuredly does. But thirdly, we have in the passage itself the suggestion, at the very least, the suggestion that this flight of Elijah actually enjoys divine sanction. Notice especially what we read from verse 5 through to verse 8. In the second half of verse 5, all at once he has begun his flight, he is asleep, and then we read all at once an angel touched him. Verse 7 confirms that it's not any angel, it's the angel of the Lord, this mystical divine figure. The angel of the Lord touched him and said, get up and eat. He looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then laid down again. And we continue, 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.

Here the angel of the Lord is facilitating this journey. It would seem perhaps even sanctioning the journey. Now we might argue that what we have here is God in his graciousness providing for him, even though he is going on a flight, on a journey that he ought not to have undertaken. That is a possibility. But we can at least consider as possible, as plausible, that what we have before us is divine sanction. The angel of the Lord is providing him sustenance. The angel of the Lord makes specific reference to this journey, and he's saying, it's too much for you. You want to get to Horeb? Well, if you're going to get to Horeb, you're going to have to eat, you're going to have to drink, you're going to have to be strengthened. And here I provide for you that you might arrive at your destination. There certainly doesn't seem to be here great condemnation of Elijah for the journey he is undertaking.

[23 : 30] And note also, and this would really merit more comment, but we're not going to give it more comment, just note the destination. It's Horeb, Sinai, Mount Sinai, the mountain of God, of huge covenantal significance. And we can simply hint at that and move on. But then some might say, what are the questions God poses to Elijah? One question repeated on two occasions. Is there not in the question implied criticism or the suggestion that Elijah is going in a direction he ought not to be going in? Then in verse 9, what are you doing here, Elijah? What are you doing here? He's arrived at Horeb. And the question of the Lord is, what are you doing here? And the Lord repeats the question in verse 13. Well, if we are to give Elijah the benefit of the doubt, and I think it's always good to give everybody the benefit of the doubt. I certainly hope that you are so gracious as to give me the benefit of the doubt, as I hope I would do the same for you. And if we are to give Elijah the benefit of the doubt, we should take the question of the Lord at face value. He is simply asking Elijah, what are you doing here? We can't definitively conclude that this is a criticism or that there is implied criticism.

There may be, but it is by no means clearly apparent. Is it not perhaps rather that the Lord is simply and indeed tenderly inviting Elijah to bear his soul before his God? The Lord knows that he's dejected.

The Lord knows that he's downcast. The Lord knows that he's broken. And he says, why are you here, Elijah? Tell me all about it. Like a loving mother to her child who comes crying. And she says, tell me all about it. I'm all here. I'll listen to you. I'll understand. What are you doing here, Elijah?

Perhaps we can come to a better judgment as to whether indeed that is the intention of the Lord with that question in answering the next question. Is Elijah telling the truth? In verses 10 and 14, in response to the question that the Lord poses, what are you doing here, Elijah? Elijah responds.

And he replies, I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken 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. Is Elijah telling the truth? He claims to be very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. Surely that is true. His whole life speaks of dedication to the Lord. He's not being proud. He is simply indicating that which is true, and he is before the God who knows all things. Far be it from Elijah to try and pull the wool over the Lord's eye. No, he speaks of being very zealous because he was very zealous. He says that the Israelites have rejected your covenant.

[26 : 35] That is most abundantly true. That they had broken down the altars. Yes, indeed. That they had killed the prophets. They had done that also. It's all true. Perhaps the one thing that Elijah says that some would question and say, well, that's not true. He says, I am the only one left. I am the only one left.

As we think about that, do notice that even in his finest hour on Mount Carmel, he had made the same claim. In chapter 18 and verse 22, I am the only one of the Lord's prophets left. He seldom criticized for saying that on Mount Carmel, but here at Horeb, we are quick to criticize. Is it true what he's saying?

Is he the only one left? Surely the text confirms that that is not so. Surely here there is self-pity or pride on the part of Elijah. Well, perhaps. But is it not fair for Elijah to say that of all the prophets of the Lord, he is the only one who has taken a stand publicly and deliberately face to face with Ahab and the prophets of Baal. There are Mount Carmel. Where were the prophets hidden in the cave by Obadiah? Did they join Elijah? Did they say, Elijah, we're right behind you? No, they remained hidden in the cave. And so there is a genuine sense, I think we can fairly conclude, that what Elijah is saying is true. Up to a point, I am the only one left. Perhaps in a moment, we will see further confirmation of the truth that Elijah is indeed telling the truth. So the questions posed, and we must draw things to a conclusion and come to our final mystery question. The questions posed and answered lead me to the conclusion that Elijah has often been given a raw deal. Yes, he is a broken man. Of that there can be no doubt. But broken not by his own pride or self-pity, but broken by the burden he carries for the honor of the name of the Lord whom he serves zealously. Which does lead us to our final question. How does God deal with his faithful yet broken servant? And how does the Lord continue to deal with broken servants as perhaps some of us are, or perhaps at some point in our Christian experience we will be? How does God deal with faithful and broken servants? Well, the passage gives us an answer to that question. We must very swiftly notice three things that can be said.

First of all, he provides for his broken servant graciously. There is, as we've noted, the material provision, the bread and the water to give him physical sustenance. But there is also his near presence and his listening ear. The Lord provides graciously for his broken servant. And the Lord continues to provide graciously for his broken servants. And if you are a broken servant of the Lord, be assured that his dealings with you will be tender and gracious and loving.

He provides for him graciously. He speaks to him gently. The wind and the earthquake and the fire, followed by the gentle whisper. They merit a sermon in themselves. Suffice it to say for our purposes this evening that God speaks gently to a broken man. He speaks gently to a broken man. A gentle whisper is all that Elijah could bear. A gentle whisper is all that Elijah could understand. And a gentle whisper is what he has given by the Lord. And the Lord knows where you are, and he will deal with you where you are. He knows what you can bear, and he knows what you cannot bear. He provides for him graciously. He speaks to him gently. And finally, he vindicates him eloquently. The truth of what Elijah says in response to the question of the Lord, what are you doing here, Elijah? The truth of what Elijah says in his complaint, in his accusation before God, is confirmed by the commission Elijah is given. In verses 15 to 18, part of, if you wish, the restoration of this broken man is that he is given a commission for further service for the Lord. This man who wished to die is told, no, you will not die, for you still have work to do. And what is the commission he is given? He is told to anoint three men. Hazael, king over Aram.

[31 : 34] Aram was a foreign nation. He is told to anoint Jehu, son of Nimshi, king over Israel. This is a king who would become king over Israel several years later. There would be three or four kings in between. And he is told to anoint Elisha as his successor, as a prophet of the Lord. What were these men to do? These men were to execute judgment on this apostate nation. What does Elijah say? He says, these people are apostate. These people have broken the covenant. And the Lord says, you're right, Elijah. You are dead right. And I will judge them. The accusation you make is true. The case that you have presented is coherent. The evidence is overwhelming. And I will judge them. And you, in vindication, will anoint the man who will exercise that judgment over this apostate, idolatrous nation. And so, in the commission he is given, he is vindicated by God.

The judgment in question will not be seen for many years, certainly a decade or more later. But it will come. Indeed, if we are reading through the book of Kings, we need to get through to 2 Kings and chapters 8 and 9 before we discover the fulfillment of this judgment announced by the Lord in this commission. But there is one final thing we must notice. Having posed and answered in a measure, perhaps, the questions posed, there is one final element. And it is this, that the judgment on an apostate Israel that confirms the accuracy and the justice of Elijah's accusation against the people is accompanied, as it ever is, by a sign of God's grace. In verse 18, yet I reserve 7,000 in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed, or perhaps it should be will not bowed.

Given that the previous verses are speaking of future events, they're speaking of the judgment that is to come, it seems reasonable that the 7,000 that are being reserved, that are being kept, will be those who will remain following on from the exercise of this judgment. Yet I reserve 7,000 in Israel, all whose knees have not or will not bow down to Baal, and all whose mouths have not kissed him. Following the judgment, following the work of judgment that will be exercised by Hazael, king over Aram, by Jehu, son of Nimshi, by Elisha, the prophet of the Most High, following that judgment, there will be a remnant of faithful, believing people. And this is the comfort, this is the promise, this is the rock upon which dejected servants can rest and indeed persevere. Grace always has a remnant. Praise be to God.

Let us pray.