

1 Kings 19:1-18
“The Lord’s Still, Small Voice”

Introduction

Happy New Year! How do you want to spend this new year? Some of you may be in the midst of major changes. Are you praying about what to do in the midst of trials? Grace City Church Tokyo also wants to see the light of the future. We are praying about who the next pastor will be.

In all of these situations, what we have in common is the need for certain guidance. A concrete vision that gives promise for the future. If God has a plan, we want to find the way to that plan. How is God leading us to the next step? As we ponder these questions, let’s look at the tumultuous life story of the prophet Elijah.

1 Kings 19:1-18

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.”

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.

⁹ There he came to a cave and lodged in it. And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and he said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

¹⁰ He said, “I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away.”

¹¹ And he said, “Go out and stand on the mount before the LORD.” And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks 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 the sound of a low whisper.

¹³ And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

¹⁴ He said, "I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away."

¹⁵ And the LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus. And when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Syria.

¹⁶ And Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel, and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place.

¹⁷ And the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death.

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."

As we have just read, the prophet is devastated and in despair. He even thought his life was over. We too can fall into such circumstances. First, let me clarify what weaknesses we tend to fall into when we are disappointed. I would like to diagnose weakness and despair.

Second, let's look at how God deals with those who have been weakened by burnout, so to speak. What is God's treatment? And how can you be lifted up and recover from it? The third thing we want to look at is the encouragement that God has a plan and a vision for your future. However, it is not one you might expect.

1. Weaknesses we Fall into as a Result of Disappointments: Diagnosis

The prophet Elijah is one of the greatest prophets along with Moses and Isaiah. Perhaps one of the most famous episodes in Elijah's life is his victory in a battle of faith against 450 prophets of a false god called Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah. This is recorded in chapter 18 of 1 Kings.

Elijah, as the only prophet who believed in the true God, bravely faced a life-threatening battle against 950 false prophets and won a great victory. Elijah believed and revealed to Israel that the Lord (Yahweh) was the one true and living God, the God of promise, full of grace who gives salvation.

But when Jezebel, the queen of the northern kingdom of Israel, learned of this, she threatened to have Elijah killed by the next day (v. 2). This was no mere threat. For Jezebel had killed Yahweh's prophets before (18:4, 13). Jezebel had a ferocity and cruelty that her husband, King Ahab, lacked.

How did Elijah react? Whether it was exhaustion, lack of faith, or resignation that there was no way to win, Elijah, for whatever reason, sought deliverance by fleeing.

19:3,4. 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.

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."

This is an unexpected response! No one else had as much faith and courage as Elijah (18:15). He believed in God's miracles and did mighty works. If Elijah responded like this, any one of us, no matter how much faith we have, how strong we are, how full of hope we may be, is capable of retreating and fleeing in fear and anxiety.

Elijah is on a long journey from Yisrael in the north to Beersheba, the southernmost point of the Promised Land, trying to get as far away from Jezebel as he can. The fact that he is left alone when he reaches Beersheba and travels another day may indicate that he dismisses his servant and abandons the ministry altogether. In other words, Elijah interpreted Jezebel's personal attack on him as the end of his ministry.

Not only that, but some biblical scholars believe that Elijah was exhibiting a state of depression. "The Bible typically exposes the weakness of a man of God, for Elijah exhibited symptoms of manic depression, wishing for death, together with loss of appetite, an inability to manage and with excessive self-pity." (Donald Wiseman, 1 & 2 Kings)

Beloved, what happens to Elijah may happen to us. I understand this very well. Last October, I had a transient ischemic attack (TIA) and had to take a 3-month leave of absence. My condition is what is often called "burnout." I sympathize with Elijah in his painful experience. What kind of condition is one prone to in such a situation? Let's try to diagnose it.

First, Elijah was not listening to God. The phrase "word of the Lord" that was so prominent in chapters 17-18 (17:2, 8; 18:1) does not actually appear here. The word of the Lord is absent and does not reappear until verse 9. Certainly God helped Elijah on his journey. But the fact that the journey was not at God's initiative is well illustrated by the question, "Elijah, what are you doing here?"

And after these words, God commands Elijah to "return" to Damascus, or "the north" (v. 15). So the trip south was not God's plan, but Elijah apparently ran away of his own accord. He forgot to think faithfully, spiritually, or theologically, and simply reacted to the situation.

Second, he is very pessimistic and focuses only on the negative factors.

19:10. He said, "I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away."

Elijah speaks only of the apostasy of Israel and the sacrifice of the prophets of the Lord. There is no mention of the victory that brought the Israelites back to faith (18:39), the rebuilding of the altar (18:30-32), or the defeat of the prophets of Baal (19:1). Elijah's memory is indeed selective! He turns a great victory into an overwhelming defeat, and he is all about pessimism.

Third, he looks at himself with great pity. He is filled with self-pity, saying that he is the only one who has served the Lord diligently, that he is the only one left, and that he is the only one whose life is in danger. In other words, he is filled with an exaggerated sense of self-importance (pride), and an exaggerated sense of self-loathing, saying that he wants to die.

2. God's Way of Dealing with the Situation: The Treatment

So, how did God deal with Elijah and this situation, and what was his treatment?

*19:5,6. And he lay down and slept under a broom tree.
And behold, an angel touched
him and said to him, "Arise and eat."
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.*

What gentle treatment! God sends his messenger twice. He cheers Elijah up by giving him food and drink as he lies there, exhausted from fatigue and despair, even wishing for death. There is no harsh rebuke, no reproach for unbelief. This is the time when Elijah just needed to eat, drink, lie down and rest.

But that is not all. The messenger of God who provides Elijah with food reminds us of the miraculous feeding. When there was a famine and Elijah took refuge on the banks of the River Cherith, God used ravens to bring bread and meat to feed Elijah (1 Kgs 17:1-7). God is reminding Elijah that his needs will be met.

In fact, there are other prophets who fled from God. Jonah was commanded by God to go to Nineveh, the capital of the great northern kingdom of Assyria, but he fled to the west. God did not abandon Jonah in his flight...but, by the very terrible means of having him swallowed by a great fish...God drew Jonah to himself!

However, Elijah was treated in a gentler way. God approaches and deals with each person in a way that is appropriate to his or her circumstances, feelings, and condition. Not all people are the same. It seems that Elijah was gently touched by the Lord, cheered up by food, and began to seek God again. God himself will make those who voluntarily leave him rise up to seek him again.

About 400 kilometers south of Beersheba, Elijah traveled for 40 days and 40 nights to Horeb, the mountain of God. Elijah would travel to Horeb, the mountain of God, because in the past, God had revealed Himself to Israel at Horeb. Elijah would also

remember that it was here that Moses received the promise. At the same time, the 40 days and 40 nights also recalls Israel's 40 years of wandering in the wilderness without knowing where they were going, as they disbelieved and disobeyed God.

Beloved, in order for us to also seek God, he will have us go through a trying journey. For you to find your Horeb, God will allow this. Where is your Horeb where you will meet God? Where God speaks to you, shows Himself to you, and where you hear His voice. Christ is your Horeb!

Then God asks Elijah, "Elijah, what are you doing here?" This question is asked twice (vv. 9, 13), which tells us how hardened Elijah's heart was and how he was in a state of unbelief.

The question in the Bible of God asking, "Where are you?" is often posed to unbelievers. As we read in Genesis 3, Adam and Eve hid in the shade of a tree after eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. The Lord called out to them saying, "Where are you?" (Gen. 3:9)

Elijah is asked twice, and both times he answers with the same words, exposing his stubborn attitude before the Lord. As I said earlier, he has a stubborn heart of self-importance, self-loathing, and self-pity. And yet, the Lord says amazing things and does powerful things.

*19:11,12. And he said, "Go out and stand on the mount before the LORD."
And behold, the LORD passed by, and a
great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks 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. And after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was
not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper.*

What does the great wind, earthquake, and fire signify? It reminds us of the great miraculous work God once did for Elijah, right before his eyes. He needed to remember Mount Carmel. Not only that, but Horeb (Sinai) is not just a mountain, but "the mountain of God" (v. 8). It is the place where Israel, sustained in the wilderness, met the Lord and learned more about the kind of God they served.

God revealed to Elijah, who was disappointed and afraid, that He was alive and doing His work, no matter what state Elijah was in. God gently rests, strengthens, and leads us on a journey to find Him again, revealing who He is. That is God's prescription for our disappointment.

3. God's Vision: Recovery

You may have noticed that many times here it says, "The Lord was not there." The Lord God was not there in the great wind, in the earthquake, or in the fire. In addition, Elijah was told to "go out and stand before [the Lord] on the mountain." But he was hiding in a cave. After a great wind, earthquake, and fire, "there was the sound of a low whisper"

and he finally came out of the cave and stood at the entrance. But his face was covered with a cloak, and he remained hidden.

The Lord may be trying here not only to remind Elijah of recent history, but also to teach him something new. On Mount Carmel, the emphasis was on God's magnificent ways, especially the miraculous fire coming down from heaven. But the emphasis in verses 11-12 is on God's quiet ways.

Outside the cave was the storm (wind... earthquake... fire), and God was not present in such spectacular and amazing (miraculous) events. Rather, on this occasion, God revealed Himself in a gentle whisper. Elijah needed to remember the wonderful works of God in the past, but there is more to God than fire. Elijah needed to understand that there is more than storms and earthquakes.

Like Elijah, we tend to simplify God (His ways). We tend to try to make God obey us according to our own preferences. If it is not the way we wish it to be, we get angry and act as if God is either not there, asleep, or does not care about us.

This lesson seems to be quite difficult for us. Even Elijah had difficulty understanding it, because the second time he was asked by God, he repeated exactly the same answer as the first time. Moreover, God's great demonstrations (the great wind, earthquake, and fire) passed before Elijah, who (like Moses, who had the privilege of seeing them) was hiding in a cave and could not recognize them.

God works in ways we do not expect. He leads us down unexpected paths and saves us in unexpected ways. It is different from what we have experienced before. It is different from what we expect in the future. Therefore, we often have to modify our stereotypical view of God.

Last week during our Christmas worship, we celebrated how Christ came in a surprising and unexpected way. As such, Jesus, who became a baby, accomplished salvation by hanging helplessly on a cross. He demonstrated His eternal love by dying—not by performing powerful miracles—but by giving His life. Instead of exercising divine power and dominion, He humbly gave up everything to give life and protection to all things. It is hard to believe, because it was the unexpected way.

So the Lord gave Elijah new instructions. He anointed Hazael, anointed Jehu, and anointed Elisha to be his successor (vv. 15-18). The new order and leader took over the old order. This was, of course, to bring about the final victory over Baal worship.

And this victory is the result of a political process, so to speak. Elijah expected miraculous spiritual means. But the power of God does not come by some grand demonstration that is obvious to all.

The final salvation comes not through Elijah's efforts, but through the efforts of others. It was not to be won by his own strength, success, and ability. When Elijah thought he was

the only one, 7,000 other believers were prepared, and they would win. This would not happen right away, but after a long process.

As you come to understand the unexpected ways of God, the unexpectedness of the gospel of the cross of Christ, and the riches of grace, your devastated and despairing heart will begin to be restored. You will begin to find a vision of God, even as you go back and forth. God prepares grace-filled paths at unexpected times, by unexpected people, and in unexpected ways. This will be your new year!