

The Prophet: There and Back Again

1 Kings 19

As a prophet of the Lord, John the Baptist proclaimed the nearness of the kingdom of God and called upon Israel to repent of their sins to prepare to enter that kingdom when the Messiah appeared. When his cousin, Jesus of Nazareth, came on the public scene, John saw the Spirit descend on him and told his hearers that Messiah had come. When Jesus started preaching and baptizing followers, John was content to see his own ministry recede. “He must increase, but I must decrease,” he said (John 3:30). John was a bold witness, pointing people to Jesus with all the zeal he had in him. Then one day, John was arrested by Herod Antipas, and as his days in prison wore on, and he heard more about Jesus’ public ministry, he sent word to Jesus in Matthew 11:3: “Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?” Something had shaken John’s bold assurance about Jesus’ identity. What was it? It was the fact that Jesus went around preaching, teaching, healing, and casting out demons, but there was no dramatic divine judgment, no social upheaval, no upending the political order. Jesus’ ministry caused a stir, to be sure, but it didn’t look like the kingdom John had been expecting. After all, what kind of kingdom is it that allows faithful prophets such as John to languish in prison? Jesus’ response to John in Matthew 11:4-6 reads, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.” Jesus reassured John that the messianic prophecies of Isaiah were being fulfilled in his ministry, and everything was on track with what God had planned. Therefore, John had to reframe his expectations for the coming of the kingdom of God. It would not yet come immediately with a dramatic judgment, but more like a seed that grows slowly and mysteriously.

The prophet John’s faith was shaken when his expectations were not fulfilled, and the same thing had happened to the prophet Elijah hundreds of years before, in this story of 1 Kings 19. Let’s recap what had just happened in chapter 18: Elijah had challenged the prophets of Baal to a showdown to determine who is truly God. After Yahweh, the God of Israel, utterly humiliated the false god Baal, the people confessed, “The Lord, he is God!” and they helped Elijah slaughter Baal’s prophets. Then, having humiliated the storm god Baal, the Lord ended a three-year drought in a way that made it unmistakable that he, and not Baal, is sovereign over the rain. So the covenant curse of drought was lifted, and Elijah miraculously ran before King Ahab’s chariot from Mt. Carmel to the king’s residence in Jezreel, presenting a picture of the prophet honoring the king and the king following the prophet. In all these events, the Lord wiped the slate clean and gave King Ahab a chance to start over and rule the kingdom of Israel in obedience to the Law of Moses. In his astounding patience, the Lord had set the stage for a genuine covenant renewal in Israel. So now it’s time for pure worship to be restored and for Israel to thrive! I’m sure Elijah could hardly wait for what was about to come next if King Ahab truly learned from these events and repented.

And then all his hopes were dashed immediately in the space of verses 1-2 of chapter 19: “Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. 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.’ With a chance to start fresh,

King Ahab went right back to his wife, told her everything Elijah had done, and once again let her call the shots in the kingdom. Notice that, in spite of being told that the Lord had sent fire from Heaven in response to Elijah's prayer, whereas the prophets of Baal got nothing but the sound of crickets, Jezebel did not say, "Well, obviously, the Lord is God, and Baal is not. I must now repent of worshipping Baal." No, sin doesn't work like that. Sin, by definition, is irrational, so merely demonstrating its folly is not enough to change the sinful heart. Queen Jezebel gave Elijah an ultimatum: get out of my kingdom within 24 hours, or you're a dead man! The great revival Elijah had expected did not come to pass.

So you can understand Elijah's discouragement. This chapter narrates a story of a discouraged prophet who goes out to the wilderness to meet God at an old, familiar mountain, and gain a deeper understanding of God's ways. The late author and long-time pastor Eugene Peterson once commented on the nature of true spirituality: "The assumption of spirituality is that God is always doing something before I know it. So the task is not to get God to do something I think needs to be done, but to become aware of what God is doing so that I can respond to it and participate and take delight in it."¹ I think Peterson is right, and Elijah's journey to Mt. Horeb and back again is a story that summons us to relinquish our attempts to control God's plan and instead joyfully receive his kingdom as he chooses to give it to us. It is often our lack of spiritual perception that leaves us discouraged by the events of our lives and our inability to control them. We expect one thing, and we get another, and then we get discouraged when we don't have eyes to see what God is doing. We expected good health, and then we find out the cancer came back. We expected a wonderful marriage, and the reality of being married is much more difficult than we thought. We expected a glamorous, fruitful career of serving the Lord with unmistakable impact on many lives, but it never seemed to pan out that way, and we're left wondering if God has forgotten us. This story trains us to see with the eyes of faith that God is always up to something. Let's follow the contours of this story and see what it speaks to our lives today.

The first section of the story sets up the narrative tension by telling of

1. A broken prophet (vv. 1-8).

Elijah was clearly broken by Ahab's failure to lead in Israel's renewal and Jezebel's rage against him. He ran for his life, fleeing the northern kingdom of Israel to get as far south as he could, to the city of Beersheba at the southern end of the kingdom of Judah. There, far away from Jezebel's reach, he left his servant, indicating that he thought his ministry was over, and he had failed to accomplish anything. But he kept running, going a day's journey by himself into the desert. Maybe he kept going because he wanted to get even farther away from Jezebel, or maybe he had no plan other than to run. Whatever the case, by the time he reached an isolated broom tree in the desert and sat under its shade, he had given up all hope, and he prayed in verse 4, "It is enough now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers." His ministry has accomplished nothing, so he believes he doesn't deserve to live any longer. He sees no way forward for Israel, so he has given up.

Then he lay down and slept, hoping that he would not wake up again. But instead of granting his request for death, a heavenly messenger gently touched him, commanding him to rise and eat. And Elijah found at his head a cake of bread baked on hot coals and a jar of water. The Hebrew words for "cake" and "jar" both previously appeared in chapter 17 in the story of the Lord's provision for Elijah through the widow of Zarephath during the drought. So once again, the Lord

shows his provision for his prophet. Elijah then lay down again, but again the angel came to him and said the same thing, adding this time that Elijah needed to eat, “for the journey is too great for you.” So Elijah ate and drank again, and it sustained him for forty days and forty nights in the wilderness until he came to Mount Horeb, also known as Mount Sinai. We hear in that an echo of Exodus 34, when Moses at this same mountain was with the Lord forty days and forty nights, and he neither ate bread nor drank water (Exod. 34:28). And it foreshadows the forty days our Lord Jesus spent in the desert without food, preparing for his public ministry.

Although Elijah was broken and ready to die, the Lord graciously cared for him in the wilderness. As we see throughout Scripture, the wilderness is a place of provision and protection for God’s people: Moses, Israel, and now Elijah. He is a broken prophet, but the Lord is not done with him. The next time you find yourself in a wilderness season of life, where you seem to be wandering without clear direction, don’t be too quick to try to find your way out of it. Pay close attention to all the ways the Lord is caring for you in it. Don’t waste your time in the wilderness.

For Elijah, the wilderness is the pathway to a particular mountain. Mountains are important places in Scripture. Moses first encountered the Lord at Mount Horeb. Later Israel met the Lord at the same mountain. And now, at the heart of this story, Elijah does the same, so we come to the second section:

2. A mountain encounter (vv. 9-18).

At this mountain there are two rounds of dialogue between the Lord and Elijah, and sandwiched between them is an account of a divine encounter. We first note that Elijah came to a cave in verse 9 and lodged there. The Hebrew says, “There he came to *the* cave,” implying a definite cave that we have already seen before. I think it is likely the author means the very same cleft of the rock where the Lord hid Moses on the mountain when his presence passed by in Exodus 34. Then the dialogue began with the word of the Lord: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Many commentators read that question as a rebuke, as though the Lord is saying, “Why are you here at all, Elijah? You shouldn’t even be here.” But I think that reading ignores the fact that the angel of the Lord directed Elijah here when he encountered him in the wilderness. I don’t think this is a straight rebuke. It is more of an invitation to Elijah to speak and then to grow through listening to the Lord. So Elijah answers in verse 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 laments to the Lord that in spite of all that he had done, Israel remained hardened to the Lord. One major difference between Moses and Elijah here is that in Exodus 34, Moses interceded for Israel after the golden calf incident. Here, Elijah is not an intercessor for Israel, but an accuser of Israel. And his overall point is correct: Israel has remained utterly hardened and unchanged by the dramatic display of the Lord’s power at Mount Carmel.

After this first round of dialogue, the Lord told Elijah to stand at the mouth of the cave, and then as Elijah watched from inside, the Lord “passed by” (v. 11), the same verb used in the Moses story of Exodus 34 when the Lord’s presence passed by him. But this time, the “passing by” consisted of a destructive wind that tore through rocks on the mountain, then an earthquake, then fire (presumably lightning). And yet, we are told that the Lord was not in the wind, he was not in the earthquake, he was not in the fire. After these three dramatic displays, there was the sound of a low whisper, and although the text does not say it explicitly, we are to conclude that the Lord

was indeed present in the quiet. Knowing the Lord's presence was there, Elijah wrapped his face in his cloak, just as Moses had been hidden in the cleft of the rock, and he went out to the mouth of the cave. What is the meaning of this event? Notice something interesting about two verses that parallel each other. In verse 9 we read, "the *word* of the Lord came to him" to ask him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" But then the second time that happens, we read this in verse 13: "there came to him *a voice*". So the "word of the Lord" in verse 9 becomes a "voice" in verse 13, and the Hebrew word for "voice" is the same word translated "sound" in verse 12, in reference to the low whisper. So there are clues in the text that tell us that the "low whisper" is a way of representing the Word of God.

So what does this divine encounter teach us about God? It teaches us that God's work is not normally in dramatic, earth-shaking events, such as fire coming down from Heaven on Mount Carmel. God works through the surprisingly quiet and simple means of his Word. As a church, we must remember that lesson. The advance of God's kingdom does not depend on the size of our church, the size of our budget, the slickness of our branding, or the efficiency of our programs. Many churches in America run like well-oiled machines, with an impressive array of staff, with well-produced public events, with programs for every conceivable age group and demographic. None of those things are bad in themselves, but none of them are indications that the Lord is at work. The measure of a church's faithfulness in the advance of the kingdom of God is its faithful proclamation of, and reverence for, the Word of God. For two-thousand years, God has been pleased to gather a people to himself and form them into the image of his Son by the simple means of the Word, water, and table. May we always keep these things front and center in our church's life.

After the Moses-like divine encounter, the Lord has a second round of dialogue with Elijah. He asks the same question again: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" And Elijah's answer is exactly the same as before. He remains Israel's accuser. But what the Lord taught him the first time by "passing by" he now teaches him directly by speaking to him. He told Elijah, "You're not done. Your ministry will continue, but now it will take the form of bringing down the house of Ahab. So go to Damascus, and you shall anoint Hazael king of Syria. You shall anoint Jehu king of Israel. And you shall anoint Elisha to be prophet in your place." These three men would become adversaries of the house of Ahab. Hazael will be an international enemy, Jehu an enemy from within Israel, and Elisha the prophet who will carry on the prophetic task of opposing Ahab's house. Although the Lord had graciously given Ahab a chance to repent and start fresh, Ahab had spurned the opportunity, so he and his descendants are now destined to be wiped out.

When the risen Christ appeared to his disciples in John 20:22-23, we read that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld." Notice that Jesus has given us a twofold mission in the world: to declare forgiveness and to withhold it. The ministry of the gospel is a ministry of both salvation and condemnation. We don't merely invite people to salvation through faith. We confront a rebellious world with a warning of judgment, and for those who refuse, that judgment will indeed come to pass. And even though we might find ourselves discouraged when people do not believe our message, we have to remember that God will be glorified when he brings judgment on those who have refused to bow the knee to his Son. Even where it serves to harden the hearts of unbelievers in order to store up greater wrath for them on the final day, our

proclamation of the gospel still serves an important purpose in God's plan. Once again, this story challenges us simply to remain faithful to the Word of God. Don't try to manipulate the results. Speak God's truth to a sinful world, and let the Word draw some to repentance and harden others in sin. Both aspects are in keeping with our mission.

But if Elijah is now going to have a ministry of condemnation toward Ahab's house, what does that mean for Israel? If the king's house is going to be taken out, does that mean the nation is finished? No, look at the Lord's final word in verse 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." It is as if the Lord is saying, "Elijah, things are not as bad as they seem. You are not, in fact, the only one left. There are 7,000 others, and I will preserve them as a faithful remnant through judgment." Israel is going to pass through death and be raised to life again by means of a remnant. In Romans 11:1-5, addressing the problem that Israel has failed to believe the gospel, Paul writes these words: "I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel? 'Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life.' But what is God's reply to him? 'I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.' So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace." Although 1 Kings 19:18 speaks in the future tense, "I will leave seven thousand in Israel," showing that God will preserve the remnant through judgment, Paul quotes in the past tense: "*I have kept for myself seven thousand men.*" Paul's quote highlights that the reason these seven-thousand have not worshiped Baal is because God first chose them in grace.

The doctrine of election is often debated as a deep mystery of theology, and it is. But notice that in Scripture, this doctrine is constantly a source of encouragement. When Paul first brought the gospel to Corinth, he met opposition from the Jews there, so he left the synagogue and preached to Gentiles. Acts 18:9-10 tells us, "And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.'" God's chosen people were already there, waiting to hear and believe the gospel. God's sovereign election was Paul's very reason not to be discouraged but to go on facing opposition because he knew that God's saving purpose would not fail. Whenever you find yourself discouraged about God's work in this world, remember this: God has chosen a people for himself, Jesus has secured their certain redemption by his death and resurrection, and the Holy Spirit will, without fail, draw them to faith through the ministry of the Word. Let your heart soak in that truth regularly, and nothing will be able to discourage you for long.

Elijah has had a Moses-like encounter with God, and now it's time to come down the mountain and pick up his ministry again. So that brings us to the last section of this story:

3. A renewed mission (vv. 19-21).

The story moves us quickly from Mt. Horeb to Elijah's return to the northern kingdom and his encounter with Elisha son of Shaphat. When we first meet Elisha, we see him plowing a field with twelve yoke of oxen. That many oxen indicates that Elisha comes from a wealthy family, and thus would seem to have a relatively comfortable life. According to verse 19, Elijah passed

by Elisha and cast his cloak on him. That action constitutes the symbolic “anointing” of Elisha to succeed Elijah as a prophet. It was Elijah’s way of “passing the mantle” to the next prophet in line, and Elisha understood the message.

Then Elisha asked permission to say goodbye to his father and mother. That does not indicate hesitation on Elisha’s part; rather, it indicates the opposite: he knew his departure would be for good, and he wanted to make a complete break with his old life. So Elijah gave him permission, and then Elisha sacrificed the oxen, prepared the meat, and gave it away to his community. That action symbolized that there was no going back. He would now be a prophet on the margins of society, serving alongside Elijah, rather than a son who was to inherit a wealthy estate.

Elijah the prophet ended chapter 18 thinking that Israel was on the cusp of genuine revival. Now he ends chapter 19 with a new mission: to set events in motion that will bring down the house of Ahab. Elijah personally won’t see it happen, but his assistant Elisha will be one of the main players who makes it happen. Elijah expected the Mt. Carmel incident to restore the nation, but instead the Lord is going to put it death and raise it back to life by means of a remnant.

In Acts 1:6, after Jesus was raised from the dead, we read that his disciples asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” And that was the natural question to ask. There had been no son of David ruling from Jerusalem in over 600 years. The land and the people had experienced the rule of successive Gentile empires for centuries, and now that God’s Messiah had been raised from the dead, wasn’t it time to restore Israel’s national sovereignty? But then Jesus said, in essence, “Don’t even worry about that. Here’s what you should focus on: the Holy Spirit is going to come upon you and empower you to bear witness to me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” And as we read the book of Acts, we see that they went out and proclaimed the gospel, facing opposition nearly everywhere they went. They were detained, arrested, interrogated, imprisoned, and in some cases even stoned or beheaded. They thought the kingdom would come with Jesus overthrowing the Romans and ruling from Jerusalem. Instead it came with Jesus’ ascension to the right hand of God and their commission to take the gospel to the world, even at the cost of their own lives. They expected the kingdom to come dramatically, but instead it showed up in countless churches they planted across the empire, where believers would gather together for the simple practices of hearing the Word, baptizing, and eating at the Lord’s table together. They had a dream of a what Jesus’ kingdom would look like, but the reality was very different. If they had refused to let go of the dream, they would have lost their faith completely when the kingdom didn’t come as they expected.

Sometimes the greatest moments in the growth of our faith are those moments when we must watch our own dreams die so that God can raise them to life again. Maybe you had a certain vision for what you wanted your life to look like by this point. Maybe you wanted to serve the Lord in this way or that way, but it didn’t work out. Maybe you dreamed of being married by now, or you dreamed of having a marriage that looks different from what yours looks like. Maybe you never imagined that you would face infertility, but it’s become a discouraging fact of life for you. Whatever the case, let me offer you this counsel: don’t let your unfulfilled dreams distract you from the reality that the Lord has placed in front of you. Your situation may not be what you thought, so welcome to Elijah’s world. When you have unfulfilled expectations, don’t

wallow in discouragement. Look around you with expectancy to see what God is up to. God is still working through the simple means of his Word, if you will only have eyes to see, and ears to hear.

As the poet William Cowper so beautifully wrote:

*God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform;
He plants his footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm.*

*Deep in unfathomable mines of never-failing skill,
He treasures up his bright designs and works his sovereign will.*

*Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take, the clouds you so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break in blessings on your head.*

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust him for his grace;
Behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face.*

*His purposes will ripen fast, unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flower.*

*Blind unbelief is sure to err, and scan his work in vain:
God is his own interpreter, and He will make it plain.*

The most important thing for you is not that all your dreams come true. It is that you know the God who moves in mysterious ways, quietly advancing his kingdom by the power of his Word. Amen.

¹ Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 4.