

O LORD, TAKE MY LIFE

SERIES: THE PRAYERS OF THE SAINTS

By Steve Zeisler

This message will consider two prayers of Elijah in which he despaired of the goodness of God.

Earlier we studied the prayer of Moses (Discovery Paper #4712), which spoke of Moses' concern about his own failure (Exodus 3:1-4:17). Moses asked in effect, "Who am I to be considered to serve you, Lord? I am inadequate." We also looked at a prayer of Hannah (Discovery Paper #4713). It began, "O LORD Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant's misery..." (1 Samuel 1:11). Her anguish had to do with hard circumstances.

But Elijah's problem was deeper still. He had served God and seen God's power and glory displayed, and yet apparently to no good end. He began to fear that God couldn't save, that all the words about God's purpose and character weren't really true, that nothing would ever come of trusting God. That is the great depth to which Elijah fell. Perhaps you have been there yourself.

Let's meet Elijah briefly before we get into the text. He is one of the great figures of the Bible. That is a bit curious, because he lived a strange life and had a prickly personality. In addition, his story covers only a few chapters in the text of Scripture. He never wrote a book, as Isaiah, Daniel, and others did. Yet he is the prototypical prophet. When Jews have measured prophets as to their personality and their work, they have always done so against the standard of Elijah. Part of the reason for that is because what we do know about Elijah is so engaging. The few stories we have of him are vivid and powerful. In the one I commented on in the last message (Discovery paper #4714), he was taken up into heaven in a chariot of fire.

Malachi prophesied that Elijah would come before the Messiah (Malachi 4:5-6). That's why John the Baptist's ministry was so powerful; people saw in him Elijah returned (Matthew 11:7-15). Jesus himself was erroneously thought by some to be Elijah returned to earth (Matthew 16:13-14). It was Elijah who stood, along with Moses, next to Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-3).

Yet we will consider the great Elijah at the lowest point in his life, when he wanted to die and he questioned God's goodness. The event that precipitated this fall is told in 1 Kings 19:1-2.

The miracles that changed nothing

Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets [of Baal] with the sword. So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, "May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them."

I'll summarize the events of chapter 18 in a moment. But at this point, Jezebel was told of those events, and she didn't care. Miracles, God's presence, the triumph of righteousness mattered to her not at all. She was not persuaded to change, and in fact was more vehement in her insistence that Baal was lord. So she threatened

Elijah, and he took her threat seriously. That's what made him so desperate. Even at the end of the great day of miracles on the top of Mount Carmel, Jezebel remained unpersuaded, the good people in Israel were not raised up, and his own life was threatened. Tomorrow and the day after and the day after would be no different from the past. God, even on his best day, couldn't establish righteousness where unrighteousness existed before.

Let's review what happened in 1 Kings 18. It is one of the most vividly drawn scenes in all literature.

Elijah, as God's servant, had pronounced a drought in Israel three years earlier. For those three years Israel had seen the drought grow worse and worse. Ahab the king was furious, and Elijah was a fugitive.

At the end of three years he came back to declare an end to the drought. He proposed a contest that was to take place on the top of Mount Carmel, which overlooked the Mediterranean on one side and the plain of Jezreel on the other. Elijah instructed Ahab to bring the prophets of Baal. Ahab had introduced Baal worship into the nation, and it was corrupting the people of God, promoting lewd behavior, and destroying their faith. Baal and Yahweh would each have an altar built for them. The god who sent fire would declare himself to be truly God.

So the contest was joined. The prophets of Baal built an altar and placed a sacrifice on it. They spent all day calling on Baal to come and ignite the sacrifice. But they weren't answered, and Elijah ridiculed them. In every way possible, all 450 of them, as loudly as they could, called on Baal to answer. Nothing happened.

Finally at the end of the day, Elijah strode to the center of the scene and called for an altar to be built with twelve stones, representing Israel's twelve tribes. He laid wood on the altar and an animal sacrifice on the wood. He poured water all over it three times, gallons and gallons of water, to make sure that no fire could break out by accident. As the sun set, with no one but Elijah standing for the Lord and with everyone looking on, he called on Yahweh to save. Fire fell from heaven and consumed not just the sacrifice and the wood, but even the stones, leaving only dust where there had been an altar.

That was the first of three great things that happened on Mount Carmel that day. The second one was this: Elijah said, "Gather the prophets of Baal, those who have been destroying the lives of my people by taking their faith. These destroyers will be destroyed." And all 450 prophets of Baal were gathered up and executed on the spot.

Finally, Elijah fell on his knees and prayed seven times, and a storm from the Mediterranean began on the horizon with a cloud only the size of a man's fist. The drought ended, and a torrential rain fell. In everything there was miracle and vindication of God's presence. The prophet of God stood against the entire array of the king and his evil prophets and their false religion, by himself as far as he knew, and with great courage won a victory for righteousness. When he awoke the next day, he expected the nation to rise up, throw off the false, and exalt the true. He expected people to be grateful. What he found instead was a death threat. Jezebel was not impressed by anything that had happened, and she was in charge. God on his best day couldn't seem to break the power of evil.

Let's pick up the story in 19:3-8, where we will come to the first of Elijah's prayers.

Exhaustion and despair

Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day's journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, LORD," he said.

“Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.” Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep.

All at once an angel 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 lay down again.

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.” So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God.

There are two parts to this prayer. First he said simply, “I have had enough. I cannot go another step.” He had spent a day in profound concentration, and he was spiritually and emotionally spent. He had been in the presence of God and in the presence of evil. He had seen slaughter and fire. God welcomed his prayer and ministered to him. We will talk about that more in just a moment.

In the other part of verse 4 Elijah said, “Take my life; I am no better than my fathers.” This is a bit obscure, but I think it means this: the people of God had never had a generation in which the righteous were victorious. Elijah looked back on the generations of Israel, and every time something good happened, it was followed by something evil. Elijah had thought that this time it would be different, but it wasn’t.

He was basically saying, “You know, God, this big experiment of yours isn’t working. It hasn’t worked in the past and I don’t see it working now. It’s no better now than it ever was. Not only am I worn out, but I am also beginning to conclude that you don’t know how to run your universe.” Throughout the rest of this chapter God will minister to Elijah to change his mind from this indictment to a place of faith again.

David Roper, in his great book *Elijah: A Man Like Us*, says this: “Elijah’s comedown is classic. Overadrenalized, overextended, and emotionally depleted, brooding over his feelings of inadequacy and apparent failure, he collapsed into self-pity, withdrawal and self-destructive thoughts.” (1)

Let’s take a closer look at the first part of Elijah’s prayer. The simple fact was that he was exhausted. The Lord knows that at times we have run at high “RPMs” for so long that there is nothing left. There is only so much we can handle before we need rest. And it was marvelous of the Lord, as Elijah lay under the broom tree, to send an angel who said, “I have prepared warm bread for you over hot coals. I have a jug of clear mountain water for you. Eat, drink, and get some more sleep.” He didn’t say, “Get up and get on with it!” The psalmist says, “He grants sleep to those he loves” (Psalm 127:2). The Lord refreshes those who have spent themselves thoroughly.

If there were to be a broom tree in your life, if God were to give you the gift of shedding all the expectations and pressure and stress, what would it look like? Where might you go to find God’s presence tenderly approving of you, offering you fresh bread and cold water to drink? Such “broom trees” will look different for different people. But if you need to rest because you’ve been running too hard too long, if you are spending yourself and there is nothing left but exhaustion, let God meet you. Let him bring you something to eat. Let an angel minister to you. This example is important. God knows we are physical creatures, and there are times when we need deep rest and renewal.

Rest of this sort is not the same as vacation. It’s not pampering yourself because “you deserve a break today.” (Vacation, moreover, often makes as many demands to play hard as you had to work hard!) This sort of rest is also not buying new toys to make yourself feel better. Pampering yourself is not Sabbath rest. Rest is a gift from God in which he uncovers and ministers to your need, in which you acknowledge that you’re incapable, in

which you receive from him both his presence and his approval, in which nothing is accomplished except that the gift of God descends upon you with love. If God were to find a broom tree for you, where would it be? What kind of bread would he serve you?

Let's consider the other problem—Elijah's crisis of faith. He wondered whether God could do what he said. So after he was strengthened at the end of this period of rest, he journeyed south. Mount Horeb is also called Mount Sinai in Scripture, which is, of course, the place where the nation received the Ten Commandments. It was the place where God met Moses with smoke and fire, with evidence of his presence everywhere. Elijah was journeying toward the Lord in his anguish, instead of saying, "God has failed and there's no place to turn for hope."

The still, small voice

Verses 9-18:

There he went into a cave and spent the night.

And the word of the LORD came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

He replied, "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."

The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by."

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

He replied [I think with a much softer tone], "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."

Then the LORD said to him, "Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him."

This is followed by the wonderfully understated first phrase of verse 19:

So Elijah went from there....

Elijah had moved toward God in his despair, and I think he had rehearsed this prayer all forty days of his journey to Mount Horeb. “You’ve allowed your people to descend to a place where they are no good for anything. I am the only one left. They killed all your prophets and my life is being threatened now.” These are not only admissions of hurt but accusations against God. “Everything is falling apart. Nothing good will happen. The future is desperate. I am alone. What are you going to do about it?”

The Lord passed by first in a great wind, then in an earthquake, then in a fire. But Elijah had seen God do dramatic things before. He had seen the Lord stop the rain, and he had seen the rain return when he prayed. He had seen fire fall from heaven and consume an entire altar, not to mention the sacrifice set upon it. What was different here on Horeb was that God himself said, “Those aren’t the most important things.” There was a quiet, still, small voice, the whisper of the Spirit. This is the persuasion of God as he speaks to heart after heart of love, power, and joy, replacing despair with hope. It is the still, small voice of the Spirit of God persuading us on the inside that the miracles we see mean that God rules and that he loves us.

Elijah had been drawing wrong conclusions. He had been measuring the observable things, but he had not been attending to the quiet, steady, simple communication of God’s love that is below the radar, so to speak, of historic reference and observable phenomena. God was telling him, “I, the Lord, am not who you expect me to be. What you want from me I’m not required to give. I operate in ways you don’t expect.” He was beginning to challenge Elijah’s small world with truths that were different, subtler, and more wonderful.

The second time God asked him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Elijah gave his speech again, I think a bit sheepishly this time. He had rehearsed it so many times that even when he began to realize that he wasn’t seeing everything clearly, he didn’t have anything else to say. And now the Lord interjected something we should note: “Elijah, you have assumed the battle was over on Carmel. The battle isn’t over; it’s a long war! The light and darkness will contend for a long time. The One in whom my answer will focus, the Lord Jesus Christ, has not yet come. Death has not been dealt the final blow. Your generation isn’t the final generation. The requirement, Elijah, is to be faithful, not to be successful on your own terms.”

So God said, “Go from here and anoint the king of Aram, because I am Lord of the nations. And anoint a successor to Ahab, because Ahab and Jezebel will die ignoble deaths and be forgotten. And anoint a prophet to succeed yourself. I’m not done with the nations, I’m not done with my people, and I’m not done with the remnant. There are generations to come in which I am going to act. You are not the center of the world.”

The best-remembered line in this text is, “You’re not the only one in your own generation. There are seven thousand you don’t know about who love and serve me, who have not bowed in worship to Baal.” Elijah’s little world of anxiety was replaced by the big world of God at work. God whispered of the future and of people everywhere unknown to Elijah, and in all of this he was standing Elijah back on his feet. That’s why the beginning of verse 19 is so helpful—Elijah got up and went, because his view of the world had changed.

What happens to many, sadly, is that first, they won’t let God minister to them when they are exhausted. They won’t let an angel prepare a meal for them. They won’t let God lay them down under a broom tree and sing them to sleep with a lullaby and wake them and feed them and sing them to sleep again.

Second, many, in contrast to Elijah, won’t move toward God when they think he has failed. They won’t indict the Lord. They won’t shake their fist and call on him to answer for his inadequacies. Elijah cared enough about God to go to Mount Horeb to find an answer. And the Lord doesn’t reject our indictments, he welcomes them. But he also answers them. He replaces discouragement with faith. It’s a sad thing that many refuse to yell at

God, and they walk away from the church and from the faith in which they were raised. They turn their back on hope. Others become hypocrites; they stay in church and pretend to smile, but on the inside they're angry with God. They won't yell at God, but they won't seek help either. Elijah, in his determination to find out, was answered.

The tenderness of God is found in his care of this depleted man. It is found in his reminding Elijah that he more often whispers than thunders. He changes lives by the Spirit, not so much by dramatic quakes. He sent Elijah back to work because there was work yet to be done. God is still on his throne, and the future is not known to us. It's required only that we be faithful, not that we be successful. Elijah's prayers at the lowest point in his life have instructed believers in every generation since to find the deep encouragement of God's presence.

Notes

1. David Roper, *Elijah: A Man Like Us*, © 1997, Discovery House Publishers, Grand Rapids, MI. P. 186.

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5th Message

Steve Zeisler

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