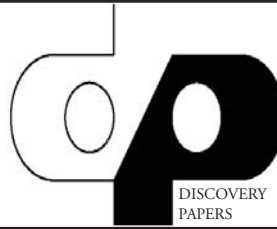


I ALONE AM LEFT

SERIES: FIRE FROM HEAVEN



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1 Kings 19:1-18
6th Message
Steve Zeisler
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1 Kings 19:1-18:

¹Now Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. ²Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, “So may the gods do to me and even more, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time.” ³And he was afraid and arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. ⁴But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree; and he requested for himself that he might die, and said, “It is enough; now, O LORD, take my life, for I am not better than my fathers.” ⁵And he lay down and slept under a juniper tree; and behold, there was an angel touching him, and he said to him, “Arise, eat.” ⁶Then he looked and behold, there was at his head a bread cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. So he ate and drank and lay down again. ⁷The angel of the LORD came again a second time and touched him and said, “Arise, eat, because the journey is too great for you.” ⁸So he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mountain of God.

⁹Then he came there to a cave and lodged there; and behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and He said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” ¹⁰And he said, “I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.”

¹¹So He said, “Go forth and stand on the mountain before the LORD.” And behold, the LORD was passing by! And a great and strong wind was rending the mountains and breaking 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. ¹²And after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of a gentle blowing. ¹³And it came about when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave. And behold, a voice came to him and said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” ¹⁴Then he said, “I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.”

¹⁵The LORD said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus, and when you have arrived, you shall anoint Hazael king over Aram; ¹⁶and Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint king over Israel; and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint as prophet in your place. ¹⁷It shall come about, the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall put to death. ¹⁸Yet I will leave 7,000 in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal and every mouth that has not kissed him.”

Elijah’s only speech in these verses is prayer. He prayed three times; once repeating an earlier prayer. The New Testament highlights Elijah as a man of prayer, honors him for the depth, quality, and reality of his prayers (James 5:17). We’ve seen Elijah pray in other settings in this series. His prayers affected the history and the climate of the world he lived in. He prayed for the life of a widow’s young son. He prayed for the nation to be faithful, and for fire to fall from heaven. These were dramatic, impressive scenes of the man of God before the throne of God.

But the prayers of Elijah here are very different, aren’t they? He prayed not for others but for himself and he’s praying because he’s desperate. No longer at the height of power and influence, he is depleted and uncertain.

We would do well to learn from Elijah when he is depressed and lost (as far as he knows). When we’ve come

to the end of ourselves, when the world is too hard, and the chaos too awful, most of us draw near to the Lord. Elijah's prayers will help us when our lives are similar to his circumstance.

Let's review the context for a moment. In the last message (Discovery Paper 5204) we saw Elijah's dramatic showdown with the prophets of Baal and Ahab on Mount Carmel. All the nation had gathered. Elijah set forth two altars and said, "The God who answers by fire, He is God" (18:24). The day passed with strenuous efforts by the prophets of Baal to evoke a response from him. Finally at the end of the day, Elijah stood on the mountain, silhouetted against the twilight sky, and prayed a simple prayer. Fire from heaven consumed the altar!

At the end of chapter 18, which we didn't cover in the last message, recounts how Elijah instructed his servant to check the sky over the Mediterranean and waited for God to end the drought as he had promised to do. He was deep in prayer and expectation, even as time passed, that God would answer. And he did. Torrents of rain flooded the ground that had been baked by drought. Elijah outran Ahab's horse-drawn chariot from Mount Carmel to Jezreel, more than twenty miles.

What had Elijah's life been like with these events stacked one on top of another? He's had an industrial-strength experience of a holy God and of evil men, of fire, judgment, and death, of loneliness and confrontation, and of drought and torrential rain. All of these experiences tore at his emotions, demanding more from him than he was able to give. He was exhausted physically, overwhelmed emotionally and spiritually. Now finally he heard Jezebel utter a threat to his life, and he came to the awful realization that this evil, violent queen had cold-bloodedly targeted him personally. And further, he realized, there had been no upwelling of righteousness in the nation. Jezebel had not been torn from her throne. The world was not going to be very different than it had been.

David Roper, in his book *Elijah: A Man Like Us*, describes Elijah at the moment of facing Jezebel's threat, the lowest ebb of his life:

*"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

In this condition Elijah made two journeys. He first fled from Jezebel and her soldiers to Beersheba. Then he

journeyed from Beersheba to Mount Horeb. In one case he ran for his life in terror, without faith. In the other, he traveled to a place where he expected to encounter God. One was a negative trip, the other, finally, a positive one. He sought God's answers to his hard questions. Let's think about these two journeys.

Faith forgotten

When Elijah had gone a day's journey into the wilderness from Beersheba, he sank down under a juniper tree and prays, "It is enough; now, O LORD, take my life, for I am not better than my fathers." On some level Elijah was accepting some of the blame for his circumstances himself. "I am a failure. The great possibilities that existed when the nation gathered on the mountain, heard me challenge them, heard me pray and saw the miracle, have come to nothing, as far as I can tell. So I must be responsible. I'm no better than my fathers."

Consider the experience of being depressed, depleted, and hopeless. It is common to find fault with yourself. "I am a failure. I'm terrified, hurt, and crushed by my circumstances. I must deserve what's happening to me."

Elijah may have thought back to the generations of Moses and Joshua, Samuel and David, who all attempted things for God, whose generations eventually passed away without seeing the triumphs they hoped for. Or perhaps his thought is closer to home, the generations of his grandparents and parents, living in times that descended into wickedness. "Everywhere I look things seem to get worse, and now I'm just like them. I'm no better. I hoped for something more, but it didn't come to pass."

There is something else in Elijah's prayer. It's a little obscure until we get to his second prayer, but there's at least a hint here that he's also blamed God. If he had just wanted to die, he could have stayed put. Jezebel was determined to end his life. But Elijah wanted God's attention before he died. He wanted God to notice his problem, because underneath he's saying, "It's not just my problem, is it? You don't seem to be able to bring about anything good, even in the lives of those who have given their hearts to you and have acted on your behalf."

Before we move on, I want to make a couple of other observations. One concerns the psychology of sin. What had Jezebel said that was so effective in undoing Elijah? Jezebel was a genius in evil—hard, ruthless, and effective. She was determined to take Elijah down. But notice what she didn't do: she didn't send an executioner or an assassin

to kill him. She didn't even send someone to capture him and bring him back to the palace to be executed. She sent a messenger, and the message was this: "By this time tomorrow you'll be a dead man."

That's always the way sin persuades us, isn't it? It projects consequences in the future that make us lose our way in the present. The faith required of us now is taken away by the fear of what will happen tomorrow, or the day after that. When sin promises us a reward for denying God, its promise is always set off in the future. If you just worship the almighty dollar and spin like a rat in a wheel, faster and faster and faster today then you'll get the reward, the security, and the admiration of others tomorrow. So you deny the Lord, live as if you are not a child of the King, and you don't enjoy his presence in the moment because of what you hope to gain tomorrow. Of course, tomorrow never comes. Or if fear is the temptation, the awful threat looming in the future causes you to despair in the moment. You're not dead yet, but you will be dead, so you lose your faith, run from where you ought to be, leave your post, and sink into darkness.

This psychology has worked on me all my life, especially in matters of attempting discipline. I want to make a change in who I am, to live with more honor to Christ, more kindness, more courage, and more purity. I embark on a path that will allow change to happen, and then the enemy whispers, "You've tried discipline before. When has that ever worked? You know you're going to fail eventually. So why not cave in now? Go ahead and get it over with." The promised thing or the feared thing, always set a day off, takes away what might be a moment of living by faith now.

Remember what Jesus said: "Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? And who of you by being worried can add a single hour to his life? And why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? . . . So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own" (Matthew 6:26-30, 34).

Thank God for what's true now. Live with a sense of blessing now, because he's the one who is in charge of the future. He knows what you need. He is going to take care of you.

The tempter's voice, in whatever form it speaks to us, will tell these lies: "I control the future . . . By this time tomorrow you'll be dead . . . You've done your best and failed . . . No one cares." So when Elijah listened to Jezebel, he ran from his post, sank into despair, and wanted to die.

The other observation I want to make is about what God does for Elijah here. It's one of four interventions he makes in this story as Elijah prays in his weakness and sorrow. The first of them is that he put Elijah to sleep. We might overlook the importance of this. But this man had spent every last drop of himself physically, emotionally, and relationally as he faced God, faced enemies, faced death, and faced drought and rain. Before he could do anything restorative to his soul, he had to sleep for a while, eat nutritious food, drink clear water, then sleep again, then eat again. There were angels who protected him and provided the simplest sort of opportunity to decompress. There was wisdom in this. Very often the first thing that needs to happen is for us to unplug from the stresses and the demands and the overwhelming sense of how many things we're responsible for. Elijah was in the wilderness, parked under a juniper tree. Nobody could get to him and make more demands of him. It's sleep, water, food, and nothing else until he was physically restored so that he could begin the process of learning the things he needed to learn.

Eventually Elijah's second journey began.

The God who speaks

Elijah went to Mount Horeb (also known as Mount Sinai). The Israelites camped at the foot of Mount Horeb during the exodus. Thunder and thick clouds and smoke descended on the mountain and Moses went up and received the Ten Commandments and the rest of the law (Exodus 19-34). It was a very holy place in Israel's history. Everything about this journey of Elijah's was reminiscent of the exodus. It took forty days and forty nights, as the nation spent forty years in the wilderness. He got special food from heaven, as Israel ate manna. He went to a place where God's presence and declared purpose were unmistakable. Elijah was moved toward God, he didn't run from anything. He no longer careened out of control. He knew that his only hope was for the Lord to speak a word to him, to uncover and heal his anger and sorrow.

He ended his journey in a cave on the mountain. There the Lord spoke to him. "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Your

covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.”

Earlier Elijah’s prayer was unbidden. He was lying under a tree pointing at heaven: “Take my life, I’m at fault. You’re at fault. Life is a mess.” This time, he didn’t start praying until he’d been asked a question. But you realize once he blurted out this speech that he had it memorized, because he said it again exactly the same, word for word. What he’d done in the forty days that it took him to get to Mount Horeb was played over and over again in his mind; the problem he has with God and with his life. He blamed the Israelites who had killed the prophets, torn down the altars, and so on, but he’d really blamed the God who had let him down.

I’ve done this frequently, too. When I’m upset with somebody or hurt by something they’ve done, I’ll let myself make up a speech that I would say to them, and they would feel terrible, and I would win and they would lose. I never intend to actually say it. But if I run the tape often enough and I’m good enough at the speech in my imagination, and then the opportunity presents itself, before I know it, it all comes out. And I regret every syllable, but it’s too late.

I believe that’s exactly what Elijah did. God had let him down, his life was threatened, and the world was a mess. He had been zealous for the Lord, and nothing good had come of it. So he blurted out this speech. We can imagine that the first time he said it with energy in his voice. But by the second time he said the same speech, he was unable to help himself, “Oh no, what am I saying? I wish I could stop” His voice is quiet now.

What does God do with his dear servant? This is the second of God’s four interventions in this story. God asked the same question twice. He drew out of Elijah the things that were inside. “What are you doing here?” And Elijah might wish what was inside could stay hidden. He might not want to bring it out in the light where he would have to look at it himself. But when God asks, you don’t respond, “I’m not going to talk about this.” That’s not an option. God called forth Elijah’s words from him, so that he must examine them.

What do you think Elijah saw as he examined his own statements? How much bad thinking is in them, how many inappropriate assumptions; how foolish were the ideas that he held on to? For instance, he spoke and thought as if one deserved to be applauded, commended, made much of for serving God. That never had been true. Rather, we are being shaped for eternity, when there will

be a real accounting of what our lives were like. Elijah’s service will be recognized someday. But he doesn’t have the right to assume his service will be recognized on his terms in this life.

Elijah also has decided that he was the only one, that he has a central role in everything God was doing. He acted as if he could properly judge every one else’s actions and motives. This is not true either. God had seven thousand who hadn’t bowed the knee to Baal. Elijah was not the central figure in the universe at the moment. God was doing a great many things that didn’t include him.

Finally, Elijah believed, as many of us do, that if we are zealous for God, if we knock ourselves out, go the extra mile, pay the highest price, then God owes us a response. And he does not. Elijah is enough of a man of God that once he heard himself speak out loud, answered the Lord (twice), he surely discovered the immaturity and self-centeredness that had been poured forth.

The third intervention God makes is to reveal himself. He said, “Go to the mouth of the cave and fasten your seatbelt. You’re going to learn something!” A rock-splitting wind roared by—perhaps a tornado. But God was not in the wind. Then an earthquake shook everything around Elijah and threw him to the dirt of the cave. But God was not in the earthquake. A fire burned past, but God was not in the fire. Then there’s a phrase in Hebrew that’s very difficult to translate. The NASB renders it “a sound of a gentle blowing.” It could also be “the sound of sheer silence,” or perhaps “a still small voice.” Translation is difficult, but the meaning is clear. A whispering word from God follows all of these dramatic events, and God is in that.

God is in the simple speech of the Holy Spirit to our hearts, in the words of Scripture, in a kind touch from a Christian friend. God is present everywhere in the little things. We don’t need to have wind and fire and earthquakes in order to be sure that God is present. He is always present.

I have a friend who is a schoolteacher, and he was once talking about how to control a rowdy class. He said,

“When I was a young teacher, I used to yell. They’d get noisier, and I would get louder, and of course they got even noisier, and so then I got louder. I wanted them to hear what I had to say, so I had to get louder and louder. But I finally discovered that that’s exactly the wrong approach. If you want your class to hear you, you say something very interesting, very important, and you speak very distinctly, but in

a soft voice. Pretty soon they realize they want to hear what you're saying, but they can't hear if they stay noisy. Eventually the refusal to speak louder teaches the class to become listeners, to expect something worthwhile to be said."

That's what the Lord is showing Elijah. He said, "I'm talking all the time. You've got to learn to hear, that's the problem." And that's the problem for us as well. The Lord is speaking all the time. The heavens declare the glory of God. But in the words of Jesus, we have to "have ears that hear."

The fourth intervention from God is a commission for Elijah to go. Effectively, what God said was, "The conversation is over. It's time for you to do something." Many of us would prefer to have the discussion go on forever and ever. But the Lord decides at some point, "You've heard enough. You've learned enough. We're done with your description of personal hurts and your questioning of me. It's time for you now to begin serving and extending yourself and going where I tell you." Part of the healing process is his insistence that we get up and do something with our lives.

God told Elijah, "It's time for you to find your successor." This was roughly the end of Elijah's public ministry. There's an important event that happened with Ahab's son later (2 Kings 1), but not many more. Elijah was going to anoint the young man Elisha to take his place. He was going to set in place kings for Syria and Israel, who would eventually bring about judgment.

In this story Elijah ran from Jezebel, believing the lie that tomorrow was in the hands of evildoers, and therefore he had to give up his life today. But he turned and traveled toward God. Those options are still always available, aren't they? We're either believing lies and heading nowhere, or we expect that God will act if we will journey toward him.

It is likely that at least some portion of Elijah's experience is applicable to each of us. Does God want to give you a period when you turn off the stress for a while, when you go someplace where you have only him to deal with and where he can care for you? Does he have a question that he's asking you about what's going on inside, bringing out problems that you would have left unresolved otherwise? Is he trying to speak, to reveal himself in some way, to make

clear who he is and that he's there? Or finally, has he given you a commission, because it's time to stop talking and do something? What have you heard? How will you answer?

NOTES

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