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Riverbank Christian Church

Elijah Runs For His Life

You know it's hard to miss the astonishing contrast between this chapter we've just read and the one before it. In the latter part of chapter 18, that Reuben looked at last week, we saw the prophet Elijah full of courage and conviction and confidence. We saw him absolutely and unflinchingly trusting in the Lord. He confronted King Ahab and put an ultimatum to the people of Israel. He challenged the prophets of Baal to a contest on Carmel, taunting them and giving them every advantage. He boldly prayed to God who sent fire in an irrefutable and explosive display of his might and power. He daringly punished those prophets, fearlessly pronounced the coming rain, and amazingly ran like a superman all the way to Jezreel.

But then we come to chapter 19. And in the opening verses it says, "Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets 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.'"

Jezebel, if you don't remember, was Ahab's foreign wife who led him and the nation to reject the Lord and worship Baal. Even though Ahab had the title of King, Jezebel was clearly in charge, and she was furious. So she swore an oath calling on her gods to deal with her ever so severely if she didn't carry out her threat. Well based on recent events she was pretty safe. But nonetheless she swore that she would find Elijah within 24 hours and she would kill him.

So what happens in verse 3? Does it say, "Elijah, filled with the Spirit and remembering Mt Carmel, boldly called upon the Lord to protect him once more, to put Jezebel in her place, to show the people that he's still in control"? No it doesn't. Instead it says, "Elijah was afraid and ran for his life." This man who'd been so full of courage and conviction and confidence, well he goes to water and flees like a rat up a drainpipe.

And boy did he run. He'd already come some 40km from Mt Carmel to Jezreel in the middle of the northern kingdom. But now he ran another 80km to the border with the southern kingdom of Judah. And then he ran right through that kingdom, another 50km to Beersheba at the southern end. And leaving his servant there he ran even further into the wilderness, as far as he could from Jezebel. And then we're told in verse 4 that "He came to a broom bush, 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 bush and fell asleep."

My friends, Elijah was certainly afraid. But there's more to it than that, isn't there? You may have a footnote in your Bible at verse 3 explaining that the words "Elijah was afraid" could also be translated "Elijah saw" which is probably more accurate. But what did he see? Well Elijah saw that even though the Lord had won a mighty victory, even though he'd proven beyond doubt that he's the one true God, that yet the nation around him would not repent. Ahab was still weak, Jezebel was still murderous, the people were still rebellious.

And Elijah just couldn't understand. Why didn't the Lord keep acting in powerful and spectacular ways until the problems were all sorted out? Why didn't the Lord step in and fix things so that he'd no longer have to feel so threatened and confused? Twice the Lord asks him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Why are you running away, what's the problem? And what was Elijah's reply, repeated word for word in both verses 10 and 14? He said, "I have been very zealous for the LORD

God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn 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."

Elijah wasn't just afraid but he was incredibly frustrated. And so he fell into a deep, deep pit of despair. He felt like he'd done his utmost but he just couldn't do it anymore, he felt like all his efforts were wasted and he was a complete and utter failure, he felt like there was no hope left and he just wanted to curl up and die. It wasn't that long ago that he'd been so brave, so assured and positive, that he'd demonstrated a jaw-dropping trust and dependence on the Lord. But now the contrast couldn't be starker, for everything has changed.

But you know my friends, this man Elijah is an awful lot like us! Haven't you too had mountaintop experiences when you felt so in tune with God, when your trust was firm and your confidence was high and your joy was deep?

Maybe it was at the time of your own conversion, when you saw things so clearly and were totally on fire for the Lord. Maybe it was a time when you experienced God's power in a miraculous way, you were amazingly healed from an illness or injury, you were rescued from an impossible situation, your prayers were answered in a way you never expected. Maybe it was when you went to a conference or convention, or on a mission trip, and you came back so filled with God's love that you were ready to take on the world. Maybe it was a time of particular blessing in your life, when you knew exactly what God was doing and were so excited about the future. Maybe it was a time of particular blessing in the church, there were conversions, people were changing, ministries were thriving, the church was growing. Or maybe it was a season when you just felt particularly close to the Lord, devotions were a pleasure, every sermon rang true, every song brought a tear to your eye.

Those are wonderful experiences and you wouldn't miss them for the world. But yet just like Elijah, we discover how fast it can change. We discover that you can't live on that mountaintop and sooner or later we find ourselves back in the valley. And that can be really, really tough.

Our faith seems less exciting and God's work in our life seems less real. People seem so negative, so disinterested, so worldly and they just bring us down. Our efforts for the Lord seem ineffective and unappreciated. The kids in Sunday School don't listen, the Growth Group study goes pear-shaped, your efforts at evangelism seem fruitless. You just get more discouraged and depressed. And like Elijah it starts to feel like it's all too much, it's all a waste of time, it's all hopeless and we find it hard to go on.

Have you had similar experiences in your life? Or are you going through it right now? I know that I have. Let me tell you I've experienced the highest highs of Christian life and ministry, days when I couldn't feel any closer to the Lord. But I've also been deep in the valley of despair when I've felt so afraid, so frustrated, so hopeless and so alone.

The Lord's Gracious Response

But it's exactly at those moments of deepest darkness that the light of God's love and grace shines the brightest. And man-oh-man how they shone for Elijah in this passage. And I think what we find here are 3 lessons from the Lord.

And the first is that the Lord never deserts us. In verse 5 Elijah is sleeping under that broom bush, he's run away in fear and frustration, he's asked God to take his life and he's waiting to die. But what happens?

Well let's start with what doesn't happen. First, the Lord doesn't ignore him. He could have, after all Elijah's basically ignoring him and running as far away as possible. But trust me, you can never run away from God. Secondly, the Lord doesn't answer his prayer, he doesn't let him die. And how often haven't we been thankful that God hasn't answered our prayers the way we wanted, when our requests were foolish and his wisdom prevailed? And thirdly the Lord doesn't condemn Elijah either. He had every right to, seeing as he's abandoned his calling, completely failed to trust, and stupidly taken matters into his own hands. But the Lord doesn't do any of these things.

Instead he sends an angel to wake Elijah and provide for his needs. In a scene reminiscent of chapter 17, the Lord provides bread, baking over hot coals, and a jar of refreshing water. And even though Elijah goes back to sleeps, the Lord sends the angel again. And he doesn't just do that to keep him alive but to strengthen him for another journey, a journey of 40 days and nights to a cave on Mt Horeb.

But this reminds us my friends that in our darkest and most desperate times, the Lord does not desert us. For he's our heavenly Father, and we, you and I, are his precious daughters and sons. We're so precious to him that he sent Jesus to the Cross to redeem us from our sin and adopt us as his children. And while he'll most certainly impart justice on those who reject him, he's filled with compassion for those who are his.

That's why in Romans 8 Paul says, "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." I don't know what you've been through in the past, or what you're going through today, or what lies ahead in the future. But this I do know, that if you're a child of God, then your heavenly Father will never, ever desert you, no matter how hard things get.

But now the reason God took Elijah to Mt Horeb was to teach him a second lesson. And that is that the Lord still works in the ordinary. So after making his complaint for the first time, in verse 11 the Lord says to Elijah, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by."

Now we need to pause and recognise the importance of what's happening here. You see this verse should cast our minds back to Exodus 34 when the Lord similarly passed before Moses on this very same mountain, then called Mt Sinai. And why did he do so? It says "he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, 'The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin." The Lord passed by Moses all those years before in order to reveal the wonder of his grace to those who love him.

But this verse should also cast our minds forward to Matthew 17. Do you remember what happened there? We find Jesus on another mountaintop, visited by 2 men, by Moses and Elijah! And God has another amazing message. For he says, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" And has there ever been a greater revelation than this?

But that brings us back to our text where Elijah is about to receive another important message. So as he stood there, we're told, "Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord" Wow, what an awesome sight that must've been? Surely the Lord was in that wind, he most certainly could've been, he'd revealed himself that way before. But it says, "the Lord was not in the wind", this wasn't him. Then it says, "After the wind there was an earthquake." Another incredible event, another way the Lord could and previously had revealed

himself. But no, it says “the Lord was not in the earthquake.” And then it says, “After the earthquake came a fire”. Well that’s how the Lord revealed himself to Moses, that’s how he’d only just revealed himself on Mt Carmel. So surely this time it’s him. But it says, “the Lord was not in the fire” either.

But then there’s something completely different. After 3 spectacular events came something very unspectacular, something you might barely notice. For it says “after the fire came a gentle whisper”. And at this point, “When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.” For Elijah knew that this was the presence of the Lord. He wasn’t in the mighty wind or devastating earthquake or raging fire, but he was here in the sound of a meek and quiet whisper.

And so the important message is that while there are surely times when the Lord does great and mighty things, when his presence is unmistakable, when he works through the spectacular, there are also other times, many other times when he doesn’t. For the reality is that most of the time God works in the ordinary, when his presence is not so obvious and his power not so evident, and it seems like he’s not even there. But we can rest assured that he is, for the Lord is present even in a gentle whisper.

And so my friends, like Elijah, we need to learn that just because the Lord isn’t working in amazing ways doesn’t mean that he’s not working at all. For he’s always with us, always protecting us, always strengthening us. You know this reminds me of that poem Footprints, and perhaps you know it.

Footprints

One night a man had a dream. He dreamed he was walking along the beach with the LORD. Across the sky flashed scenes from His life. For each scene he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand. One belonging to him and the other to the LORD. When the last scene of his life flashed before him, he looked back at the footprints in the sand. He noticed that many times along the path of his life there was only one set of footprints. He also noticed that it happened at the very lowest and saddest times of his life.

This really bothered him and he questioned the LORD about it. “Lord you said that once I decided to follow you, you'd walk with me all the way. But I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life there is only one set of footprints. I don't understand why when I needed you most you would leave me.” The Lord replied, “My precious, precious child, I love you and I would never leave you! During your times of trial and suffering when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you.”

Of course we love the mountaintop experiences. But God uses them to prepare us for the valleys. So let’s never forget that our God is still working in the ordinary, and I’d even go so far as to say that’s when he does his best work.

After all, what could be more ordinary, more unspectacular, more unimpressive than the Cross? That’s why in 1 Corinthians 1 Paul writes, “Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.”

And what could be more ordinary that a group of believers like us, with all our fears and failures, seeking to call the lost and build the church and grow an eternal kingdom in the face of increasing opposition. But yet the Lord chooses to use us in the ordinariness of our lives.

But now there's one last lesson that the Lord has for Elijah, and we'll close with this. And that lesson is that the Lord's plans will always continue. After this amazing revelation, Elijah still struggles because he thinks evil has won and he's the only one left.

But from verse 15, "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 whose mouths have not kissed him."

Thus the Lord reveals that even though Elijah thought all was lost, nothing was further from the truth. The Lord might not be doing anything spectacular but his work goes on. And so he'd use Elijah to anoint 3 men. He'd anoint Hazael, a foreign king who the Lord would use to bring judgement on his people. He'd anoint Jehu over Israel, who the Lord would use to bring judgement on Ahab and Jezebel. And he'd anoint Elisha to continue his own work after he's gone, an anointing we're told about in the final verses of the chapter.

But on top of this, the Lord assured Elijah that he had also preserved 7,000 people in Israel who'd remained faithful. And what's the point? The point is that the Lord was not finished with his people. From Elijah's perspective all was lost, but from the Lord's perspective everything was under control. And while he'd allow his enemies to thrive for a time, they'd never overcome. For the Lord's plan, his plan of salvation would continue to the end.

And that's such an important lesson for us today. For there are times when we feel just like Elijah. We're afraid and frustrated, we feel far from the Lord and he doesn't seem to act. We don't understand what he's doing and can fall into despair. But the Lord reminds us today that he never deserts us, he's our loving Father and he always cares for his children. He reminds us that he still works in the ordinary, even when we're far from the mountaintop he's still with us in the gentle whisper, always carrying us through. And he reminds us that his plans will always continue.

They continued through the coming of his Son, who won the ultimate victory on the Cross. And they will continue until that glorious day when Jesus returns to make all things new. There'll most certainly be ups and downs along the way but the Lord's plans will never be jeopardised. And so my friends, we can rest assured that he's still active in our lives, active in our church, active in this world. And he'll bring all things to their appointed end.

So we need not be afraid or frustrated, we need not fall into despair. For we can trust that our Lord is with us still, even in a gentle whisper, he's still in control and he'll never let us go. Amen.