



# The Message of Elijah

## (17) The LORD's Question and Elijah's Complaint

1 Kings 19:1-10

Text: 1 Kings 19:9-10

Rev. Jerry Hamstra  
Riverside ARP Church  
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We are hearing the word of God to us from the biblical passages that deal with the prophet Elijah and for the last few weeks we have been looking at 1 Kings 19 which tells us of Elijah's discouragement after he was faced with the reality that his ministry so far had been rather fruitless. He had fled when he learned that Jezebel was seeking his life. He had left the land of Canaan and had entered the wilderness which meant that he had left the place where God was pursuing his goal of re-establishing his kingdom on earth. Last week we considered the beginning of God's work to renew the spirit of his servant. That involved some rest and food and the ministry of angel as well as forty days and forty nights of wandering in the wilderness contemplating God's judgment on the first generation of Israel after the Exodus who had failed to trust in God when he instructed them to go in and take the Promised Land.

In the verses we will consider this morning, we will pay close attention to what God said to Elijah and how Elijah responded when Elijah finally arrived at Horeb, the mount of God.

Now it is quite likely that the person who wrote down the story meant for us to consider it in the light the story of Moses on the same mountain, the story of Moses meeting with God after the sin of the golden calf. We have already seen how the fact that Elijah's journey through the wilderness took forty days and forty nights is intended to remind us of Israel's forty years in the wilderness. It is very likely that we are also meant to see a parallel between Moses and Elijah: Moses

speaking to God about Israel after Israel's sin of worshipping the golden calf and Elijah speaking to God about Israel after his failure to convince the people to return to the Lord instead of worshipping the prophet Baal. They were both on the same mountain speaking to God about a people who had been graciously chosen by God to be his people but who were spectacularly unfaithful to the Lord.

In verse 9 we are told that Elijah "came to a cave and lodged in it." It is not certain, but it may be that we are meant to be reminded of the cleft of the rock into which the Lord placed Moses to protect him from the intensity of his glory as it passed by in response to Moses' request to see God's glory. The parallel is not exact, but it is suggestive: the same place, the same problem, and God showing something of himself to his servant.

Here in the story of Elijah on the mountain, we read again of the word of the Lord coming to Elijah. The last time we have read about the word of the Lord coming to Elijah was at the beginning of chapter 18 where the word of the Lord had told Elijah, who at that point was dwelling with the widow of Zarephath, to go and show himself to Ahab. The significance of this is that the word of the Lord had not told Elijah to stop declaring the word of God in Israel. Elijah's journey into the wilderness and to mount Horeb, had not been at the direction of a word from God like his other movements in the story had been. And so the question that the Lord asks Elijah here must be understood in that light. God asks Elijah, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" The implication is that this was not where Elijah was supposed to be. The Lord was asking Elijah to explain why he was not where the Lord had last sent him, why he was not in Israel bringing the word of the Lord.

We can apply this question to ourselves because as God's people we have been given a task to bring the word of the Lord to the world. We are not prophets in the same way that Elijah was a prophet but if we are believers we are members of Christ's church which collectively has been given the commission to be lights in the world and to bring the gospel to the nations. And if we are not engaged in that task in one way or another, we can be sure that the Lord wants to know why. It is not that we all have to be engaged in the same way for the exact nature of our

calling is to some extent determined by our gifts and opportunities, but there is no question that we are to be engaged in the task that Christ has given to the church by being involved in some way in the mission of the church. What we can be sure of is that the Lord will call us to account. Romans 14:12 teaches us that “each of us will give an account of himself to God.”

We are accountable to God. Elijah here was accountable to God. And this is one of the many places in Scripture where we are taught that God cares about what we do with his instructions for our lives and we are not free to live as we please. God will one day ask us what we have done with our lives and what we have done with his instructions for our lives.

Well this is Elijah’s answer. “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 here accuses the people of Israel of having forsaken the covenant that God had made with them. This is at the heart of Elijah’s complaint and there is no doubt that he was right about that. By forsaking God and worshipping Baal instead, the people of Israel had broken their covenant with God. It is important for us to understand a little of what this means because as members of Christ’s church, we are also in covenant with God.

God had made a covenant with the people of Israel. What that means is that God had taken this people to be his people. This idea is expressed very clearly in Deuteronomy 7:6 where Moses says to the people, “For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.” The Lord had chosen Israel to be his people. This is at the heart of the idea of covenant in the Bible. God’s covenant people are a chosen people. They are chosen from “out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.” They are set apart from other people. They are God’s treasured possession. They are set apart from others to be God’s special people.

There is a tenderness here. The people whom God chooses are treasured by him. Deuteronomy 7:7-8 says, “It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it was because the LORD loves you....” This covenant relationship is a warm and tender relationship. In other passages it is compared with marriage. The covenant relationship between God and his people is like a marriage relationship. It is a love relationship. It is a formalized love relationship like marriage is.

And so when Elijah said that Israel had forsaken God’s covenant, he is speaking about the violation of a tender loving relationship with God. He is speaking about the rejection of God’s love. He is speaking about the spurning of all that God had done for Israel – choosing them to be his people and redeeming them from slavery and giving them the Promised Land.

It is important for us to understand that we also are in a covenant relationship with God if we are members of Christ’s church. When Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper he said, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.” Baptism replaces circumcision as a sign and seal of the new covenant. The covenant relationship is a tender loving relationship. It is a relationship in which God takes the initiative in choosing his people and loving them. And our part is to respond to God’s love by loving him back and showing that love by obedience.

The tender nature of the covenant relationship gives the sin of forsaking the covenant its very particular character because it is the rejection of the blessing of having been chosen and it is a rejection of love. And so it is particularly terrible when covenant people go astray. Thankfully it is not that common in our circles, but it does happen. Sometimes young people turn away from the God who has chosen them to belong to his people. Sometimes older ones drift away. There is something very personal about that because God’s choice is personal, specific and loving. It is important for us all to understand the tender nature of the covenant relationship between God and his people and to understand the personal affront to God that breaking that relationship entails.

Now it is instructive to compare Moses and Elijah and how they address God in connection with the covenant-breaking of the people of Israel. Moses spoke to God after Israel had broken the covenant by the sin of making and worshipping the golden calf. The burden of Moses' prayer to God was for mercy for the people. Moses asked for forgiveness. He offered to have his name blotted out of God's book if God would forgive the people. That of course was impossible. Moses did not understand fully the necessity for God's justice to be satisfied and what that entailed. God's response to Moses spoke of justice. Exodus 32:33, "But the LORD said to Moses, 'Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book.'" The burden of Moses request was for forgiveness while not understanding fully the need for the justice of God to be satisfied.

Elijah, on the other hand, did not ask for forgiveness for the people. He had given up on them. He only spoke to God of the sin of Israel: "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." The apostle Paul in, Romans 11:2-3, refers to this part of the story. He writes, "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.'" Paul says that Elijah appealed "to God against Israel?" Elijah had given up on Israel. He just lists Israel's sins and does not ask for forgiveness or mercy. All that is left is justice.

So we have Moses asking for mercy and minimizing justice. And we have Elijah speaking of justice and saying nothing of mercy. This points to a tension in the Old Testament between the mercy and the justice of God. There is an awful lot in the Old Testament of the wrath of God against the sins of his people. But there is also the theme of God's mercy that runs through the story. And these two aspects of God's character are in tension with one another at least from a human perspective.

That tension is finally resolved in Jesus Christ. It is interesting to consider Jesus speaking with Moses and Elijah in the story of the transfiguration of Jesus as it is told in Luke 9. Luke 9:30 says, "And behold, two men were talking to him [Jesus], Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to

accomplish in Jerusalem.” Moses had leaned towards mercy. Elijah had leaned towards justice. Jesus spoke with both of them about “his departure, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem.” Jesus spoke to Moses and Elijah about his coming death. Jesus was finally the solution to the tension between God’s mercy and his justice.

Paul in Romans 3:26, speaks of how God can be both “just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” In the same passage he speaks about Jesus as the one whom God “put forward as a propitiation by his blood.” The word “propitiation” refers to appeasing the wrath of God. The point is that both the justice and mercy of God are satisfied by a forgiveness that is rooted in the propitiation that Jesus made by his death on the cross. God forgives sinners. But those sins are not just overlooked. Jesus has paid the penalty for those sins. Jesus has satisfied the justice of God for the sins of his people. And the result is that God is both “just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

This is actually a very big deal. It sounds like a lot of theological and legal jargon, but it is at the very heart of any hope for any of us. If God just forgave sin without punishing sin, there would never be a time when all wrongs will be made right. If God just forgave everyone’s sin without dealing with that sin, evil would win, and righteousness would never be done. And if God had not found a way to show mercy while maintaining his justice, no one would be saved. We would all end up in hell. The way of salvation in Christ deals with sin. Those who are forgiven through Christ – the penalty for their sin has been paid. Jesus has endured the penalty of sin in their place. Those who refuse Jesus will pay the penalty for their own sin. In the end the scales of justice will be balanced. And the new heavens and the new earth will be a place of righteousness.

It is also edifying to compare Elijah and Jesus directly. You see Jesus also complained about the sins of the people of Israel in a way that was quite similar to Elijah’s complaint. In Matthew 23:37-38, Jesus is quoted saying, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See your house is left to you desolate.” Jesus’ experience with Israel was similar to that of Elijah. But Elijah had

nothing more to say after he had related the sins of the people. And other than continuing to call the people to repentance, there was nothing more that Elijah could do.

But Jesus could and did do more. He not only called the people to repentance. He not only bemoaned their stubborn rebellion against God. He did what Elijah could not do. He gave his life. He took upon himself the sins of his people. It was able to break the power of the sins of his people. Jesus became our Saviour. And so while we are no better by nature than apostate Israel, we can come to Jesus and receive forgiveness for our sins and renewal for our lives.

Indeed Jesus is the answer to the problem of sin. The Old Testament, in all kinds of ways, teaches us how great a problem sin is. So many times in the Old Testament the situation looks hopeless as it does in the stories about Elijah. This is a huge part of the message of the whole Old Testament. How is God ever going to overturn the curse of sin? Most of the history of Israel is a story of Israel's sinfulness. Again and again things look hopeless. And that hopelessness is in tension with God's purpose of blessing the whole world through the people of Israel. The Old Testament poses the question in all kinds of ways of how there will ever be a people who serve God faithfully and experience the blessings of the favor of God. And this all is preparation for Jesus. Jesus is the one whom God sends in the fullness of time to finally break the hold of sin over the human race. He does that in a most unexpected way. He does that by dying – by giving his own life as an atonement for sin.

And the result of that is a very different people of God. In our text we see Elijah expressing his hopelessness about Israel. He is sure that he is the only one left who is faithful to God. That turns out not to be the case, but it is the case that most of the people of Israel had forsaken the Lord.

The way that the New Testament speaks about the people of God after Christ is very different compared to the kind of language Elijah uses in this verse. The people of God after Christ are still sinful, but there is a huge difference because of what Christ has done by his life, death and resurrection. The language is much more positive. There is nothing in

the New Testament after the death and resurrection of Christ that is similar to the kind of language that Elijah uses in our text.

Instead we have verses like Ephesians 2:10 “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.” In Ephesians 3:20 says that Jesus, “is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us....” And then in 4:1 he says, “I therefore... urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called....”

In Romans 6 Paul teaches that believers, because of their relationship with Christ, are dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus and then he continues in verse 12, “Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions.” In Romans 8:8 Paul says, “Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” But then he continues in verse 9, “You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you.” To the Galatians Paul writes, in 5:16 “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.”

One of the great ways that the Old Testament relates to the New Testament is by way of contrast. And we see that contrast by comparing Elijah’s hopelessness in our text with the way that the New Testament speaks to and about believers after Jesus had completed his saving mission on earth and on the basis of that poured out his Holy Spirit upon his church.

Certainly the people of God after Christ still struggle with sin and the church is far from perfect. But you do not find any of the apostles say anything remotely like what Elijah says in this text where he pours out his hopelessness to God. And since we are to read the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament we can say that part of the message of this text for us is that things are very different for we who believe in Jesus compared to the Old Testament people of God. It is true that there were truly saved people of God in Israel and they were saved on the basis of what Jesus would do in their future. But there is a huge difference in scale and degree of the renewing power of the Holy Spirit. That is the significance of Pentecost which is the outworking of the salvation that Jesus accomplished by his life, death and resurrection.



The spirit of hopelessness was not appropriate for Elijah as we will see when we consider God's response to his despair. But the spirit of hopelessness is far, far more inappropriate for us who are believers in Jesus Christ. The New Testament certainly has a lot to say about the sins of God's people, but the overwhelming emphasis is on the power that we receive in Christ and by the Spirit to live lives that are pleasing to God and at the same time satisfying for us. The exhortations in the New Testament are given with the confidence that they can be obeyed, not because of any power that we have in ourselves, but because of the power that we receive through faith in Jesus Christ and by the Holy Spirit who dwells in us.

So Paul says to the Philippians, in 2:12-13, "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." And listen to what he says to the Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3, "We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."

What a difference between Paul's thanksgiving and Elijah's despair! And while Elijah had more reason for hope than he had, the situation that he faced was radically different from the situation that Paul faced. And the difference was Christ. The Old Testament shows why the saving work of Christ was necessary. The New Testament shows the wonderful results of Christ's saving work. And that is why Jesus Christ is the key to the biblical message and the heart of the joy and the hope of the people of God.

The message of the New Testament, as far as living for God is concerned, is well summarized by Paul in 2 Corinthians 9:8, "And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work."

There is no doubt that we will sometimes be discouraged – both because of our own remaining sin and the sins of others. But there is always reason for hope when it comes to growth in love and obedience

because of the great achievement of Jesus Christ. In ourselves we are no different than the Old Testament people of Israel, but the good news is that what Jesus has accomplished on our behalf gives us all that we need to make progress in holiness and a life that is pleasing to God. We will struggle. And it is a fight. But the New Testament assures us over and over again that in Christ we can and will grow. As Paul wrote in Philippians 1:6, "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."