



# The Message of Elijah

## (15) Discouragement and Endurance

1 Kings 19:1-4

Revelation 13:1-10

Text: 1 Kings 19:4

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Endurance is an important biblical word. Endurance is necessary in the Christian life because the Christian life is often hard. Last week we reflected on the biblical teaching that the meaning of history is a conflict between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. As followers of God we are caught up in that conflict whether that is in our personal battle with sin, our attempts to overcome evil with good as individuals, or together with other Christians, or in the fight between good and evil in our society and all around the world. In the nature of the case conflict is hard and while the outcome is certain, there are many setbacks along the way. The path to ultimate victory is rather convoluted in God's way of doing things. Indeed since the key victory of all which Jesus won on the cross looked an awful lot like a defeat, it is clear that God's way of winning this war involves a lot of apparent defeats which later turn out to be victories.

The story of Elijah is part of this conflict between God's kingdom and Satan's kingdom. On Mount Carmel, Elijah had seemed to win a great victory by the grace and power of God. And yet at the end of the day it accomplished very little. And Elijah saw that when he got the message from Jezebel that she was after his life. That means that nothing had changed in the palace. Ahab had not been soundly converted by witnessing the failure of the prophets of Baal and the dramatic manifestation of the reality and power of God. He had not come home to the palace and put Jezebel in her place and insisted on completing

the purge of the Baal worshipers that Elijah had begun. There are a few instances in this history of Israel or Judah where the king is convicted of sin and great changes are initiated in accordance with the law of God, but this is not one of them.

And as Elijah was running for his life, he came to the realization that the famine and the fire from heaven and the renewal of the rain had accomplished very little to promote the cause of the Lord in Israel. All that prayer and all that confrontation and even fire from heaven and nothing had changed. Baal had won even though he did not even exist. And Elijah had had enough. He had had enough of futile propheting. He did not want to be a prophet anymore.

Verse 3 tells us that he ran until he came to Beersheba. Beersheba was a long way from Jezebel's reach. It was in Judah where Jezebel had no power. Elijah was safe from Jezebel in Beersheba. But Elijah was beyond just wanting to be safe. It wanted out of the battle altogether. That is why he left his servant at Beersheba. He no longer needed a servant because he was planning to give up being a prophet. That is also why he kept on walking even though he was safe from Jezebel. By going on into the wilderness, Elijah was leaving the Promised Land. He was leaving the land of Canaan, the land that God had promised to Abraham. He was leaving the kingdom of God because the people of Israel and Judah living in the Promised Land were the kingdom of God in the Old Testament period.

He was leaving the place where God was establishing his kingdom. God's plan was to establish his kingdom over the whole world, but he was beginning with Israel. The land of Canaan was the location where God was at work to fulfill his purpose to overcome the kingdom of darkness. It is where God was at work to win the battle over evil. And by leaving Canaan and going into the wilderness, Elijah was checking out of the battle.

Verse 4 says, "But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he asked that he might die, saying, 'It is enough now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers.'"

Notice that he asks God if he might die. He does not make the decision himself and take his own life. He is in a very dark place. He feels that his life has been a failure. He has accomplished nothing with his life. And he just wants it to end. He is tired of living. And yet he does not commit suicide. He is not in a good place spiritually at that moment, but he still submits to the Lord as far as living or dying are concerned. He understands that God has reserved the giving and the taking of life for himself. Life is a gift from God and even though life can be very difficult, ending it ourselves is not a legitimate option. And so while there is a lot wrong with Elijah's attitude at the moment, he is right at least to ask God to take his life rather than to take the matter into his own hands.

The last part of his request is puzzling. He says, "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers." What has that got to do with anything? Why does he add that last bit, "for I am no better than my fathers"? He seems to mean that he is not better than the prophets or other leaders before him who had failed in their ministries to turn Israel back to the Lord. Elijah was not the first prophet who had not succeeded in winning Israel back to the worship of the true God. There had been some relatively good times in Israel's history, but for most of her history she was little different than the pagan nations around her. Just think of Israel under Moses and the time of the Judges and the time of Samuel and the time between the breakup of the kingdom and Elijah's time. Through much of her history, Israel had been ignoring the ministries of the true prophets of God. Elijah seems to be saying that he is no better than all the prophets and other leaders before him who had failed to have much of a beneficial influence on the people of Israel.

Now there is no doubt that Elijah is in the wrong here and we will explore that in a moment, but I think that we can understand where he is coming from. Even though Elijah is in the wrong here, it is a different kind of wrong, than say, the treachery of Judas. We can have some sympathy for Elijah. It is not surprising that he is feeling so discouraged and disappointed. Just think of all that God had done through him. What powerful signs! The drought. The failure of the prophets of Baal. The fire from heaven. The confession of the people. And then ...

basically nothing in terms of lasting change. It is no wonder that Elijah was discouraged.

And you know what Elijah was going through is not unusual in the kingdom of God. God has made these wonderful promises, but the way to their fulfillment is long and there are an awful lot of setbacks along the way. On the one hand, we have the revelation of God's greatness and his power and his glorious promises to defeat evil and bring renewal, but on the other hand it often seems that evil has the upper hand. It often seems that any progress is tiny, and the advance of evil is massive. And that can be true in our individual lives and battles as well. The language of the Bible about the transforming power of salvation for believers is often so dramatic, while the experience of the transforming power of the gospel is often less than dramatic – it can be slow with many setbacks and discouragements. Even Paul had to admit in Romans 7, "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing."

If we care about our own spiritual growth, we will often be disappointed. If we care about the church of Jesus Christ, we will often be disappointed. If we care about the kingdom of God we will often be disappointed. The forces of evil are very powerful whether that is in our own lives or in the church or in the greater cause of the Lord in all the earth. The Bible has wonderful things to say about Jesus sitting at God's right hand and building his church and the Holy Spirit sanctifying the people of God, but what we actually see, and experience is often tiny, mixed with sin and overshadowed by the massive success of evil. It is not surprising that Elijah exited the place where God was bringing his kingdom. It seemed as if evil had the upper hand. It is not surprising that discouragement, disillusionment and despair are common among the people of God particularly if they care deeply about the glory of God and the progress of his kingdom.

Now, we will see that it is not good to be discouraged and disillusioned because of what seems to be little positive momentum in personal growth in holiness or in the bigger picture of the church and kingdom. Elijah is not being presented here as an example for us to follow. We should not be like Elijah was here in our text – asking God to take his life

because he felt that it had been a failure. But there is something positive underneath his negativity and that is that he cared deeply about the cause of the Lord in Israel. A little further in the story, he will say to God, "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."

Even though he should not have been despairing, beneath the despair was a deep jealousy for God and a profound desire to see Israel obeying and honoring God as they should have been doing. And that is something worth thinking about as we seek to apply this verse to our lives. You see it is possible that we are not tempted to be discouraged or to despair because we are complacent. It is possible that personal holiness and the advance of God's kingdom are not all that important to us because we are living for this world and are quite satisfied if we have an enjoyable life in the here and now. The things that disturb us or fail to disturb us tell us a lot about what is really important to us. The things that disappoint us or fail to disappoint us tell us a lot about what the deepest desires of our hearts.

And in that way, even though Elijah here is not a positive example for us to emulate, he is still in a much better place than we are if we are happy all the day because we have little passion for holiness and for the glory of God and the progress of his project of defeating evil and replacing it with holiness and godliness in the world. Elijah was so discouraged that he had essentially resigned from being a prophet, but at least he cared deeply about the sad fact that God was not being honored and served in Israel and that the forces of wickedness seemed to have the upper hand.

But still this text is not holding up Elijah here as an example to be followed in his discouragement and disillusionment. We should be very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts, but at the same time we should not give up in the face of setbacks and disappointments in the fight for progress in the cause of the Lord. And we can apply this idea to our own struggles with sin as well as disappointments in expanding areas of

concern: our families, our church, the church of Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God in the world.

It is important for us to give full weight to the fact that God's ways are not our ways. This is so very clear when we place side by side, God's promises concerning the coming of his kingdom with all their certainty and glory and the strange and unusual and unexpected ways that God is working towards the fulfillment of those promises in history, both in Bible history and in history beyond Bible times. We know that the history recorded in the Bible is the history of God working out his plan for the defeat of evil and the establishment of his reign over all the earth and yet it almost always seems that God's side is weak and miniscule and the devil's side is powerful and big. So often God's promises are long delayed in being fulfilled and so often when they are fulfilled, the fulfillment seems to be so much less than was promised. Just think of the promises that God made to Abraham and their fulfillment.

God promised that he would make Abraham a great nation and make his name great and that through him all the families of the earth would be blessed. The fulfillment of these promises in Abraham's own lifetime were rather underwhelming compared to the language of the promises. And even when the offspring of Abraham did become a nation, they were hardly great when compared to the empires that surrounded them. The promises that God makes, when they are initially fulfilled always seem to cry out for greater fulfillment.

There is lots of exalted language in the promises, but the fulfillments often seem underwhelming. So you have this tiny group of people moving through history surrounded by vast empires of evil and this tiny group – very unspectacular - is what God is doing to fulfill his purpose of filling the whole world with the knowledge of his glory.

We see this in the ministry of Jesus while he was on earth. Jesus was so different from what was promised concerning him that virtually no one recognized him for who he really was. And from the perspective of obvious success, Jesus was a failure. He had a very small band of faithful followers, who proved not to be faithful enough when the going got rough and in the end he was executed as a criminal. The only way to see

success in what Jesus accomplished is to see it in the light of the word of God, but on the face of it, being executed as a criminal did not look like success.

Now things did change to some extent after Pentecost with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The New Testament church grew rather spectacularly during the first centuries of its existence so that after some three hundred years Christianity became the dominant religion of the Roman Empire. And certainly, it is amazing how the church has survived through the centuries and even flourished in some times and places. And even today Christianity is one of the major religions of the world.

But even so, there is so much weakness and corruption that it is hard to know how much of what calls itself Christianity is the real thing. And many places, where it is growing, like China for instance, it is persecuted. And then we have the west in which secularism and other false religions vastly outnumber the church.

The reality is that there is still an awful lot that tempts those who are jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts to be discouraged and disillusioned. There is a lot that is weak. There is a lot that is small. There is a lot that is questionable in terms of faithfulness to the word of God. And when we look at our own lives, there is also a lot that is weak and small and questionable.

God's ways of accomplishing his purposes are often the opposite of what we expect. God is king over all the earth. Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth, but you would never know it from how the church is fairing in many places around the world. And so it is not surprising that God's people are often dispirited and demoralized when the enemy seems like a tidal wave and the people of God seem to be barely surviving.

But the Bible insists that God's plan is right on schedule. Jesus is building his church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. It insists that God is working all things together for the good of his people and that means that he is working all things together for the good of his kingdom. The book of Revelation is very interesting in this regard

because one of its main points is that the scroll of the plan of God for the salvation of the world is firmly in the hands of the Lamb who was slain and that everything that happens in world history is a direct result of the Lamb opening the seals of that scroll.

And yet the picture that the book of Revelation gives of the battle between the followers of Christ and the followers of Satan has the followers of Christ overwhelmed by hordes of worshipers of demons and it has them winning by dying. In the book of Revelation, God is sovereign, accomplishing his purposes, but we only know that because we are given a glimpse of what is going on in heaven. As far as things on earth are concerned, things look pretty dire for the followers of the Lamb. Chapter 13 of Revelation speaks of a beast who, we are told, “opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling...” And then in verse 7 of Revelation 13 we read, “Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them.” And then in verse 10 we read, “Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.” In chapter 14:12 we have something similar, “Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus.”

The point is that God’s way of establishing his rule over all the earth involves an awful lot of what looks like defeat. An awful lot of the time, God’s followers are few in number and the people who worship false gods are great in number and influence and power. And yet the Bible insists that everything is going according to plan. God is fully in control. Jesus is the one who is orchestrating the purposes of God. And God’s victory only becomes clear and unambiguous at the very end when Jesus returns and wraps things up with overwhelming power and glory.

There is a phrase in the book of Revelation that conveys this idea again and again and that is the phrase, “it was given” or some equivalent phrase. For instance in Revelation 13:5 referring to the beast which represents organized evil throughout the period between the ascension of Christ and his return, we read, “[I]t was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months.” And verse 7 again, “Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them.” The meaning of these phrases

is that the beast was allowed to exercise authority and to make war on the saints by God and by the Lamb.

What this all means is that things are not as they appear to be from an earthly perspective. God's way of establishing his kingdom involves allowing many apparent victories for his enemies and many apparent defeats for his followers. Just as the foundational victory of the cross was an apparent defeat, so God continues to pursue his purpose of defeating evil following that same pattern.

And that is why the saints are called to live by faith and not by sight and that is why the saints are called to endurance. In the story before us, Elijah so disillusioned that he was calling it quits. But in a roundabout way this story is in fact a call to endurance. Elijah here is an example of what not to do as a follower of God. And so it is a call not to give up, but rather to keep on going in the fight, following the Lord, doing whatever he calls us to do even when it seems futile to do so. And so it is a call to endurance.

God's way of pursuing his cosmic goal of establishing his rule is very different from what we would expect it to be. It involves giving the enemies a lot of power and influence. It involves allowing evil to develop according to its own logic. It involves God's own kingdom appearing weak and feeble much of the time. And because of this it involves the people of God living in the light of revealed truths that are known only by faith in the word of God and that seem to be contradicted by conditions on the ground. And so endurance is a necessary grace.

One of Jesus' repeated sayings was, "But the one who endures to the end will be saved." Paul wrote of believers that "we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope...." (Romans 5:3-4) The book of Hebrews teaches in 10:36, "For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised." In 12:3 it points us to Jesus: "Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted."

And the verses before that give us one of the most pervasive encouragements in the Bible. We are to “run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” We are to be encouraged by the example of Jesus and we are to be encouraged, as he was, by the joy that is set before us.

It is very significant that the endurance that God calls us to is not a sullen, bitter endurance, but a joyful and hopeful endurance. The Christian life is not easy. The Bible makes that abundantly clear. But it is also about joy and it is also about hope because it is about being right with God and being loved by God and being one with Christ. It is about the victory of good over evil. It is about the defeat of sin and death. And it is about eternal life which begins now already and will never end. We are called to endurance – to persisting through hardships and disappointments, but that endurance is motivated by joy and by hope and by love. In our text we see Elijah in a moment of despair, and we have reflected on the meaning of that despair. But God was not finished with him yet and we will consider how God ministered to him and called him to his next task. God’s ways are perplexing, and they are challenging for his people to navigate, but God’s love and care for his people is sure and he lifts them up and enables them to endure.