



The Message of Elijah

(16) God Begins to Restore

Elijah's Soul

1 Kings 19:1-8

Text: 1 Kings 19:5-8

Rev. Jerry Hamstra
Riverside ARP Church
September 29, 2019

Last week we considered Elijah's discouragement as described in verse 4 of this chapter. Elijah had been instrumental in showing the futility of the worship of the false God, Baal. In answer to Elijah's prayer the true God had demonstrated his reality and power by sending fire from heaven. The people of Israel watching had confessed that Elijah's God was the true God and together they had executed the prophets of Baal. But when Jezebel had heard of all that Elijah had done, she swore an oath to have Elijah killed and Elijah lost his courage and ran for his life. In verse 4 we read of Elijah leaving the Promised Land and asking God to take his life. He was thoroughly discouraged. All that God had said and done through him and nothing much had changed. There was no great change in Israel. There was no repentance in the palace and no evidence of repentance among the people. And so Elijah gave up. He in effect resigned from being a prophet. His life had been a failure and he was tired of living. And so he said to God, "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers."

This morning we will look at the beginnings of God's response to Elijah. Clearly Elijah is not in a good place. He had abandoned his post. He was absent without leave. He was no longer strong in the Lord. The joy of the Lord was no longer his strength. He had had an enough of being a prophet since being a prophet had meant bringing the word of the Lord with so little fruit. And so he lays down and goes to sleep under a broom tree.

First the Lord says nothing and lets him sleep. The Lord did not answer him right away. In fact that Lord says nothing to him in this part of the story. The Lord is going to answer Elijah, but it will take a while. First he lets him sleep. And then, presumably after Elijah had slept awhile, he is awakened by the touch of an angel who tells him "Arise and eat." And he looks over and sees a warm cake and a jar of water. So he eats and drinks and goes back to sleep.

There is a tenderness here. And a quietness. Something rather remarkable is happening, but it is told in a very low-key way. Being visited by an angel was not an everyday occurrence even for someone like Elijah, but we read nothing of a reaction on his part. In some of the other instances of angel visitations in the Bible, the human person is terrified. Elijah is just sleepy. He does what the angel says and goes back to sleep. In the other Old Testament story of a prophet going AWOL, that of Jonah, God's response was rather more dramatic: a huge storm, Jonah being thrown overboard into that raging sea and then three days to contemplate the futility of trying to run away from God in the belly of a great fish.

But God is treating Elijah very differently. One of the things that we learn from this is that God does not deal with every prophet who had abandoned his calling in the same way. Each prophet gets a personalized program to lead him back to the way that he should go. And we can apply that principle to God's way of ministering to all of his children. He does not treat us like "cases" which all get the same approach. Psalm 103 says, "As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him." A good father knows that each of his children is unique and needs to be treated in ways most suited to their unique personality. Good fathers reflect the wisdom of God who in the case of wayward prophets, deals with them in ways best suited to their unique situation and personality.

There is a gentleness about how God is treating Elijah here. Elijah asks to die. The Lord gives him food and drink and rest and an angel to nudge him awake when it is time to eat again. One is reminded of the 23th Psalm. There are no green pastures and still waters here, but LORD who

is Elijah's Shepherd is restoring Elijah's soul and first on the agenda are food and drink and sleep.

And surely that is always a good beginning when we are down and discouraged and even wanting to die. It is not often the complete solution, but the first step towards our soul being restored is our body being restored by sleep, diet and exercise. The exercise will come later in this passage. Not every instance of discouragement and depression will be fixed by a good rest and a good meal, but they are often an important factor in the way back to hope and vitality. If you want to read a good book that covers this ground I recommend David Murray's *Reset* for men and Shona Murray's *Refresh* for women.

Now the angel is interesting. It is interesting that Elijah seems to be so unsurprised by the angel. Perhaps he was used to getting meals prepared for him by angels, but it is more likely that the narrator of the story was simply not interested in Elijah's reaction to the angel, so it just left it out. He simply wanted us to reflect on the fact that God sent an angel to minister to Elijah at this point when he was very discouraged and disillusioned. Clearly God wanted to encourage Elijah by sending him a visitor from heaven. There is one suggestion in the literature about the significance of this that is quite convincing, and it is that God, by sending this angel, was reminding Elijah that he is the LORD, the God of hosts.

This was a name for God that Elijah liked to use. Remember when Obadiah was afraid when Elijah sent him to go and fetch King Ahab earlier in the story. Obadiah thought that Elijah would disappear, and that Ahab would think that Obadiah was playing games with him and have his head. In that context Elijah said, "As the LORD of hosts lives, before whom I stand, I will surely show myself to him today." And now when Elijah had run away because Jezebel was after his head and when Elijah became so discouraged that he just wanted to die, God sent him one of his hosts to remind him that he was indeed the LORD, the God of hosts.

It is interesting to compare Jesus to Elijah in this regard. Jesus did not forget that God was the God of hosts. Remember what Jesus said when the henchmen of the Jewish religious leaders arrested Jesus and when

Peter then cut off the ear of the servant of the high priest. Jesus' words are recorded in Matthew 26:53, "Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels." Jesus could not see those angels, but he knew that they were there.

And this may well be what God was reminding Elijah of by sending him an angel to minister to him – that he was the LORD, the God of hosts. God has innumerable angels at his disposal. Think of the picture we get from Psalm 103:20-21, "Bless the LORD, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his word, obeying the voice of his word! Bless the LORD, all his hosts, his ministers, who do his will!"

Elijah needed to be reminded of unseen reality. He was discouraged because he was restricting his thinking to what his eyes could see and what his eyes could see was that the forces against God were many and the followers of God were few. But by sending him this angel, God was reminding him that there is more to reality than what meets the eye. There is a vast unseen reality that can be known by faith in the word of God and the God of hosts lives there. Those hosts are angels – heavenly beings. God really doesn't even need them because he can obliterate any enemy simply by speaking, but he has chosen to have angels and those angels are pretty powerful and have done some pretty amazing things in the Bible.

And you know that those angels minister to all of us who are followers of Jesus. This is not a frequent theme in the New Testament, but it is mentioned. Hebrews 1:14 says concerning angels, "Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation." Angels serve for the sake of believers. The Bible does not really say how they serve us, but it does teach that they do serve us. That is good to know. And that is something to keep in mind when we are discouraged. There is more going on than what meets the eye. Our God is the LORD the God of hosts and those hosts are ministering to us in ways beyond our sense perception. A huge encouragement for Christians who are feeling overwhelmed by the power and influence of evil is to know that in the unseen spiritual reality, God and his hosts are

at work and those who are for us are far greater than those who are against us.

This story of Elijah being ministered to by an angel after he had checked out of the battle, also reminds of us how angels ministered to Jesus who did not check out of the battle, but persevered until he could declare, "It is finished" when he was dying on the cross.

Angels ministered to Jesus after he had successfully resisted Satan's temptations in the wilderness. Jesus had not eaten for 40 days and forty nights. He was very hungry. Satan tempted him to throw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple to demonstrate the reality of the promise of Psalm 91:11 which says, "He will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways." Jesus responded by saying, "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test." And then when Jesus had successfully resisted all the devil's temptations we read in Matthew 4:11 "Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him." God sent an angel to minister to Elijah after he had **failed** to stand in the face of temptation. God sent angels to minister to Jesus after he had **succeeded** resisting the temptations of the evil one.

Another significant example of an angel ministering to Jesus is found in Luke's version of Jesus' struggle in Gethsemane. There Jesus was facing the cross and the horror of suffering the wrath of God for our sins. He had asked if the cup of suffering could be removed, but he ended his prayer by saying, "Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done" (Luke 22:42). And then we read in verse 43, "And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him."

The contrast between Elijah and Jesus is striking. Both of them were strengthened by angels. But Elijah was strengthened in failure. Jesus was strengthened in success. The angels sent to strengthen Jesus show us how the LORD, the God of hosts was behind Jesus and supportive of Jesus in his mission. But the contrast with Elijah highlights the fact that while Jesus had to go through a whole lot more than Elijah or any of us, his faith did not fail. His resolution did not waver. And he, with the encouragement of angels, stuck to his mission right to the end. And it

was because Jesus did not fail, that God can be gracious to us when we fail.

Ultimately God could be gentle and compassionate to Elijah in his sinful abandonment of his post because of what knew what Jesus would do. And for us the principle is the same, although we look back on Jesus' finished work. When we get discouraged, it is understandable, but still sinful. We are supposed to trust. We are supposed to be strong in the Lord. And the reason that God deals with his struggling people with such patience and tenderness is that Jesus succeeded where we failed and in succeeding not only accomplished obedience for us, but also satisfied the penalty for our sin by his death on the cross. And the help of the angels that he had along the way demonstrate that the one who sent the angels was behind Jesus all the way.

We return now to Elijah and our text. After Elijah had been awakened by the angel and told to eat and drink he fell asleep again. And verse 7 says, "And the angel of the LORD came again a second time and touched him and said, 'Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you.'" And then verse 8, "And he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God."

This has to be significant. There are too many associations with Israel's past for this journey not to be significant. The forty days and forty nights of travel in the wilderness remind us of Israel's forty years in the wilderness. And, of course, Mount Horeb is another name for Mount Sinai, the mountain where Israel gathered before God who spoke the Ten Commandments and where Moses received from God the rest of the covenant arrangement by which Israel was constituted as a nation. Mount Sinai was the place where God entered into a covenant relationship with Israel, a covenant which they were now breaking.

We look at Elijah's journey here as something that actually happened, but also as something that the narrator of the story purposely included to convey the message that he wanted to convey. And so we must try to discern what that message was for Israel and is for us.

Now there are a couple of things we have to understand about this journey to mount Horeb to get at its significance. First Elijah is taking

this journey at his own initiative. We know that because when the word of the Lord does come to Elijah, God asks him “What are you doing here, Elijah?” That suggests that Elijah really should not have been there. He should have been back in Israel continuing his mission of bringing the word of the Lord to Israel. It is striking that in other parts of the story Elijah’s movements are directed by the word of the Lord. But not here. However, at the same time, God is guiding him and strengthen him for the journey. The angel with the food and drink had strengthened Elijah for the journey. And the fact that the journey took 40 days and 40 nights suggests that God was guiding Elijah on the journey so that it would take that amount of time.

So while the journey itself was not authorized by God, God was guiding it because he was going to use it to teach Elijah and renew him to his calling. This teaches us that even when we sin God can be directing events so as to teach us things that we need to know from our sins. It is not that God is ever responsible for our sin. But God is able to orchestrate things in such a way that we learn lessons from our sins. So while Elijah should not even have been making this journey, God was overruling it to teach Elijah what he needed to learn in this situation.

So Elijah was on his way to Horeb, the mount of God. He had given up on Israel and he was going back to where it all began, or at least to where the covenant between God and Israel had been made and ratified. And basically he was going to report to the Lord that that it was all over. The people had broken the covenant between themselves and God. They had turned away from the Lord. The people were apostate. And there was no kingdom of God left on earth. Listen to What Elijah says when he gets to Mount Horeb. Verses, “I have been 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 traveled all the way to mount Horeb, retracing the steps of Israel back to the place where God had taken his people as his covenant people to report that there was basically nothing left. He was it. Elijah himself was all that remained of the covenant people. The rest was all apostate. The covenant had failed because of Israel’s apostasy.

But the forty days and forty nights are significant. This is clearly God's doing. It did not need to take forty days and forty nights for Elijah to travel from where he was in the wilderness to mount Horeb. Somehow this was the Lord's doing and the fact that the journey took that exact amount of time indicates that it is significant, and that God was telling Elijah something by it. The most obvious connection is to Israel's forty years of wandering in the wilderness. God was reminding Elijah in a symbolic and powerful way of the fact that Israel had had to wander in the wilderness for 40 years before they were allowed to enter the Promised Land.

You remember the story. That forty years of wandering in the wilderness was a judgment of God against Israel because she had been afraid to go in and take the land by faith after the spies that Moses had sent into the land to check out the strength of the enemy had reported that the enemy was very strong and formidable. The people had grumbled and wanted to return back to Egypt and so the Lord in his wrath decreed that that whole generation would die in the wilderness except for Joshua and Caleb and that only the next generation would be allowed to enter the Promised Land.

God was reminding Elijah of this. God was reminding Elijah that what Elijah was experiencing now was nothing new for the Lord. The Lord knew what this people were like. Moses had come to understand this as well. At the very end of his instruction to the people near the end of the book of Deuteronomy Moses said, Deuteronomy 27:27 & 29, "For I know how rebellious and stubborn you are. Behold, even today while I am yet alive, with you, you have been rebellious against the LORD. How much more after my death! For I know that after my death you will surely act corruptly and turn aside from the way that I have commanded you. And in the days to come evil will befall you, because you will do what is evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger through the work of your hands."

By having Elijah wander in the wilderness forty days and forty nights, God was reminding Elijah that what he had been experiencing of Israel's apostasy was nothing new. God had been dealing with this all the way along. By wandering in the wilderness retracing symbolically, Israel's

forty years of wandering, Elijah was walking among the graves of that whole generation that had perished in the wilderness.

It was important for Elijah to learn the truth about Israel that God had known all along. God expressed this to Moses already after the sin of the golden calf. In that context God said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people."

This was an important lesson for Elijah to learn and it is an important lesson for us to learn as well. Elijah was disappointed when his ministry proved to be fruitless. He was disappointed in the people. And perhaps he was disappointed in God. And part of God's way of restoring Elijah's heart was to impress upon him in the most powerful way the incorrigibility of the sinfulness of Israel. She was a stiff-necked people. Elijah should not have been surprised at the depth of the sins of the people of Israel. She had been that way right from the beginning. In Psalm 95 God said about his people "They are a people who go astray in their heart, and they have not known my ways."

Elijah had to learn to a greater degree the depth and the persistence of Israel's sin. He had to learn the truth of what we read about the human heart in Genesis 6:5, "The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." He had to learn what Jeremiah would later write, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?"

Elijah had to learn what God knew all the way along and that is how desperately wicked we are in our sinfulness.

Now you might think that that was a very strange way for God to encourage Elijah, but it is at the heart of the encouragement for him and for all of us because true hope in the Bible begins with a profound understanding of the depth of the wickedness of the human heart. You see hope in the Bible is in the grace of God and no part of it is in what man may be able to accomplish. Hope in the Bible cannot be strong until it gives up entirely and completely on man whether that is ourselves or our fellow man. "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" Knowing this is where hope

begins because it turns us away from hoping in man and turns us to God with the profound knowledge that he and he alone is our hope.

And we see something wonderful in this story of Elijah wandering forty days and forty nights in the wilderness among the graves of those who had experienced the judgment of God. God is a God of wrath and judgment. But he is also a God of very, very persistent grace. And no matter how dismal things looked, and they were dismal, God was not finished with his people and he was not finished with his plan for overcoming the power of sin at its very root. Before the story is over Elijah will be sent back to carry on God's mission. It will involve God's judgement, but it will also involve God's grace to an underserving people.

The hope here is not in people. It never is. It is in God's persistent grace – his persistent working out his purposes among and through people who are incorrigible in their sins. And the story leads to Jesus, who finally did what needed to be done. He broke the power of sin by becoming a sinner, by imputation, and then experiencing the penalty for that sin and exhausting the penalty for that sin on the cross.

But even after the cross, even after the renewal that Christ works in his people, sin is still very, very powerful in the lives of God's people. God has decreed that it will not be until the end that we will be completely free from sin and so even though we do experience and see a degree of transformation in ourselves and others, there is no place to hope in people. We will always disappoint ourselves. We will often be disappointed in others. Hope is rooted not in people, but in God and his persistent grace. The lesson Elijah had to learn, we must learn as well. True hope begins when we despair of people and focus our expectations on God and on him alone.