

God Answers Doubt with His Gracious Promise

1 Kings 19:9-18

⁹ He came to a cave and spent the night there. Then the word of the LORD suddenly came to him, saying, "Why are you here, Elijah?" ¹⁰ He said, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of Armies, but the people of Israel have abandoned your covenant. They have torn down your altars and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking to take my life." ¹¹ Then the LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is passing by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains and shattered rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind came an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. ¹² After the earthquake there was a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. After the fire there was a soft, whispering voice. ¹³ When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak, and he went out and stood at the entrance to the cave. Then a voice came to him and said, "Why are you here, Elijah?" ¹⁴ He said, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of Armies, but the people of Israel have abandoned your covenant. They have torn down your altars and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking to take my life." ¹⁵ Then the LORD said to him, "Go back the way you came and go to the Wilderness of Damascus. When you get there, you are to anoint Hazael as king over Aram. ¹⁶ You will also anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel and Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah as prophet in your place. ¹⁷ Whoever escapes the sword of Hazael, Jehu will kill, and whoever escapes the sword of Jehu, Elisha will kill. ¹⁸ But I have preserved in Israel seven thousand whose knees have not bent to Baal and whose lips have not kissed him."

To say that Elijah had a difficult ministry is an understatement. God sent this prophet to minister to God's people when the nation was divided. There were the northern ten tribes that made up the kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Elijah was sent to the northern kingdom of Israel during the rule of wicked King Ahab. Probably the worst thing about Ahab was his choice in a wife. He married Jezebel. Jezebel was a zealous worshipper of the false god Baal. And she made it her mission to turn all Israel into Baal worshippers. She installed and supported 450 prophets of Baal. But she didn't want Baal worship just to be tolerated in Israel. She wanted Baal worship to replace the worship of the true God. So she began to slaughter of prophets of the true God. Now God is a jealous God. He shares his glory with no one, especially not some false god named Baal. So he sends his prophet Elijah to minister in Israel during the wicked rule of King Ahab. The first thing God had his prophet do was to announce news of a severe drought. For more than three years it would not rain a drop anywhere in Israel. During that time, God's prophet went and stayed with a widow and her son in the town of Zarephath. The prophet made sure the woman's food supply would miraculously last throughout the famine.

The next chapter in the life of God's prophet was to rid the land of Baal worship. So a challenge was raised. We're going to prove today who is God in Israel. Was it Baal that Queen Jezebel wanted? Or was the God Elijah served? Each side would set up an altar for sacrifice. Then leave it up to each God to respond. So King Ahab went along with the challenge. Why? Ahab

was a desperate man. He needed the drought in Israel to come to an end. The prophet who called for the drought, was the one who could end it. Ahab was at Elijah's mercy. You know how the challenge ended. The 450 prophets of Baal could get nothing out of their false god. But Elijah's God sent fire from heaven that completely consumed the sacrifice, the stones that made up the altar for sacrifice, and even licked up the many gallons of water that Elijah had poured over his sacrifice. The Lord left no doubt that he alone is God.

Next follows God's judgment upon those false prophets of Baal. His law required that they be executed. And so they were. But when news reached the #1 supporter of Baal worship, Queen Jezebel, she sent a message back to Elijah: *"May the gods punish me severely and even double it, if by this time tomorrow I have not made your life like one of theirs"* (1 Kings 19:2). That's where our text begins. We see how God answers his prophets doubt with his gracious promise.

How does Elijah react to Jezebel's threat? He runs for his life. You can just imagine the roller coaster of emotions that the prophet is going through. He had just witnessed how God proved beyond a doubt that he and only he is God. The prophet even heard God's people confirm it: *"The Lord, he is God!"* Elijah thinks they're finally done with Baal worship in Israel. But then to hear a threat on his own life. It was too much. The prophet runs to save his own life. Soon he offers up this prayer: *"I've had enough, LORD. Take my life, for I am no better than my fathers"* (1 Kings 19:4). I have failed miserably. There's no hope left for God's people. That wicked queen has turned every heart against you. I'm throwing in the towel. I've got nothing left. End me, please. Take me out of this miserable world.

How many a Christian has offered up the same prayer? We have, you know. Each time we pray, "Deliver us from evil," we're asking God to take us from this world of evil to himself in heaven. How many a Christian has been fed up with the evil in this world and longed to be at home in heaven? But it must be in God's time and according to his will. Sadly, our own sinful flesh gets us fed up with life. We may even be led so far as to think that God cares very little about what's going on in my life. What an insult that must be to God. That could not be further from the truth.

From eternity he chose you to be his very own. He formed our world's history around his saving plan for you and for all mankind. And when the time was just right, he sent his Son into our world to do what we had not done—Be holy as God is holy. He came to undo all the wrong that we did. He paid dearly for it all on a cross. He made sure that truth reached our ears and settled down deep in our heart. And when our flesh complained about our lot in life, we were led to our baptism. In those saving waters we drowned that sinful flesh. And God made sure we'd have a steady diet of word and sacrament to keep faith alive in us. That way we don't have to travel alone through this valley of the shadow of death. When life seems impossible to bear and we just want to be with our Lord, he keeps us content knowing our Lord is always with us. He keeps us faithful to him and focused on the eternal goal.

Kind of like he did for his despairing prophet. Elijah was famished. The Lord decided his prophet could use a good, warm meal. Probably hadn't had one since he left that widow in Zarephath. And look who's there to serve it. It's an angel from heaven. Can't get better service than that.

And look what the prophet is able to do with that meal in his belly. We've heard about Lord's miraculous feeding of the 5,000. We've heard about the miraculous manna from heaven that supplied daily bread to God's people for forty years in the wilderness. Look what this miraculous meal did for God's prophet. He's able to travel 300 miles on foot to Mt. Horeb.

But while the prophet hangs out in a cave there, God has an important question for his prophet: "What are you doing here? I sent you to prophesy in Israel. What are you doing here 300 miles away in a cave? The prophet had his answer: *"I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of Armies, but the people of Israel have abandoned your covenant. They have torn down your altars and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking to take my life."*

The Lord needed to remind his prophet about the way that God chooses to operate. He calls his prophet out the cave and tells him that the Lord will pass by him. It sounds similar to when the Lord in his glory passed by Moses on that same mountain. As the prophet waits for his Lord to pass by, there's a violent wind that begins to tear the mountain apart. But the Lord wasn't in the wind. Next came an earthquake that began to split rocks and shake the mountain. But the Lord wasn't there either. Next came an intense fire. The fire that consumed Elijah's offering at Carmel was impressive. Try this one. But the Lord didn't come by fire either. Then comes a quiet, gentle whisper. Elijah needed to be reminded that the Lord does not use powerful judgment to do his work. He uses the gentle whisper of his Word. And that's what God sent Elijah to do. Elijah was God's mouthpiece to share God's whisper with the people of Israel.

God doesn't need his prophet lying under a broom tree asking God to take his life. He doesn't need him hiding out in a cave 300 miles away from Israel. So our Lord gives his prophet his next assignment. Anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Anoint Jehu as king over Israel. And anoint Elisha to replace you as prophet. And remember that you're not alone either. There are seven thousand in Israel who are still listening to God's gentle whisper. They still trust all his promises. They remain true to him and his word. So Elijah, get back to Israel and keep prophesying there and know that I am still in control.

What does God need to get work done in his church today. He doesn't need the loud clanging of a church bell ringing every hour on the hour. He doesn't need some dynamic preacher who can control the weather and perform other miracles? He chooses to use a gentle whisper. And we need to just keep listening. Listen to his gentle whisper. Hear how much he loves you. Hear how he took on human flesh for you, how he lived life to perfection for you, how he gave up his life to die on a cross for you and win you forgiveness for every sin. Hear how he conquered death when he returned to life on Easter. And know because he lives you also shall live body and soul forever in paradise. He doesn't need a violent wind, or a quake, or a fire. A gentle whisper will suffice. All that's left for us is to listen.

It may be difficult to keep people listening, when the world around them is screaming. But our God does have something to say to us. It's not found in disasters in nature. It comes to us in the quietness of his holy Word. So keep listening. That's what his sheep do.