

Elijah and Elisha—Help for Church in Dark Times

3—Sustained by God 1 Kings 19

In our reading, Elijah sees that his victory on Mt Carmel is not the last word and he suffers a shocking disappointment. Our reading deals with how God sustains and restores his servant and readies him for the new situation.

The Lord has vindicated himself on Mount Carmel. He has vindicated Elijah as his servant. It also seems that 'all Israel' who were there, now know that their hearts have been turned back to the Lord. These are Elijah's three requests.

Israel's ritual of coming to God via a sacrifice has been reinstated, Israel has confessed that the Lord is God and destroyed Baal's prophets. Elijah has prayed for rain and it has come. God has heard from heaven, forgiven their sin and healed their land (2 Chron. 7:14). It is hard to imagine the thoughts in Elijah's mind as he runs to Jezreel!

Now, Jezebel enters and everything changes. She is not summoned to Carmel (suggesting the gathering was religious, not political), she controls the king and country and vows to have Elijah dead in a day. If someone has an ideology that excludes the Lord, facts don't matter! There are always ways to explain him away. Obviously, Baal sent the rain!

We are always among rival powers that owe no allegiance to God. This is certainly true in our communities. But sometimes, it is also true within the church. Jezebels abound.

Elijah successor, John the Baptist, is remarkably effective in calling Israel to prepare for their Messiah, but he also meets his 'Jezebel' in Herod's wife. Later, in jail, he asks Jesus if he got his identification right, and Jesus speaks reassuringly to him—not very different to Elijah.

Then, Christ sends a message to the Thyatira church about their tolerating 'the woman Jezebel'. She has considerable influence as a prophetess in the church, leading people to compromise with immorality and idolatry. The duty of the church is to not tolerate her. If the leaders identify and expose her and the people don't believe her, they have done what is asked of them.

Jesus says he will give her time to repent (!) and if not, *he* will deal with her and her followers. It takes a bigger pair of hands than ours to finally deal with evil.

I find this analogy helpful in understanding Elijah. He has not tolerated Jezebel! But the Lord will have to deal with her and her followers. Where does this leave Elijah? Clearly, not compromised but certainly devastated and broken.

There are situations we face in the church, and in the world, that we must stand against, but cannot change. How do we then live as we wait for the Lord to act? Clearly, it doesn't happen without difficulty. And it doesn't happen without the Lord sustaining us.

The new situation

Most English Bibles read that Elijah is frightened of Jezebel and flees from her. He certainly runs but the Hebrew word translated 'frightened' can also mean 'saw'. Context has to decide. There is no reason to believe he is afraid to die. Later on, he asks for it. But why should he stay around and be her victim—adding to her triumph?

He leaves Israel, passes through Judah (where he could be safe under Jehoshaphat) to Beersheba—its southern border—160km away. Here, he leaves his servant and walks for a day into the wilderness. He's outside of the land God promised to bless. Is he saying, 'If this is Israel, I don't want to be part of it'?

He doesn't have to go this far to be alone or safe. His prayer tells us what is on his mind: 'I don't want to live. I am no better than any before me.' He does what the Psalm says, 'Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us.'

Failure, uselessness, hopelessness are profound enemies for all of us. Victor Frankl says people can endure any suffering except purposelessness (*Man's Search for Meaning*). Elijah would rather die than live because his hopes for Israel and his calling to intervene—so focused for these last few years—lies in ruins.

God tends his despondent servant

It is easy to give advice here. But a proverb warns us, 'Like vinegar on a wound is one who sings songs to a heavy heart' (Prov. 25:20).

Elijah is in the desert. 'The angel of the Lord' attends him. The phrase is hard to pin down but it signifies little less than God attending him—two times. God treats him as an ordinary human being with human needs. He has a chance to sleep and eat appetizing food. There is a huge significance in this (as mental health practitioners know).

The second day God says the journey is too great for him. That is, to Horeb, or Sinai. God, it seems, suggests this is what he will want to do. So, he walks another 320km.

Return to the covenant of grace

He is returning to where the covenant was instituted under Moses—back to Israel's roots. This is also where the covenant was broken and where Moses prayed for God's continued presence. At Horeb, or Sinai, Elijah seeks out *the* cave—suggesting it is the one used by Moses when he prayed for Israel (Exod. 33:21f.; 34:5-7).

Where do we Christians go when our hopes for the kingdom are dashed? We have a Saviour who has established the covenant of grace by his own blood. We need to go to the cross to find the truth again.

We could say that Jesus had his high day, when he rode into Jerusalem, cleared the temple of malpractice and when people hung on his words. But he also had his Jezebel in the hierarchy and they stirred up mobs to crucify him. On the way to his cross he urges sad people to weep for themselves because of what will happen to them. He knows the reality of God dealing with those who resist his grace. But from his cross he says, 'Father forgive them'.

The reign of grace is the reign of God, not of a principle. We don't always know how God will deal with situations. Executing judgement is not our task (1 Cor. 4:5).

Paul is an example of this. He could warn about God judgment coming to those who resist God and his word, but he had anguish in his heart for his fellow Jews, no matter how many times they made his life difficult.

For Paul, the outcome of this is that he says, 'for we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task?' (2 Cor. 2:15-16).

Elijah certainly wasn't. Not of himself. But then, he wasn't just 'of himself'.

Restored

The word of the Lord comes to him again. This is the way he has lived, so he is back on familiar ground. It is his vocation to hear and speak God's word—and it is happening. 'What are you doing here?' says God.

We could read this as a criticism of his running away. Rather, I suggest we read it as God asking Elijah what he wants to achieve while being here. Notice the 'Why'. What purpose does he want to achieve? God is still treating him as a person with a mission.

Again, Elijah pours out his heart to God—full as he is of all the events back in Israel. 'Israel doesn't serve God; their sacred places are despoiled, all the prophets are killed and I'm the only one left.'

Is Elijah peeved and self-pitying? We don't know. But he may just be grieving. John Piper prayed after the twin towers disaster in New York, 'Lord teach us how to grieve. We have forgotten how to grieve.' There is a place for grief—and a place for asking God to act.

Is this also a charge against Israel? (So Dale Ralph Davis.) What does he expect God to do about his accusation? The prosecution has been lodged. Now God comes—formally, with overtones of the earth shattering noises that attended his coming to Moses and Israel.

Here seems to be the turning point. God himself will come to him. The covenant of grace is not a principle we can apply—giving us some control. It is God himself, being God.

Elijah has spoken to Ahab about 'the Lord before whom I stand'. And again, he will do just this: '...stand on the mount before the Lord' (v. 11). After the wind, earthquake and fire comes a whisper-breath. Only in the latter does God come to Elijah. God is gentle with his servant. Again, 'Why are you here?'

This brings Elijah out. Again, he lodges his complaint against Israel.

Israel has broken the covenant. True. What does God do with a broken covenant? Moses pleaded for God to renew it. Who knows the end of the patience of God? Who can understand a covenant of grace? Who understands it for themselves? We all need mercy!

We cannot calculate when and how the Lord will bring judgement, or when and how he will show mercy. We need to know that he is God, that he is the God of grace.

And read our job list! Elijah is now back on track, living by every word that comes from God's mouth.

For Elijah, his jobs are to anoint Hazael king of Syria, Jehu king of Israel and Elisha to succeed him. They will attend to what God wants to do.

And in the midst of this coming judgement, God says, 'I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal' (v. 18)! Were these 7000 at Mt. Carmel? It is tempting to think so. Whatever, God's kingdom is exactly on track, as always. And Elijah is back on track!

We will leave the story of Elijah here, but note that later, he is given the task of going to Ahab and telling him he will die for his sin over the Naboth vineyard affair (1 Kings 21). When Ahab repents, the promised disaster is postponed to the lifetime of his son. Who can work out the grace of God?