

## **DANGER IN CAVES OR COMMUNITIES**

I Kings 19: 9-10 – Pastor Richard P. Carlson

After forty days and forty nights of journeying, Elijah came to the place God already knew he was going. Elijah was not on a God-sent mission, but on a fear-sent mission of his own. He was running as fast as he could go in the strength of two divine meals the angel of the Lord supplied. It was 250 miles from Beersheba to Mt. Sinai, the mountain where the law was given to Moses. Though the Scripture gives us no account of God calling Elijah to go to Mt. Sinai, 350 miles from Jezreel, God had no doubt of the place Elijah decided to run to, if he could get there—to Mt. Sinai. The angel of the Lord told Elijah to eat a second meal when he was but a day's journey from Beersheba, with 240 miles left to go. The angel said, “Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you.” We have no record of God calling Elijah to the Sinai desert, but Psalm 37: 23 is clear, “The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord, when he delights in His way. Though he falls, he shall not be cast headlong, for the Lord upholds his hand.” Elijah was not on a God-sent mission, but he was on a God-accompanied mission to Sinai.

For the prior three and a half years, Elijah had been running from King Ahab, at God’s command, first in isolation at the Brook Cherith and lastly, in the village of Zarephath, in community, living with a Phoenician widow and her son. God protected Elijah in his three and a half years of running from Ahab, by first using isolation, and then using a pagan community, but it was all at God’s command. Now Elijah was running again, but this time from Jezebel, and not at God’s command. Rather than running and hiding by God’s design and desire, this time Elijah was on his own, running out of terror and extreme fear—trying to put miles between himself and Jezebel’s executioners. Whether we are alone or in community, that is, in fellowship with God’s people in the body of Christ, what is most important is that we are, where we are, by God’s direction and God’s design. There is safety in isolation if God calls us to isolation, and there is safety in community, if God calls us to live in a family or to be a part of a church family, such as Rock Springs Evangelical Free Church. Yet, if we go into isolation on our own, if we run in fear to a cave to hide, or if we run and hide in a community, and God is not directing our way, there is danger then, both in caves or in communities.

Think of it with me. Elijah was lodging in a cave, not by God’s divine directive or command, not because of a divine vision, or a prompting of the Holy Spirit, not because God led him there or gave Him a quickening within or a plan. Elijah was in this mountain of God cave because he chose to be there. The Hebrew word for lodged there is **luwn**. **Luwn** can mean to spend a night, but more often it means (33 times out of 87 times, it means to set up house or to plan to live, abide or remain there permanently. It appears, in fear, Elijah had temporarily given up his

revival mission to live in this cave. To translate it into our terms, he had looked over the cave and decided where to put his bed, his cooking area, his restroom probably down the mountain a-ways, and if it were us today, he already knew where his play station would be, with his television, DVD, VCR and he was keeping house. But no matter what he had done to make the cave livable, it was still a cave. How many of us are on the run, letting our enemies, our low self-esteem, our bad grades in school, our health, the political divide in America, our lack of adequate finances, our marital troubles, our doctor's diagnosis, a fellow church member, our reputation, our credit rating, or our not being chosen to be in a church clique, drive us away to live in a cave of our own making. Our perceived problems can send us into a cave where we want to hide in isolation. In the last week, I talked with 2 men who said they were hiding out in their own home.

A cave is a place where we think we are safe. This week, I read about a wonderful group of believers known as the Bruderhof. That's German for the place of brothers. These are Amish-like Anabaptist believers who are pacifists and conscientious objectors. I have read from their amazing magazine called Plough. This group was founded in 1920, and God did lead them to this kind of living in close community with deep love for whatever nation they are living in. I respect their way of life and their convictions. But be certain—even among the Amish, the old order Mennonites, though we may see them as living in a cave, it is not, but it is a closed community. Perhaps it is safer, but there are still dangers even in such a close community. I know of evangelical parents who send their children to Christian colleges, thinking this will ensure safety for their children, but though the chances are slimmer there for their children to begin to idolize Charles Darwin or Karl Marx, yet there are dangers in a closed community, or in an open community such as being a member or friend who is faithful in our own church. Our safety is not found either in isolation, being on a lonely island, or in being in community, in church, or in a separated life-style that separates our family from all others, and we have church in our own home. No place has fool-proof safety. The only safe place in the world is being in the center of the will of God. Dangers arise on every hand, especially when we think our safety is in our placement. Safety is found only in obedience, love, faith, hope, and joy in the center of the will of the Lord.

As we look at this text before us in I Kings 19: 9-10, the question of the Lord stands out sharply as the word of the Lord came to Elijah saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" That's was a good question for Elijah, and it is a great question for each of us to answer. Just days earlier, Elijah was winning a great victory on Mount Carmel. What was he doing, cowering fearfully, and lodging in a cave, 370 miles away from Mt. Carmel? Not that God didn't know. This question was not for God's benefit, but for Elijah's. God was saying, "Explain yourself, My son. You are my man, and you stood in triumphant faith up on Mt. Carmel. What

are you doing here in this Sinai cave? It's time to face your fears." It's time for you and me to face our fears too, whether we are living in isolation in a cave of sorts, or whether we are living in community. Let's take a close look at the danger of living in our caves of isolation, as well the danger of living in our communities, in our fellowship right here in our church. Let's examine these two dangers and what God wants us to do to get us back into the safety of living securely in His will.

**WHAT ARE THE DANGERS OF LIVING IN A CAVE OF ISOLATION, WHEN IT IS NOT THE WAY GOD IS LEADING US TO LIVE?** (I.) Notice v. 9. "Then Elijah came to a cave and lodged in it. And behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and He said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" We've already explored last Sunday how Elijah's running alone into the barren Sinai wilderness was not drawing him closer to God, but leading him into despair, depression, making him willing to give up his divine calling, and asking God to take his life. If you notice Elijah's answer, it was no real answer at all. Elijah ducked God's question entirely. He changed the subject, which explains why God asked the question again, not long afterwards, the same question, "What are you doing here?" And Elijah the second time, in 19: 14, answered as he answered the Lord the first time in v. 10. Elijah's evasive answer was identical. He answered the Lord, saying, "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." From what Elijah answered, we can find the answer he should have given God. Elijah should have honestly said, "Truthfully, Lord, I am running as fast and far as I can, to save my life from the wicked threats of Jezebel." But God's penetrating question to His faithful servant was, "What are you doing here, hiding in this cave, located hundreds of miles from your appointed place of ministry?"

Elijah's reply reveals many dangers in living or lodging in isolation in a cave? Let's list what Elijah could have answered honestly (1) **I am doing nothing.** Was there no more follow-up work to do after the Mt. Carmel victory in Israel? When all Israel had cried out, "The Lord, He is God; the Lord, He is God," was God wanting Queen Jezebel to be the final mistress and guardian of Elijah's victory? Was this one alien Queen supposed to scare God's fearless prophet to death, and to overawe all Israel into falling back into the worship of Baal and Asherah? Was the Lord God of Israel willing to accept the "I, even I only" words of Elijah, and thus to become the God of one frightened fugitive of Jezebel? (2) **I am frustrated, hopeless, and grieving, and all Your victories are for nothing.** Where is the confidence of Elijah that he displayed on Mt. Carmel? Why had Elijah's confidence turned into murmuring against the Lord in the grief of this wounded prophet's soul? God heard Elijah say, "I have done my utmost; I have failed. I am only one poor hunted prophet alone against the world. I can do no more. What use

is my life?" Elijah was pouring out his grieved heart, and relieving the pressure built up within his bosom that had weighed him down to take 40 days and nights to make 250 miles—only about 8.2 miles a day to get to Mt. Sinai. Out of Elijah there was gushing a full stream of his giving up.

But Elijah would have had more to say if he answered honestly. (3) **I am being dishonest and purposely forgetful, if I would answer you truly, Lord.** Listen to all Elijah was dishonestly and conveniently forgetting. First, Elijah was taking credit for being zealous, which he had been, but he wasn't being zealous when God asked him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" In fact, Elijah was sort of insinuating that he had been more zealous than God had been. Elijah was conveniently forgetting the national acknowledgement of all Israel crying out, "The Lord, He is God." Elijah was conveniently forgetting about the statesman for God, Obadiah, and the 100 prophets he was secretly feeding in caves, by God's appointment to save their lives. Despair and depression has the ugly knack of picking its facts. Fear and despair are color-blind and can only see what's wrong, the dark spots. Many separatists isolate themselves and curse the darkness, never willing to open their eyes to the millions of other believers around the world who are holding the fort for God. Such a separatist danger is that Elijah and many like him, accuse their countrymen, other believers, their families, and are secretly calling God to take vengeance. Surely Ahab and Jezebel were killing God's prophets or Obadiah wouldn't have been secretly hiding 100 of them. But to say that all Israel had killed God's prophets with the sword, thrown down his altars and forsaken His covenant—how convenient it was for Elijah to make himself look good and even though Israel had repented on Mt. Carmel, to paint them all as Jezebels. When so much began on Mt. Carmel that Elijah needed to follow up in the Reformation of Israel that had just begun—who was Elijah kidding?

There's more Elijah should have said. (4) **I feel I am indispensable, and this responsibility put on my shoulders for revival in Israel has been too much for my sensitive soul.** Beloved, it's easy to get where Elijah was, thinking it all depends on us. Perhaps, Elijah knew that the slaying of all the false prophets had started a feud that Jezebel would finish—as he reviewed her words in 19: 2 daily. "So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." When we start feeling indispensable in our caves, we must re-learn that God's power is not in the sword or in chariots or in horses, but it is the power of the Spirit which breaks down wayward hearts and humbles repentant backsliders. (5) **I am self-righteous.** What a danger this is in isolation and living a separative life, acting as if everyone else is evil and only you are good. Self-righteousness is often the last sin we ever see in ourselves, and it is the hardest sin to admit. Yet this dangerous sin is obnoxious to God. Self-righteousness is not eradicated at conversion. This is Pharisaical, but we would dub

others as Pharisees without looking inside ourselves. Every believer is a Pharisee at times. It is becoming our nature when we say, "I am all right, okay, but you aren't. I'm fine, but we can all find countless ways to omit simply saying, "I was wrong." We can see the wrong in others, jealousy, envy, bitterness, and oversensitivity and defensiveness clearly, but rarely in ourselves. Robert Burns back in 1759 -1796 said, "O wad some Power the giftie gie us, to see ousrels as ithers see us!" Self-righteousness demands the credit, plays the victim card, cries about not being noticed, and finds it exceedingly difficult to admit any fault, always justifying behavior as right. The glory of God is that Elijah did all this in the cave and God didn't nail his hide to the wall. God knows all of us are prone to being self-righteous. R. T. Kendall said, "We cannot usually see our faults just because someone has told them to us; we will be defensive and deny them. If we cannot see our own faults for ourselves, it is healing. The healing therapy begins by talking to a caring spouse or friend. The objective is to see ourselves as we really are rather than what we think we are. Each of us have our weaknesses." It has been also well said by an 80-old grandma, Fida Meier from Walden, New York, "Self-perspective is never perfect; the objectivity of others can hone our best qualities."

There are 2 more dangers. Elijah should have answered, (6) **I am full of self-pity, an identical twin of self-righteousness, and full of self-importance, a triplet.**

God wants us to express our feelings, but it doesn't mean we have it right. Alexander Pope said it well. "All is yellow to the jaundiced eye." Oh, the dangers in the cave! (7) **I am exaggerating the truth and I am proud.** Elijah exaggerated the size of his opposition. His reply to God made it look like every-last Jew in the northern kingdom had turned against him and the Lord, when actually, what got Elijah in this cave was Jezebel alone who threatened his life to kill him. 2ndly,

**WHAT ARE THE DANGERS OF LIVING IN GODLY COMMUNITY, WHEN WE ARE ENTRUSTING OUR SAFETY TO THAT FELLOWSHIP AND NOT THE LORD?** Let me reread the words of the apostle Paul from one of the passages Pastor Larry read. We say, "These are the days of Elijah, and they are." What did Paul say in II Timothy 3: 1-5? Listen to the many dangerous sins that God uncovers, revealing them even in the safety of a marriage, a family, a community and a church. "But realize this, that in the last days, difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God; holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; and avoid such men as these." (II Timothy 3: 1-5--NASB) Did you know the sins in community are just as awful before God as the sins of the cave? Let me choose two cave sins and two community sins and let's conclude this message with a path back to safety. What is

the secret to overcome dishonesty/purposeful forgetfulness and self-righteousness in the cave and disobedience to parents and malicious gossiping in the community or in God's church?

It is all the same issue, beloved. The secret to safe living in the cave and in the community is first integrity. The secret to integrity is godly conviction, and the secret to godly conviction is the fear of God. I could go to many passages to prove this, but I want to turn to a man who lived in isolation and loneliness as well as in community as God directed him. A snippet of Nehemiah's life in Nehemiah 5: 14-15 tells the three secrets to overcoming danger and being safe in the center of God's will. Listen. "Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes the king, twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the food allowance of the governor. The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people and took from them for their daily ration forty shekels of silver. Even their servants larded it over the people. But I did not do so, because of the fear of God." Listen to Nehemiah. The secret to safe living in the cave or the community is integrity—honesty before God. He saw the sin of the prior governors, and it was not honest before God to lay heavy burdens on the people. Why? The secret to integrity is godly or biblical conviction. The other governors did it, but I did not do so. Why? The secret to godly, biblical conviction is the fear of the Lord. "I did not do so because of the fear of the Lord." Now when God calls us to times alone, in our caves—where no one sees what we watch on social media, to see if it is pure, but we are dishonest and purposely forgetful, when we in community get into cliques and start to maliciously gossip, in caves when we start to be self-righteous and refuse to confess our own sins, or in community, when we as children, teens, college students at home start becoming disobedient to parents, what is the cause? We have given up our integrity and godly convictions. We must say to them all, "Others may, I cannot." Like Nehemiah, "yet I did not do so"—Why? Because of the fear of the Lord. When Jesus comes knocking at our cave or community door and He says, "What are you doing here?" It's integrity to tell the truth, to stop watching that pornography, to stop that malicious gossiping, to stop justifying our evil behavior in self-righteousness, and to stop disobeying our parents. "Yet I did not do so because..." I am being watched—Jinny, Mom, Dad, family, flock, world.

I close with a prayer of Paul that can keep us walking in our caves or communities with integrity, godly conviction, and the fear of the Lord. It was my own father's favorite verse in the Bible. It is II Thessalonians 3: 5. "Now the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the patient waiting for Christ." Be dissatisfied to stay in the danger zone. Ask God to direct you out to His safety zone where you can freely gaze on the face of Jesus. Say "I must not do so because...." Will you?