

## Sermon 29, Things Go South in Israel, 1 Kings 19:1-8

“An office-bearer must always act on the assumption that he himself, as a “living soul,” is only a means in God’s hand, and that the purpose of his life and work lies beyond himself. . . . His flight, too, must be a deed of faith if it is viewed as service to the Lord, as seeking the Kingdom, as trying to preserve one’s life in order to be able to carry out one’s calling. Elijah went wrong by turning the means into the end; that is to say, he fled simply for the sake of fleeing.” — M.B. Van’t Veer

**Proposition:** The Angel of Yahweh meets Elijah in his sin, judges him by setting him to wander in the wilderness, feeds him with bread from heaven, and proves to him that God’s purpose will triumph over His people’s sin.

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4. He Leaves the Land and Returns to the Place of Covenant-Making to Accuse his People of Covenant-Breaking, v. 10

\*Elijah thinks his journey shows that the covenant has failed, that the remnant has been reduced to one single faithful Israelite, and that this means that the whole Exodus was ultimately a flop!

#### B. God's Goal: To Show that His Faithfulness Will Triumph Over His People's Faithlessness

\*God uses the trip to show the exact opposite: that even when the entire Wilderness generation faithlessly abandoned His promise, He still kept His covenant and brought His people into the Promised Land. Elijah, He says, I preserved Israel through the wilderness just like I preserved you through the wilderness. I'm still going to preserve Israel, through judgment and through a remnant.

**Proposition:** Against the backdrop of Jezebel's fury and Elijah's despondency, God reveals Christ's victorious power and saving provision.

### Introduction

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come tonight to one of the most powerful texts in the book of Kings. I know I've said that before, especially regarding Solomon's prayer in chapter 8 and the climax of God's fiery revelation that we saw two weeks ago. But tonight, once more, we must invoke the aid of God's Holy Spirit to open our hearts to the tremendous truths that lie in the passage before us. This is the first appearance of the mighty Angel of the LORD in this book. Indeed, He appears as speaking to humans only here and 2 Kings 1, where He again speaks to Elijah. The only other time He's mentioned in this book by name is in 2 Kings 19, where He strikes 185,000 men in the camp of the Assyrians.

So tonight, we know that our text is telling us something about this Angel, who is one and the same as Yahweh and yet is distinguished from Him. We also see Elijah, the mighty prophet of God, fleeing from Israel. He leaves the battleground, deserts his calling — and yet in the midst of that desertion the Angel of Yahweh intercepts him, feeds him, and sends him to Mount Sinai to meet with God. This is a powerful text, a disturbing text, and a somewhat elliptical text. Commentators tie themselves in knots over it. Yet looked at with care, the message is clear. Against the backdrop of Elijah's despondency and Jezebel's fury, God reveals Christ's victorious power and saving provision for His people. Again, in this chapter, God shows us that Christ will triumph over His people's enemies, His people's despondency, and His people's idolatry.

#### I. God's Word Hardens: Jezebel Reacts Against God's Revelation, vv. 1-2

Jezebel knew that YHWH was the true God, but rejected the clearest evidence.

### **A. Ahab, the Bearer of God's Revelation, v. 1**

It became a proverb in Israel: "Is Saul also among the prophets?" And yet here is an even greater surprise. Is Ahab also among the prophets? Here he is, narrating how he was requisitioned by the word of the LORD and made complicit in the revelation of God as a jealous and avenging God who controls the weather and who sends blessing on His people through a substitutionary sacrifice and a mediator's intercession. Whatever Jezebel thought of that, she certainly couldn't argue with the massive rainstorm that was parked on top of Jezreel! Every point that we saw made in chapter 18 came to Jezebel's attention through Ahab, who particularly emphasized to her the death of her beloved prophets.

### **B. God's Revelation Hardens Jezebel, v. 2**

Jezebel heard the truth clearly. Whatever her background, whatever her upbringing, here was proof positive that YHWH is God and Baal is not. And what did she do with that revelation? She hardened herself.

#### **1. Her Ironic Threat**

In Hebrew, the people of Israel had cried out, "YHWH, He is Elohim!" Here, Jezebel swears by "Elohim," threatening that the gods may do and add thus and thus if she leaves Elijah alive. The NKJV and most other English translations add the words "to me" to her threat, but she leaves them out. What's the irony here? That she doesn't kill Elijah! She fails to meet the condition she puts in her oath, and even though she carefully avoided cursing herself, Elohim will do so to her, and more also. We'll get to that in just a few weeks! Jezebel tries to curse Elijah, and her curse rebounds on her own head. How ironic. It goes to show that it doesn't pay to make threats against God's servants!

#### **2. Her Impotence**

Yet notice, too, Jezebel's impotence. Why doesn't she slaughter Elijah then and there? She sends a messenger, not an assassin. Ultimately, the implication is that God is at work behind the scenes to protect His prophet. Maybe Jezebel felt that politically, the timing was wrong. Maybe all her assassins were busy elsewhere right then. Maybe Ahab pleaded with her to wait. Any number of things could have happened. The point is not that a particular one of them took place, but rather that God rendered her impotent. Jezebel can't carry out her threat, but God sends her oath back upon her own head.

Being where Jezebel is in these verses is a scary place. If the word of God ever comes to you, and you respond by saying "I don't care. I'll do what I want anyway," then you are in the grip of the same hardening — and the same curse — that fell upon her. Don't harden yourself against God's word!

## **II. God's Word Crushes: Elijah Abandons his Calling to Represent God's Word in Israel, vv. 3-4**

Elijah's response is curious. It has called forth a host of amateur psychoanalysts. No doubt there was a psychological dimension to it. But that's not what Scripture emphasizes. Rather, it emphasizes what he saw. He saw that under Jezebel's regime, the victory on Mount Carmel

meant only more persecution for the servants of Yahweh, more aggressive tactics deployed against the remnant. He saw that the climactic revelation of Yahweh as the God who will bless His people and cleanse their land only brought forth greater rage from seed of the serpent. So he got out of Jezebel's territory. He decided to save his life instead of to stay and maintain in his person a witness to the truth of God's word.

#### **A. Elijah's Controlled Despair, vv. 3-4**

I submit that what we see in this passage can best be labeled "controlled despair." Elijah is clearly ready for God to end it all and call him home. But rather than simply committing suicide by turning himself in to Jezebel, or by laying violent hands on himself, he continues to act like a highly functional depressed person.

##### **1. He Sees his own Impotence, v. 3a**

What triggers his running is a sight of his own impotence. He called down fire from heaven in front of Ahab and all Israel, and what was the result? Only more persecution. Only a doubling down on Jezreel's anti-YHWH policies. So he determined to preserve his own life. He runs for his life, the text tells us.

##### **2. He Leaves Jezebel's Territory, v. 3b**

His life was presumably safe from Jezebel once he crossed the border into Judah. On the other hand, the king of Judah (Jehoshaphat) was at peace with Ahab and may have been willing to extradite Elijah back to the north. So though Elijah heads into Judah, we see that he doesn't plan to stay there.

##### **3. He Sets his Affairs in Order, v. 3c**

Rather, he discharges his servant. Presumably he had no other property, no other responsibilities in an earthly sense. Telling his servant "You're going to need to find another job" indicates that Elijah is setting his earthly affairs in order, tying up loose ends, and getting ready to depart this life.

##### **4. He Leaves the Promised Land, v. 4a**

Then he crosses the southern border of Judah and heads into the wilderness. Commentator M.B. Van't Veer suggests that this is an exit from the struggle. Elijah represents the word of God, as we have seen from his demand that the widow of Zarephath feed him first. His calling was that of a prophet, but more than a prophet. He was the man who embodied the power of the dynamic word of God. He was the one who spoke truth to power, who ordered Ahab around. Moreover, Israel was the one place in the world where God had revealed Himself at that time. God had hidden Elijah as a symbolic excommunication of Israel, cutting them off from His word. But now, Elijah hides himself without instructions from God. Outside Israel, the kingdom of Satan reigned undisturbed. There was no gospel light in the other nations of the Earth. And so by leaving the promised land, Elijah more or less announces that he's quitting. Just as me stopping this sermon in the middle, shutting my mouth and walking out the door of the church would indicate that I was done with this whole pastor thing, so Elijah leaving God's land shows that he's tired of the fight, tired of proclaiming God's word to God's rebellious people. This is an

attempt to resign. In this pre-Pentecost age, God's word doesn't come to challenge other nations. It doesn't come to challenge Sidon, or Egypt. It remains confined within Israel. Outside Israel it is still valid, but it is unknown. So Elijah leaving Israel is his way of saying, "I don't want to be a prophet anymore."

#### **5. He Asks for Death, v. 4b**

In case you missed this hint, he goes on to ask God to take away his life. Why didn't he just let Jezebel have him if he wanted to die? Why run for his life? We'll answer these questions in a second. But first, a comment.

The temptation to psychoanalyze Elijah becomes very strong just as this point. No doubt psychological factors were involved in his request. No doubt the natural low after a huge high like that of chapter 18 was part of this. No doubt he indulged some thoughts he shouldn't have. But let's refocus: what is the main point of this Bible? Of this book? Of this chapter? Of this verse? All of them exist to tell us about God and His relationship to His people. This verse, like all of Scripture, is a revelation of God. Rather than hunting here for clues about Elijah's soul, we need to look for what we can find about Elijah's God and Elijah's place in redemptive history.

#### **6. He Confesses his Inability to Destroy Idolatry, v. 4c**

What do we find? We find that Elijah knows himself to be no better than his fathers. Which fathers? The patriarchs. Adam. Noah. His immediate ancestors, who lived under David and Solomon and Rehoboam. All of his human ancestors are summed up in this phrase. God, he says, I am a man like all my fathers were. They did not succeed in converting and perfecting Israel! They failed too, because they were mere men like me. God, I'm no better than they are, no more successful at eliminating idolatry in Israel than they have been!

#### **B. Elijah's Real Question: How Can a Weak Man like me Bear (and Be) the Omnipotent Word of God?**

So what do we learn about God and His relationship with His people here? If we look closely at the text, in its context of Elijah's status as the unique representative of the word of God in apostate Israel, the one who brings climactic revelations of God as the one who raises the dead and blesses His people, we hear Elijah's real question: "God, how can a weak man like me bear and virtually be the omnipotent word of God?"

Effectively, Elijah's answer is "I can't. My role of delivering and representing God's word has crushed me. I am not equal to this burden. It was too heavy for my fathers and it's too heavy for me. I resign. I quit. I can't be the one who comes in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just to make ready for the Lord a people prepared! I just can't. I did as much as I could to demonstrate that YHWH is God to this disobedient people, and the only result is redoubled persecution. God, I'm done. Finish me off. This task is greater than I can bear."

Elijah was a man of like passions as we are. He felt his failure acutely. That didn't lead him to question God's word; it only led him to say, "I am not fit to be the bearer of that word. I can't do it. I reveal God's might and His victory over Baal, and no one cares."

I hesitate to draw lots of direct parallels between Elijah and us at this point. But I must turn aside for a moment and ask you this: Do you ever feel inadequate to bear the word of God? It's not that you doubt His promises. It's just that the opposition they provoke, the rejection they meet, is too much. You have an unshakeable conviction that the word of God is the truth, but you just want to step out of the fray for a while, go AWOL like Elijah, and ask God to send someone else to apply and reiterate the word of God among those who really don't want to obey it.

My grandfather had a vision to evangelize his county in Georgia with Christian broadcasting. He bought a radio station and ran it as a BBN affiliate. But the impact has not been particularly pronounced. To this day, Jefferson County is a poor region of rural Georgia with a lot of unbelief and a lot of nominal Christianity.

Grandpa didn't succeed at turning Jefferson County upside down for Christ. What makes me think that I'll succeed in making a gospel difference in Campbell County, Wyoming? Am I better than my fathers?

Let yourself think this way for a while, and you'll be ready to quit. Our fathers built something truly great in this country. But who are we to think we can outdo them? Indeed, these thoughts are soothing, after a fashion. Surrendering to them is like feeling the false warmth that washes over you when, as a hypothermia victim, you lie down in the snow to die. Yet there's a kernel of truth here. Elijah was no better than his fathers. They didn't permanently save Israel, and neither could he. He could proclaim, in accordance with his name, that YHWH is the true God. But he couldn't save his people.

### **III. God's Word Refreshes: Christ Feeds Elijah in the Wilderness, vv. 5-7**

It is at this point that he drifts off to sleep, and that God answers his real question. How can a weak man bear and be the word of God?

#### **A. God Answers by Sending the Angel of YHWH, vv. 5, 7a**

God says, "Here's how. Elijah, I'd like you to meet my Angel." Who is the Angel of YHWH? As I've already mentioned, He is the preincarnate Christ. He is the Son of God. God's name is in Him. He is conflated with YHWH in several texts, such as Judges 13 (the birth of Samson). Once Manoah sees the Angel of YHWH, he says, "We will surely die, for we have seen God."

Who is the weak man who will bear and be the Word of YHWH? It is the Son of God, the Angel of the LORD, who will come in the flesh. It's as though God says, "Elijah, you're right. You're no better than your fathers. But your mission *is* possible because of the greater mission of my Son. He is the true God. He is the one who will bear the word of God in the face of the most intense rejection. He is the one who will be better than His earthly fathers. He is greater than Solomon, greater than David, greater than Moses — and greater than you, Elijah.

When God's servant is low and depressed and ready to quit, what's the only thing that can keep him going? Some one-on-one time with Jesus Christ. Elijah was weary of the struggle, but Jesus came to strengthen him. When you're weary of the struggle, do you seek Jesus? Do you recognize in Jesus Christ the man who bears, who *is*, the Word of the Father, the ultimate

revelation of all that is in the Father's mind? Do you worship Him as the one better than your fathers, the one who conquered the forces of evil represented by Jezebel?

Notice Christ's compassion. "He touched him." It doesn't say He poked him, or that He elbowed him. What kind of touch is this? A caress. Elijah's soul was in trouble, but Christ ministered to his body too. Sometimes, some of us feel like we just need a hug. I read a book by a prison chaplain who said that one of the most effective parts of his ministry was simply providing a loving touch to the felons under his charge. In prison, the only available touches are either dehumanizing, as in a strip search, or exploitative, as in a rape. There are no legitimate hugs, no caresses there. But Christ came and touched Elijah.

Worship the Lord Jesus Christ! Love Him! Be in awe of His mercy to the undeserving. We can understand Elijah feeling like he'd had enough. But we will never understand the Son of God feeling like He wanted to come down and lovingly touch one of His servants.

### **B. The Angel of YHWH Feeds Elijah, v. 6**

Well, Christ comes to Elijah, the same Elijah who was not interested in continuing to bear God's word, and feeds him. The parallels between Israel's wilderness journey and Elijah's begin here. While this was not quite a meal of manna, it was like a meal of manna. Notice also that Elijah's rehabilitation involves obedience. The Angel of YHWH doesn't say too much to Elijah. He only tells him to get up and eat. Surely this food from the Good Shepherd restored Elijah's body, and combined with the sleep, it no doubt went far to restore his soul too. Brothers and sisters, that's what Jesus does. When you're despondent over the prospects of God's work in the world, as the Tishbite was, go back to Jesus Christ. Ask Him to restore your soul. Ask Him to feed you with heavenly bread. Partake of the holy sacrament of the Lord's Supper, in which Christ provides for you not just bread and water, but bread and wine.

We see here not just the sin of Elijah in abandoning the struggle, but the mercy and gentleness of Jesus Christ, who comes and gives His child food and sleep. Is this the Christ you know? One who will come and comfort even a sinner, even a depressed prophet who feels (with good reason) that God's work on earth is over? Do you recognize the provision of Jesus Christ in your everyday life? Do you trust Him with your life and death, and with the spread of the gospel and the coming of the Kingdom?

### **C. The Angel of YHWH Commissions Elijah to go to Horeb, v. 7b**

Christ goes on to prepare Elijah for a journey which he could not make on his own. The attraction of using this text as a Lord's Supper meditation is very strong. But that's not directly what it's about. It's about Christ's revelation of grace through judgment. Elijah must reenact the wilderness wanderings of the faithless generation who refused to believe God for 40 years, until their carcasses fell in the wilderness. But he also sees God's grace in preserving His disobedient people. Elijah is empowered by Jesus Christ for a journey he could not make on his own, back to Mount Sinai.

Why did Christ do this when it seems clear that Elijah sinned by leaving his task? Here's one answer: If Christ never met errant, wayward sheep and redirected them back toward their true callings, then He certainly would never have saved any of us!

#### **IV. God's Word Strengthens: Elijah Reenacts the Israelites' 40-Year Wilderness Wandering, v. 8**

So Elijah obeys the Angel of YHWH and travels back to Horeb, the Mountain of God, otherwise known as Mount Sinai. Elijah is going back to the place where God made His covenant with Moses and the people of Israel, as expressed in Exodus 19-24. In fact, the material given at Sinai comprises everything from Exodus 19 to Numbers 10. I believe that in this text, we see Elijah at cross-purposes with God, and the intertwinings of Providence whereby God takes up Elijah's purpose and subsumes it under His own purpose, to reveal Himself as a the God of the Exodus and the God whose good purpose to bless His people cannot be thwarted, even by their sin.

##### **A. Elijah's Goal: To Reverse Israel's Journey from Sinai to Canaan**

What was Elijah doing at Horeb? He informs God (and hence us) in vv. 10 and 14 that he was at Sinai to present a charge against God's people. Paul echoes this teaching in his citation of these verses in Romans 11. Indeed, Paul says Elijah "pleads with God against Israel." Elijah goes to Horeb, the site of law-giving, to formally accuse Israel of law-breaking. He is strengthened in this mission by the hand of Jesus Christ Himself. What was Elijah's big idea? It seems to me that we can reconstruct his thought process thus.

##### **1. God Brought Israel into the Land by the Covenant, Gen. 15:18**

First, God promised by His covenant to bring Israel into the land of Canaan. That's all the way back in Gen. 15.

##### **2. Israel Has Forsaken the Covenant, 1 Kings 19:10**

Secondly, Elijah believes that Israel has forsaken the covenant. They left it behind, and moved on to some other way of relating to God. So Israel is in the land by covenant, but Israel is no longer faithful to the covenant.

##### **3. Elijah Believes himself to be the Faithful Remnant and thus the True Israel, v. 10**

In Elijah's mind, he is the only faithful Israelite left. He represents all that remains of covenant-keeping Israel.

##### **4. He Leaves the Land and Returns to the Place of Covenant-Making to Accuse his People of Covenant-Breaking, v. 10**

And so, what does he do but go back to Sinai to plead against the rest of his nation! His thinking seems to be that his Sinai trip shows that the covenant has failed, that the remnant has been reduced to one single faithful Israelite, and that this means that the whole Exodus was ultimately a flop! "God," he says, "Israel is so unfaithful that I can only present their wickedness to you. I'm done pleading with them."

He was reenacting their wilderness wanderings, but in reverse — leaving the Promised Land and going back to Sinai, reversing the process whereby God brought His people to the land

He swore to give them. He's effectively playing the film backwards. "Here's the true Israel, leaving the promised land and going back to square one." That's how bad it was in his mind. Israel's relationship with God needed a reboot, and Elijah was going to be the one that provided it.

**B. God's Goal: To Show that His Faithfulness Will Triumph Over His People's Faithlessness, Deut. 8:3**

But brothers and sisters, what was the point of the wilderness wanderings? We don't have to speculate. Moses tells us:

So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD.  
(Deu 8:3 NKJ)

God used the wilderness wanderings to show that His people need to live by the word of God! But He also used the 40 years of wandering to show that even when the entire Wilderness generation faithlessly abandoned His promise, He still kept His covenant and brought His people into the Promised Land. "Elijah," He says, "I preserved Israel through the wilderness just like I preserved you through the wilderness. I'm still going to preserve Israel, through judgment and through a remnant." That's His promise in vv. 15-18. Lord-willing, we'll look at that next week. But for now, brothers and sisters, take away this truth: God will fulfill His promises to His people. He will bring them to the Promised Land.

So when you look around and see a largely faithless American church, hostage to liberalism and consumerism and sexual anarchy and other perversions too numerous to mention, don't give up hope! When it seems that your service to God is pointless, and that no one's going to listen anyway, and that what the church really needs is a reboot, a fresh start, remember God's treatment of the wilderness generation. He judged them, but at the same time, He preserved His people. God will not cast away His people whom He foreknew.

If you're discouraged, look to Jesus Christ, the great Angel of YHWH who goes with His people through the wilderness, who gives us bread from Heaven to eat, who may judge an entire generation but who can make that generation's children the most faithful generation in the history of the church. Jesus can do all of this! He's done it in the past. He's the one who restrains Jezebel and her ilk. He's the one who lays on us tasks that we think are too heavy, but who personally strengthens us to perform them. He's the one who feeds His people, and He's the one who leads them through the wilderness. Yes, He will judge the faithless. That's one message of the forty years in the wilderness. But He will preserve His people. Trust Him. Worship Him. Cry out to Him. He'll hear you. He'll strengthen you. One way or the other, through judgment or through salvation, His faithfulness will always triumph over His people's faithlessness. So join the remnant. Receive Christ's healing touch, eat His heavenly food, and know that He will always preserve His own. Always. Amen.