

Standing in Darkness

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[0 : 00] So I've got a friend, and he likes to describe a classic Scotland performance on the rugby pitch as snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.

You might disagree with that assessment. What we have here at the start of 1 Kings 19 seems to be just that, a defeat snatched from the jaws of victory.

When we last saw Elijah, things were looking up. On Mount Carmel, God had arrived in fire. Baal had been proclaimed as a false god, and the people fell down and said, The Lord, he is God.

And it looked like the prophet and the king might finally lead the people together in following God. But from the moment Ahab stepped into his palace, his wife Jezebel, the one who murdered the prophets of God, is unchanged and unmoved.

The vision of harmony that we ended with last week has vanished in the smoke of her hatred. Things look dark. Elijah himself, who has been so bold and courageous in his stand for God, is a breaking point.

[1 : 13] Despair reigns. Where do we go in times like these? When it looks like all is lost and the shadows creep in, can we still place our trust in God?

Sometimes Christians face years and years of darkness. Sometimes this is our own personal darkness. We feel the onslaught of the devil, the pressures of temptation, or a lingering spiritual emptiness.

Sometimes this is the darkness of persecution. Millions of Jesus followers throughout the world face the sword, just like God's faithful people in Elijah's day. Sometimes this is the darkness of doubt.

Is God still working in Scotland? Is God still building his church here? Is God still working in me? In the face of darkness, what does the one who follows Jesus have?

They have hope. And when you have a hope built on a firm foundation, a hope that you can trust, then, though the darkness may remain, you can start to see the light.

[2 : 32] The Christian's hope is in God. And this makes all the difference. And it means the one who follows Jesus can stand in the darkness.

We have three points today as we work through this passage. First is there is hope in God's comfort. Second is there is hope in God's word. And lastly, there is hope in God's call.

So we start with this idea that there's hope in God's comfort. The drop from the glorious heights of God's fire burning on Mount Carmel to the start of this chapter is a steep one.

Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done. And now he had killed all the prophets with the sword. So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, May the gods deal with me be it ever so severely if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them.

Elijah spent the last three years being hunted. He spent most of this time outside his home of Israel. He returned to defend the name of God in a society that had rejected him.

[3 : 42] And it seemed that the people were ready to follow God again. It seemed the king had changed. And now this. What was the point?

Was any of it worth it? In verse three we're told that Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. Translators differ on how to interpret this verse.

Literally it reads, He saw, he arose, and he went for the sake of his life. Translators add a sense of terror and urgency that isn't necessarily there.

Elijah isn't so much afraid of Jezebel. After all he faced down the 450 prophets of Baal. He's weary. He's weary from the fight.

He sees the situation. He stands with weary resolve. And he leaves with his life. Because standing for the true God provokes outrage.

[4 : 41] Defending Jesus, his word, his message, the way of life that he calls us to. It doesn't make us friends with the world. That's why Jesus told his disciples, If you belong to the world, it would love you as its own.

As it is, you do not belong to the world. But I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Elijah knew this.

The world and the gospel are naturally opposed to one another. There's a tension. Because we are in the world, but we do not actually belong to it. We belong to Christ.

That doesn't mean that standing for him is easy. Sometimes it feels like defeat and despair. So Elijah, he travels south into Judah.

He leaves his servant there. And he himself, he keeps on walking into the wilderness. The same wilderness that God's people wandered in when Moses led them from Egypt into the promised land.

[5 : 42] In verse 4, we're told, He came to a broom bush, sat down under it, and prayed that he might die. I have had enough, Lord, he said.

Take my life. I am no better than my ancestors. Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep. Now, Elijah knows what he's got to do.

This journey he's going on, it's not an evacuation. It has purpose. He's going to Mount Horeb, also known as Mount Sinai. The mountain where God appeared to Moses and gave the law.

The mountain where God made a covenant with his people. Elijah going to Horeb is symbolic. Elijah, he can speak to God in prayer anywhere and be spoken to by God anywhere.

Elijah's not going to Horeb because it's the place where God will hear him. Nor to escape the evils of Israel. Elijah is going to Horeb as the prophet of the covenant.

[6 : 46] As God's representative to his people. But he's lost the will to keep on going. He's feeling the darkness closing in.

He feels no better than his ancestors. He has been ignored just as all the prophets who came before him were ignored. And it just looks like the whole thing was for nothing.

And though we might think it's strange that Elijah left Israel to save his life and now wants to die. Well, I suspect what we're seeing is that Elijah didn't want to die at the hands of Jezebel. But would be happily at this point be taken by the Lord.

But God has other uses for him. Elijah's promises to keep and miles to go before he sleeps. The mountain is calling. And notice how God comforts him in his despair.

He provides rest, food and drink. And this happens twice. And it is the angel of the Lord himself who comes to comfort Elijah. The angel of the Lord is often a manifestation of God himself.

[7 : 51] God has come to comfort his prophet and strengthen him for the road. Elijah is at his absolute lowest ebb. But there is hope in God's comfort.

Paul, much later on, will write to the Corinthian Christians. And he'll tell them this. Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Father of compassion.

And the God of all comfort. Who comforts us in all our troubles. So that we can comfort those in any trouble. With the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ.

So also our comfort abounds through Christ. God comforts his people in their suffering. He is always there.

And in your darkest moments, I urge you never to doubt that your Father loves you. And is with you.

[8 : 55] He is the Father of compassion. And he is the God of all comfort. And the devil would love us to doubt that. He wants to feed that doubt and weaponize it against you.

Some of us, like Elijah, may even desire death. The trials of our minds. The trials of illness. The trials of old age.

The trials of following Jesus. There are many reasons that we might despair of life itself. But God will be your comfort.

There is hope in the comfort of God our Savior. To quote from the book of Isaiah, God says, Do not fear. For I am with you.

Do not be dismayed. For I am your God. I will strengthen you. And help you. I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

[9 : 57] I love that Elijah, even in the pit of despair, he still keeps going. He has a job to do. He has a God to follow. And he will keep on going, no matter the cost, until his Lord calls him home.

And so after 40 days and nights wandering in the wilderness, Elijah arrives at Mount Horeb. And he goes into a cave. He's now going to discover that there is hope, not just in God's comfort, but there's hope in his word.

And let's just on to our second point. We said that Elijah has come to Horeb as God's representative. There have been many generations earlier when the people of Israel became God's people.

God's representative was Moses. And Moses met with God on Horeb. And God made a covenant with Israel. That is, he chose to make Israel his special people who belonged to him and would be blessed by him if they followed him.

Elijah's been defending the name of God in Israel. And even after God so clearly proved himself to be the one true God on Mount Carmel, Israel has continued to follow the lead of Jezebel and Ahab.

[11 : 17] It reminds me of a certain Twitter exchange. An individual tweeted that all you have to do is present facts and evidence and people will change their minds.

Someone then replied saying that the data actually suggests that facts alone don't cause people to shift their opinions and change their minds. And this person attached the relevant data to back up that claim.

The individual behind the original tweet then responded, apparently ignorant of the irony, that he thought he was still right. Despite having been presented with data and facts to the contrary.

Israel has seen God appear in fire on Mount Carmel. And yet nothing has changed. They have the facts. They have the incontrovertible facts. But their hearts are hard.

And they don't want God. So Elijah has come to Horeb. The mountain where God made a covenant with Israel. We read, And the word of the Lord came to him.

[12 : 17] What are you doing here, Elijah? He replied, I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword.

I am the only one left. And now they are trying to kill me too. When God asks Elijah why he's here, it's not a rebuke. It's more like a judge calling forward a witness for the prosecution.

God's not surprised by Elijah's coming. He's calling Elijah to state his case. The case against Israel. Because they have broken the terms of the covenant, and they have rejected God.

Elijah has not come to complain to God. He could have done that anywhere. He's prayed to God before, and God has answered him. Now he's come to Horeb because, in order to condemn Israel for breaking the covenant, there's an appropriateness, a rightness in going to the place where the covenant was first made.

A bit like in the Lord of the Rings, where the one ring can only be destroyed in the mountain where it was forged, if that analogy is helpful. Location is important. How then will God answer Elijah's case?

[13 : 38] Verse 11. The Lord said, Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by. There's a Moses reference there.

Moses, on this same mountain, asked to see God in all his glory. And God passed by him, the same words, giving him a glimpse of his holy splendor.

And what's happening with Elijah is meant to evoke something similar. What happens on the mountain is both strange and mysterious. Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord.

But the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind, there was an earthquake. But the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire.

But the Lord was not in the fire. The language of earth, wind, and fire is often associated with the power of the Lord and the coming of the Lord.

[14 : 41] But as Elijah watches these, frankly terrifying spectacles play out upon the mountain, God's not in them. But then, in verse 13, and after the fire came a gentle whisper.

When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. So after all the spectacles of earth, wind, and fire, Elijah hears a thin, almost silent voice.

The text doesn't say it because it doesn't need to. God was in the voice. And it's at this voice that Elijah pulls his cloak over his face.

Not at the earthquake, not at the falling rocks or the fire, but the voice. The word of God. God is present in his word.

And his word is more powerful than the most terrifying manifestations of nature. Indeed, this is the same word that spoke creation into being.

[15 : 56] Elijah hears it. I suspect he's hearing it in a way that he never has done before. God has just spoken to Elijah before. He's going to speak to him just after.

But here he encounters God's word in a new and powerful way. A thin, almost silent voice that makes him cover up his face.

So Elijah goes and stands at the cave. And then God speaks again. He asks the very same question that he asked when Elijah first arrived. What are you doing here, Elijah?

Elijah's response hasn't changed. He has heard God. He's met with him in a more intimate manner than ever before. Now he restates the witness against Israel.

The repetition of Israel's crime, particularly after Elijah's encounter with God's word like this, only makes the accusation hit harder. Israel have broken the covenant.

[17 : 03] And so God is going to act. His word and his actions are tied together. And things are about to happen in Israel because of what they have done.

And so Elijah's given three tasks. One, he's to anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Two, he is to anoint Jehu as king over Israel.

And three, he is to anoint Elisha as his prophetic successor. And between these three men, God is going to judge those who have hated him and rejected him.

He's going to judge those who have killed his people and killed his prophets. Because God does not let evil go unpunished. Our culture would suggest that God's justice is what makes Christianity so unpalatable.

Why counter by asking, if God is God and he lets evil thrive, why then should we follow him? On Thursday, it was Holocaust Memorial Day.

[18 : 04] There's a reason that we remember it. What happened then was diabolical and evil. And God will punish those who are responsible. And God will judge more evils besides.

There's an awful lot we could say about God's justice and God's judgment. But the point here in 1 Kings 19 is that God's justice is a reason for hope.

God says he will sort things out. He will not leave the guilty unpunished. God's word is hopeful because it does proclaim justice.

We all yearn to see justice done, don't we? We should hate injustice and we do. We should hate evil. God hates evil. And he won't ignore the evils of the world.

And this is what we see in action on Mount Horeb. God's justice is coming. There's also hope, not just in justice, but in God's preservation.

[19 : 08] God says, yet I reserve 7,000 in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed down to bow and whose mouths have not kissed him. God preserves his people.

Sometimes it's only a tiny remnant, but his people are always preserved. God's word, God's word is a source of hope.

I would argue the source of hope. Not only has Elijah encountered God in a unique way, but he's been encouraged by God's words of direction.

God is sending Elijah out to set in motion the wheels which will judge the evil of Israel. And God himself is going to preserve his people. They will not be abandoned.

And what's really interesting is that Elijah actually only does one of these things. Now this isn't because Elijah's disobedient. Rather, these things had to happen at the right time.

[20 : 07] And it's actually going to be Elisha, Elijah's successor, who anoints both Hazael and Jehu. So Elijah appoints a successor who carries on his work.

Because this work isn't really the work of Elijah, but it's the work of God. It's the work of the word. Elijah, important though he is, is not in the driving seat.

The word of God is. And there's real hope in that. When we look at the church and worry for its future, the word of God is working.

When we look at the world around us and we worry about the direction that events are taking, the word of God is working. When we look at our own lives and our own doubts and fears and anxieties about all sorts of things, the word of God is working.

there is hope in God's word. It's not as obviously powerful as an earthquake, a fire, or a mighty wind. Nevertheless, the still, small, almost silent whisper of the word of God brings down empires.

[21 : 24] It brings justice to the oppressed. And most importantly, it does a work of salvation in the life of sinners by calling them to follow Jesus.

Our story then ends on a farm where a young man called Elisha is plowing his dad's fields. It ends with a final beacon of hope in God's call.

That's us on to our final point. The prophet comes from his time in the wilderness and throws his cloak over Elisha. Now, Elisha knows what this means. He has to follow Elijah.

Let me kiss my father and mother goodbye, he said, and then I will come with you. Go back, Elijah replied. What have I done to you? It's hard to know exactly what Elijah means here, but probably he's saying, go back, say goodbye, you know the seriousness of what I've just done to you.

And in a land that has rejected God, Elisha is a vision of faithfulness. Verse 21, Elisha left him and went back. He took his yoke of oxen and slaughtered them.

[22 : 35] He burned the plowing equipment to cook the meat and gave it to the people and they ate. Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his servant. So Elisha really burns his bridges.

He kills the oxen and symbolically uses his plow to fuel the barbecue. And then he leaves to follow Elijah. How exactly is this hopeful, you might ask?

With the call of Elisha, events are being put into motion. God is working and he's working through the people that he has called. We might sometimes wonder, quite rightly, why God, the one who's created all things, uses weak people like ourselves to advance his kingdom.

And yet, that's exactly what he does. At every stage of history, God's been using his weak people to call the world to know him and receive his gift of salvation from sin.

God is still working. It isn't always obvious. It isn't always obviously powerful. Yet, God's word works wonders and he is active in his world.

[23 : 52] And principally, his word calls people. Now, Elisha's call that we see here is a very particular call. And sometimes, Christians are called to very particular tasks and roles.

But behind Elisha's call is a much more fundamental call. The call to follow. The idea of following has been reduced in our own culture, I think, by the parlance of social media.

When we follow someone on Twitter or Instagram, we're merely agreeing to see what someone posts. Or perhaps in what we watch when we follow a TV series. That kind of commitment is fairly limited.

Even in sport, when we follow a team, though there is commitment and though it might mean a lot to us, it doesn't demand our all. But Jesus does. This is what he said to those who wanted to be his disciples.

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it.

[24 : 55] But whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. Elisha is a pattern of this kind of following in action.

He left everything for a life that would not be easy, a life of danger, a life of struggle, but a life lived to God. The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was killed under the Third Reich, said this in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*.

And I want to quote it at length because it's a great quote and I think it really cuts to the heart of the issue. He wrote, The cross is laid on every Christian.

The first Christ suffering which every man must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world. And it is that dying of the old man which is the result of his encounter with Christ.

As we embark upon discipleship, we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with his death. We give over our lives to death.

[26 : 07] death. When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. An odd place perhaps to end in a sermon ostensibly about hope, you might wonder.

And yet, the hope of the gospel is both richer, deeper, and stranger than any hope offered by the world. Elijah was ready to die as he journeyed towards Mount Horeb.

And there's a sense in which that's right. When Christ calls a man or a woman or a child, he bids them come and die.

Why then is this good news? Well, when we shoulder that cross and follow Jesus, as we live for him and reject the world, as we build a life on his powerful word, we know where we're going.

Do not let your hearts be troubled, Jesus said. You believe in God, believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms. If that were not so, would I have told you that I'm going there to prepare a place for you.

[27 : 23] And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me, that you also may be where I am.

You know the way to the place where I am going. The way is Jesus and following him. And with promises like these, we have a hope that will strengthen us to stand in the darkness as we carry our cross and follow our Lord.

Being a Christian is not easy. Many of us will know that very well. And if you don't know Jesus, I owe it to you to be frank and honest just as Jesus was.

Following him is hard and following him requires sacrifice. But, in following Christ, I can promise you that there is no greater hope and no greater blessing.

In Christ is meaning, in Christ is life, in Christ is hope. So when he calls you, will you come and die? Will you come and live?

[28 : 39] do you two there then? Therefore, you would also write TV or you