

4. God's Word Heals and Restores

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[0 : 00] Now let's pray before we look together at 1 Kings 19. Speak, O Lord, as we come to you to receive the truth of your holy word.

Our Father, we pray now that as we draw near to you, you will most graciously draw near to us, that you will open your word to our minds and hearts, and that you will open our minds and hearts to your word, as we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, the living word. Amen.

And so we come to the fourth of our morning studies in Elijah. One of the books on my bookshelf which influences me most, although I seldom read the book, is a book whose title is Trembling at the Threshold of the Biblical Text.

And that's a good title, not just a good title, but a good thought for any preacher to keep very much in the forefront of his thinking as he prepares and as he delivers the word of God, trembling at the threshold of the biblical text, because it's indeed an awesome and awe-inspiring thing to be entrusted with the living word of God.

It is regrettable that many commentators on 1 Kings, when they come to chapter 19, have ceased to tremble and have begun to crow with satisfaction.

[1 : 43] Here is an Elijah we can handle. Elijah of Carmel, well beyond us, calling down fire from heaven, confronting the priests of Baal.

Here is an Elijah who is much more like us, the Elijah of Horeb, who ran in terror from a woman. It's part of a regrettable tendency, isn't it, of human beings, and I recognize this tendency myself, and I'm sure we all do, to do down, to denigrate people whom we're rather jealous of.

Commentator, not sorry, biographers of Churchill, take great pleasure in telling us that he drank too much, and that he was petulant and sulky.

In other words, when we find somebody who is big, who is outstanding, we want to do them down. So, as we approach this passage, let's keep that in mind, and I want to suggest, that there are two wrong turns we can take in this passage, often taken by commentators and preachers.

The first one is to be moralizing and super spiritual. As I say, the tendency to place ourselves alongside Elijah, or even above Elijah, and look down on him.

[2 : 58] cowardly and unbelieving, self-occupied, praying against, rather than for God's people. One rather good commentator, as I say, goes completely astray when he comes here.

Another, weak and in need of God's rebuke. Now, I find it rather distasteful, to read these kind of comments. Are those men such titanic giants of the faith themselves, that they feel able to denigrate this man of God?

So, let's not be over super spiritual. Let's not moralize about this chapter. A second wrong turning is sentimentalism. It goes something like this.

Elijah needed to get away from the razzmatazz, the fire falling from heaven, the earthquake, wind and fire, and get back to the, get back to the, still small voice.

Problem with that is, it takes the still small voice, and puts it in the first part of the story, a part that it doesn't belong to, the still small voice, which incidentally, a glorious phrase, from the King James Version, but a mistranslation, and leading people astray.

[4 : 12] And, therefore, we have an Elijah, who needs to be, an Elijah who needs to get away, from all the, all the bustle, and, and experience some quietness.

Now, there is truth in that, obviously. Jesus says to his disciples, come apart and rest a while, away from the busyness, and so on. Nevertheless, that's not the major point of the story.

And it, and it doesn't, as I say, belong in the second part of the story. So, let's take the story as it unfolds. It's an exciting story, full of drama, full of suspense.

But it's better to take verses 1 to 8, than find out what they mean, rather than read them with our minds already made up, about verses 9 to 14, which is what these approaches do.

First approach, the moralizing one, God is rebuking Elijah. The second one, the sentimental one, that God is telling Elijah, he said too much. But once again, the emphasis is on the word of God.

[5 : 13] I've called this series, Elijah, God's messenger in difficult times. And I'm going to call this, this sermon this morning, God's word which heals and restores.

And we're going to look, obviously, at the power of the human word as well. Now, I'm going to suggest the story develops in four movements, four scenes, if you like.

And first of all, we have the word which threatens, in verse 1 to the first part of verse 5, down to, and he lay down and slept under a broom tree.

The first part, the word which threatens. Before we hear the word of God, we're going to hear the word of others. And first of all, there's a rather petulant word, Ahab told Jezebel.

You almost get an idea of a little boy running and telling mummy. Ahab told Jezebel. And of course, a more formidable antagonist then emerges, because Jezebel is far more deadly than Ahab.

[6 : 23] She's been mentioned in the story up to now, but now she takes a hand in the story, and she sends a threatening word, verse 2, So may the gods do to me and more also.

If I do not make your life as the life of one of them, that's the prophets of Baal, by this time tomorrow. Now, her words are threatening words, but there is just a hint of bluster and uncertainty.

If Jezebel had been really sure of her ground, surely she would have sent an executioner, rather than a messenger, to warn him, to warn Elijah. She would have sent an assassin.

And there is just the hint here, that Jezebel is rather more afraid of this man Elijah, than she appears. And this comes to verse 3.

Then he was afraid. Willie, I believe, rightly read it as it can be understood. Then he saw. Because the Hebrew word for was afraid and saw, are very, very alike, a mere point of difference.

[7 : 29] But even, take it for a moment, even if was afraid, is the right translation. Wouldn't you be afraid, in these circumstances? Are those commentators, who do Elijah down, so confident, that they would have stood up, to Jezebel, and all the machinery, of the state?

I think Eugene Peterson, paraphrases it very well, when he says, in the message, then Elijah took stock, of the situation.

That's a very good paraphrase. What was the situation? The great demonstration, of the power of Yahweh, sending fire from heaven. The destruction of Baal's prophets.

But there is no change of heart, in the ruling elite. And this is something, we've got to remember. This runs right through scripture. Miracle does not, in itself, convince unbelief.

Remember the story, in Luke 16, of Debes and Lazarus. Where Debes says, send Lazarus. And Abraham says, they have Moses, and the prophets.

[8 : 30] If they don't believe them, they won't believe, although someone rises, from the dead.

Miracle can always, be explained away. Miracle can always, be given another gloss, on it. Elijah sees, there is no change of heart, in the ruling elite.

And he takes flight. After all, it's not spirituality, but stupidity, to remain to be killed, when an escape route, is available. But Elijah, is doing far more, than running away.

Because, he, look at verse 3, he came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah. Now that's the very, very far south, of the promised land. some 100 miles away.

Totally unnecessary, to run all that way, from Jezreel, unless, he was already, on his way, to Horeb, to the country, to the country, where Moses, had met God.

So you see, what's happening here, the threatening word, sets in motion, a chain of events, which Jezebel imagines, she's controlling. And another, another little detail, surely, as we, as we come to verse 4.

[9 : 41] Elijah asked, he might die, saying, it is enough now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better, than my father's. Elijah can scarcely, be terrified of death, because he pleads, with the Lord, to be the executioner, Jezebel, had failed to be.

But let's never, underestimate, the power of human words, to threaten. It's always, God's people, face threatening words. And well, he mentioned that incident, of course, which is ongoing, the Presby of Aberdeen, where people are facing, threatening, and hostile words.

It's always difficult, to stand for God. But secondly, the second, main, main part of the story, beginning in, beginning in the second, part of verse 5, behold, an angel touched him, and said to

him, rise and eat.

And then going on down, to the first part, of verse 9, then he came to a cave, and lodged in it. I'm going to call this, the word which brings life. The word which threatens, is instantly challenged, by the word which brings life.

And behold, says the ESV, all at once, says the NIV. If this were a film, you could imagine the music, beginning to speed up, and become louder, at this point, because a new character, is about to enter, the story.

[11:02] Behold, an angel touched him. To pity the versions, don't make clear, the connection between this, and verse 2. Then Jezebel, sent a messenger.

It's exactly the same word. The word translated angel, in verse 5, is the word translated messenger, in verse 2. Jezebel is not in control.

Jezebel sends her angel, so to speak, her messenger, but Yahweh is always, also at work. And again, as with the ravens, and the widow, in chapter 17, as we saw a few weeks ago, his needs, are going to be met.

An angel touched, said, arise and eat, and he looked, and behold, there was at his head, a cake, baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. We can imagine, he left, without taking time, to eat.

Now, this is, as I say, a reminder, not to be super spiritual, about this story. What Elijah needs now, is not a spiritual pep talk. What he needs, is rest, and food.

[12:10] He is human. The letter of James, tells us that, Elijah, was a human being, a man, just like us. And notice, this happens twice. Arise and eat, for the journey, is too great for you.

We need to remember, God's servants, are human, like everybody else. The same fears, the same doubts, the same worries, the same human pressures, and weaknesses.

Rather, as Shylock says, and the merchant of Venice, if you prick us, do we not bleed? God's servants, are human, and must not be treated, as being superhuman, and on some kind, of ridiculous pedestal, which is impossible, for any human being, to stand on.

Elijah needed rest, Elijah needed food, and God brings, to his exhausted servant, at that moment, just exactly, what he needs. Well, there's something, even more important, in the second visit, of the angel, which is not just, the repetition, of the first.

The angel, the angel says, arise and eat, and adds the significant, phrase, for the journey, is too great, for you. The Lord, knew exactly, where Elijah, was going.

[13:22] Indeed, the Lord, was orchestrating, this journey, anticipating that journey, and therefore, giving it his approval. I think that's, the important point. Arise and eat, for the journey, is too great for you.

If some of those, commentators I mentioned, were right, what the angel, author said, was arise, and get back to Jezreel, as quickly as you can go. But Yahweh, intended, that Elijah, should go to Horeb, the mountain of God.

Now, Horeb and Sinai, are the mountain of God. Horeb is the mountain range, and Sinai, the most significant peak, in that range. And he goes, 40 days, and 40 nights.

And surely, this is a deliberate recalling, of how Moses, was in that same mountain, 40 days, and 40 nights, and how Moses, met with God. The word, which threatens, on a human level, and from Jezebel's perspective, she was orchestrating, the events.

But then, the word, which brings life, which shows that God, is in control. But now, the third part, of the story, which I regard, as running from, in the middle of verse 9, behold, the word of the Lord, came to him, and running down, to verse 14, I've been very jealous, for the Lord, the God of hosts.

[14:42] I'm going to call this, the word, which restores, a true perspective. And the key to it, seems to me, to be the repeated question, verse 9, what are you doing here, Elijah?

And verse 14 again, what are you doing here, Elijah? Now, that's most commonly taken, as a rebuke. Elijah, you ought to be back, in Jezreel, carrying on, with your work.

It seems to me, there is another way, to take this, which fits better, with the story, as it develops. I think the Lord, is saying, Elijah, share it with me.

Tell me, exactly, what the problem is. Not that the Lord, didn't know, but that Elijah, needed, to lay this, before the Lord. He needed, as we sang a week or two ago, to take it, to the Lord, in prayer.

I'm not denying, of course, that Elijah, is deeply depressed, and deeply unhappy. But what's he depressed at? Look at verse, 10. Elijah said, I've been very jealous, for the Lord, the God of hosts.

[15 : 50] Well, 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.

Now, surely, it is the state, of God's people, that is at the heart, of Elijah's burden. Now, I know, the commentators, criticize him, they say, what about the 7,000, whose knees, have not bowed to Baal?

We'll come to them, in a moment or two. There is no doubt, however, Elijah, is the only figure, in conflict, in public conflict, with Baal, and all his works.

Where were the 7,000, on Mount Carmel? They weren't there, cheering on Elijah, worthy. Elijah stood, alone, against the 400 prophets. So, you see, Elijah, is depressed, at the fact, that God's people, are, in a state, of apostasy.

The driving, underground, of all signs, of God, is all, thrown down, your altars, killed your prophets, and they seek my life, to take it away. So, it seems to me, that's a better way, to understand this.

[17 : 02] God is inviting, Elijah, Elijah, tell me about it. Elijah, you need to, you need to be totally open, and totally honest. And what happens next, is exactly the same, as happens to Moses, in Exodus 34, where, God, passes by.

And first of all, and of course, as we know, there is this, this wonderful, build up the strong wind, but the Lord, was not in the wind, an earthquake, but the Lord, was not in the earthquake, and a fire, but not the Lord, was not in the fire.

In that lonely place, there would be, a terrifying experience, and a reminder, of God's majesty. Now, once again, commentators, go astray here.

Some commentators, regard this chapter, as a contradiction, or at least, a rebuke, to chapter 18.

The Lord, was not in the fire.

Now, the point is, we noticed last week, the issue, in chapter 18, is not, primarily, that God, answers by fire. The answering by fire, was to show, who the true God was.

[18 : 12] He's not Baal, he's the God of Sinai, a God who, was flaming sword, appeared at Eden, the God, who is to descend, in tongues of flame, at Pentecost. But the important thing, surely there, was that, this is the God, who answers.

The difference, between God and Baal, is not the one God, answers by fire, and the other doesn't. It is, that Yahweh answers. Baal does not answer. And that's the point, here again.

It's not a rejection, of chapter 18. It is a reminder, that God speaks, in many ways, in different ways. And so it is here. Verse 12, after the earthquake, of fire, the Lord, was not in the fire.

And after the fire, the sound, of a low whisper, more literally, a voice, of silence, or a voice, in the silence. Do you see, what the point, that's being made here?

It is in silence, that the voice of God, is going to be heard. Verse 13, when Elijah heard it, he went out, and stood at the entrance, of the cave.

[19 : 19] And behold, there came a voice, to him. Another parallel passage, is Job 38, where the Lord, after the whirlwind, speaks, speaks to Job. Now, you see, the point is this, it's not that it's a still, small voice, breathe through the heats, of our desire, thy coolness, and thy balm, let flesh be quiet, let sense retire, speak through the earthquake, wind and fire, thy still, small voice of calm.

That's not what's being said, here at all. What's being said, here is something, very different. It is the word, of God, which is the power, of God. Even when no fire, falls from heaven, even when God, is not in wind, and earthquake, and fire, it is his word, which brings change about.

And that surely, is the point, of the gospel, is it not? The gospel word, according to Paul, is not something, accompanied by the power, of God.

The gospel word, is the power, of God, to salvation. So whatever the accompaniments, may be, and God, in his wisdom, in his providence, will give such accompaniments, as and when he chooses.

The important thing is, it is the voice, which is going to change. It is the word of God, which is going to restore perspective. That word, that we've seen already, challenging Baal, that word, which has restored, the restoring, and healing Elijah.

[20 : 48] And that brings us now, to the fourth part, of the story, verses 15 to 21. I'm not particularly, going to talk about, the very last section, very much, because that really, takes us into another subject, the story of Elijah.

The word now, which looks to the future, the final part, of the story. The human word, which threatened, challenged, and defeated, by the divine word, which gave life, and which restored, perspective.

And notice, and notice here then, verse 15, and Yahweh said to him, go, return. This is not a rebuke, for not being there.

It is actually, there is further work, for him to do. And some of you, may remember, that wonderful passage, in the Narnia stories, the silver chair. Everyone, too ruefully says, the only reward, for doing a difficult task, well, is to be given another, and more difficult one, to do.

And that's what's happening here, surely. But the point is, Elijah is not finished. There is a future. And that future is secured, by the word of God. Elijah is certainly not finished.

[22 : 02] We're going to have, three more sermons, on Elijah next month. So we're not just going, to leave him here. Now, what is this message saying? This message is, first of all, saying, that the word, controls, nations, and kings.

Anoint Hazael, to be king over Syria, Jehu, over Israel, and Elisha, to be a new prophet. Now, it's often, I mean, poor Elijah, really gets a terrible drubbing.

And he's criticized, for this as well. Elijah only did, one of those things, anointing Elisha. But surely, that is to miss the point. The anointing of Elisha, is far more important, than the anointing, of Hazael, and Jehu, because it is Elisha, who is going to be, in the next phase, is going to carry forward, the word of God.

And, in a sense, it doesn't matter, who does the particular anointing. The point is, the anointing, is going to happen, by the word of God. You see, it is always, the message, and not the messenger. Always the preaching, and not the preacher, that matters. It is the word of God, which controls, nations, and kings. That wonderful text, in 1 Thessalonians, we looked at the lunchtime service, last week.

[23 : 23] The one who calls you, is faithful, and he, will do it. He is emphatic there. He is faithful, and he, will do it. So, it is the word, which controls, nations, and kings.

Very hard, from running away, from Jezebel, this is what's going to happen. And as you read on the story, in 1 and 2 Kings, you find that this is, exactly, fulfilled. But secondly, it is the word, which secures, the future.

And that, I think, is the point, of the 7,000 in Israel, verse 18. Who have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth, that has not kissed him, that's presumably, kissing the image of Baal, which was, which was a symbol, of allegiance, to him.

The 7,000 in Israel, shows that God, is still going to have, his people. They, of course, will need to be led, and that is the significance, of Elisha, surely, going to carry on, into the next phase, of the story.

And that, what we sang, a few moments ago, speak, O Lord, till your church, is built, and the earth, is filled, with your glory. And surely, this story, is an important part, in that.

[24 : 33] Elijah, is speaking, the words of God. Elisha, will speak, the words of God. And that, that is also, the story, isn't in the Acts, of the Apostles. The word, remember, remember that phrase, that we notice, now, studies in Acts, the word increased, the word spread.

And as the word spread, the church, was built. And that is the way, it is now, that's the way, it was then, that's the way, it will always be. There will never, be a time, when God, does, when God's word, is not active.

And, when one servant, passes, there will be others, whom God, will call. So you see, why I call this, the word which heals, and restores. Not only does it, restore Elijah, as a human being, which is so important, as I've said, it's not just simply, a case of, spiritual help.

Elijah needed rest, Elijah needed food, Elijah was a person, just like us. The word, which totally, overthrew, the human word, of Jezebel. And the word, which now, looks to the future.

And just two things, as we finish. This story, purely illustrates, the frailty, and the humanity, of God's servants. I've not denied that, of course.

[25 : 46] It's, because, God's servants, as Paul tells us, in 2nd Corinthians, are jars of clay. We are jars of clay, so the excellency, might be of Christ, and not of us.

And as James Denny, the 19th century, principal, of Glasgow University, said, no man, can prove, that Jesus Christ, is a great savior, and he himself, is important.

We preach Christ, that is the point. Through human vessels, through frail, weak human beings, Christ, is magnified. But the second thing, surely, is the power of God, in that living word. Last week, we saw how that word, destroyed evil, and idolatry. How that word, tore through the, both the fanaticism, of Baal's prophets, and the complacency, of the people. And now that word, which heals, and restores. He who calls you, is faithful. And he, will carry it out. [26 : 53] Let's pray. Amen. Father, we are very conscious, of our own frailty, and weakness. We are jars of clay, so that the excellency, may be in Christ, and not in us. And so we pray, Father, that we may neither, we may neither, try to be stronger, than we are, nor on the other hand, to doubt your word, and its power. We ask this in Jesus name. Amen.