

# Elijah and His Expectations

## I Kings 19

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Elijah, the great iron prophet of the northern kingdom of Israel, finally came to the end of himself. It was not merely a fear of Queen Jezebel. True, she was a scion of the Great Ethbaal, King of Sidon, who controlled the sea trade in the Mediterranean from Spain in the West to Phoenicia in the East, and through her marriage to King Ahab extended this trade to the great caravan routes into the East. True, she was shrewd and ruthless in getting her own way as we see by the way she handled the Naboth affair. However, she had just lost her 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah to Elijah's sword, and was licking her wounds. The best she could do for the moment was to send a messenger with a death threat. It was this threat that sent him over the edge.

It was not that Elijah was afraid to die, for he in fact rushes off deep into the wilderness without food or water, expecting to die under one lone solitary tree that somehow managed to keep a grip upon life in the desert sands. There in bitterness of soul he blurts out his death wish, "I have had enough now, Oh Yahweh, take my life for I am not better than my fathers." It is evident that he did not expect to return.

It is here in this statement that we begin to see his deeper fears emerge. The phrase "...for I am not better than my fathers" reveals the core of the prophet's struggle. On a superficial level, it could merely mean that he has lived as long as his fathers had, and now being old, he is ready to die. On a deeper level, it reveals a self knowledge of himself that he did not have before his recent success at Mount Carmel. Like many gifted and powerful servants of God, we charge into ministry full of enthusiasm and great expectations. This only increases when God blesses our ministries. Such a thing could well have happened to Elijah. After all, few have been so wildly successful as to call fire down from heaven in the very presence of an apostate nation, and then bring mortal judgment upon God's enemies.

This is where Jezebel's threat comes in. Even in the face of the most glorious victory, Jezebel, and all that she stands for, is defiant and still alive. Elijah now sees that he and his ministry, no matter how unique and far surpassing anything that has ever gone before him, cannot create the new order in this life that we all long for. He recognizes now his arrogance; that he assumed deep in his heart that he was better than his fathers, whether they be his biological fathers, or his prophetic fathers. This realization rattles him to his bones. He now doubts his ministry, life itself, yes, and even God. The Psalmist's cry "For I am a stranger with you, a sojourner like all my fathers" (Ps. 39:12) had hit home in his soul.

It is in this state of mind that he falls asleep under his lonely tree. A "messenger"<sup>1</sup> awakes him ... could it be Jezebel's messenger of death that has dogged him to this remote place? No, it is some

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<sup>1</sup>The Hebrew word *mal'ak* can mean either "messenger" or "angel." See v. 7 where it is evident that it is the "Angel of the Lord," perhaps here a theophany.

angelic visitant ministering water and a loaf of bread, no doubt baked by the mysterious fires of heaven, bread for the journey like the manna of old, *Panis Angelicum*, the Bread of Angels. After eating he fell asleep again in his exhaustion and depression, apparently oblivious to his marvelous visitation and provision. The messenger, now styled “the angle of the Lord,” comes a second time, encourages Elijah to eat again, supernaturally knowing that he had a long way to go.

Indeed, on the strength of this mysterious bread, he went 40 days and nights through the desert to Mount Horeb, the mountain where Moses of old had encountered God. Obviously, Elijah is driven to rediscover his spiritual roots. He comes to a cave, perhaps the very one in which YHWH had stationed Moses in preparation of the ultimate experience—human eyes of flesh gazing upon “the back side” of divine glory. The drama is intense ... what will happen this time? Nothing at first! Evidently the prophet falls asleep during the night. In the morning he is stirred by the word of YHWH with a disarmingly direct, anticlimactic question, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

What utters forth from the prophet’s mouth is one of the most famous “bellyaches” of all times. It must have been fairly well rehearsed, for he blurts it once again latter in the dialogue with no variation. In fact, his bellyache doesn’t even answer the question. The gist of it is that YHWH has failed to meet his expectations for his ministry, and that things were quickly deteriorating, even to the point where he was the only one left that was faithful. This last point was certainly an exaggeration, for he knew that Obadiah, the King’s servant, had hidden away 100 of the Lord’s prophets in caves (18:13).

The Lord doesn’t respond to this bellyache. Instead, He tells Elijah *to go out* and *stand* before Him so that He might *pass by* the prophet. Now here we must see the subtle differences between this passage and Exodus 33:20-23. There YHWH tells Moses to *stand* on a rock, and that He would place him *in the cleft* of the rock while He *passes by*. Here YHWH shows no intention of hiding him in the cleft of the rock so that he could be protected from the divine glory. Rather, a great wind, an earthquake, and a fire happen in the Divine passing, but it is explicitly said that YHWH was not “in” these things. The point is that whatever Elijah experienced on the mount, it was not what Moses experienced. Although he beheld an awesome display of divine power, he did not directly see God. Again, the prophet is met with dashed expectations!

It is a curious fact that Elijah responds by “covering his face” with his mantle and “coming out” from the cave. Could it be that since God didn’t cover his face as he did for Moses that he covers his own face in his attempt to experience what Moses had experience? Also, could it be that Elijah disobeyed God by not standing outside the cave (v. 11), but by going inside the cave, again to enter into Moses’ experience where YHWH placed him in the cleft of the rock? Be this as it may, YHWH needles the prophet again with that same question, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

Elijah blows his chance again! Weakened by disappointment, he rattles off his sob story when he could have been bold! Moses went to the mount to intercede for his rebellious people; Elijah went to the mount to complain about and to condemn his people before God. YHWH accepts Moses’ intercession. Once this was done, Moses reached out to God with his deepest yearning,

“Oh YHWH, show me your glory!” Moses knew what he was about. When Elijah was asked why he came to the mount of God, he could not directly give an answer! There can be no other conclusion than that Elijah failed himself, his people, and his God at this crucial juncture of his life.

It is amazing that a prophet of Elijah’s stature could be so in the dark about his own life, his circumstances, and about his God. Somewhere down the path of life he lost focus on his reason for being—that of beholding God and His glory. He then magnified his circumstances beyond the size of His God, absurdly believing that he had a comprehensive grasp on all the complexities of his world. YHWH doesn’t blast away at him for this, but in a very business like manner tells him to accomplish three things: he was to anoint two kings and a prophet to replace him. YHWH is in full control! These three will accomplish His purposes. He then slightly jabs the prophet by revealing to him that all along he had 7000 in Israel who had not bent the knee to Baal. Obviously, things were not out of control, and Elijah was not the only faithful one left.

All this should be very encouraging for us who live in dark times such as ours. Not only did Elijah blow it, but even his prophetic prototype Moses, who did everything right on the mountain, blew it later when he struck the rock out of anger and disobedience. Moses was not allowed to enter the land! However, both of these mountain men, these failures, appear with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, easily conversing with Jesus, the Glory of God. It is not about us getting it right, but about Jesus getting it right. When everything is falling apart around us, our expectations for life dashed in a hundred different ways, when we are tempted with the dark shadow of despair, disappointed by our failures, let us not lose sight of the fact that Jesus is always extending an invitation to us on the mountain. Jesus has worked a long time with the likes of us, and knows how to get us to ascend to Him through the fog of this world.

There are a number of things that are certain in life. One of these is that no matter what vision, calling, charisms and promises God has endowed us with, our life and ministry will not be what we expected them to be. There will be failures, disappointments, or something lacking even in our successes. However, another thing is as certain. As we let God spin out the fabric of our lives we will begin to see that God will certainly outdo even our wildest expectations; we will come to see that what we once envisioned for ourselves pales in comparison with the “weight of glory” God is secretly and mysteriously working in our trials. Surely this is what Elijah learned on the mount.