First Kings 19:9–18. (EHV)

> [Elijah] came to a cave and spent the night there. Then the word of the LORD suddenly came to him, saying, "Why are you here, Elijah?" He said, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of Armies, but the people of Israel have abandoned your covenant. They have torn down your altars and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking to take my life." Then the LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is passing by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains and shattered rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind came an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake there was a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. After the fire there was a soft, whispering voice. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak, and he went out and stood at the entrance to the cave. Then a voice came to him and said, "Why are you here, Elijah?" He said, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of Armies, but the people of Israel have abandoned your covenant. They have torn down your altars and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking to take my life." Then the LORD said to him, "Go back the way you came and go to the Wilderness of Damascus. When you get there, you are to anoint Hazael as king over Aram. You will also anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel and Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah as prophet in your place. Whoever escapes the sword of Hazael, Jehu will kill, and whoever escapes the sword of Jehu, Elisha will kill. But I have preserved in Israel seven thousand whose knees have not bent to Baal and whose lips have not kissed him."

Are you, or is someone you know, disappointed, dejected, downcast, depressed, or despairing?

So was Elijah.

We already heard last week how the Lord had Elijah announce a severe drought, which lasted three and a half years, and how the Lord provided for Elijah's physical needs, just as he does for all his believers. Well, by the time the events of 1 Kings 19 take place, those three and a half years have already passed. So let's catch up on what has happened in the meantime.

We heard how the Lord had ravens bring Elijah bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and how he drank from the ravine that still had water in it from before the rain had stopped falling. Well, eventually the ravine did dry up, and so the Lord had him go to a Gentile widow living in Zarephath near Sidon. She only had a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a pitcher. She was about to prepare her final loaf of bread for her and her son. But Elijah told her that her jar of flour and pitcher of oil would not run out until the Lord sent rain, if she also used that flour and oil to provide for him. And that is what happened.

Some time later, the widow's son became ill and died, and Elijah raised her son from death by God's power, which strengthened the widow's faith in God and his word even more.

Then, not long before the drought came to an end, the Lord sent Elijah back to Israel, to present himself to King Ahab. During the journey, Elijah found out that the palace administrator had hidden a hundred of the Lord's prophets, because Queen Jezebel had been killing them off,

probably thinking that *they* were the reason for the drought. So when her husband, King Ahab, came to meet Elijah, he accused him of bringing trouble on Israel. But Elijah said it was Ahab and his household that had brought trouble on Israel by abandoning the word of the Lord and worshiping the Baals. He called for a showdown on Mount Carmel between him and the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah, and he wanted all the nation to be made aware of it and invited to it. Ahab agreed to this.

When the day came, Elijah gave the details of the showdown. The prophets of Baal and Elijah would each slaughter a bull, arrange it on an altar, and call on their respective god, and the god who answered by fire would be known as the true God, with the prophets of Baal getting to choose which bull they wanted and getting to go first. And remember how dry it was. The prophets of Baal started in the morning and went into the afternoon, praying, dancing, and engaging in a prophetic frenzy and even cutting themselves with daggers and spears until their blood flowed to try and get Baal's attention and sympathy.

But no sound. No answer. No response.

After Elijah rebuilt the broken-down altar to the Lord that was there, he had a large trench dug around it, arranged the bull on top, and then had his sacrifice drenched with water, probably from the Mediterranean Sea. Then, at the time of evening sacrifice, he prayed to the Lord, and even though there wasn't a cloud in the sky, fire fell from heaven and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones, the dirt, and even licked up the water in the trench. After the Israelites acknowledged the true God, Elijah had the prophets of Baal put to death in the valley below.

Then Elijah went back up the mountain and prayed. A small cloud rose up from the sea and became larger and larger until the sky was dark with clouds and wind. And finally a heavy rain fell on the land. And by the way, if, as we talked about last time, the drought began in the middle of the rainy season, and if it lasted three *and a half* years, that means that it ended with this heavy rainstorm right in the middle of the dry season, when Israel usually doesn't get a single drop of rain. This rain was clearly from the Lord. The Lord also strengthened Elijah so that he was able to run on foot ahead of King Ahab on his chariot all the way to Jezreel for shelter.

That should do it, right? The Lord's purpose in sending the drought was fulfilled, right? The nation had been reformed, right? Well, not really. Instead of telling his wife that Elijah had demonstrated that they had been in the wrong, Ahab basically tattled on Elijah to his wife, so that Jezebel issued Elijah a threat that she would make his life just like one of the dead prophets of Baal by that time tomorrow. Three and a half years of drought, an amazing showdown with an amazing miracle in the presence of the king himself—and the leadership of the country was still exactly the same.

So Elijah ran away, way south into the wilderness. There he sat down under a tree, asked God to take his life, and fell asleep, probably hoping never to wake up. The angel of the Lord appeared and gave him some food and drink to revive him. Elijah then went even farther south, journeying for forty days until he came to Horeb, the mountain of God, probably the same as Mt. Sinai or at least in the same mountain range. Elijah entered a cave and spent the night there. And that's where we meet up with him. He is disappointed. He is depressed. He feels utterly alone. He is spiritually spent.

The Lord now didn't need to provide for Elijah physically. He needed to provide for him spiritually. So what did he do?

First, he listened. Twice he invited Elijah to share his burdens with him by asking him, "Why are you here, Elijah?" He already knew why Elijah was there. The point was to have Elijah pour out his heart to him and for the Lord to listen and to show he cared.

He does the same with us. "Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you," the apostle Peter would later write (1 Pet. 5:7). Share what is distressing and upsetting you and weighing you down with the Lord. He is always interested. He will always listen.

Second, he reminded Elijah, just as he reminds us, of the gospel and its importance. And he did this in an interesting way. He sent a powerful, rock-shattering wind. He sent an earthquake. And he sent a fire. But he made it clear to Elijah that he was not in any of those. But then came a soft, whispering voice. When Elijah heard that voice, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out to stand before the Lord, because he knew that the Lord was there.

One of the questions that was probably running through Elijah's mind was, "Lord, if you're powerful enough to send a three-and-a-half-year drought during the rainy season and then send rain again during the dry season, if you're powerful enough to send fire down from heaven to consume a sacrifice when I ask you to, why don't you just use your power to stop all this rebellion and false worship? Why don't you just destroy all the church's enemies and exalt your faithful followers?" So the Lord reminds Elijah that, even though he has the law proclaimed, and that it has its place, it is not the law that changes hearts. It is not commands and prohibitions, threats and punishments that actually advance his kingdom. It is the gentle whisper of the gospel, the good news of free forgiveness and salvation through the Messiah that advances his kingdom —the same gospel that brings enough cheer to Elijah, even in the midst of his depression, to cause him to get up from inside the cave and to go to the entrance in order to listen to the Lord.

And God brings out one of the aspects of that gospel message as he addresses Elijah— and remember, he is doing so in a soft, whispering voice: "Go back the way you came and go to the Wilderness of Damascus. When you get there, you are to anoint Hazael as king over Aram. You will also anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel and Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah as prophet in your place. Whoever escapes the sword of Hazael, Jehu will kill, and whoever escapes the sword of Jehu, Elisha will kill." If God knows who the next king of Aram will be, if he knows who the next king of Israel will be, if he knows who the next head prophet will be, if he knows whose lives will come to an end and who will take them, then he is firmly in control and has a good plan and purpose, in spite of the impression that all the rebellion and false worship may give. And not only that, but if there will be another head prophet after Elijah, that means that God's kingdom will continue to march on. It will not be snuffed out, no matter how much its enemies rage and rave. All the enemies of the Church will pass away, but the word of the Lord will endure forever.

Third, with these same words he also gave Elijah useful work to do, to turn him outside of and away from himself and toward God and others in service. He does the same for us: The apostle Paul writes: "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 have received from God" (2 Cor. 1:3–4). There is a time to take time for ourselves. There is a time to grieve and a time to mourn.

But that is not all the time. If it were, our grief and sadness would quickly turn into self-absorption, which is an empty and bottomless sea. No, there is then a time to take that grief and turn it into compassion and understanding that we can share with others who are grieving and mourning. There is a time to take that sadness and turn it into service to God and to others.

Fourth, he reminded Elijah, just as he reminds us, that there was an appointed end to his struggles and hardships: "Anoint…Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah as prophet in your place." In other words: "You are not going to be the main prophet of Israel forever, Elijah, because you are not going to live forever. Eventually, when the time is right, I will call you out of this vale of tears, out of the valley of the shadow of death, to life and bliss eternal. Keep fighting the good fight; you will see just how worthwhile that fight is in the end." The apostle Paul tells us the same: "Yes, our momentary, light trouble produces for us an eternal weight of glory that is far beyond any comparison" (2 Cor. 4:17).

And finally, God reminds Elijah in the meantime, after first listening to him, that part of what he is feeling is not legitimate—namely that he is all alone. "But I have preserved in Israel seven thousand whose knees have not bent to Baal and whose lips have not kissed him." God's word was still producing fruit. There were many others just as grieved by Israel's poor spiritual condition as Elijah was, many others who rejoiced in the gospel of forgiveness just as much as Elijah did. Not only was God with him, which was most important, but there were other human shoulders to cry on, other human hearts who shared his joys and convictions, other humans who loved God and loved his people and his ministers.

God does the same for us. Whether it's an unexpected visit, card, or message from a fellow Christian, someone checking up on us, someone telling us they are praying for us, another routine Sunday trip to church, a sermon like this one, or any number of other ways, God assures us that, no matter how dark things are around us, we are not alone. You may need to do some looking, but they are there—people to listen, to understand, to encourage, and to help.

Our gracious God doesn't just provide for us physically. He also provides for us spiritually. He listens to us. He shares his gospel with us, reminding us that he has saved us, that he forgives us, that he is in control and has a gracious plan and purpose for us. He turns us outside of ourselves in service to him and others. He reminds us that there is an appointed end to our disappointment and hardships. And he reminds us we are not alone. May his soft, gentle, whispering voice continue to comfort and strengthen you in all fear and doubt, in every trouble and sadness, to his glory. Amen.