

A Change in Elijah from Courage to Cowardice!

1 Kings 19:1-8

1 Kings 19:1-8 - *“And Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, also how he had executed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, “So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time.” And when he saw that, he arose and ran for his life, and went to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he prayed that he might die, and said, “It is enough! Now, LORD, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers!”*

Then as he lay and slept under a broom tree, suddenly an angel touched him, and said to him, “Arise and eat.” Then he looked, and there by his head was a cake baked on coals, and a jar of water. So he ate and drank, and lay down again. And the angel of the LORD came back the second time, and touched him, and said, “Arise and eat, because the journey is too great for you.” So he arose, and ate and drank; and he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights as far as Horeb, the mountain of God.”

Background Notes

1 Kings 19 describes a great change in the prophet Elijah. No longer was he boldly confronting Ahab and the prophets of Baal. He was running scared from the evil pagan queen, Jezebel.

At the end of chapter 18 the rains had returned in answer to Elijah’s prayer, and Elijah had outrun Ahab’s chariot to Jezreel, where Jezebel was waiting. When Jezebel heard that her prophets of Baal had been defeated and executed, she was furious and threatened to kill Elijah. Jezebel knew that any revival in the kingdom of Israel would just fizzle out if she could get rid of Elijah, the prophet and leader. But rather than standing up to Jezebel, as he had stood up to Ahab, Elijah ran for his life! Can you believe it?

Elijah and his servant ran all the way to Beersheba, a town about a hundred miles south of Jezreel, near the southern border of the kingdom of Judah. But Elijah wanted to put even more distance between himself and Jezebel, so he went even farther south. He left his servant in Beersheba, and he went on a day’s journey farther into the wilderness.

At that point Elijah was so discouraged and depressed that he sat down under a broom tree, or juniper tree, and asked the Lord to take his life: *“Now, Lord, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers!”* (v4). In essence He was saying, ‘I’m

a failure Lord. I might as well die.’ We would never say something like that – or would we? Have you ever been so discouraged and depressed that you’ve said, ‘Lord, I’m a failure. You might as well take my life right now.’

But rather than taking Elijah’s life, the Lord sent an angel to minister to him. The angel gave Elijah something to eat - *“a cake baked on coals and a jar of water.”* [What kind of cake was it anyway? Well, angel food cake, of course! Laughter.]

Then the angel told Elijah that he had a long journey ahead of him. After Elijah ate and rested, he went on the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights, all the way to Horeb, the mountain of God. Horeb is another name for Mount Sinai. Mount Sinai is the place where God spoke to Moses in the burning bush, and where the Lord gave His Law to the nation of Israel after their Exodus from slavery in Egypt.

Doctrinal Point

Let him who thinks he stands, take heed lest he fall.

“Let him who thinks he stands, take heed lest he fall.” 1 Corinthians 10:12. We certainly see the truth of that verse illustrated in this segment of the life of Elijah. What a comedown! One day he boldly confronted the prophets of Baal, praying in great faith for the rains to return, and then outrunning Ahab to Jezreel in order to confront Jezebel. The next day what happened? He was afraid of Jezebel, ran for his life to get away from her threats, and then prayed that God would take his life!

What happened? How could the great prophet Elijah fall so quickly? There are some reasons in these verses, and a great lesson here as well: *“if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!”* There are at least four reasons why Elijah suddenly took this spiritual nose-dive. These reasons should be a warning to us so, that we *“take heed lest we fall.”*

a. Elijah took his eyes off the Lord.

First and foremost, Elijah took his eyes off the Lord. In chapters 17-18 Elijah had his eyes on the Lord. He practiced the presence of the Lord. He said that he *“stood before the Lord,”* meaning that he was in standing firm in the presence of the Lord.

But his eyes off the Lord and placed his eyes on Jezebel. As a result, he became afraid and he ran! It reminds us of the time when Peter began to sink in the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 14). As long as Peter’s eyes were on the Lord, he walked on water - but when he took his eyes off the Lord and looked at the angry waves and howling wind, he began to sink. Let’s keep our eyes on the Lord!

b. Elijah was sucked into the vacuum that comes after a big victory.

Have you ever experienced this? It happens in all areas of life. Take sports, for example. Let’s say you’re on a team and your team wins a big victory. You’re the champs. But after the excitement and celebration is over, there comes a down time - a vacuum.

Have you had that experience? It happens in the spiritual life as well. Right after a “mountaintop experience,” where you’ve seen victory over sin in your life, or you’ve led someone to the Lord - watch out! After a victory in your spiritual life, a “down” time may come. A spiritual vacuum. It can happen. It happened to Elijah; it can happen to us.

c. Elijah’s expectations were unfulfilled.

After the great showdown with the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel and the return of the rain, Elijah really expected that Ahab would choose to follow the Lord, and that Jezebel’s power would be taken away. Elijah expected that there would be a great revival in Israel. He expected that the secret believers would come out of the woodwork.

But it didn't happen! Ahab didn't even mention God when he made his report to Jezebel. And weak-willed Ahab did nothing to stop Jezebel's threats against Elijah's life. We too need to watch out when our expectations are not fulfilled.

Every year at Emmaus Bible College, some of our students expect that after a few weeks of Bible college, they'll become spiritual giants, have their spiritual act together, and have victory over sin. But it doesn't always happen that way. Discouragement can creep in, and some even leave. Maybe that's happened to you as you serve the Lord. You have unfulfilled expectations, and you're discouraged. Watch out! You could be vulnerable to a fall! Watch out when your spiritual expectations are not being fulfilled.

d. Elijah was physically exhausted.

Elijah had run all the way down to Beersheba, and then on into the wilderness. He was physically exhausted! When we're exhausted, all of us are vulnerable to a spiritual nose-dive or to a lapse in faith. So take care of your body!

We could go off into a long tangent here about how a Christian should stay physically fit, and that certainly has its place. But the main point here is: try not to get physically *exhausted*. When you're physically exhausted, you open yourself up to spiritual discouragement and depression, and you're more likely to experience to a spiritual lapse of faith.

We've seen four reasons why Elijah lapsed in faith: he took his eyes off the Lord; he was sucked into the vacuum that comes after a big victory; he was disappointed because his expectations were not fulfilled; and he was physically exhausted. Let's watch out for these dangerous signals in our own lives. *"If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!"*

Practical Application

Let's follow God's method of restoration.

Elijah needed to be restored to a closer walk with the Lord. He had lapsed in his faith and trust in the Lord. He was discouraged and depressed. He was ready to throw in the towel. He needed to be restored!

What was God's first step in restoring Elijah? He sent an angel to feed him - and force him to rest. God didn't rebuke him or reprimand him. (That would come later.) God even fed him, even though He knew Elijah was going to run further away.

Well, we should follow God's method of restoration. Psalm 103:13- 14: *"As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear Him. For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust."* God remembers our frailty when we

have lapsed in faith and need to be restored. Remember how the Lord Jesus restored Peter in John 21? Peter had denied the Lord three times - but the Lord loved him, and wanted to restore him. They met on the shore of Galilee. The disciples had fished all night. Peter was tired. The Lord was going to have to rebuke Peter. He was going to have to deal with him. But what was His first step in Peter's restoration? The Lord fed him! He fed him first, and then He began to talk with him. We need to follow that same method of restoration.

There are a lot of fellow believers who are weary, or disappointed, or fearful – who need to be restored. Follow this method of restoration. Make sure they're restored to physical strength before you reprimand or rebuke them.

A number of years ago I was facing burnout in the ministry. If I'd gone on any longer in this condition, I probably would have taken a nosedive in faith. In addition, the Lord wanted to teach me some things at that time, particularly about being bolder in witnessing.

How did the Lord deal with me, to restore me? He had me go away for a week to take a course from another ministry. It was just what I needed! It was a great week of teaching from the Word. I was forced to rest. I was even away even the telephone (no mobile phones in those days!)! I was fed great food, both physically and spiritually, and I got some rest. I was restored in body and spirit.

On the plane coming home, the Lord began to rebuke me and reprimand me about being bolder in my witness. I was sitting next to a couple, and I knew I should look for an opportunity to witness to them - but I didn't. What I didn't know was that they were a Christian couple – and they began to witness to me! Was I rebuked? You bet I was! I determined then that I was never going to let this happen again – to let somebody beat me to it - to witness to me rather than I witness to them! After He had restored me, that was the rebuke the Lord used at that time in my life. And I have never forgotten it!

Let's remember this first step of restoration. When you're dealing with people who need spiritual restoration, rebuilding their physical health and strength is an important first step - before you begin to rebuke and reprimand. Let's follow God's method of restoration.