

THE GOD WHO MINISTERS LIFE (1 Kings 19:1-18)

Recently, from this pulpit, on a Sunday morning, I told you about a preacher friend who claims that the theme of the Bible is, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” I agree that there are many verses and stories in the Bible that reinforce that principle. While I believe that is certainly a major theme in the Bible, I don’t see as the theme of the Bible.

Let me make a stab at what I believe the theme of the Bible. I believe it is simple, really simple. Both the OT and the NT agree that God is the Giver of life. The Bible starts with God creating life—animal life and human life. In chapter 2 of Genesis, we learn that God created man from the dust of the ground, and God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature (2:7).

As Moses prepared the children of Israel for his departure and readied the new generation to go into the Promised Land, he spoke to them what God had said:

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore, choose life, that you and your offspring may live (Deuteronomy 30:19).

In the very next verse we read, “For He is your life.”

The NT sharpens the focus of that theme. Not only is God the giver of life, but you must come to Jesus by faith to receive the life that only He can give. Jesus gives to us new life, abundant life, and eternal life.

The Gospel of John uses the word “life” more than any other NT book. The word “life” appears 39 times in John. The first occurrence is John 1:4. John writes of Jesus, “In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.”

Jesus said in John 5:39-40, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about Me, yet you refuse to come to Me that you may have life.”

In John’s gospel, Jesus teaches that He is the bread of life, the resurrection and the life, and in His prayer to His Father recorded for us in John 17, Jesus prayed, “And this is eternal life, that they know You the only true God, and Jesus Christ who You have sent” (v. 3).

In John’s gospel we find seven miracles Jesus performed, but he doesn’t call them miracles. He called them “signs” because just as a sign exists to convey a message, Jesus’ signs signified who He is and why He came. In the next to last chapter of his book John reveals why he included the signs he had chosen to put in his gospel account, “But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you have life in His name” (20:31).

We have been studying the life of Elijah as it is recorded for us in 1 Kings. Something happens in chapter 19 that is surprising. Elijah wants to die. He asks God to take his life. At this point, God graciously chooses to ignore his prophet’s request. He never directly

addresses Elijah's request. Instead, He proceeds to minister to Elijah. We are going to look at how Elijah got to where he was, and how God responded.

The God Who Ministers Life Refuels the Burned Out

Notice 19:1-3. Can't you just picture King Ahab walking into his palace. He is soaking wet due to the soaking rain. The fact that it rained should have brightened him. The drought has ended. Jezebel, his wife, is probably rather smug thinking that her god, Baal the storm god, has come through, that he made it rain. But she notices her husband isn't smiling. She asks, "What's wrong, dear? Tell me all about it."

Ahab slumps into his recliner and rehearses for Jezebel, the day's events. He tells her about the contest. He says, "Well, when we got to Mount Carmel, Elijah had two bulls waiting . . . Then, the worst part was when Elijah pointed at your prophets, those 450 prophets of Baal that you dragged here from Sidon. Elijah yelled, 'Get'em! Seize them. Don't let any of them get away!' Then, they marched those men down the hill to the river. Well, it used to be a river. And with all this rain, I suppose it is again. Then, he butchered 'em; he slaughtered every last one of them."

Jezebel's eyes narrowed, and she asked coldly, "Where's Elijah now?"

"He's here in Jezreel," Ahab moaned. "He got here right before I did."

Jezebel didn't say another word to her husband. She marched off, called for a messenger, and said, "You find Elijah and give him this message, "So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow" (v. 2).

It didn't take long for the messenger to locate Elijah. Everybody was talking about him. He gave the message, word for word, to the prophet.

We find Elijah's surprising response in v. 3.

What? This doesn't make sense. Would the real Elijah please stand up?

- Where's the man who stood toe-to-toe with the king and said, "You are the troubler of Israel. All this is your fault, O King."
- Where's the prophet who challenged the people, "How long will you go limping between two opinions? If YHWH is God, follow Him; but if Baal, then follow him"?
- Where is the man who called out to God to send the fire, and God did?
- Where is the man who unflinchingly dispatched the 450 prophets of Baal?
- Where is the man who called upon God to send the rain, and God did?
- Where's that man?

Surely, that prophet would not run just because a woman threatened him. If she had the power to carry out her threat, she would have sent an assassin, not a messenger. Yet, Elijah crumbles like a cheap, folding chair and runs away. How do we account for this? How can we explain it?

Do you remember who Vince Lombardi was? He was the coach of the Green Bay

Packers football team. The year before he became their coach, the Packers had a losing season. In fact, that year they were 1-10-1. They were a dispirited bunch. Under Lombardi's leadership, the Packers never had a losing season. He was a hard-nosed coach. He reportedly told his running backs, "If you fail to score a touchdown from one-yard out, I will consider that a personal affront, and I will seek retribution." He coached the Packers for only 9 years, but including the first two Super Bowls, he won the NFL Championship game 5 times during his last 7 seasons.

Vince Lombardi once said this: "Fatigue makes cowards of us all."

If Elijah was anything, he was fatigued. Think about the day's events. When everyone arrived at Mount Carmel, there were two bulls present. How did they get there? Elijah couldn't telephone Rent-a-Bull and ask them to deliver two bulls to Mount Carmel. Somehow, Elijah got two bulls to the hillside on Mount Carmel.

Elijah had his sacrifice doused with a considerable amount of water. Where did the water come from? It hadn't rained for 3 and ½ years. We are not told it was fresh water. Mount Carmel was not too awfully far from the Mediterranean. We are not told that Elijah hauled all that water, but I bet you he was involved in some way. We are told in 18:40 that 450 men lost their lives that day. They were false prophets. OT law stipulated they were to be executed. Verse 40 says that Elijah slaughtered them. Was he overseeing the executions or was he the one wielding the sword? Ahab told Jezebel that Elijah killed them with the sword.

After all the events of that day, Elijah ran 17 miles to Jezreel staying ahead of King Ahab who was riding behind him in his horse-drawn chariot.

Do you think Elijah might have been a bit tired at the end of the day. Fatigue makes cowards of us all, even bold, powerful prophets of YHWH.

The same is true for you and me. We live in a fast-paced world. Many of us go, go, go, and do, do, do. That kind of schedule is injurious to the spiritual life.

We must remember that we face an enemy who is far more wicked and dastardly than Jezebel ever thought about being. And who is that enemy? That's right—the devil, Satan. When you are exhausted, he will whisper in your ear.

- He might whisper a temptation, "O come on. You deserve to have a little fun."
- He might whisper an accusation, "And you call yourself a Christian?"
- Whatever he whispers, he means to deceive you and to discourage you.

He will seek to deceive you because he is the father of lies. He means to discourage you because by doing so, he will get you to leave the field of battle.

I read this past week that between 4,000 to 5,000 ministers leave the ministry each year due to either mental or physical exhaustion. And the majority never return to the ministry.

I am convinced that the chief cause of unhappiness in our world is unmet expectations. Think about it. Husbands and wives get divorced because of unmet expectations. "He didn't do what I expected him to do." "She didn't do what I expected her to do." Over time, those unmet expectations eat away at the foundation of the

marriage, and they call it quits.

Every two or four years, voters go to the polls with the intent of voting for the other guy because the incumbent did not meet their expectations. That's a form of buyer's remorse.

Coaches get fired, pastors get replaced, or church members go shopping because of unmet expectations.

I believe Elijah was struggling with unmet expectations. After God showed up, sent the fire, and then the rain, I think Elijah thought that was going to be the turning point. Now, the king is going to repent, idol worship is going to be eradicated, and revival is going to sweep through Israel. He had high hopes and great expectations.

Then, with one word of threat from Jezebel, Satan removed the right piece from Elijah's Jenga tower, and his carefully constructed view of the future came tumbling down. Satan leaned in close and whispered, "Elijah, you are a failure. You are a fake."

Maybe, that is why Elijah cried out, "I am no better than my fathers."

According to v. 3, Elijah ran from Jezreel to Beersheba. Jezreel was in the northern kingdom of Israel, well north of the capital of Samaria. Beersheba was in the southern kingdom of Judah, well south of the capital of Jerusalem. The distance between Jezreel and Beersheba was roughly 100 miles. Elijah was putting as much distance between himself and the murderous Jezebel, not wanting assassins to find him.

Let's look at v. 4. To make himself even more elusive, after getting to Beersheba, Elijah went a day's journey further into the dessert. That location was very inhospitable terrain. No one would be looking for Elijah there. If Elijah was exhausted before, now he is utterly spent. He plops himself down under a broom tree. It is also translated as a juniper. This tree is found in the Sinai dessert. It is bit more a bush than a tree. You probably could stand under it, but you could sit and lay under it, and it would provide shade.

In the shade of the broom tree, Elijah asked God to take his life. He said, "I have had enough. I'm done."

I'm reminded of a professional boxing match that took place when I was still in high school. It was a rematch between Roberto Duran of Panama and the American, Sugar Ray Leonard. The two first fought in June of 1980. Duran won on a very narrow decision. The rematch took place in November of 1980. In the re-match, Leonard was moving quickly and landing blows. In the closing seconds of the 8th round, Duran held up his glove, turned to the referee and said in Spanish, "no mas." That translates in English as "no more." Duran gave up in the fight. He had had enough.

While Duran gave up on a fight, Elijah was giving up on life. He was done. He asked God to take his life. He wasn't the first man of God to do that, and he wasn't the last. Moses asked God to take his life. Jonah asked God to take his life. Moses was tired of being the object of the people's criticism, and the job of leading the people was too big for just one man. Jonah was just being a snot. He didn't like the fact that God had forgiven the enemies of Israel. Jonah wanted God to rain down fire on them and destroy them, not spare them. Basically, Jonah was saying, "I don't want to live in a world run by a merciful God like you." Elijah was tired, worn out, disappointed, feeling alone,

discouraged, maybe carrying a sense of false guilt, and he was ready to check out.

Have you ever known anybody who was where Elijah was? Have you ever been where Elijah was physically, emotionally, and spiritually?

Just one day before the Boston Marathon several years ago, an article in *Harvard Health* predicted what would happen to the thousands of runners:

Come tomorrow morning, about 27,000 runners will begin the annual 26-mile, 385-yard mass run from suburban Hopkinton to Boston. But if past marathons in Boston and elsewhere are any indication, perhaps up to 40 percent of these optimistic and determined souls will slam into a sudden sensation of overwhelming, can't-do-this fatigue several miles (typically about five) before they get a chance to experience the glory of crossing the finish line.

Runners call this experience, "hitting the wall." It happens when the carbohydrates and hydration the runner has consumed become so depleted that the body feels like it can't continue. One runner described it like an elephant jumping on her shoulders and expecting her to carry it to the finish line.

Maybe you feel like you have been carrying an elephant, and you feel you can't continue. Peter wrote in the first of his two NT letters, cast "all your anxieties on Him, because He cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7). In other words, give all your anxiety, all your troubles, all your burdens to Jesus because He loves you and cares for you.

That brings us to the second half of our story.

The God Who Ministers Life Uses Common Means

We said that God refuels those who are burned out. How does He do that? He uses common means. Let's read vv. 5-8. God let Elijah sleep. There's something beautifully restorative about sleep. God let Elijah sleep, and God wants you to sleep. You need to sleep.

Now, you can overdo a good thing. I heard about a man who went to the doctor. He explained his problem. He said, "Doc, I sleep well at night and in the morning, but I just toss and turn all afternoon."

You need sleep. Adults need between 7-9 hours of sleep. Teenagers need 8-10, school-age children need 9-12 daily.

Do you remember being in kindergarten and the teacher putting the class down for a nap? You didn't want to take a nap. I know I didn't. Now, I long for someone to come to me and say, "It's time for your afternoon nap."

Psalms 127 is a song of Solomon. Verse 2 reads, "It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for He gives to His beloved sleep."

Sleep is a common thing, but it is a necessary thing.

In time, an angel woke the prophet and said, "It is time to eat." The prophet then saw cake or loaf of freshly baked bread beside him. The prophet needed nourishment, and God provided it. This is just one more instance of God providing food to Elijah. Early in chapter 17 God sent Elijah to the brook Cherith. There, he could drink from the brook,

and God caused ravens to bring bread and meat to Elijah every morning and every evening. When the brook ran dry, God sent Elijah to Zarephath where he met a widow. That widow gave him lodging and cooked for him because God did miracle. Whereas the brook ran dry, her jar of flour and her bottle of oil didn't. Every time she went to bake bread there was enough flour and oil to do so, every time. Now, God is using an angel to feed the prophet. The source of the meal was uncommon, but the means itself was very common.

We are told of two occasions where the prophet slept and then ate; he slept and then ate. The prophet is beginning to feel better, but he is not back fully. He decides to continue his journey. We are not told that God sent Elijah to Mount Sinai but nor did God stop him. Mount Horeb is another name for Mount Sinai. That was the mountain at which Moses talked with God, and God gave him the Ten Commandment and the Law. For whatever reason, Elijah decides he needs to go there. The journey from Beersheba down to Mount Sinai was much longer than the journey from Jezreel to Beersheba. It was at least 250 miles.

When Elijah finally got there, God asked him a simple question, "What are you doing here?" Look at vv. 9-10. Elijah fails to answer the question. He just gives God a sob story.

Do you ever complain to God about how bad you have it? That's OK. Job did that. David did that. Elijah did that. You can, too. You can tell God how you feel. He's not threatened by that. He is big enough to handle your dissatisfaction with the status quo.

Look at what happens next. Look at vv. 11-12. Three dramatic things happen—a strong wind, an earthquake, and a fire. These are the kinds of things that when they happen, they grab your attention. God has used these things before to communicate. It was God who sent the fire on Mount Carmel to consume the fire. By doing so, He was saying, "I am real, and I am the one true God." This time, however, we are told that God wasn't in the dramatic and the flashy. This time, God wasn't in the strong wind, the earthquake, and the fire. But then, Elijah heard a low whisper. The KJV calls it "a still, small voice." And when Elijah heard that, He knew God had spoken.

If you are wanting to hear the voice of God, don't look for the dramatic, the loud, the big, listen for the whisper. Do you know why God whispers? To hear a whisper, you must get quiet and draw close, and that is what God wants you and me to do. "Be still and know . . ." Be still and hear.

God asked the question, He had asked before, and Elijah gave the same answer as before (vv. 13-14). It is as if he has it memorized. It is a tape he has played in his head repeatedly. It has become his theme song.

God knows Elijah must get his eyes off himself. He has been navel-gazing long enough. To complete his work of restoration in the life of His prophet, God gives Elijah an assignment. Look at vv. 15-18. God gives Elijah three tasks. The prophet has traveled about as far south as he could. Now, God sends him farther north than he has probably been. Damascus is in Syria, which is north of Israel. These tasks were important in an off themselves, but more importantly, they served to get Elijah's head up and his eyes looking outward.

If you are in the desert, spiritually, you may need for God to do in your life what He did in Elijah's. You may need rest and nutrition. You may need the care of a doctor. We are both a body and a soul. Each affects the other. It is hard to feel close to God when are either exhausted, ill, or both.

Let God question you. He may ask you, "What are you doing here?" Look around. You may find yourself in a place God never intended you to be.

Then, listen for His voice, that still, small voice. You find it and hear Him as you prayerfully read this book.

Finally, let Him give you an assignment, a task, a job to perform. Who do you need to pray for? Who do you need to talk to? Who do you need to serve, to encourage, to help?

We serve a God who ministers life. Jesus can give you a life you never imagined. All it requires is that you give up yours and take the one He offers. It will be the best trade you ever made.