

Dealing with Disappointment

I Kings 19:1-18

It was thirty-five years ago, in June of 1988, that I graduated from college. I had already been accepted into graduate school, and had dreams of becoming a history professor so that I could follow in the footsteps of my newfound heroes, the men who had taught me so much in the previous four years about the glories of Western Civilization in general and American history in particular. I wanted to join in the tradition of learning about and handing down to the next generation the wisdom of those who have gone before us, just as my father had done when he earned a PhD and became a professor of accounting.

But I ran into the buzzsaw of secular Marxism into which far too many institutions of higher learning have deteriorated. You see, my grad school professors weren't interested in celebrating the admittedly complex, difficult and often hesitating path on which we Americans have traveled towards greater freedom and opportunity for everyone. And they certainly didn't appreciate the important role that the Christian faith has played in forming our institutions and in challenging us to love all of our neighbors more consistently. No, because they looked at everything through the lens of class struggle, they were interested only in the ways that race-based slavery warped and twisted the best of America's ideals. I had no use for such a biased, cramped, distorted perspective on the past. And so my dreams of becoming part of academia dissolved into bitter disappointment.

What about you? Has your life turned out the way you wanted it to? Did you end up with the prosperous business or the happy, healthy family you dreamed of when you graduated from high school? Have you really been able to make a difference in the world around you, leaving things better for future generations? Or do you also know what it's like to be disappointed?

Elijah certainly did. For after all, his dreams and expectations had to have been higher than any of ours. Oh, the society in which he lived also had big problems. Most of the people had abandoned the God of Israel to become followers of Baal, a false god whose priests claimed was responsible for sending rain on the earth. The priests of Baal insisted that if people wanted their crops and their pastures to flourish, all they needed to do was to make sacrifices and offerings to Baal. And many of the people believed them, giving the credit to Baal for the blessings that the One True God was actually pouring out on them.

But because Elijah was a real prophet of God, he knew God had a plan to bring His people back to Himself. That's why God had told him that a three-year drought was coming: God would allow His people to cry out to Baal and offer sacrifices to Baal, but make sure they got no rain in return. No, as God told Elijah at the beginning of chapter 17, the rain and the dew would only fall on the land again when the Lord God of Israel said that it would.

And after three years of proving His power in such an undeniable way, the Lord set up an even more dramatic confrontation with the priests of Baal. In chapter 18, Elijah challenged them to a test: he would set up an altar to the Lord, and they would set up an altar to Baal. On each altar, wood and an ox would be placed. And whichever god sent fire from heaven to burn up the sacrifice offered to him, well, the reality of His power would be beyond question, right?

And so by the end of chapter 18, it was only the Lord Who sent fire from heaven, burning up not only the offering Elijah had made, but also the water with which he had doused them, along with the

very stones of the altar he had constructed. Moreover, Elijah had told King Ahab that the rain would come once again on the land and, sure enough, a heavy shower poured down on the king even before he could get back to his house.

Yes, it looked like every barrier to a great revival had been removed. It looked like the people would finally abandon Baal and turn back to the God of their fathers. But at the beginning of chapter 19, we learn that King Ahab's wife Jezebel was unmoved even by such miraculous events. Far from abandoning Baal as an obviously impotent false god, she put a price on Elijah's head, forcing him to flee not only into the neighboring kingdom of Judah, but all the way through it, into the southern desert.

And so we see that, instead of the triumphal success that he expected, instead of the vindication Elijah had longed for all through those three years of drought, his public ministry had come to an abrupt end. It's no wonder that Elijah was so disappointed. It's no wonder that verse 4 says he even wanted God to take his life.

So, what do we do when our own dreams come crashing down? How do we face the disappointments that come our way in this sinful world? Indeed, how can we Christians keep on praying for the fire of God's Holy Spirit to fall on us when it has been some 160 years since the last nationwide revival blessed our land?

Well, in spite of his despair, Elijah gives us a clue. For notice in verse 4 that he cried out to God. More than that, as he moved south, he wasn't just running away from the murderous Jezebel. He was also heading to Horeb, to the same mountain where God had met with Moses, face-to-face. In other words, no matter how much Elijah may have believed that God had let him down, he kept turning toward the Lord.

And isn't that the same thing that David did? After all, he also had great expectations. Even when he was just a youth, God's prophet Samuel had promised that he would be king over Israel. And yet, in our responsive reading from Psalm 27, he admitted that he was often surrounded by evildoers, adversaries who slandered him. Like Elijah, he spent years on the run from a king who was trying to kill him, a king who also happened to be his own father-in-law. Oh yes, David had even greater reason to be disappointed than Elijah did.

But just like Elijah, instead of running away from God, he ran toward God. He sought God's face. He begged God not to turn him away, not to cast him off or forsake him. Instead, his greatest desire, the only thing he really wanted was just to be with God, to dwell in His temple.

And that's the first thing we must remember, even when our fondest dreams have been crushed, even when we think in one way or another that God has let us down. No matter how dark our way may seem, it is only the Lord who is our light, showing us the next step we need to take. No matter how fearsome our foes may be, it is only the Lord Who can give us shelter. No matter what other gods clamor for our love and obedience, it is only the Lord Who can set us up high on a rock where our enemies can't reach us. In short, no matter how great our disappointment may be, we must always run toward God.

And we must also rely on His Word alone to guide us, even when we are most tempted to fall into despair. That must have been a big reason why Elijah headed for Horeb: after all, that was the place where God had first given His Ten Commandments to His people. Because Elijah told God everything that had gone wrong with his ministry, he obviously wanted God to explain it to him.

But did you notice how God answered Elijah? He sent a wind as strong as Hurricane Katrina that broke the rocks in pieces. He sent a mighty earthquake that must have sent huge boulders tumbling down the mountainside. And then He sent a fire, like the one that filled the burning bush when He first spoke to Moses, like the one that burned on the top of that very same mountain when He revealed His Ten Commandments to His people, like the fire that consumed Elijah's offering on Mount Carmel.

In short, God overwhelmed Elijah with the kind of sensory experiences that usually accompanied His presence in Old Testament times, the kind of supernatural display of power that Elijah had hoped would recapture the allegiance of the people of Israel. But the Lord wasn't in any of those things.

And you know, it's still easy for us to crave such experiences from God. As we think back to Pentecost Sunday just two weeks ago, it's easy for us to long for the sound of that mighty rushing wind again, and to feel the presence of God's Spirit descending on us in fire. As we read the stories of revivals from long ago, it's easy to crave similar miraculous displays of God's presence, to feel the healing power of His Spirit within us. It's easy to imagine that if we could just experience something supernatural, faith would be easy for us and attractive to others.

But did you notice that when God finally spoke to Elijah, there weren't any special effects – just a still, small voice. In other words, it wasn't some sort of overwhelming experience that made the real difference for Elijah – it was simply God's Word that mattered.

In the same way, David simply asked God to hear him when he cried out in prayer. He begged, "Teach me Thy way, O Lord, and lead me in a level path because of my foes." Sure, David wanted relief from the problems that pressed around him on every side. But instead of telling God what to do, David simply wanted to inquire in God's Temple, to hear what God had to say.

And no matter what may be the source of our discouragement, no matter how good a reason we may have for despair, we must do the same thing. Instead of relying on our feelings or our reason, instead of trusting in our traditions or our experience, we must stand only on the promises that we find in the Scripture. We must trust that God really is our salvation, the stronghold of our life, the One Who will show us His goodness in the land of the living, no matter how great any of our disappointments may be.

But, just as David urged us to do as he wrote the ending of Psalm 27, we may very well have to wait for God to keep His promises. Just as David was on the run from King Saul for years, we may have to wait a long time for God to answer our prayers too. In fact, that was the essence of God's answer to Elijah. Yes, God would replace Ahab and Jezebel on the throne of Israel. Moreover, God promised to replace Ben-hadad on the throne of Aram.

But here's the catch: Elijah wouldn't be around to see any of those things. Instead, Elisha, the prophet who would succeed him, would be the one who would tell Hazael that he would be the next king of Aram. And it would be Elisha who would direct one of his followers to anoint Jehu to be the next king of Israel. In fact, it's not too much to say that the rest of I Kings and the first ten chapters of II Kings simply unfold how God kept the promises He made to Elijah in verse 17. But for the rest of his earthly ministry, Elijah would simply have to go on waiting for God to do what he himself would never see, to provide the justice for which he longed so much.

And all too often, the same thing is true for us. Just as Elijah and David did, we must wait for the Lord to help us and save us in His way and in His time. For however urgent our prayers for deliverance

may be, God's bigger plan often requires events to unfold at a much slower pace or even in a much different way than we would prefer.

For think about it: God would eventually overthrow all the unjust rulers like Ahab and Jezebel who were making Elijah's life so miserable. But as chapter 20 goes on to explain, God first needed to use Ahab to defeat the equally wicked king of Aram, Ben-hadad. Only then would God replace the house of Ahab with the house of Jehu, who would complete God's judgment on Jezebel and the rest of Ahab's family.

And as we look back over our lives, can't we see the same need to wait for God? For what if, thirty-five years ago, God had allowed me to go to a graduate school that was more traditional? What if God had allowed me to earn that PhD I so desperately wanted? How long would it have taken for me to realize that the Lord actually wanted me in pastoral ministry? And after investing so many years in one career, how much harder would it have been for me to make the change?

So yes, we've all had many reasons to be disappointed throughout our lives. And maybe, like Elijah, we feel like there's nothing we can do to improve our circumstances or fix the problems in the world around us. But no matter how discouraged we may be, let us continue to run toward God, seeking His face in prayer. Instead of insisting on splashy displays of His power or overwhelming emotional experiences, let's rely only on His Word for guidance and direction. And let's wait for Him to give us comfort and peace, trusting Him to protect us and provide for us – but in His way and in His time.