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1 Kings 19:1-21

Fourth Message

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WHEN THINGS FALL APART

SERIES: A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

What do we do when things fall apart, when the bottom falls out? How do we understand our life? How do we view our relationship with God? Is our picture of God and his ways sufficient to encompass difficult times or have we been jaded with a picture of God that is all about blessing and prosperity? How do we respond when God seemingly allows the rug to be pulled out from under our feet? Elijah was forced to deal with these issues and sooner or later we are too.

Up to this point in our studies of Elijah we have seen a prophet who is directed by God, obedient to God, and empowered by God to deal with famine, death and the prophets of Baal. But now as we come to chapter 19 all of that changes.

Now Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me and even more, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time." (1 Kgs 19:1-2 NAS)

Elijah had called down the thunder on Mt. Carmel. All of Israel was gathered to witness the impotence of Baal. They declared with one voice that Yahweh is God and struck down the 450 prophets of Baal at the brook Kishon. Elijah prayed and rain came after a drought of over three years. The victorious Elijah outran Ahab's chariot to Jezreel.

But, when Ahab came to Jezreel, he told Jezebel, his sinister wife, "all" that had happened on Carmel. The word "all" is used three times in the Hebrew text, not just twice, to emphasize the fact that Ahab spilled his guts - all that Elijah did, all that he killed, all the prophets. Ahab is like a little kid tattling on his friend so he doesn't get into trouble. In other words, "I didn't do it, Elijah did." Ahab himself might have repented, but he wilts in the face of Jezebel's scorn.

Jezebel wears the pants in this family and she reacts by putting out a contract on Elijah's head. Jezebel is like Pharaoh who sought to kill Moses. However, she sends a messenger and not a death squad to Elijah. Perhaps she just wants him to leave. In every Elijah story up to this point, the story begins with "the word of the Lord came to Elijah." That pattern is now broken. It isn't the Lord's message that comes, but Jezebel's.

And he was afraid and arose and ran for his life and came 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 juniper tree; and he requested for himself that he might die, and said, "It is enough; now, O LORD, take my life, for I am not better than my fathers." (1 Kgs 19:3-4)

Elijah immediately flees from Israel. He goes a distance of 70 miles to Beersheba, a city at the southern tip of Judah. He dismisses his servant and goes another full day's journey into the wilderness. This is a completely different Elijah than we saw on Mount Carmel. We see the absence of God's direction and we see the absence of

prayer that was prominent in the healing of the widow's son and calling down the fire on Carmel. What happened?

The text tells us that Elijah "was afraid," but there is a variant reading. The word may be "see." When we read the text we immediately think that Elijah was afraid for his life and so he went as far away as he could to get away from Jezebel. That might be part of it, but I think something else was going on as well. Elijah could "see" what was happening, i.e. he got the picture. God had been with him in a powerful way on Carmel and given a great victory. Things were really going to change. Ahab was going to repent. He was going to send Jezebel packing. Baal worship would be eradicated and the house of Baal would be torn down. All of Israel would worship Yahweh the true God of Israel. Elijah thought that he was a grand success as a prophet of the Lord. Maybe he could retire.

But then Ahab told Jezebel and she would not be swayed or moved. When Elijah got the message all his dreams went up in smoke. He saw the reality of the situation. This was unexpected. He thought he was in the clear and had succeeded where his ancestors had not. But now he saw failure and he was crushed. He wanted to quit and turn in his prophet badge. He ran away, fired his servant and, like Jonah and Moses, prayed for God to let him die. He was no better than God's men who had gone before him in dealing with the people of God and their problem with idolatry. Elijah's hopes were dashed into pieces. And so are ours.

My message title this morning is "when things fall apart" not "if things fall apart," for certainly that is our experience sooner or later. Being a Christian, believing in God, and going to church do not safeguard us against life's struggles. Most of the people we read about in the Scriptures faced heartache, pain, and persecution.

Life is difficult and is filled with surprises. Life turns out different than we expect. Our hopes and dreams don't seem to materialize. We experience failure in our ministry attempts, our careers take an unexpected twist, our health begins to suffer, and we watch our loved ones struggle and our hearts ache. "Our stocks fall, our retirement plans fail, our dreams go belly-up, our best laid schemes 'gang aft a-gley.'"¹ And often our greatest times of defeat come on the heels of our greatest victories, when we think we are done and can coast. Spiritual lows fall on the heels of spiritual highs. As C. S. Lewis said, we can handle a pound of expected pain, but an ounce of expected pleasure that is taken away sends us packing.

Our initial response is often like that of Elijah. We want to give up and quit. We don't think we have the strength to go on. We mouth the words that Elijah uttered: "I want to die." How often have you muttered those words to yourself or to God? Like Job we wonder why we were ever born only to experience heartache and pain. Like Jeremiah, we ask "why has my pain been perpetual and my wound incurable, refusing to be healed (Jer 15.18)?"

He lay down and slept under a juniper tree; and behold, there was an angel touching him, and he said to him, "Arise, eat." Then he looked and behold, there was at his head a bread cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. So he ate and drank and lay down again. The angel of the LORD came again a second time and touched him and said, "Arise, eat, because the journey is too great for you." So he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mountain of God. (1 Kgs 19:5-8)

As Elijah is alone in the wilderness, wishing death, an angel comes and touches him. The angel directs him to arise and eat. This happens twice, a common feature in the Elijah narrative (18:4, 13, 26, 29). The first time the angel touches Elijah, he looks intently and behold there is a bread cake and a jar of water. The idea is that he can't believe his eyes. The mention of "bread cake" and "jar" is a link to the story of the widow at Zarephath (17:13-16). Elijah would be reminded of God's provision for himself and a widow. This would be a positive and comforting image. Elijah ate and drank and slept.

The second time the angel touches Elijah he tells him he needs to be nourished because he has long journey ahead of him. Elijah then goes on a journey of forty days and forty nights, to Horeb, or Mt. Sinai, the mountain of God, a distance of 200 miles beyond Beer-sheba. Immediately, we are alerted to remember the exodus story. Israel wandered in the wilderness for forty years. We also recall that Jesus was in the wilderness forty days and nights. Elijah is in the wilderness.

We also remember that Moses twice spent forty days and forty nights on Mount Sinai. And while Moses was on Horeb the second time he asked God to show him his glory. God put Moses in the cleft of the rock and showed him his back as he passed by. We get the sense that Elijah is going to meet with God.

This brings up an interesting question. Was Elijah running away from God and his prophetic calling or running to God to get some answers? Was Elijah always headed to Horeb hoping to talk to God face to face and ask him why things had turned sour? Or was it the angel who directed him to go to Horeb so that God could have a word with him? The text is ambiguous. Maybe both are true at the same time, as is so often the case with us. We want to turn our back on God, but the same time we want some answers. We don't want God but at the same time we do want him. When things fall apart we are as confused as the text is about Elijah. But a couple of things are clear.

First, God does not leave Elijah alone and he doesn't leave us alone. He comes to us in our weakness and weariness, sometimes in the form of angels - people that minister to us in our despair. He touches us and provides for us. He cares for us and gives us strength. And second, when all seems lost, when the darkness sets in, when we are worn out and exhausted, when we have expended all of our energies, what we might need most is to simply have a good meal and go to sleep. When we find ourselves burned out, wiped out, stressed out, overwhelmed the best thing might be letting go and going to bed. We cease from our compulsion to figure everything out and nail everything down. We recall the words of Psalm 127: "he grants sleep to those he loves" (Psalms 127:2 TNIV).

Then he came there to a cave and lodged there; and behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and He said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He said, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken

Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away." (1 Kgs 19:9-10)

Elijah comes to Horeb and lodges in a cave or dark place, perhaps the very place where Moses stood. God asks him a question: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Sounds a little like God's question to Adam in the garden after the fall when Adam is hiding: "Where are you?" God is asking Elijah why he has run away, why is he taking himself out of the game. You get the sense that Elijah isn't where he is supposed to be. God's question is calling Elijah to honesty. He never beats around the bush.

Elijah responds by complaining about his lot in life. He is frustrated because nothing is changing. He is the only one left. All the other prophets have died and now they are after him. Elijah is filled with self-pity and sees himself as a victim. Of course there is no mention of what happened on Carmel - an altar rebuilt, Israel confessing Yahweh, prophets of Baal killed. He may be standing where Moses stood, but his perspective is much different. Moses interceded for the people before God when they fell into idolatry and pleaded for mercy. Elijah is wondering why God's judgment has not come on Ahab and Jezebel.

I don't know about you, but I hear God's question all the time, whenever I am in an unhealthy state of mind, when I am complaining and angry, when my plans get thwarted. He asks me time and again, "what are you doing here?"

So He said, "Go forth and stand on the mountain before the LORD." And behold, the LORD was passing by! And a great and strong wind was rending the mountains and breaking in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of a gentle blowing. (1 Kgs 19:11-12)

Wind, earthquakes, and fire are all associated with the Lord coming in power and might throughout the Scriptures. They are associated with Moses receiving the Law on Sinai. But this time God is not in any of these physical, observable forms. Rather he comes to Elijah in a still, small voice. This is the smallest audible sound, a thin silent voice, the sound of gentle blowing. This is how God speaks. We want God to shout to us but he asks us to quiet down, sit still, so we can listen and hear what he has to say.

My wife and I have an ongoing argument about the volume on the television. I want it loud so I can hear everything and not ask my wife, "what did he say?" But she likes it barely audible. When things fall apart we want God to speak loudly and clearly. But unfortunately he speaks in a whisper. Maybe this is why my wife can hear God better than me.

When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave. And behold, a voice came to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Then he said, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away." (1 Kgs 19:13-14)

Elijah wraps his face in a mantle. He remembers the Moses story and the fact that he cannot look at the face of God and live. God asks the same question and Elijah repeats the same answer.

THE LORD said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus, and when you have arrived, you shall anoint Hazael king over Aram; and Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint king over Israel; and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint as prophet in your place. “It shall come about, the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall put to death.” Yet I will leave 7,000 in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal and every mouth that has not kissed him.” (1 Kgs 19:15-18)

God doesn't pander to Elijah's complaint and self-pity. There isn't a huge rebuke. It is more like, “You will get over it; you will grow up. Now here is your next assignment.” Elijah is to anoint Hazael, Jehu and Elisha. God also tells Elijah that he is not the only one left. Rather there are 7000 that have not bowed the knee to Baal. The number 7000 combines the number 7, the number of perfection, with 1000 that indicates a very large number. Bruce Waltke points out the key to Elijah's encounter with God, which is seen in the two panels beginning with identical questions and answers.

- A Setting: at the cave, and the word of Yahweh came (9a)
- B Yahweh's question: “What are you doing here, Elijah” (9b)
- C Answer: “I have been very zealouskill me too.” (10)
- D Then Yahweh said (11a)
- E Wind not in the wind (11b)
- F Earthquakenot in the earthquake (11c)
- G Firenot in the fire (12a)
- H Sound of sheer silence (12b-13a)

- A' Setting: at the cave a voice came (13b)
- B' Yahweh's question: “What are you doing here, Elijah” (13c)
- C' Answer: “I have been very zealous ... kill me too.” (14)
- D' Then Yahweh said (15a)
- E' Anoint Hazael (15b)
- F' Anoint Jehu (16a)
- G' Anoint Elisha (16b)
- E' Hazael kills (17a)
- F' Jehu kills (17b)
- G' Elisha kills (17c)
- H' 7000 have not bowed to Baal (18)²

The wind, the earthquake, and the fire will come through Hazael, Jehu, and Elisha. This is the new order that will defeat Baal worship and bring judgment on the house of Omri. Elijah does not have to fear the threat of evil. God is in control. He is sovereign. He will take care of things.

The still, small voice is the remnant that is faithful to God. Elijah is mistaken. He is not the only one. He isn't the plan, only part of the plan. God's presence may be hardly audible in the world, but it is there nonetheless. When we read the paper we think the world is out of control. But we are wrong. There is the still, small voice in this world of those who are living their lives faithfully before God. God is calling out a people for his namesake. Even when things seem like they are falling apart, everything is happening according to God's purposes and plans. God is never trumped by Jezebel. He has not failed.

So he departed from there and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, while he was plowing with twelve pairs of oxen before him, and he with the twelfth. And Elijah passed over to him and threw his mantle on him ... Then he arose and followed Elijah and ministered to him. (1 Kgs 19:19, 21b)

Elijah departs and calls Elisha by throwing his mantle over him. Elisha willingly and quickly follows in the same way that the disciples followed Jesus. Elijah doesn't actually anoint Hazael and Jehu. This happens later through the ministry of Elisha who receives a double portion of Elijah's spirit. The judgment on the house of Omri will come, but it will have to wait until 2 Kings 8-10. In many ways Elijah's greatest ministry is the training of Elisha, not the victory on Carmel. He is the forerunner of Elisha in the way that John is the forerunner to Jesus. By God's grace Elijah got back in the game.

This is truly a marvelous text. What are we to take away?

When things fall apart, when the darkness descends, God is there to love us and speak to us. Not too long ago during a dark time I received a word from God: “The darkness is only a shadow, the shadow of God.” We may go through many dark nights of the soul, but God is in the darkness and it is there where we have our most intimate times with him. God knows what is going on and he knows our concerns and complaints, our struggles and heartaches. We don't really need answers, we need to know that God is there and he loves us. In the darkness we let go of our wrangling and complaining. We empty our minds and listen for his whisper. In order to hear his voice we have to retreat to that quiet place again and again. This morning we sang the song “Out of the Depths”: “When the harvest time is over and I still see no fruit/ I will wait, I will wait for you.”

When things fall apart we must learn to fight against despair and discouragement. God doesn't seem to let us play the victim or wallow in self-pity. This never accomplishes anything. We must be willing to receive correction from the Lord and grant that our perspective may not be true. Elijah was asked to make a choice, to exercise his will. And that is what we must do.

“Next to the genuine fatigue of pain, possibly the most energy-depriving thing I know is self-pity. I know from firsthand experience that it is one of the greatest wastes of my time and emotions, yet I confess my vulnerability to it. My greatest need at these times is for people who will listen to me compassionately, but then firmly and gently encourage me out of such dreadful behavior. It is important that people don't join me in my self-pity party, but love me into remembering what I can do and must do ... Most of us have enough excuses to last a lifetime. The sooner we let go of them and get on with living, the better off we are.”³

George MacDonald wrote: “God will carry us in his arms till we are able to walk and he will carry us in his arms when we are weary and cannot walk; but he will not carry us if we will not walk.”⁴

When things fall apart we must remember that God is not through with us yet. God's purposes are beyond our understanding. Winston Churchill said: “success is never final, failure is never fatal, it is courage that counts.” The times when we think we have failed or been disqualified or feel like we have wasted our lives might be the times when God wants to accomplish significant things through us. These might be the times of greatest opportunity, when God gives us another assignment.

Dave Roper wrote: “Elijah felt himself a failure, used up, laid waste, good for nothing. Little did he know that he was about to begin his most enduring and life-giving work: shaping a young person whom God would use to bring salvation to a nation.”⁵

As we grow older we might work less or retire. Our physical energies may begin to dissipate. But God wants to use us until the very end of our days. There is no shortcut to gaining wisdom and character and knowledge that come with years of living and walking with God. God would have us pass this on to the next generation, to invest our time, energy, and wisdom in a young believer or a young couple. We are deceived if we think we are no longer useful or have nothing to offer. Our greatest contribution might come in the waning years of our life when we become teachers and healers and mentors.

And finally when things fall apart we must learn to be thankful for God’s goodness and grace. We rest in the truth that God is sovereign and working things according to his ways and plans. Gratitude does not come from our circumstances. It comes from delighting in the Lord and who he is. As we sang this morning “his love never fails.” We look at our lives through the lens of the cross, where God turned the greatest defeat into the greatest victory. And so we say with the apostle Paul: “we also exult in our tribulations,

knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.” (Rom. 5:3-5)

Let us give thanks this morning by singing “Everyday:”
Thank you for the trials
For the fire, for the pain
Thank you for the strength
Knowing you have ordained
Everyday

1. David Roper, *Elijah: A Man like Us*, (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1997), 191-192.

2. Bruce Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 718.

3. Tim Hansel, *You Gotta Keep Dancin’*, (Elgin, Illinois: David C. Cook Publishing, 1985), 118.

4. David Roper, *Elijah: A Man like Us*, 198.

5. David Roper, Emusing, <http://davidroper.blogspot.com> July 3, 2003.