

What doest thou here Elijah?

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 January 2000

Preacher: Principal John L. Mackay

[0 : 00] In the portion of God's words that we read in 1 Kings 19, you find in verse 9 the words, what are you doing here, Elijah? And you find them again in verse 13, what are you doing here, Elijah?

Elijah. In this chapter, we have presented to us the other Elijah. We no longer have the Elijah of the top of Mount Carmel, the champion of orthodoxy, fearlessly battling against the forces of paganism. We no longer have the man who stood resolute, trusting in his God and prepared to face the adversary, no matter what the occasion or the challenge.

Here we've got the man, proving himself to be just what the Apostle James calls him, a man with a nature like ours.

He's frail, he's feeble, he's fallible, and in his own estimation, he's defeated. He's not presented to us here as someone who is a model for our behaviour.

Elijah under the broom tree is not an example that we should seek to emulate. It's a course of spiritual peril if we try to excuse our own conduct in the light of the great sins of the saints of the past.

[1 : 42] It's a sin if we say, if an Elijah can be cast down like that, why should I not be? His experience isn't presented as a model to pattern ourselves on, or a model to justify and excuse ourselves by.

But even so, we can still learn from his experience. He felt down. He felt flattened by the circumstances of life.

He thought that the Lord had deserted him. But the reality was far otherwise. He had not been deserted by his God.

And he would know the hand of his God, restoring and upbuilding and equipping him. But here we see him as the prophet in his weakness.

So that we may see more clearly the wonder of the tending care of the Lord. Who stoops down to the needs of his people.

[2 : 50] Who draws close and provides for their physical needs. But above all, who draws close and provides for their spiritual needs. Here, at the very time of weakness, Elijah is privileged with a disclosure of the divine character.

Which resembles that given to Moses on the mountaintop at Sinai. Same place. Very similar. A revelation of the nature of God.

But there's one big difference between what happened with Moses on Sinai and what happened with Elijah here. And that is that here, the Lord asks questions.

Here, the divine physician asks questions not to gain knowledge about the inner state of his prophet, of his servant. But he asks questions to alert Elijah himself to the nature of the spiritual experience he was going through.

Here we have this question repeated. The words are virtually identical. And to that repeated question, there's given, in effect, three different answers in this passage of scripture.

[4 : 08] And what I want to do this morning is to look not so much at the question, perhaps, as at the answers. Because they provide us with a means of probing ourselves and our own spiritual condition as we seek fellowship with God.

Here, Elijah is privileged with this revelation of God in his glory and in his power and in his effectiveness. And it is through questioning, through the Lord's questioning, that the prophet is able to benefit from this experience.

Understanding somewhat of himself, as he is also privileged to understand somewhat more of the Lord whom he serves. So we have the Lord's question, the repeated question.

What are you doing here, Elijah? Now this is an accurate record of what the Lord said, but it's not a sound recording.

And that means that we're left to work out the tone in which these words were uttered. You can use the same words and convey quite a different meaning depending on the tone in which you utter them.

[5 : 27] And I think we've got here words that were uttered in a gentle but insistent fashion. Not words uttered loudly.

Not words uttered as an expression of divine anger. But words uttered as an expression of divine anger. But words uttered sympathetically with an understanding of what the prophet had gone through and where he was.

But words of one who's not prepared to leave the prophet where he finds him. So these words uttered with care.

Uttered with an intense emphasis on sympathy and stirring up the prophet.

Are repeated. And they are repeated so that Elijah doesn't stop short in his self-awareness. Yes, there is a measure of rebuke.

[6 : 30] You can see that if you emphasize the word here. What are you doing here, Elijah? Hadn't you been given a mission miles away?

Weren't you told by me to go prophesy to my people Israel? Didn't you have a work to do for me in the northern kingdom? What are you doing here, Elijah?

In what spiritual state do I find you here at Horeb? But it's more than the fact that Elijah is not where he should be.

It's that Elijah is there and he's not functioning properly within. He hasn't got a complete assessment of his own situation.

He hasn't come to grips with the climax, the crisis that has occurred in his life. And so the Lord uses this question not only to say to Elijah, look you're in the wrong place.

[7 : 32] He's also using it to say to Elijah, come to realize. What it is that you are. Reassess your actions. Consider more closely what your life and your ministry is all about.

And that leads into the final challenge the Lord gives. Go get on with what I want you to do. So here we have this question.

This question that comes, can I put it this way, from the Lord, the divine physician? Or perhaps even more particularly the Lord, the divine psychiatrist? He's dealing with the soul condition of his servant.

And he's dealing with it in such a way that he's saying to him, things are not right with you. You aren't where you should be. And why is it that you aren't where you should be?

And to this diagnostic question, there are three responses given. And the first of them is the response of Elijah himself.

[8 : 40] And it itself is in three parts. And the first of these seems quite factual. I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts.

Elijah says, I've been acting properly. I have displayed great zeal. I was there on Mount Carmel, alone, facing so many prophets of Baal.

Facing so many who were hostile to me and to the Lord's cause. And it was true. One could not doubt Elijah's commitment to the Lord.

And the Lord himself is not doubting it. There is never any word saying to Elijah, you haven't got faith. There is never anything saying to Elijah, you are not one of mine.

That's not the problem. But even as Elijah states this truth, there almost seems to be a hint of self-justification over against God.

[9 : 50] I've been there, but the Lord hasn't responded in the way I expected. I have been zealous as regards the overthrowing of Ahab, but the Lord, where is his zeal?

We'll see that develop. And Elijah then goes on in the second part of his response to give another accurate summary of recent events in the northern kingdom. The people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword.

In doing these things, the people were breaking off contact with the Lord. The breaking down of the altars means that the priests could no longer function as they ought to, and the priest was the one who approached God on behalf of the people.

The prophets had been killed, and the primary emphasis of the prophetic ministry was that the prophet came with the word of the Lord, with the Lord's message to the people.

And they've killed the prophets because they don't want to hear the Lord's message. They didn't want anyone approaching them in the name of the Lord and exposing their behavior, exhorting them to repentance and amend their ways and their conduct.

[11 : 10] Elijah was saying, these people have blocked off the channels of communication between heaven and earth. They've severed the ties in both directions, neither priest to mediate on their behalf, nor prophet to come with the Lord's announcement to them.

And notice, when he speaks, three times Elijah says, your, your covenant, your altars, your prophets.

He's saying this is a situation that should concern the Lord himself. Their behavior was a blatant affront to the covenant king of Israel.

And the prophet who had so identified himself with the Lord's cause felt very keenly the affront they were giving to the majesty.

The sovereignty of the God whom he served. And so he's also saying, I was right to be exercised.

And notice that word for, at the beginning.

[12 : 20] I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts, for the people of Israel. The reason why I have been so jealous is because they have been acting in this way against the interests, against the claims of God.

And again, I think, while what he says is true, there's an underlying question. Has the Lord himself shown similar zeal?

Elijah has been there contending on behalf of the majesty and the authority of God. Where has God been? Come back again to that.

And the third part of Elijah's response, well, I think it's really obviously overstated. I, even I only, am left. And they seek my life to take it away.

Yes, there was a threat against his life. But he did know about others. Look back at the previous chapter, chapter 18, and you find the prophet there at the beginning of the chapter talking with Obadiah and Obadiah telling him, I've hidden a hundred prophets of the Lord in caves.

[13 : 33] Elijah knew there were others. Elijah knew there were others who had been protected from the persecuting zeal of Jezebel. This indicates that we've got here a man who's lost his spiritual perspective.

He is very keenly zealous for the cause of God, but he feels I'm the only one left. And he feels the matter's hopeless because I'm the only one left and there's a death threat against me.

The nation is beyond recovery and my ministry is a failure. I'm no greater or no more effective than previous generations.

I'm just on a par with them. Yes, there were people in Israel, Obadiah was one of them, who thought Elijah was in such close fellowship with God that God's spirit might come at any moment and transport him miles away.

Elijah was viewed by those who had spiritual understanding in Israel as one who was great, but he was great only in the power of his God.

[14 : 49] He was not in himself capable of anything that went beyond mere human achievement. Yes, his ministry had been marked by great miracles, but those miracles didn't come from power that inherited in him.

He was only an instrument in the hands of his God. God. And Elijah had begun to see things in a distorted perspective because he felt that his ministry was the only key to the future, and because it didn't work out the way he'd expected, the whole thing was going to collapse.

And if you think about it, you can see just how wrong he was. Because this is just days after Carmel, where the Lord had intervened mightily, where the Lord had proved his power, and where the previously forgetful and rebellious people had been forced to confess the Lord, the Lord, he is God.

Oh, there might not yet have been a complete turnaround in the nation's religion, but there certainly was a tremendous impact divinely given on Mount Carmel.

The downward plunge into apostasy of the nation had been stopped, even though it might not as yet have been turned back. Elijah was running away from a situation in which there was tremendous potential for things still to be done, and the prophet runs away from it because of the

death threats uttered by Queen Jezebel.

[16 : 37] And in doing so, he himself has devalued the Lord and what the Lord had done. He was ignoring the measure of victory that had already been granted, and he was in effect blocking off what might very well have sprung from it.

what had gone wrong? He had taken his eye off from God.

He had focused on self. His perception of what was going on in the land was such that he, Elijah, was indispensable when it came to the bringing of God's blessing to the people.

I, even I only. There's his focus, and there's his downfall. It all hinges on me. Faith always thrives when God occupies the whole field of vision.

And when we read, then he was afraid, or as others would translate it, when he saw that, he arose and ran for his life. Why?

[17 : 56] Because his vision was focused on the fury of the wicked queen. His mind was occupied by her power and overwhelmed by her indignation.

And therefore his heart was filled with terror. And the only deliverance from such carnal, earthly fear is a living faith in God and a focus in him.

God is my salvation, I will trust in him and not be afraid. You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you because he trusts in you.

And Elijah had slipped from his moorings. His mind was no longer stayed upon the Lord and fear took possession of him.

Now there are those who would explain this simply in terms of physical causes. That Elijah had been on a high. The adrenaline had been flowing on Mount Carmel.

[19 : 03] That he was there buoyed up physically with the enormity of the challenge he was dealing with. And once the immediate challenge was over, the adrenaline fell away and he sunk into the depths.

I'm not saying there wasn't a physical aspect to it, but the matter was primarily spiritual. Elijah here, there is many resemblances to Peter trying to walk on water.

It was fine so long as he kept his gaze on Christ, but if he looked down he faltered. Elijah could be the bold prophet of Carmel when he kept his gaze on the Lord, but when his spiritual focus came down to earth and to himself, he stumbled.

and he deserts his appointed sphere of labor. He goes south into the land of Judah. He goes as far south into Judah as he possibly can to Beersheba, and he still can't be at rest.

So he goes into the wilderness and wishes he was dead. I am a failure. I am no better than my father's. In his depressive mood, he considers his life useless.

[20 : 20] and he takes it upon himself to judge what the end should be. But oh, how gently the Lord deals with him.

He deals with him in his physical need. He sends the angel to touch him and provide the bread, the water. We are not told that Elijah was ever commanded to go to Horeb.

Horeb is the name for the set of mountains. Sinai is a particular peak in Horeb. Elijah is going back to the place where God met with Moses.

We are not told that he was commanded to do that, but the Lord enables him to go there. It takes 40 days. Even for the slowest of travelers, a week would have sufficed to get from the wilderness south of Beersheba to Mount Sinai.

There is significance therefore in the 40 days that the Lord makes him take. It's the Lord's doing, not Elijah's. And that's to remind him of the 40 years that the people wandered in the wilderness.

[21 : 30] He's almost as it were taking up Elijah at his challenge, Elijah at his own self-perception. I'm no better than my father's. And God said, yes, in a way you're not. Here's 40 days to wander in the wilderness to remind you that you are just as a rebellious failure as they were in the wilderness years.

But he takes him back to Sinai. Elijah seems to have wanted to go there to the place the Lord had begun his work with his people to go back there to report failure.

To say, Lord, the work with these people's over and it hasn't worked out. but God comes and he takes him back there and he's got other ideas.

He has another message to present. Not only has the Lord not given up on Elijah, he hasn't yet totally given up on his people either. And so we come to the Lord's first response to this situation.

He tells Elijah, go out and stand on the mountain, mount before the Lord. It's possible Elijah had spent the night in the cave and that may well have been the cleft in the rock where Moses had hidden in Exodus 33 when the Lord's glory was revealed to him.

[22 : 56] Elijah wasn't allowed to stay in the cave. He was told to come out of it and to see what the Lord would do. And there is the strong wind, there is the earthquake, there is the fire.

And these are all associated with the power of the presence of the Lord. Earthquake, fire and storm announce the presence of God in a theophany, particularly associated with the appearance of God, the divine warrior, coming in holy war against evil in every form.

Fire goes before him and burns up his adversaries. The mountains quake at the presence of the Lord. These are manifestations of divine power.

And it doesn't seem inappropriate to work backwards from the Lord's answer to Elijah's condition. because the Lord is meeting the prophet where he is.

And what seems to have happened is that in his zeal, Elijah would have welcomed the divine warrior coming in judgment on his enemies. Elijah would have welcomed God's self vindication as on the great day of the Lord.

[24 : 21] Elijah had been expecting that the Lord would strike down Jezebel rather than that she would utter curses against him. But that hadn't happened.

His expectations had been disappointed. We've got here the depressed prophet and the Lord is saying, it says very clearly, the Lord passed by and the Lord has power and the Lord is there in these awesome phenomena that speak of that power and that speak of the reality of the divine judgment.

But Elijah recognizes the Lord is not in them on this occasion. The Lord is not in the wind. The Lord is not in the earthquake. The Lord is not in the fire.

Because the Lord was not at that point acting in final judgment. And the Lord instead chose to appear in the sound of a low whisper.

It's a very difficult phrase to translate. Some people contend that it's a roaring, crushing voice, very loud. But most people, and I think they're right, understand this as something not so much that's quiet as that's non-existent almost.

[25 : 42] It is a still, small voice, a brief sound of silence. It's almost as paradoxical as that, a sound of silence. silence. And that drew Elijah out the cave again.

It would seem as if he had come out before the fire and the storm and the earthquake and had retreated back in. But now he comes out with renewed wonder at this awesome stillness.

And the Lord was saying to him, yes, I can intervene in judgmental power. I can intervene visibly and dramatically. But there are times when I show my power by coming quietly.

In earthly terms, in an unspectacular fashion, but equally effectively. It's not that the Lord is disowning judgment.

He will manifest his destroying might when he chooses. But he's teaching the prophet the lesson of the rescuing, preserving, and quickening action of God in love when he comes in the quietness, in the stillness, and speaks to the heart of the prophet.

[27 : 10] The people had broken the covenant of grace. The Lord maintains that covenant. He remains faithful and gracious as he promised.

And he is the one who will act in his time, at his choosing, and in the way that is most conducive to display his majesty and his sovereign power.

And Elijah refuses at first to admit all that. God will stand in front of all those prophets of Baal, you don't defy the civil authorities of the land without having a measure of pertinacity.

We call it personacity when we approve of it, and you call it sheer stubbornness when you don't.

And here's the prophet showing the same character trait, but at the wrong time.

The Lord asks him again, what are you doing here, Elijah? And he gives the self-same response. I'm reminded very much of Jesus' threefold questioning of Peter after the resurrection, and Peter having to be drawn into realization of where he stood and what was going on.

[28 : 33] Similarly here, the Lord is drawing the prophet. Have you learned the lesson? Have you seen what's happening? And at first Elijah is saying, no, it's still the same.

But the Lord is as persistent as Elijah, and he doesn't leave the matter there. He gives another response. The work's going to go on, and the work's going to go on through Elijah, the man who was defeated.

He is recommissioned. He's directed to go back to his appointed field of witness, and he's given three tasks, to anoint a new king in Damascus, to anoint a new king in Israel, and to anoint his own successor to the prophetic office.

And the Lord says, these men are going to work out my judgment. Not through you, Elijah. These men are going to do it. I've my way, and my way is going to prevail.

You must stand corrected. But I give you a role in the outworking of my purposes. And the Lord encourages him in the remainder of his ministry.

[29 : 44] And above all, he encourages and rebukes him by saying, you're not on your own. I have 7,000 who have not compromised their faithfulness and who have not engaged in pagan, heathen worship.

Elijah had dismissed everyone else's faith. He thought himself on his own. He'd failed to appreciate the ways in which God was at work. And the Lord has brought him to realize the divine perspective on the matter.

And the Lord has not cast him off. He said, there's still a role for you, Elijah, a role in obedience. Go back where I want you to be.

Now I think all that is very relevant to us on the day before coming to the Lord's table. Just as what happened here is against the background of the Lord revealing himself to Elijah, of the Lord presencing himself with Elijah.

Elijah. And the question the Lord asks Elijah twice is one that can be addressed to us as we seek fellowship with the Lord.

[31 : 06] What are you doing here? And the main lesson is not to come with complaint against God because he hasn't acted according to our ideas.

And this is something that is very much the case nowadays amongst many of the people of God. Because like Elijah we're facing a nation that's turned its back on the Lord.

And if we have any measure of sympathy, empathy, realisation of what it is and who it is that they've turned their back on, we can't but be affected.

And we can't but wonder why does the Lord not signally bless the testimony that's maintained to his name, to his word, to the saving presence of his son?

We have very much the same sorts of questions Elijah had. Why is it that I have been zealous that your people have done all this and there's been no response in judgment?

[32 : 18] And Elijah was there, with a fair measure of complaint against the Lord. And it's possible for us to come with a barrier in the way of having fellowship with the Lord because we have our time scale, our idea of how he should work in our own life, in the life of our families, in the life of our community, in the life of our nation.

And it's a barrier because we're not prepared to accept that the Lord will work in his time, in his way. Now it's not a recipe for passivity, it's not a recipe for sheer resignation.

What the Lord does with Elijah here shows that very clearly. But there is first of all to be the answer to what are you doing here? And it must not be I am here with a spiritual chip on my shoulder because the Lord hasn't done according to what I have dictated.

And we've also got here a very real presentation of the way the Lord does come to his people in their dejection at times when their spiritual witness is not being openly honoured.

Elijah under the broom tree is a picture of the defeated church, the depressed church, the church that is saying we've done all the witnessing, we've done all the outreach, we've maintained the testimony, we've unfurled the banner for truth and there's nothing come of it.

[34 : 01] And the Lord still deals with his people in those times. He doesn't desert them. He deals with them both physically and spiritually. Faith always thrives when it recognises God in the whole field of its vision.

And that's a very essential truth at a time of coming to the Lord's table. Because the Lord's saying remember, he's saying get me back into the centre of the picture.

Yes, I know you're feeling down, I know you're feeling weak, I know you're feeling that you're no better than your fathers and that may very well have an element of truth in it. But you've got things out of perspective.

I'm the one you're to focus on. I'm the one who is your strength. Come back to basics and come back to realise who I am. And then there is the lesson of the still small voice.

you see, there are many in our day who say, oh, the church is weak, the cause is defeated, our land is drifting, what we need is spectacular, what we need is to make a loud noise, what we need is almost to imitate the prophets of Baal and Mount Carmel with the racket and the din and the dancing they produced.

[35 : 32] And the Lord says, no. I can be effective in the unspectacular but very powerful quiet stillness.

And that is something that runs against our unnatural human inclinations. Because we can contribute to the noise, we can contribute to the frenzy, we can do something.

But ultimately, true success is only from the Lord himself. There was Elijah, he had to learn that lesson. Yes, you've been used by the Lord, you've been used by the Lord signally on Mount Carmel, you are one who has been valiant for the faith.

But the answer to spiritual power is the divine contribution and that does not depend on your contribution although it may use it, Elijah.

And then there is something else here that is also of significance at a time of coming to the Lord's table. One of the corrosive influences in Elijah's life that was debilitating, weakening his faith was his sense of isolation.

[36 : 50] And it's part of the Lord's ongoing provision for his people that he bids us come to the Lord's table in remembrance of him, reminding us that we're not on our own.

Now it's true that our Lord did what he alone could do. He is the saviour, he is the one who bore the burden that none else could bear.

But he himself valued, valued highly the fellowship of the twelve and the fellowship of that inner group he so often took aside with him because in his human nature he knew the value of not being alone.

And he's made provision for his people at the Lord's table. Oh we have battles to fight. There are many things that we have to contend with. And not only does the Lord not desert us, he also wants his people in community and in fellowship to contend for him.

coming to the Lord's table is a reminder just as much as it was to Elijah. You're not the only one in the remnant. There are 7,000 that I've reserved for myself.

[38 : 11] And finally I'd leave you with this thought. The privilege of experiencing the Lord's presence was given to Elijah to spur him on to renewed endeavour.

Can I ask you, when you're thinking about this weekend, do you stop at the Lord's table? It's very easy for us to get into that thinking.

I must get ready and there is a spiritual duty of examining ourselves. I must be, take this opportunity to re-examine my life, to repent of sin, to confess sin and to come prepared to the table.

But how much thought do we give to rising ready from the table? The Lord comes and meets Elijah at Sinai.

He comes and deals with Elijah's needs. He builds him up physically and spiritually but he then says, go. You have a task from me.

[39 : 23] This time of vision of God, this time of awareness of God's purpose, this privilege you have, it's not the terminus of the journey.

It is a time apart to get ready for further action. salvation. And if we are to come rightly affected to the Lord's table, we're to come not merely with the anticipation, and it's true we should come with the anticipation of personal blessing from the Lord, but not as it were something to hug to ourselves, but something that readies us to go, return on our way, and get back to where the Lord wants us to be doing what the Lord wants us to do.

And I think that if we come with that further anticipation, the Lord will not disappoint us as we meet with him around his table. So here's Elijah.

I don't know where you are today, whether you're down, whether you're depressed, whether you're overwhelmed by the seeming weakness of the cause of Christ in our land, things getting blacker and bleaker all the time.

the answer is not to be found in I, I'm the only one that's left. We're the ones that are battling for the truth.

[40 : 50] We're the ones who've stood steadfast. Oh yes, those are good, I'm not decrying them. But if we're focusing on that, we've got it all wrong. It's the Lord who is the focus, and especially the Lord at his table of remembrance.

And as we come to that table of remembrance, with our faith focused on him, it's so that we can serve him the better. Not merely to enjoy a foretaste of heaven now, but to equip ourselves and be ready for the battle that awaits us on earth.

It is his battle. He would equip us. He has instituted this for us. Let us then come focusing on him and seeking his provision for our need.

Let us pray. Let us pray.