



Strength to Draw Near

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1st Kings 19:3-10

Where and how do we find the strength to draw near to God? When all seems lost, is there really a way forward?

Elijah was a depressed man. He was disappointed, frustrated, dejected, emotionally drained, and grieving over a sense of failure to having made a difference. On one level, his depression seems so disproportionate to the victory over 450 prophets of Ba'al just witnessed in the previous chapter. If anything, he should have been basking in the wonder of being used in such an amazing manner by God. In reality, the great victory to him was emptied of any value by the death threats issued by the queen.

He had hoped the face-off with the prophets of Ba'al would have served to usher in a new era in Israel's relationship with Yahweh. That was the validation he had truly been seeking. With those hopes crushed, his life seemed emptied of purpose. He saw no reason to go on. There was no longer any point in serving God, as it did not seem to make any difference at the end of the day.

Why struggle to take a stand against the power structures of Israel, knowing they would never bow to the will and authority of Yahweh? Why keep on in the battle to rid Israel of its idols, when even the king of Israel would not worship Yahweh, even after the demonstration of Yahweh's power at Carmel? There was just no point.

Elijah did not want to be killed by the idolatrous queen. That would simply be disastrous. At the same time, he was ready to give up, roll over, and play dead. He ran from her clutches and made his bed under a bush to shrivel up and die.

The battle was over. He had witnessed an astounding victory, but he had lost the war. The power structures of Israel would not submit to Yahweh's direction.

Elijah lay down to die, but somehow he found the strength to talk to God, anyway. He said, "God, this is useless. It's pointless. This taking a stand for you has gotten me nowhere. All I have to show for my faithfulness is a death threat against me! There is no sense in keeping on, as Israel has abandoned you and will not return. I'm done with being your spokesman here! Kill me and let's end this thing already!"

God didn't answer.

There was no voice of thunder railing against Elijah. There was no sound of assurance for Elijah. There was no justification for God's actions. God allowed him to lie down to sleep, then sent a messenger with food and one simple message, "Rise and eat." Life goes on.

Elijah rose, ate, drank water, and lay back down to sleep and await death.

God still gave no answer. This time, however, the messenger presented food and water with another word: "Rise and eat, for you have a long, hard journey ahead of you."

Elijah ate, God still silent. He started out on his journey, a month's travel to the mountain of God. It was a month of plodding, waiting, searching, rehearsing all the things he could have done, should have done, might have done, wished he had done. It was a month of crying out in anguish to make some kind of sense out of the events of three years leading up to the death threat now upon him. He had given up and surrendered, yet one by one, his footprints took him toward the mountain of God on the far side of the wilderness. Perhaps there he would get his answers and begin to make sense of it all.

Why bother?

It would have been easier to travel elsewhere. It would have been much simpler to just throw in the towel and walk away from God. After all, it would seem to all appearances that Yahweh was the one

who had failed. Elijah had done his part. He had stood up against the king, prophets, and soldiers and called on the fire of Yahweh. God had burned up the altar and offerings, but had done nothing about changing the hearts of the people. What more could a prophet do?

His feet kept on walking, step after step after step, mile after mile, after mile.

Elijah finally arrived at God's mountain. He located an empty cave and threw himself down to sleep.

Then God finally answered. "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

"What are you doing here, Elijah?" What kind of question is that? "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He had just walked a month to the mountain after God's messenger had told him he had a long journey ahead of him. "What are you doing here, Elijah?" How does one even begin to answer such a question from God in such a place?

Elijah was there because he just kept plodding.

Elijah was there because he didn't know where else to go.

Elijah was there because he had committed his life to serving God and didn't know where else to go.

Elijah was there because he was searching for answers to make sense of the turmoil in his life.

Elijah was there because... he didn't really know why.

"God, I have earnestly served you, but I have just lost all sense of validation for why I've served you. I don't know what else to do, where else to turn, where else to go. I've done all I know to do, and it just hasn't made a difference that I can see. I'm here, because I'm still alive, but I've made enemies along the way, and they want to kill me. I'm at a loss. I'm here because I just don't know what to do anymore. I don't know how to keep on. I'm not sure I really want to keep on, but here I am."

Amid the turmoil, the disillusionment, the questioning, the depression, the loss of meaning and purpose, Elijah turned to God, because that's who Elijah was. He had set his course to follow and serve God, and that's what had brought him to the mountain.

More interesting, perhaps, is how God responded to Elijah. God knew why Elijah was there. God just wanted Elijah to hear it with his own ears. Underneath the torrent of words that came pouring out after a month-long plodding journey, the real reason for his presence comes through. "I'm here because I just don't understand. I thought I knew what was happening, what you were doing, and what the results would be. When things did not turn out according to my expectations, I lost it. I came here to figure out what you are really doing."

It was important that Elijah get that question off his chest. It was important that he work through the anguish, turmoil, and uncertainty, even if only to the point of being able to present it all to God. God never really answered the surface questions in Elijah's words. God never gave him a simple response to back up his reasons, to defend his actions. There are no simple answers God could give that would offer us complete understanding of God's purposes. The only real answers God gave Elijah were twofold: 1. I'm not done. You haven't read the last chapter. 2. You still have a part to play. You can still make a difference in the life of Israel.

If we come to God seeking answers to our turmoil, that's probably the same kind of answer we will receive. The story is still being written, and we still have a part to play. If we come to God because we don't know where else to turn, we can be sure that God is waiting to put us back in the game. If we come to God because we have given up, God is waiting to grant assurance that God has not given up on us. There is no promise of the kind of answers we seek. There is the promise of hope that there is more to come and more to the story than what can be seen from a limited human perspective.

Keep plodding. God is waiting at the journey's end, providing strength, one step at a time.

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