

**Series:** I Am Not Alright

**Title:** Staying Strong in the Stressful Seasons of Life

**Text:** 1 Kings 19:1-18

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In 1 Kings 19:10-18, Scripture tells of the way in which the Lord brought Elijah through a stressful season of life. The man had experienced a meltdown of epic proportions. His disillusionment concerning the godless state of his nation, along with his fear of death at the hands of the nation's queen had led him to bad place. His experience teaches us that we need to know how to stay strong in the stressful seasons of life.

Stress is a fact of life. Some have made much of the difference between eustress and bad stress. Interestingly, the holiday seasons are often regarded as a stressful season. The Mayo Clinic recently released an article in which it recognized the reality of holiday stress. It attributed the phenomenon to "a dizzying array of demands — cooking meals, shopping, baking, cleaning and entertaining, to name just a few."<sup>1</sup> For some, mention of "holiday stress" seems like child's play compared to some of the tough things they are enduring — family tragedies, deep depression, anxiety, panic attacks, feelings of worthless and despair. How can we navigate through such difficult things? Does God have any advice for us in His Word?

If we don't know how to Scripturally stay strong in the stressful seasons of life, we might succumb to darkness and despair, we may forfeit the joy of living in the Lord's presence, and we might miss out on being used mightily by the Lord in our generation. The question we face is one of how — how can we stay strong in the stressful seasons of life? Fortunately, God's Word provides help. In 1 Kings 19:1-18, we see three commitments that can help us stay strong during the stressful seasons of life.

## REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

One of my best friends has been trained as a biblical counselor. He once shared with me concerning a common culprit of many emotional and personal problems. From his point of view, the issue of expectations is at the heart of a lot of struggles. We can often become bewildered when a family member, friend, our spouse does not live up to an ideal. Similarly, unmet expectations regarding life goals and dreams can bring about a tailspin.

When we analyze Elijah's breakdown in 1 Kings 19, we discover that he struggled in this regard. He had certain expectations for his ministry, his nation, and his future. Because of a letdown in those areas, the man spiraled out of control. He fled his own country and isolated himself on a mountain top that had significance in Israel's history.

In grace, the Lord appeared to Elijah at the pinnacle of the man's pain. As He approached His suffering servant, He did so with a question, demonstrating His patient grace. The Lord asked, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (1 Kings 19:9). The Lord's interrogative would have evoked memories of the Garden of Eden for many Jewish readers. When Adam and Eve rebelled against the Lord's commands and suffered ensuing guilt and remorse, the Lord appeared, asking, "Where are you?" (Genesis 3:9). Like the first man and woman, Elijah had veered from the Lord's will for His life. He needed confrontation and restoration from the Lord.

In response to the Lord's gracious query, the prophet responded, "I have been very zealous for the Lord God of Armies, but the Israelites have abandoned your covenant, torn down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are looking for me to take my life" (1 Kings 19:10). The prophet's response reveals the real problem behind his pain.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/stress/art-20047544>

The Lord hadn't lived up to the man's expectations. Remember what preceded the events of 1 Kings 19. In 1 Kings 18, the Lord powerfully revealed Himself in a showdown between the Lord's prophets and the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel.

It seems that Elijah had anticipated that the events on the mountain would usher in a national revival. When he didn't receive that anticipated result, he wilted in despair.<sup>2</sup> One has commented on the root of Elijah's despair, saying, "He had expected the contest on Carmel to settle the Baal issue once and for all. His dream of Israel in the fold of fidelity was smashed by the defiant declaration of the queen."<sup>3</sup> Elijah's breakdown was indeed caused by things like Jezebel's threat, his lack of food, his fatigue, and his circumstances, but it was ultimately rooted in something far deeper. Plain and simple, the prophet despaired because of unmet expectations concerning the spiritual state of his nation.

### An Error in Expectations

Many modern Christians are unaware of the way expectations rob them of joy. They live under a cloud because they've allowed the voices of society, friends, coworkers and even family members place burdens on them the Lord never intended. The fuel of social media, popular entertainment, and a commercialized culture only make frustration worse. Many are stuck in a never-ending spin cycle of shame, regret, and embarrassment. They are prisoners of a cleverly spun web in which Satan ensnares people by making them believe that they are not good enough, that they have failed, and that they haven't measured up to a certain standard.

The trap of misguided expectations is clearly portrayed in Scripture. From the Old Testament, consider the example of David. He wanted to build a temple for the Lord, but the Lord had no designs for such a project (2 Samuel 7:1-2). In response to David's proposal, the Lord graciously explained that there were other Divine plans for such a work (2 Samuel 7:3-17). The king had to learn to live by God's expectations for his life, not his own expectations.

From the New Testament, consider the example of Peter. The man is now famous for his impulsivity. He seemed to constantly concoct expectations for Jesus, himself, and others that were not based in the Lord's plan (Mark 9:32). When Jesus was gloriously transfigured in front of him and two other disciples, he couldn't contain himself. He had a vision of what Jesus could do, so he imposed a plan on our Lord, saying, "Rabbi, it's good for us to be here. Let's set up three shelters: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" (Mark 9:5). In response to Peter's proposal, a voice from heaven cut him off in near mid sentence, saying, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him!" (Mark 9:7). Instead of living by his expectations of Jesus and himself, Peter needed to learn to live by God's expectations.

### God Has A Plan

God had a plan for Elijah's ministry, but Elijah had another plan. This reality was at the heart of the man's breakdown. It is the reason the Lord would later send a still, small voice to speak to the man. Yahweh wanted Elijah to know that the ways of the Lord are different than the ways of the world. The prophet wanted God to act, to remove the godless from the Earth and inaugurate an eternal kingdom of righteousness. The Lord knew he needed to learn the truth of Exodus 34:6-7 — "The Lord—the Lord is a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love and truth." His expectations needed to be regulated by the same realities conveyed in 2 Peter 3:9 — "The Lord does not delay his promise, as some understand delay, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance."

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<sup>2</sup> New American Commentary, [CD-Rom].

<sup>3</sup> Books of History, [CD-Rom].

It's easy to point the finger at Elijah, but are we not so often like him? God has a plan for our lives, but we often do as well. In our headstrong pursuit of what we think is best, we often harm ourselves emotionally. When things don't pan out according to our expectations, we usually give into despair, disillusionment, and disappointment. Mental, emotional, and spiritual burdens multiply when we are driven by an agenda that is outside the parameters of God's will for our lives. It is wise to take heed to Isaiah 55:8 — "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not my ways." This is the Lord's declaration.

### **Misplaced Expectations and Maladies of the Mind**

From Elijah's example, we learn that misplaced expectations can do us great emotional harm. We also learn that those who live with expectations that don't come from God are open to several sorts of faulty mental schemas. Be on guard, if you don't allow the Lord and His Word to be the standard for your life, you may slide down a slippery slope of deception and despair. Consider four patterns of faulty thinking that often dominate those who struggle to live by realistic, godly expectations.

#### *The Lone Ranger Syndrome*

Elijah had isolated Himself through his retreat into the desert. As a result, he felt all alone in his battle for righteousness and truth. When the Lord revealed Himself, the prophet complained, saying, "I alone am left" (1 Kings 19:10). The man's perspective was faulty. He was either unaware of the fact that there was another faithful prophet name Obadiah, or he intentionally chose to overlook that fact (1 Kings 18:3). Whatever the case, Elijah didn't see things correctly. He mistakenly believed that he was all alone.

Some believers fall into the same trap. They fall victim to Satan's ploys, unaware that the archenemy loves to separate us from both God's truth and God's people. The Devil knows that he can drive us to despair if he can get us to buy into what I call "the Lone Ranger Syndrome." When we believe we are all alone in life, we are not far from an emotional and spiritual fallout. The Bible says, "One who isolates himself pursues selfish desires; he rebels against all sound wisdom" (Proverbs 18:1). To guard yourself against this mental malady, be intentional to pursue the encouragement and edification you need. You can find it in the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-12; Hebrews 10:24-25)!

#### *The Burger King Syndrome*

The fast-food chain Burger King was once famous for its slogan that said, "Your way, right away." The one-liner was intended to tout the restaurant's commitment to both personalized and speedy service. It was endemic of the demands of contemporary, Western society. Many within the modern world are raised with an expectation to get things their way, right away.

When we unwittingly transfer such a value system into our spiritual lives, we are destined for disillusionment. Such was the problem with Elijah. He wanted the Lord to finish the work of 1 Kings 18:38, immediately eradicating the godless from Israel. He was sick of swimming against the stream of a deceived and depraved culture. He wanted God to act, to remove sin and sinners and initiate a perpetual kingdom of righteousness. A Burger King complex — "my way, right away" — contributed to the man's breakdown.

In all generations, there are those who struggle with the same syndrome that plagued Elijah. They want God to act in their way. Though they agree with doctrines related to the sovereignty and providence of God, they forget that there are divine purposes beyond their own expectations. Ultimately, such thinking leads to emotional despair and disappointment. There is a need for a revival regarding the truth of Proverbs 19:21 — "Many plans are in a person's heart, but the Lord's decree will prevail."

### *The Single Point of Failure Syndrome*

When Elijah expressed his complaint to the Lord, he said, "I have been very zealous for the Lord God of Armies, but the Israelites have abandoned your covenant, torn down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword" (1 Kings 19:10). One has commented that Elijah exhibited a degree of inflexibility and ego-centered behavior in his complaint in verse 10.<sup>4</sup> The prophet regarded Himself as being the sole hope of the nation.

Elijah falsely believed he was the single point of failure for all that was good and right in Israel. In his eyes, the destiny of an entire nation rested upon his shoulders. Such was too heavy of a weight to bear. It is no wonder the man suffered such a breakdown. None can live underneath the burden of such unrealistic expectations. Furthermore, the Lord doesn't regard any as being the solve-all, the silver bullet to guarantee kingdom success in any given situation.

We must be careful to remember that we are not the single point of failure in any arena of life. The false belief that we are in charge of the destiny of our personal lives, our families, our churches, or our workplaces can be too much. When we live as if everything hinges on what we can do, we will surely wilt underneath the pressure. We must stay mindful of the fact that our lives are in the hands of the Lord, that He will always have a remnant of people to do His work, and that nothing can thwart His plans or purposes.

### *The Bigger and Better Syndrome*

American society is into upward progression. If things aren't growing and advancing, it is assumed that all is a failure. Bigger is automatically assumed to be better. Such can indeed be true at times, but we must be careful. God's ways are not our ways. If we always expect gains in life, we may be disappointed.

Such was a part of Elijah's problem. When there was a letdown after the Mount Carmel incident, he fell into a rut. He had perhaps imagined that things would continue their upward trend, so he was abysmally disappointed when Jezebel didn't repent. His disappointment led to disillusionment that led him to despair of his life.

In his famous commentary, Matthew Henry rightly said, "Despair of success hinders many a good enterprise."<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, the commentator was acquainted with the type of difficulties Elijah experienced. Henry lived in a nation that underwent radical religious upheavals in his lifetime. His father, Phillip Henry, was a firsthand witness to the execution of King Charles I. In his day, Matthew saw Protestant values and biblical Christianity enjoy great favor under Oliver Cromwell.

However, Cromwell's support of biblical Christianity was short-lived. With his passing, Charles II ascended to throne under the 1660 Restoration. The newly-minted king set his sights on restricting Protestant influence. He banished many pastors from their pulpit and prohibited any religious assemblies that weren't under the auspices of the Church of England. Many faithful ministers like John Owen and Matthew Henry suffered under new laws.

Henry knew well that neither successes nor failures are sure indicators of faithfulness to God. One should not give up when things don't seem to be going well. Sometimes the Lord's most faithful servants don't seem successful in the eyes of the world. Ask Elijah and ask Matthew Henry. If bigger and better are the immovable standards of success in our lives, we will make ourselves more susceptible to the dark night of the soul.

### **Look to God's Word**

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<sup>4</sup> New American Commentary, [CD-Rom].

<sup>5</sup> Henry, [CD-Rom].

Many see a self-justifying spirit in Elijah's complaint to the Lord. Indeed, if you read 1 Kings 19:10, you will notice the presence of a great number of personal pronouns — "I" and "me." The prophet's despair was due in part to a self-oriented perspective. Relief was only found when he transferred his gaze from himself to God and God's Word.

May we learn a lesson from Elijah's experience. When we are tempted to despair because of unmet expectations, we can find encouragement by looking to our Lord and His Word. In times of disappointment, may we develop an upward perspective. We can encounter hope and help by saying with Samuel, "Speak, for your servant is listening" (1 Samuel 3:10).

### **ENJOY THE LORD'S PRESENCE (vs. 11-13).**

Christianity is special because it gives special promises concerning the presence of God. According to Scripture, the Lord is transcendent. That is, He is high and lofty above creation. He is holy, unique, and completely different than humankind. Despite these realities, He chooses to also be descendent. That is, He willingly condescends to humans in order to relate to Him. These realities were perhaps best displayed through the coming of Christ to Earth. Through an event called "the incarnation" Jesus dwelt among us as "Immanuel" (Matthew 1:23; Philippians 2:6-8).

In order to survive the dark seasons of life, we must become well-acquainted with these realities. The spiritually strong live with an abiding awareness that God is with them. A mature perception concerning the Lord's presences enables them to persevere. Though many difficult problems and people may assault them, they stand strong in the knowledge that "The Lord is with me!"

### **Elijah and The Theophany**

Elijah's ordeal in 1 Kings 19 contained lessons concerning this truth. After having fled his country, the man hit rock bottom. In 1 Kings 19:4, he despaired of his life, asking God to kill him in his sleep. Knowing that the man needed food and rest, the Lord gave him time to recuperate from his long journey. When the prophet was physically refreshed, he travelled to Mount Horeb, hoping to meet with God.

The Lord did not disappoint. The man received the Word of the Lord as he hid in a cave on the very mountain upon which the Lord gave Moses the Ten Commandments. Then the Lord said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the Lord's presence." Elijah obeyed the command. Scripture says, "At that moment, the Lord passed by."

There is great grace in the words "the Lord passed by." While Elijah certainly had needed rest, food, and the Word of the Lord, he also needed the presence of the Lord. In order to be refreshed and restored from his breakdown, a fresh encounter with the living God was required.

The event that followed was what theologians call a "theophany."<sup>6</sup> The term is based on two Greek words. One meant "God" and the other meant "to appear." Plain and simple, a theophany involved an occasion in which God appeared to man. One has described the phenomenon as "An appearance of God that is perceptible to human sight."<sup>7</sup>

We find an example of a theophany from the life of Moses in Exodus 33:18-22. There are a number of parallels between the experiences of Moses and Elijah. Moses' encounter with the direct presence of the Lord in Exodus 33:18-22 served the purpose of restoring the man's faith after the Golden Calf incident of Exodus 32:1-35. It also was intended to prepare him to once again minister God's Word to God's people. Interestingly, Elijah needed his faith restored in a sense. The Lord also intended to prepare the prophet for future use (1 Kings 19:15-18).

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<sup>6</sup> NAC, [CD-Rom].

<sup>7</sup> McKim, 282.

We can learn a lot from Moses' and Elijah's encounters. God's presence has a way of building us up when we've been beaten down. Sometimes we need renewing and restoring. Failures and frustrations have a way of bringing us to our whit's end. The comfort and encouragement of God's presence has a way of picking us up.

It also has a way of preparing us for the mission the Lord has for us. When the Lord prepared Moses' heir apparent (Joshua), it is for good reason that He told him, "Be strong and courageous? Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go" (Joshua 1:9). Joshua's ability to lead the children of Israel into the Promised Land was predicated upon his trust in the Lord's manifest presence in his life.

As New Testament believers, Christians have the right to claim the promise Joshua received. Why? Because Jesus has given us a similar assurance concerning His presence in our lives. When He gave His famous Great Commission to the church, He said, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20).

Our ability to survive and thrive in life isn't contingent upon our resources. We aren't left on Earth to do life by ourselves. Being in Christ guarantees that He is with us. We have a guide by our side in even the darkest valleys of life.

### **Earth, Wind, and Fire**

Earth, Wind, and Fire is known as one of the best-selling bands of all time. With hit songs like "September" and "Let's Groove," the soul, funk, and jazz group has sold over 90 million records. Their innovative and sensual tunes have made them one of the greatest bands of all time. The band's name was meant to give homage to three of the four classical elements. Water, the fourth element, was subtracted from the band's name, because of a consideration of the band members' astrological signs.

When we read of Elijah's experience at Mount Horeb, we find three of the classic elements — "earth, wind, and fire." Instead of water, we are told of the presence of "a soft whisper." Together, the three elements were used to teach the man powerful lessons about the Lord's presence. In Scripture, movements within nature were regarded as signs of the Lord's judgment. Remember the event of 1 Kings 18:38. The Lord used fire from the sky to exhibit his wrath toward idolatry. Perhaps Elijah's despair in 1 Kings 19 was based on the fact that he wanted more fire to fall from the sky. He expected Queen Jezebel and King Ahab to be consumed in a blaze of God's Shekinah glory!

At Horeb, the Lord sent wind and an earthquake, but He didn't appear in such things. Scripture says, "The Lord was not in the wind...the Lord was not in the earthquake...the Lord was not in the fire" (1 Kings 19:11-13). Why did God not appear through such means? The lesson was clear — the Lord did not intend to work according to Elijah's expectations. While many expect God to do big things, and to reveal Himself through magnificent means, the Lord's modus operandi is often different.

Many times, God prefers to work in what could be likened to a still, small voice. Though Elijah didn't experience God's presence in the mighty, natural phenomenon the Lord sent, he did sense it through what 1 Kings 19:12 called "a soft whisper." The Hebrew language of the text literally meant "a brief sound of silence."<sup>8</sup> The meaning of the language is hard to fully convey. It seems to be intentionally mysterious, since our Lord is mysterious. One has defined it as

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<sup>8</sup> Carson, [CD-Rom].

referring to a “pregnant silence in which one can hear the proverbial pin drop – and yet in which one feels oneself challenged, and knows one has been addressed.”<sup>9</sup>

God intended to use the “soft whisper” as an object lesson for Elijah. The meaning, as one has said, was that “God is not always at work in ways which are visible and dramatic. He may choose to be present silently.”<sup>10</sup> The Lord wanted to teach the prophet that He would work in small, nearly imperceptible ways to accomplish His will. The false worship of Baal would indeed be dealt with. Ahab and Jezebel would be removed from the throne. However, such things would take place in a much more subtle way than the prophet envisioned. God wasn’t going to thunder judgment on Jezebel and the worshipers of Baal, as Elijah wanted, but the Lord would indeed fulfill His own purposes for His glory.

A lesson is found here for us. We often want God to do grandiose and glorious things. Perplexity and impatience often grip us, as we see godlessness seem to profit and advance all around us. The meaning of the still, small voice must not be forgotten. The Lord is always at work in our midst, though He doesn’t always work in the ways we desire. One has beautifully said, “The spectacular and dramatic have their place in God’s order of things. Most often, however, the divine program is carried forward through the still small voice which speaks to the hearts of people.”<sup>11</sup>

### No One Can See God

Surrounded by the blazing glory of the Lord, Elijah “wrapped his face in his mantle.” The garment was probably a sheepskin cloak.<sup>12</sup> The prophet covered his face with it in order to protect his eyes. The glory of the Lord was so bright that the man could not look on it fully. One has said, “He wrapped his face in his mantle as one afraid to look upon the glory of God, and apprehensive that it would dazzle his eyes and overcome him.”<sup>13</sup> When the Lord appeared directly to Moses, that man had to guard himself from fully seeing the Lord in a similar way (Exodus 33:20).

There is a lesson in Elijah’s gesture. None can fully see the Lord. Of Him, the Bible says, “who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see” (1 Timothy 6:16). Elijah’s act of wrapping his cloak around his face confirmed this reality. Elijah experienced the Lord’s presence, but he wasn’t able to look upon it fully. One has said the prophet saw God “so far as a man is ever able to see the glory of God.”<sup>14</sup> It is for this reason that John said, “No one has ever seen God” (John 1:18; 1 John 4:12).

### The Best of All

Elijah’s experience teaches us of the importance of God’s presence in the lives of His children. When the storms and seasons of struggle seem to prevail, one can rely on His abiding presence. Scripture teaches us that Christ dwells in two places – in heaven and in the hearts of His children! Though it may seem like evil is winning and the error is increasing, we can have comfort and consolation from Immanuel – God with us!

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<sup>9</sup> Daily Bible Study Series, [CD-Rom].

<sup>10</sup> Carson, [CD-Rom].

<sup>11</sup> Books of History, [CD-Rom].

<sup>12</sup> Books of History, [CD-Rom].

<sup>13</sup> Matthew Henry, [CD-Rom].

<sup>14</sup> K & D, [CD-Rom].

John Wesley was one of the agents God used mightily during the First Great Awakening. He was the founder and father of the Wesleyan branch of the Methodist movement. He was known for espousing certain “methods” that encouraged practical holiness in the lives of Christians. Like his Calvinistic counterpart, George Whitefield, Wesley ministered outside the confines of the state church, the Church of England. The Lord used him mightily to confound the wisdom of the religious elite.

He seemed to preach anywhere and everywhere. Stories have been told of him trumpeting the gospel outside of coal mines to spiritually hungry workers in his native land. He spent time in the New World, preaching to eager listeners in Georgia and other colonies.

In his lifetime, the man amassed quite a following. Evidence of his influence is seen to this day through Christian denominations that were built because of his ministry.

Many inspiring stories can be told about the life of the man. One of the most encouraging, however, comes from his death bed. When his physical body began to fail him, friends and family drew near. The one who had preached to so many struggled to utter even a few words. Finally, onlookers saw him labor earnestly to say something that was undoubtedly of great importance. Wesley mumbled – “The best of all is, God is with us!”

On his deathbed, the great preacher held on to one of the greatest promises of God. To be spiritually strong, and to really navigate through the stressful seasons of life, we must live by the reality that God is with us. This is what Jesus encouraged us to do in John 15:3 when He said, “Remain in me, and I in you.” It was also what Paul referenced in Galatians 5:16 when He said, “Walk by the Spirit.” An abiding awareness of the Spirit of Christ’s presence in our lives will provide us with timely help so that we might experience emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical health.

All in all, the Christian life is not about a program, a precept, a paradigm, or a principle. It is first and foremost about a Person! Until we learn to personally walk in the Lord’s presence, we will be spiritually hamstrung. We will struggle with the struggles of life. May we learn to live in light of the fact that God is always with us. This is what the author of Hebrews encouraged in Hebrews 13:5-6 when He said, “...we may boldly say, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?’” (Hebrews 13:6). This is the best of all – God is with us!

#### **ANTICIPATE FUTURE USEFULNESS FOR THE LORD (vs. 14-18).**

When we get low in life, we often feel like God is done with us, that we have no future or purpose in life. Getting back on track often requires that we capture a fresh vision of how the Lord wants to use us. Such was the case with Elijah. In 1 Kings 19:14, we read of the way in which the man vented his frustration to the Lord. He said, “the Israelites have abandoned your covenant, torn down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they’re looking for me to take my life.”

The Lord responded to the man’s cries of despair in a way that must have certainly seemed strange. Instead of addressing the prophet’s complaint, the Lord simply said, “Go and return by the way you came” (1 Kings 19:15). God wanted the prophet to return to the Promised Land by traveling through a desert south of the city of Damascus.<sup>15</sup> Though the prophet wallowed in self-pity and misery, the Lord commissioned him to a new, monumental work. We will soon see that the Lord wanted Elijah to anoint two new kings and one new prophet! Though the man felt like he was finished with life, God still had plans to use him!

Elijah’s experience is instructive for us. We many times feel overwhelmed by the wickedness of the world around us. Aren’t we often tempted to quit because of the onslaught of evil and perversity? Many feel compelled to complain like Elijah, saying, “I alone am left!” The

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<sup>15</sup> K & D, [CD-Rom].

Lord's reply to cynical saints of all generations is the same — "Go!" (Mark 16:15). Many times, the path out of the pit of despair involves a renewed vision of the Lord's mission.

What has God called you to do? What is His plan for your life? Recovering from life's seasons of struggles often requires us to reorient ourselves with our personal life purpose. If you want to get out of the pit of despair, you may need to get refocused on the way in which the Lord wants to use you.

### **God Will Work**

The Lord's instruction became more specific in verse 15. He told Elijah, "When you arrive, you are to anoint Hazael as king over Aram" (1 Kings 19:15). The act of "anointing" involved the act of appointing or calling another one into service.<sup>16</sup> The three men Elijah would anoint would have great significance in the history of Israel. They would be used by the Lord to fully eradicate the worship of Baal from Israel. Remember, this had been the cause of Elijah's despair — false worship. The Lord answered the man's prayers and addressed his heartache by raising up men — two kings and one prophet — to purge false worship from the Land.

An application is found for modern believers. We are often discouraged by the darkness around us. Sometimes our despair is driven by a false belief that wickedness is winning. We wonder, "Why doesn't the Lord do something?" It often seems He is apathetic and absent. Elijah's experience reminds us that God has a plan, and that He will work His plan in accordance with His timing. We must have a trust that He is good and faithful. Worry, anxiety, and depression grow when we lose sight of these realities.

### **The Work is Not Dependent on One Person**

When we study Scripture, we encounter what appears to be a contradiction in relation to the Lord's instruction for Elijah to anoint Hazael and Jehu. Reading on in 1 Kings, we discover that Elijah would never anoint these men personally. What is the reason for this apparent gaffe in Scripture? Well, by studying the Bible, we find that Elijah would anoint a prophet — Elisha (1 Kings 19:19-21). The new prophet would in turn anoint both Hazael (2 Kings 8:7-14) and Jehu (2 Kings 9:1-10). The Lord designed things to work this way for a very special reason. It seems He wanted to demonstrate that the work of the Lord is never dependent on one person.

Remember, Elijah's complaint had been "I alone am left." The Lord answered the prophet's whining complaint emphatically. He showed that there were indeed other faithful individuals within the nation. He aimed to teach Elijah that God's mission is never dependent on one, lone individual. The Lord didn't need Elijah. Another prophet — Elisha — was perfectly suitable to fulfill the Lord's purposes.

The faithful of all generations need to come to grips with these realities. Those who believe they are the single point of failure for their families, their church, their work, and their community will soon burn out. We become weary and worn when we believe we are alone and that everything is up to us. Life gets tough when we put unrealistic expectations on ourselves concerning the fate of everyone and everything in our lives.

### **Called to Interdependency**

It is significant to note that Jesus referred to the Elijah's anointing of Elisha when He called disciples to follow Him. In Luke 9:62, our Lord said, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." His words were a clear reference to the way in which Elisha forsook his plow to follow Elijah. Our Lord meant to convey the idea that a call to follow Him has a more special significance than the junior prophet's call to follow the senior prophet. As

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<sup>16</sup> Books of History, [CD-Rom].

New Testament believers, there is great meaning for us in Elijah's anointing of his successor. No individual believer is the single point of failure for the church. The Lord desires to work through a discipleship movement in which all have greater significance than one. The work of Christ's kingdom is never dependent upon a lone individual.

This is why Jesus led a movement that was steeped in the work of enlisting and training others in God's kingdom agenda. As Elijah was commissioned to call and equip Elisha, Jesus called the Twelve unto Himself (Mark 1:16-20) and He thoroughly trained them for the work they were to do (2:13-14; 3:13-19; 6:7-13). Since the time in which our Lord walked upon the Earth, it has been the job of His people to work in similar way. It is for this reason that the Lord said, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20). It is also why Paul instructed first-century churches, "What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, commit to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Timothy 2:2).

The Lord desires for His church to function as a body (2 Corinthians 12:12) in which there is an interdependency amongst believers that results in mutual teaching, training, and edification (Titus 2:1-8). When such an environment exists, no one has to succumb to the lone-ranger, single-point-of-failure mentality that led Elijah to the brink of despair. Each believer has spiritual gifts to use in the kingdom (Romans 12:6-8) and the welfare of the kingdom is not dependent on any one person. Jesus promised, "I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it" (Matthew 16:18).

Such realities should bring relief to those who feel weary and weak. If cruel, unrelenting expectations are causing you to become weighed down, take a deep breath and remember you are not alone. Success in life does not depend on you. The Lord doesn't intend for you to carry the weight of life and life's responsibilities by yourself. He has given the body of Christ to support, strengthen, and sustain you (Ephesians 4:11-12; Hebrews 10:24-25).

American culture will load you down with expectations that are unrealistic. The modern craze with goals, productivity, and prosperity is unhealthy. The word "hustle" has become a mantra for those who are driven by achievement, accomplishment, and attainments. Many times, such people are trying to live beyond the bounds of what the Lord intends. They desire to have more and be more than God desires. Burnout and brokenness are inevitable when we push the limits on what is reasonable and realistic for our lives.

### **The Weapons of Our Warfare**

When the Lord commissioned Elijah to anoint a prophet apprentice, He said, "Elisha will put to death whoever escapes the sword of Jehu" (1 Kings 19:17). It is important to note that Elisha never literally killed the prophets of Baal himself. He simply anointed the kings who would do the killing. His work was accomplished through his preaching and prophesying. He worked by the sword of God's Word.

The man's ministry stands as a memorial for all generations. The Lord's people are called to fight with weapons that are different than the world's weapons (2 Corinthians 10:4). Our strength comes from the Sword of the Spirit (Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12). To stay spiritually and emotionally strong, we must place our confidence in the Lord and His Word. Our war is not a political, cultural, intellectual, or social one. It is a spiritual one, and spiritual wars are only accomplished by the Spirit's means and methods. When we lose sight of these realities, as Elijah did, we will certainly become frustrated and fatigued. Looking to the world for help will always result in emotional and spiritual breakdowns. The Word of God is our sure help in the work of God.

### You are Not Alone

The Lord closed His re-commissioning of Elijah by saying, “But I will leave seven thousand in Israel — every knee that has not bowed to Baal and every mouth that has not kissed him.” Worshippers of false gods often kissed the graven images of the gods they adored. A kiss was a show of devotion. Instead of adoring false deities, the Lord calls people to “Pay homage to the Son” (Psalm 2:12).

Regardless, the Lord wanted Elijah to know he wasn’t alone. There were “seven thousand” people who hadn’t succumbed to idolatry. The number was a figurative one. It was symbolic of completion. Elsewhere in Scripture, round numbers were used to figuratively represent the remnant of God’s people (Revelation 4:4; 7:1-8). The Lord’s point for Elijah was that He had reserved a complete and perfect number of true worshippers for Himself.

Elijah’s despair and disillusionment was unwarranted. The work of securing souls was not dependent upon Him. Jezebel had no ability to prevent what the Lord wanted to accomplish. The Spirit of God would perform the work of God in the timing of God.

It is enlightening to note how Paul referenced God’s words to Elijah in Romans 11:2-3. The apostle did so within the context of sharing about his burden over the lost condition of Israel. It seems that he, like Elijah, was tempted to be discouraged concerning the depravity and deception amongst his native people. At the moment of his despair, he recalled to mind the Lord’s promise to Elijah — “I have left seven thousand for myself who have not bowed down to Baal” (Romans 11:4).

Neither Paul nor the prophet needed to live by what we could call a “lone-wolf mentality.” Though it seemed like corruption and confusion were increasing all around them, the Lord had promised to reserve a remnant of faithful people. In Romans, Paul would later reflect on the Lord’s promises by saying, “And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, ‘The Deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob’” (Romans 11:26). Elijah was driven to distress because he thought he was alone in the Lord’s work.

The Lord aimed to encourage His prophet by opening the man’s eyes to the reality that there was a perfectly preserved remnant of unseen faithful people in the nation. Modern believers can find help in Elijah’s experience. Aren’t we sometimes tempted to believe we are alone, that there are few who actually live for the Lord nowadays? News reports and statistics often drive us to dark thinking. We assume the whole world is given over to apostasy and immorality.

It is worth remembering that the Lord has secured the names of His people in His Lamb’s Book of Life (Revelation 13:8). He has always had a faithful remnant, and He always will. Darkness decreases and joy increases when we meditate on these realities. Commenting on Elijah’s experience, Matthew Henry has said, “There are more good people in the world than some wise and holy men think there are. Their jealousy of themselves, and for God, makes them think the corruption is universal; but God sees not as they do. When we come to heaven, as we shall miss a great many home we thought to meet there, so we shall meet a great many home we little thought to find there.”<sup>17</sup>

### Program People

At the end of the 2021 college football season, Lincoln Riley, the head coach of the University of Oklahoma’s football team, abruptly quit his job to become the new coach at the University of Southern California. The move was a shock to football fans, especially for fans of the Oklahoma Sooners. A number of top-tier recruits who planned to play for Riley in Oklahoma subsequently flipped their allegiances to Southern California. Oklahoma fans felt betrayed and dismayed.

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<sup>17</sup> Henry, [CD-Rom].

Many blamed their former coach for attempting to destroy their football program. The word "nuke" was used to describe the harm brought about by the coach's rapid departure.

In the wake of the storm, a former coach stepped up to help. Bob Stoops, the once, long-tenured Oklahoma coach who had led the team to win a national championship, quickly called a press conference in which he rallied the school, its fans, and its alumni toward a positive perspective. He triumphantly proclaimed, "I'm a program guy." He then said, "There's not one guy, one person, in the history of this program that's bigger than the program!"

The message Coach Bob Stoops delivered is one that is applicable to believers. The principle within the message is one Elijah needed to hear. No one person is bigger than God's program of redemption. The prophet's despair was rooted in his false belief that he was all alone, and that the destiny of a nation depended on him.

Christians should live by the conviction that God has a work for them to do. Mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being often thrives when we humbly assign ourselves to the work the Lord has for us. However, as we commit to God's work, we don't have to have a perspective that everything depends on us. Christ is the Head of the Church, and the Church is a great, big body of born-again believers. We can rest in knowing that the future of the Lord's kingdom is not dependent on any of us individually. None needs to bear that burden or live with that stress. There's not one person in the history of the church that is bigger than the church. Such knowledge should give us humility and rest in our souls.