

Contrary to the traditional view, the prophet Elijah did not lapse into self-centered whining, depression, and despair following the LORD's victory at Mount Carmel. Elijah's faithful purpose at Mount Horeb had major covenantal significance, yielding timeless lessons of judgment and grace for the Church.

Introduction: Story of my sermon prep this week, and how my last bit of study completely changed my perspective on a passage I thought I had understood intuitively.

## I. The Traditional Reading

### A. Armchair psychology (vv. 3-7, 13-14)

Elijah is so afraid he comes undone. Depressed and despairing, he begins to whine. He complains to God that he's been so faithful and zealous but it was all a total waste of effort. Elijah is an example of someone who needs a vacation, a prescription, or some counseling.

### B. God's prophet rebuked and retired (vv. 9, 11-12, 15-18)

God asks Elijah why he abandoned his post in Israel to knock uninvited at his secluded mountain lodge. God overwhelms Elijah's tantrum with a triple display of natural power (just to remind his prophet who he is trifling with), then gently rebukes him as he repeats his question to determine whether Elijah can be scared back into sanity. When Elijah throws the same fit as before, God privately deliberates and determines his overworked prophet finally suffered a nervous breakdown. God assigns him therapy, giving him three easy assignments to wrap up his prophet business and hand off the hard work to three men with more stable mental health.

## II. A Covenantal Reading

### A. Clues to examine without traditional assumptions

1. The Hebrew text (v. 3). Which is the preferred pronunciation of the consonantal text (vyyr')? The MT reads "and he saw". Some medieval Hebrew MSS and some ancient translations read "and he was afraid". Following the rules of textual criticism, when you weigh these two options, it seems more likely that "and he saw" was original because this better explains the existence of the other option. So if Elijah is not afraid, then why does he flee?
2. The geopolitical map (vv. 3, 8; cf. 1 Kgs 18:46). Why travel more than 300 miles when 50 miles will make you safe? He's a prophet! He can talk to God wherever he's at.
3. Moses parallels (at least 15!). If there were only a few parallels the link may not be very strong. But the abundance of similarities clearly shows Elijah is doing a Moses-like work.
4. Divine direction (vv. 7-8). It's important to note the angel provided for and commissioned this 40-day trek through the wilderness. There would be no need for such great provision if God wanted Elijah to take the short walk back to Beersheba.
5. An invitation (vv. 9, 13). If Elijah is not showing up at Mount Horeb uninvited, then what does God's question to Elijah mean? Both an invitation for Elijah to unload his frustration and state his business.
6. A true statement (vv. 10, 14). If Elijah is being compared to faithful Moses and not disobedient Jonah, then might it be he's actually telling the truth? Is it likely he is exaggerating in God's courtroom where the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth is paramount? Is it likely in light of what follows?
7. A guilty verdict (vv. 15-18). If Elijah's statement was not a faithful explanation of Israel's current state of religious and political affairs, then God might dismiss his case. But that's not what God does. According to the terms of his covenant with Israel, the LORD declares a guilty verdict and issues a just judgment. In doing so God the Judge agrees with Elijah's accusations.

**B.** God's prophet brings a covenant lawsuit against unrepentant Israel (vv. 9-10, 13-14)

Elijah is a broken man, even to the point of wanting to die, not in Jezebel's hand, but in God's. He's broken because he's very jealous for God's glory, and Israel his own people have rejected their covenant LORD. So having reached a terrible turning point in his ministry to Israel, God's prophet must bring a covenant lawsuit against his unrepentant nation. God's judgment won't fall immediately, but the current regime of Israel is doomed.

### III. The Difference It Makes

**A.** Are you unshaken by or undeterred by unrepentant leadership/government? (vv. 1-3)

Evidence, even divine revelation, is insufficient to change hard hearts. Don't be surprised when God is mocked or when God's people are targeted by those in power who don't follow Jesus. Watch, discern, and respond appropriately without losing your head, sinking into despair, or forgetting God's sovereignty.

**B.** Does judgment begin with the downcast believer or the wayward house of God? (vv. 9-10)

The LORD does not shoot his own wounded, but lovingly listens and provides for them. However, his judgment will come on those who forsake his covenant. The nature of such judgments may be historical and will be eternal.

**C.** May you approach God with a self-righteous rant or righteous indignation? (vv. 4, 10, 14)

God wants you to be angry, but not for your own sake. If Elijah is a ranting prophet, then the Bible gives you permission (if not God's blessing) to whine and complain. But if Elijah is a righteous prophet, then the Bible seems to encourage righteous anger.

**D.** Will you listen for God in a "still small voice" or in the word of the LORD? (vv. 11-13)

Divine verbal messages are relayed not in the sound of God's "gentle whisper" but in his spoken/written word. God is revealed in but does not speak in his storm or his calm.

**E.** Does God encourage the depressed Christian or the persecuted Church? (vv. 4-8, 15-18)

God will stubbornly preserve a faithful, suffering remnant. Your calling is not to retire from the service of God when you feel "done," but to weather the storm of God when you are widely opposed.

Conclusion: Don't despair, because God has promised to preserve his persecuted people. Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords. So when you suffer as a Christian, you can look to the Lord Jesus who also suffered and triumphed through his suffering. He endured to the end until God exalted and vindicated him. Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection are where God's covenant judgment and grace kiss each other. Because he has already won the greatest victory over sin and evil, you can stand in the strength of his powerful sustaining grace.