

“Prone to Wander”
1 Kings 19
April 23, 2017

INTRODUCTION:

James reminds us that “Elijah was a man with a nature like ours” (James 5:17). Despite being one of the greatest of the Old Testament prophets, he is exposed in this passage as being, in the words of the hymn, “prone to wander.” Fresh off his success against the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel, he is confident that the tide has been turned and that Israel will now turn back to the worship of the true God. Even King Ahab seems positively affected by God’s act of bringing fire upon Elijah’s soggy offering. Elijah excitedly runs back to Ahab’s home in Jezreel. But as Ahab walks in the door of his house, his wife, Jezebel, asked the normal question when a husband comes home after being away all day, “How was your day?” So Ahab told her all about the events on Mt. Carmel. Jezebel seemed impervious to evidence. Instead of concluding that Jehovah and not Baal is the true God—a conclusion the evidence clearly pointed to—she concluded that Elijah must die. So she sent a messenger to him saying, **“So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them [the slain prophets of Baal] by this time tomorrow”** (v. 2).

For some reason, this threat affected Elijah more significantly than we might expect. Though he had been able to face 450 prophets of Baal with only God’s promise and presence, he responded to Jezebel with fear. He knew this was no idle threat. After all, she had been engaged in her own prophet eradication plan, aimed at the faithful prophets of Jehovah. Still, we would expect Elijah to respond with faith and courage. Instead, he begins running, heading south as fast as he can go. He’s leaving the country, heading to Judah. He doesn’t stop when he crosses the border, but keeps going all the way to Beersheba, the southern-most city of Judah. He leaves his servant there and goes even further into the desert. His heart is full of fear and unbelief, after which it ripened to depression and self-pity. Self-pity is the dominant feature of Elijah in this chapter. His heart could well be expressed in that children’s song, “Nobody likes me, everybody hates me; I think I’ll go eat worms.”

We are at all times either running away from God or toward him. Neutrality toward God is impossible. Even the best of us, like Elijah, at times run from God into fear and self-pity. Our need is to be able to answer the question God twice asks Elijah, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” (v. 9, 13). God was inviting him into discernment of his spiritual condition. Let’s explore how we might better discern the direction of our spiritual lives by looking at the three characters who are running in this story.

I. The Running of Elijah

It is not easy to discern the spiritual direction of one's life. Elijah's view of his spiritual state differed significantly from God's view of it. We can see God's view in the question he asks twice, **"What are you doing here, Elijah?"** Remember that God never asks a question to get information, because he knows everything already. He asks this question not for his benefit but for Elijah's. He is asking Elijah why he is here because it is not where he is supposed to be, and Elijah needs to recognize that. It is the same kind of question God asked Adam after his sin, **"Where are you?"** (Gen. 3:9). Elijah rejects God's correction and insists that he has been the only one to remain faithful (v. 10).

If a man as great as Elijah had difficulty discerning the spiritual direction of his life, what hope is there for us? This story can help us here, because it shows us some of the early indicators of going off the rails. I see three of them, and the first one is his fear. Elijah's fear of Jezebel's threat is somewhat surprising. He had faced 450 prophets of Baal all by himself. Prior to that, he had experienced the protection of God when Ahab had put out an all-points bulletin for his capture, and what was sure to be his execution. But now, for some reason, he panics and fear rules his heart. But fear always works in this erratic way. I was reading recently of a Nascar racer who had taken up cycling, and he talked about how afraid he was when he started riding. Here is a man who is not afraid to get behind the wheel of a powerful machine and drive it over 200 mph while drafting within inches of a car ahead of him, and he's afraid of riding a bicycle 15 miles per hour. That's the way fear works. I was talking with someone this week who was greatly afraid of being thought of by others as stupid. Any hint of someone thinking that of him would provoke a strong reaction. At the same time, this young man would be seen as fearless in many other areas of his life, such as taking the risk of starting a new business. We don't know what Jezebel's threat touched in Elijah that provoked such fear, but clearly it did as he responded by getting as far from her as possible. The presence of such panic and fear is an indicator that we have begun to drift away from God. Fear and walking with God are mutually exclusive.

Depression is the second indicator that Elijah is running from God. I realize that depression is a complex issue, and I don't mean to suggest by this that running from God is the only cause of depression. It is not *the* cause, but it is *a* cause. Elijah wants to die, and he asks God, **"Take away my life"** (v. 4). And then he goes to sleep. He couldn't muster the motivation to do anything positive, so he just went to sleep. After God fed him twice, he does manage to travel to Horeb. When he gets there, he enters a cave and doesn't seem to want to come out. The darkness of the cave mirrors the darkness of his emotional state.

Elijah's self-pity is the third indicator that he has wandered from God, and it is a dominant feature of our passage. The majority of speaking that Elijah does in this passage is in his twice-repeated answer to God's question of why Elijah was where he was. **"I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away"** (v. 10, 14). He's playing fast and loose with the facts in order to portray himself as the heroic victim. Elijah had been jealous for the Lord, but he exaggerates the evil of his countrymen. He says that they have forsaken God's covenant, but hadn't many of them returned to God after Carmel? And hadn't the altar of Jehovah been rebuilt, and hadn't the prophets of Baal been the ones to die that day, not the prophets of Jehovah. Then Elijah says that he alone has been faithful. Even if that's true, how would he know? And in fact it wasn't true, but a falsehood God will correct later when he says that he has preserved 7000 who have been faithful to him. In his self-pity, Elijah plays the role of hero and everyone else is the villain.

What is the attraction of self-pity? It is simply a strategy of self-justification, a way of feeling that we are right through exaggerating both our own virtues and the sins of others. Notice too that it grows in the soil of isolation, for the simple reason that self-pity requires this exaggeration, and such falsehood is easier to maintain with no one around to challenge our version of reality. Elijah has isolated himself. He left his servant in Beersheba and went alone to the desert. He leaves there and goes to a dark cave where once again he is all alone.

Do you recognize yourself in Elijah and his self-pity? I do. If Wendy and I have a quarrel, I will often respond with self-pity, exaggerating in my mind both my own righteousness and her sin. For a time, it will feel good just to steep in the self-pity of that, seeing myself as the heroic victim of someone else's gross injustice toward me. But such self-pity should be a sign that my heart is drifting from God in some significant ways. Ironically, Elijah's view of God in this passage is much closer to the inept Baal than to the mighty God of Carmel. Elijah's fear, depression and self-pity all indicate a small God. At the end of the day, self-pity is simply a stubborn refusal to let God into your life and to trust him.

II. The Running of God

Elijah may be running from God while thinking that he is only running from Jezebel, but thankfully God is not so easily escaped. We see his gentleness in the desert when Elijah prays that his life might end. Ironically, instead of answering his prayer to take his life, Elijah is the only prophet of whom it is recorded that he never died. 2 Kings 2 records that he was taken up

to heaven directly by God, without having to pass through death. God sends a food messenger and tells Elijah to eat something.

We also see the pursuit of God in coming to Elijah with a question. God is here inviting Elijah into a spiritual discernment process, and he does so with a simple question that invites Elijah to look inward and assess where he is and why he's there. It is especially important that those who have been particularly active, such as was the case with Elijah, should stop and engage in a little discernment of what is going on inside. That's because activity can mask the deeper issues of the heart. We can think everything is okay between us and God because of the evidence we're able to produce from our busyness. But God has always been after our hearts.

God pursues Elijah's heart with gentleness. God often asks questions in the Bible, which is a remarkable thing because there is no question for which he doesn't already know the answer. Why, then, does he ask questions? Because he graciously and gently pursues our hearts. He could have simply thundered forth the truth. He could have said, "Elijah, your fear, depression and self-pity are running wild because you've drifted from me in all your ministry activity. Repent and turn back to me." Such a statement would have been completely true, but it probably would not have been received by Elijah. God had first to ask him questions to get him to see his need. One application of this is to remember that we are being like God when we ask questions. It is a humble and gentle way to serve others.

The next thing God does is to come to Elijah on Mt. Horeb in what the King James version famously translates a "still, small voice." God asks Elijah to come out of the cave and stand on the mountain before God. For some reason, he won't do it, but elects to stay in his cave. It would seem that such things as fear, depression and self-pity are not so easily removed. God sends wind, an earthquake and fire, all manifestations of his presence we might expect. This was all very similar to God's appearance on this same mountain centuries prior to this. Another name for Mt. Horeb is Mt. Sinai, where God appeared to Moses. We read there that his appearance to Moses was accompanied by thunder, lightning and smoke. But on this occasion, God was not present in the wind, earthquake and fire. But then Elijah heard what our Bibles translate as "**a low whisper**" (v. 12) and the King James as the still small voice. It was enough to bring him out of the cave, though he covered his face in his cloak. The whispering voice of God asked him again what he was doing there, to which Elijah replies identically to his first reply.

God then gives him his next assignment. He is to anoint three people. The first is Hazael to be king over Syria. The second is Jehu to be Israel's next king and the third is Elisha, who will be the successor to Elijah. These three will be God's appointed means for dealing with Ahab and Jezebel. Elijah will not need to conclude the battle against Baal worship. His appointed job will be to

prepare the way for others who will then conclude the matter. In this role of preparation, Elijah reminds us of John the Baptist, whose job it was to prepare for Jesus. He would be God's anointed one to deal with all false worship and bring about the true worship of God.

We also see in this low whisper from God a common way he works. He works through the quiet ways of providence rather than the loud, miraculous interventions. His first answer to sin is not thunderous judgment, but the sending of his Son to be the sacrificial offering to pay for sin.

III. The Running of Elisha

When Elijah goes to Elisha, he finds him plowing with twelve yoke of oxen, indicating that Elisha was a wealthy farmer. When he invites Elisha to follow him, we are told that he ran after Elijah. He then becomes a picture of complete and enthusiastic surrender to God. He makes a complete break with his past when he kills all of his oxen and boils the meat over a fire made with the yokes. He then follows Elijah and assists him.

Elisha is a contrast to Elijah here. Instead of depressed, he is enthusiastic. Instead of fearful, he runs to meet any challenge ahead of him. Instead of being filled with self-pity, he is filled with generosity toward others. This is what happens when we surrender ourselves to God and trust him.

CONCLUSION:

Elijah's busy life allowed him to ignore his heart. If God came to you and asked you the same question he asked Elijah, what would you say? "What are you doing here?" God asks that not just to make us feel guilty, but to give us hope in him. He wants us to be in that place where Elisha was, fully surrendered and full of hope and joy. Elisha's name means "God saves." It is the same meaning of Jesus' name. Ultimately, our hearts get put right through trusting in him. Where are you with that?