

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

ZEAL FOR THE LORD

1 Kings 19:4-8

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Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

19:4 But he himself [Elijah] went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." 5Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." 6He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. 7The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, "get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." 8He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

DIAGNOSIS: Zealotry's Dead End

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Missing from Mission*

Elijah stood in the disastrous tradition of Phinehas who, in killing an errant Israelite in the name of YHWH, "was zealous for his God and made atonement for the Israelites" (Num. 25:13; so it says). But Elijah's violent "zealotry for YHWH" (19:10) in killing some 450 prophets of Ba'al after YHWH's spectacular

victory at Mount Carmel (18:20-40) had a very different outcome. King Ahab (who reigned 874-852 BC) and queen Jezebel were hardly assuaged, either with YHWH's victory or with Elijah's murders. So, in the text before us, Elijah fled from their murderous threats [murder begets murder] into the wilderness and there "asked [God] that he might die" (v. 4). If the death of YHWH's prophets (18:4) and now Elijah as well was to be the outcome of YHWH's victory on Mount Carmel, then that victory would be hollow and without atonement. But YHWH had other plans for Elijah (19:11-18). His mission to correct Israel's paganism was not yet finished.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Ba'aling/Bailing on YHWH*

In fleeing for his life, Elijah demonstrated his own failure to see the wider purpose of God in staging that spectacular victory on Mount Carmel. Because his life was now at risk, Elijah believed that he had failed in his mission; so in fleeing he was "bailing" on YHWH. Like the prophets of Ba'al (meaning "Lord" referring to a Canaanite storm-fertility god) that he had just killed (those Israelites who themselves had "Ba'aled" on YHWH), Elijah bailed on YHWH in the wilderness of his heart and awaited his ignominious death.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *The Death of the Promise*

Because of Elijah's own faithlessness, a far larger problem than just his life, or even the Ba'al-loving faithlessness of Israel, was now looming. As YHWH's prophet, Elijah was not only a representative of God to Israel but a representative of Israel before YHWH. So if Elijah died, so too would his mission; so too would YHWH's great Promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:3). And so too—as at many such junctures in the history of God's people—would YHWH's own holiness and righteousness, his own faithfulness to his promise, indeed his entire purpose in creating the world, be

at risk of failure—meaning the death of *the Promise*.

PROGNOSIS: God's Zeal for Israel and the World

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : God's Zeal in Faithful Action

Therefore, in his own holiness and righteousness in keeping faithfulness to his Promise, YHWH came to Elijah, through angels (vv. 5-7), with the nourishment necessary to continue his mission, both his and Elijah's alike. So Elijah was sent to Mt. Horeb (19:8-9) where, after pleading with YHWH for his life, YHWH spoke to him in a "sound of sheer silence" (19:12; in the RSV, a "still small voice") and sent him off to complete his task. The unexpected "silence" on Mt Horeb gives pause to the notion that Elijah was being praised for a job well done. He surely was not. The all-consuming fire that rained down on Mt. Carmel as a sign of YHWH's present-faithfulness was not repeated here, as had been expected. Why else mention the wind and the earthquake and the fire? This is a hint, for us, that God does not always need thunderous acts to accomplish his mission. And in light of the Gospel of Jesus, who is Israel's longed for messiah-servant-king, we see that God's decisive fulfillment of the Promise (to atone for Israel and thus also for the world) was made by a silenced crucified king, and confirmed as such by an unspectacular resurrection that was not made evident except to a chosen few.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : God's Zeal in Spirit and Faith

God chose to accomplish his most spectacular deed—atonement for the sins of the world—in a most unspectacular way. Why? As Luther put it, "to make room for faith." But not just any faith; saving faith. What Elijah lacked (trust in YHWH despite the threat of death), indeed, what the whole world lacked prior to Jesus the Messiah, was a trustfulness that sees in the crucified

Jesus God's loving-faithfulness in making good on his promise to Abraham. This faith is created only by the Spirit of God, the selfsame Spirit which raised the Messiah from the dead. This is the "nourishment" that, unlike the nourishment received by Elijah in the wilderness, makes us fit for the Kingdom of God and thus also fit for mission. With faith in Jesus the Messiah of Israel (thus also the servant-king of the world), we are gifted with the power of God sufficient and necessary to be the faithful human beings for which we were created, and now recreated "in Christ."

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *God's Zeal in Mission and Love*

Elijah's zeal for YHWH was crushed, not only by royal threats on his life but more importantly by the true God's unspectacular "silence" on Mt. Horeb. Elijah's own self-importance led him to think that without him God's mission was effectively dead. But on Mt. Horeb YHWH said that he would "reserve" for himself 7000 faithful Israelites (19:18)—giving the lie to Elijah's poor-me-I'm-the-only-one-left attitude. This paved the way for Elijah's ongoing mission, though still a violent one. Violent zealousness continued among the Maccabees and various first and second century zealots, and even to this day. However, with the advent of Jesus, Israel's crucified and risen Messiah, violent zeal for God is explicitly excluded (as Paul of Tarsus also discovered). In its place is self-giving love as a visible expression of God's kingdom on earth and an extension of the Messiah's "body"—continuing, through us, the mission of Jesus in the power of the Spirit.