

The Desert of Doubt **1 Kings 19:1-16**

I'm currently reading J.D. Greear's newest book, *Not God Enough*. In it, he mentions that he teaches a class for college students each year at Summit Church about answering the tough questions of Christianity. He writes that one year he started the class by announcing that, "If you've ever had any doubts about your faith or something in Scripture, that reveals your depravity and probably means you aren't a Christian at all." And then after he laughs at all the shocked looks in the room, he clarifies that this isn't remotely true, that everyone experiences doubt, and that doubt isn't necessarily a bad thing.

Most, if not all, of the great heroes of the faith we see in Scripture wrestled with doubt at one time or another. Consider Abraham, who was told by God Himself that he would have a son and become a great nation, yet doubted God's word. Remember Moses who, when encountering a voice coming from a burning bush, doubted its authenticity enough to question everything it said. Think of David, the man after God's own heart, who wrote psalms asking "How long, O Lord, will the wicked prosper?" John the Baptist, after being present at Jesus' baptism, seeing the Holy Spirit descend on Him in the form of a dove, and hearing the voice of God declare, "This is my son, with whom I am well pleased," still sent his followers to ask Jesus if He was indeed the Messiah. Even Matthew tells us that at Jesus' ascension, the disciples came and worship Him, but some doubted. After seeing Jesus perform miracles, die and return to life, teleport into locked rooms, and now float from earth to heaven, some doubted(!). What we learn from this is that doubt is natural and does not make you an unbeliever.¹

¹ Greear, J.D. *Not God Enough*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018.

However, as we will see today, doubt also cannot linger in the presence of an all-powerful God. Our main point this morning is: **In times of doubt, God promises renewal if we defer to His wisdom, embrace His goodness, and pursue His mission.** To illustrate this point, join me as we look in 1 Kings 19 at a time of doubt and renewal in the life of Elijah.

1 Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. 2 Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, 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 by this time tomorrow." 3 Then he was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. 4 But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he asked that he might die, saying, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers." 5 And he lay down and slept under a broom tree. (1 Kings 19:1-5a)

This is a part of Elijah's ministry that we don't hear about very often. Most of us, though, are familiar with 1 Kings 18, so let's use that to set our stage. Just prior to chapter 19, Elijah has his famous showdown with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. Elijah was outnumbered 450 to 1 and proposes a challenge to the prophets: Build two altars and whichever God answers by fire is the true God. We know that the people of Israel had come to watch the showdown and we see, after the prophets of Baal embarrass and even harm themselves with no response from their god, the true God of Israel answers in a miraculous, breathtaking display that leaves no doubt as to the who the true God really is. The prophets of Baal are destroyed, the people of Israel fall on their faces and cry out, "The Lord, He is God!" and rain returns to Israel for the first time in years. This would seem to be the pinnacle of Elijah's ministry. No doubt Elijah expected a revolution to break out and depose King Ahab and his Baal-worshiping wife Jezebel. Instead, we see in chapter 19 that Jezebel is still on the

queen's throne in Israel and still hates Elijah. When Ahab runs home and tells her what Elijah did, she issues a very serious death threat. "May the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them (the prophets) by this time tomorrow." In short, one of us will be dead tomorrow, Jezebel declares, and it won't be me. And here, in this moment, we see Elijah reach our first point:

The Crossroads of Doubt

Charles Spurgeon once told his congregation that doubt is like a foot poised in the air, ready to step either forward or back. As J.D. Greear states, "Doubt can drive you backward into unbelief, but you can never go forward in faith until you raise your foot. God therefore puts us in situations that make us ask the questions to get us to raise our foot. Sometimes it's the only way we will take a step forward in our knowledge of Him."² Elijah is now at that crossroads. His foot is in the air, raised there by Jezebel's threat. Will he continue in the spirit of God that led him to duel 450 false prophets while Israel watched? Will he boldly continue his campaign against the Baal worship that has plagued Israel? Unfortunately, the answer is no. When Elijah hears Jezebel's threat, he instead flees south to the wilderness beyond Beersheba. He leaves his servant behind and carries on a day's journey into the wilderness. Elijah knows he cannot survive in this wilderness without supplies. Elijah doesn't intend to survive. Jezebel's threat has so broken Elijah's faith that he treks into a desert wasteland, lays down under a broom tree, and waits for God to take his life. Elijah came to the crossroads of doubt and stepped backwards.

² Greear, J.D. *Not God Enough*. 2018.

Most likely, you've never received a death threat that challenged your faith. However, I have no doubt that each of us in this room have found ourselves at the crossroads of doubt many, many times in our lives. Amanda and I found ourselves at that crossroads one year ago this Wednesday, when an emergency room doctor said the words, "You have a tumor on your spinal cord." Maybe you've been led to the crossroads of doubt when your boss handed you a pink slip, or when the ultrasound showed no life where life should have been, or when you spent so long staring at the news that you began to wonder what kind of God would allow such evil to continue, or when a friend explained away the Bible as a fairy tale so convincingly that you found yourself wondering if maybe she was right.

Elijah probably didn't expect things to turn out like this. It's probably safe to say that he questioned God as he traveled out into the desert. "How did things go sideways so fast, God? Why didn't the people revolt against Ahab and Jezebel? What did I do wrong?" Have you ever felt like Elijah? Everything seemed to be going well, your relationship with God was going well, then suddenly life took a left turn and you found yourself at the crossroads wondering what happened. We all come to the crossroads in different ways and at different times, but we come all the same, we all make more than one trip, and we rarely expect to find ourselves there. As a church, we may even now find ourselves at the crossroads as our pastor has departed and our worship leader is soon departing to follow God's call to a new mission field. I believe this is a large reason that God led me to preach from this text today. I have no doubt that many or most of us in the room have experienced at least some doubt over the future of Sixth Street in recent weeks. Who will our next pastor be? Who will lead us in

worship? What will become of our new building plans? Where do we go from here? It is important in these times to understand three things: 1) Doubt is a natural part of life. It does not make you a heathen or an unbeliever. 2) Whether we step forward or back at the crossroads is up to us. 3) God promises to renew our faith **if** we draw near to Him. If we're honest, it often is much easier to step backward into fear and despair than to cling to our faith and move forward. As we see in our text, however, God is not surprised by this and He is gracious in our times of doubt.

The Grace in the Trial

We left Elijah under a broom tree waiting to die. His fear got the best of him and he moved backwards at his crossroads of doubt. But follow what happens next:

5b And behold, an angel touched him and said to him, "Arise and eat." 6 And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. And he ate and drank and lay down again. 7 And the angel of the Lord came again a second time and touched him and said, "Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you." 8 And he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God. 9 There he came to a cave and lodged in it. And behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and he said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 10 He said, "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." (1 Kings 19:5b-10)

The first thing we see after Elijah's nap under the broom tree is a gracious and merciful response from God. Instead of taking Elijah's life as he requested, he spares him. Instead of allowing Elijah's doubts to spell the end of his ministry, he begins a process of restoration in Elijah's life. He sends an angel to give Elijah the food and water he needs to survive in the wilderness. And after Elijah eats, drinks, and naps

again, he sends more food and water and further instructions. “Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you.” What journey? Elijah didn’t set out here on a journey, he set out here to die. But God in his grace had other plans for Elijah. He summons Elijah to Mount Horeb, which is significant because Mount Horeb is also known as Mount Sinai. In his season of doubt, when Elijah chooses to run from the scene of God’s victory and the land of God’s people, God chooses to draw Elijah to Himself. And He does so on the very mountain where He met with Moses to begin establishing the nation of Israel.

After Elijah arrives at the mountain, he finds shelter in a cave and sometime after, Scripture tells us the word of the Lord came to him and asked, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Elijah’s answer, as we see, is informed by his crisis of doubt, as it contains a mixture of truth and error. “I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts.” True. “The people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword.” True, but this also ignores the response of the people to the showdown on Mount Carmel, where the people affirmed their belief in the God of Israel. “I, even I only, am left.” False. In his doubt and despair, Elijah has forgotten about the one hundred prophets Obadiah had gathered together and hidden away from Jezebel. “And they seek my life, to take it away.” True. Fair enough. Elijah’s answer is significant here because it shows us exactly where Elijah is. In his time of doubt, he has forgotten much of what has transpired in Israel lately and has exaggerated his own importance, and in doing so, has exaggerated his own burden. What is most significant here, however, is not Elijah’s answer, but God’s question. God, we know, does not question in order to gain information. An all-knowing

God knows all. When He asked Adam, “Where are you?” He wasn’t trying to figure out where Adam was. He wanted Adam to trust enough to reveal himself. When He asked Job, “Can you send forth lightning?” or “Can you loose the cords of Orion?” He already knew Job could not. He wanted Job to realize and acknowledge God’s sovereignty. And when he asks Elijah, “What are you doing here?” He doesn’t want to know why Elijah is there. He knows why. He summoned him there. What is significant about this question is that God gives Elijah a chance to unburden himself. In this process of restoration, he asks and listens patiently as Elijah pours out all of the troubles, real and perceived, that have led him to this moment of doubt and despair.

We serve a God of grace and mercy. In our times of doubt, God does not condemn. He ministers to us, sometimes through His word, sometimes through a pastor or a sermon, sometimes through time spent in prayer to Him or meditation in song. And we learn from the story of Elijah is that, in that grace and mercy, God allows us to draw near to Him. It is good for us to draw near to Him. He ministered to Elijah under the broom tree, yes, but He truly began to restore him on the mountain. A time of doubt is no time at all to forsake prayer and Bible study and closeness with your Creator. It is the perfect time to run to the One who made you, pour out your grief and despair, and rely on Him to renew you in His time. This time of uncertainty in the life of our church is no time at all for us to forsake the local church, fellowship with believers, worship of God in song and the hearing of His word. This is no time for us to descend into despair. This is the perfect time for us to run, as a body, into the arms of the One who established His church centuries ago and who promised that the gates of hell

would not prevail against it. This is the perfect time for us to draw near to God and allow him, in His mercy and grace, to renew our faith and our vision for the future.

Finally, after Elijah's despair, his flight to the mountain, and God's demonstration of mercy and grace, we see Elijah's encounter with God that leads to his renewal.

The Encounter with God

11 And he said, "Go out and stand on the mount before the Lord." And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. **12** And after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper.[a] **13** And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" **14** He said, "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." **15** And the Lord said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus. And when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Syria. **16** And Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel, and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place. **17** And the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death. **18** Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him." (1 Kings 19:11-18)

After Elijah has poured out his complaint before God, he is instructed in verse 11 to "Go out and stand on the mount before the Lord." Here is where God truly begins to renew Elijah and there are three subpoints in this section that describe what we must do when we draw near to God in our times of doubt.

Defer To His Wisdom

When God summons Elijah into His presence, Scripture describes what takes place. Many times, I've read this and wondered what the significance is. What does this whole series of events mean for Elijah? Remember that he is on Mount Sinai, where God appeared to Moses with many of these same phenomena. These elements, wind, earthquakes, fire, are all frequent images of God's presence. This time, however, things are different. 1 Kings tells us that God was not actually in any of these things. Rather than dwelling in the fire or wind or earthquake, these merely precede the presence of God. His true presence is found in the low whisper that comes after. And the message here for Elijah, who likely would have expected, given his knowledge of the history of Israel and how God typically appears to His people, for God to be found in these phenomena, is that God does not always work in the ways we expect him to work. Elijah likely expected God to appear one way, but He chose to appear in a different way. Later, in verses 15-18, we see that God's plan for the restoration of Israel is also not what Elijah expected. God reveals that he is working through a pagan king to bring His judgment on Ahab and Jezebel, and that, contrary to Elijah's assertion that he is the only faithful God-follower remaining, there are 7,000 people in Israel that have not yet bowed their knees to Baal. Elijah had put God in a box. He expected God to work in one particular way, through his victory on Mount Carmel, and when God chose to work in a different way, Elijah's doubt got the better of him. Where Elijah thought that God had let him down, we see that, in truth, Elijah's narrow view of God and how He works had let Elijah down.

We tend to try to put God in a box, as well. We expect Him to work one way, we think we know what's going to happen next, and when things change or don't go the

way we expect, we feel that God has let us down because he isn't bringing about success as defined by "the box." This is when it is essential for us to defer to God's wisdom. Has there ever been a time in your life when you were able to look back at a time when it seemed like God had failed or was absent and see that He was in fact working for your good? That He had not abandoned you at all, but was simply working in a way you did not expect? That is precisely why we should avoid putting God in our boxes. Instead of saddling God with our expectations, we should defer to His infinite wisdom and trust that He is working His plan out in His time, even if it doesn't make sense to us.

To borrow an example from another pastor: To challenge or refuse to defer to God's wisdom is a little like my son, Levi, refusing to obey me when I tell him not to stick a fork in a wall socket. To him, it makes perfect sense. This fork seems made to fit into these holes in the wall. But I know more that he does, so when he asks me why I tell him not to put that fork into the wall socket, I *could* explain everything I know about electricity (which admittedly isn't that much). I could say to him, "Well, son, miles away from here, a giant turbine stimulates the electrons in an atomic sequence in a way that makes these electrons jump into the circuits of other atoms, creating a polar imbalance that leads to a chain reaction that produces what we call electricity. And while our washing machine and TV need this electricity to function, if you encounter too much of it at one time, it will overload the synapses of your central nervous system, they will cease to function, and you will die." Instead of that, however, I opt for the simpler "Don't do that," and ask for him to trust my wisdom on the matter. We do this kind of thing all the time with our children and we rarely call it irresponsible parenting. "Well,

I'm not a child," you may argue. But what is greater? The difference between a five year old's understanding and mine or the difference between my understanding and that of an infinite God? In our times of doubt, we must remember to defer to God's wisdom and trust that, even if He doesn't explain everything to us, He is working out His plan for His glory.³

Embrace His Goodness

Elijah is summoned into God's presence in verse 11, but he doesn't actually exit the cave until verse 13? Why the delay? Read again verse 12. 1 Kings describes a wind that shattered the rocks on the mountain, an earthquake that shook the mountain, and a fire. Each of these things would have destroyed Elijah had he been outside the cave, but God kept him inside and allowed the mountain to absorb the damage. Just as God had done with Moses, possibly even on this same mountain, He sheltered Elijah in the rock to protect him from death. And after all of the judgment has passed, Elijah hears a whisper that draws him into God's presence. A whisper means that someone is close and intimate. What Elijah experienced of God's goodness and mercy here on Mount Sinai foreshadowed the true Rock who would come to absorb our judgment so that we could also enter God's presence. Jesus, on the cross, would absorb the wind and earthquake and fire of God's wrath so that I could experience the whisper of God's presence. Paul draws a further contrast when he says that, through Christ's sacrifice, we are now able to look on God's glory with unveiled faces, unlike Elijah who had to cover his face to keep from dying as he exited the cave and Moses who had to veil his face so the glory of God reflected there did not kill the Israelites. And this, God's

³ Example borrowed from J.D. Greear's *Not God Enough*.

protection of Elijah and Christ's absorption of God's wrath, means that I as a Christ-follower never have to doubt God's goodness. His goodness toward me was demonstrated forever at the cross. If he crushed His Son when I was still His enemy, will He not continue to be good to me even now? If Christ prayed for my forgiveness while they were driving nails into His hands, do I really need to doubt His goodness now? When God doesn't act like I think he should, when my doubt threatens to overwhelm me and I don't think God is doing what He should, I can rest in the goodness that He demonstrated toward me at the cross.

Pursue His Mission

God ends his renewal of Elijah, after proving His wisdom and demonstrating His goodness, by recommissioning Elijah to His mission. God directs Elijah to continue carrying out His plan for Israel's redemption.

As we have already examined, God reveals to Elijah here that he has indeed been working, just not in the ways Elijah expected. What is also significant for us is that he sent Elijah out to be a part of that plan. In his time of doubt, God mercifully and graciously ministered to Elijah. He summoned Elijah to the mountain, into His presence, so Elijah could rest and be renewed. As a prophet of God, however, Elijah's task was not to rest on the mountain forever, but to go work toward the restoration of Israel. It was good for Elijah to draw near to God and rest in His presence, but it would not have been good for Elijah to withdraw from his mission completely. In our times of doubt, it is good for us to take time to draw near to God and rest in His presence. It is good for us to allow God to minister to us and renew us. But it is not good for us to withdraw from the mission God has given us: to work toward the restoration of all creation and

the realization of His kingdom. Even in the midst of our doubt, we should, as Paul writes, “be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.” God is always working, even if we cannot see how.

Conclusion

We tend to believe that in the Scriptures, God’s plan was always easy to see and follow. I see posts on social media where people write, “Do you ever wish God would just walk into your room, sit down on your bed, and say, ‘Ok, this is what’s gonna happen...’?” And we tend to think this is how things happened in the Old Testament, but that’s just not the case. The heroes of the faith all doubted because God’s plan and God’s work were not always easy to see or follow. That doubt is not inherently wrong or bad, but in our times of doubt, we must do as Elijah and David and Moses and Abraham did. We must defer to God’s wisdom, embrace His goodness, and pursue His mission.

I mentioned earlier that our church finds itself in a time of potential doubt and fear regarding the future. In this time, church, we must do the same. We must defer to God’s wisdom. We may not be able to see what He is doing. He may not be working in the way we think He should. But we must rest in the fact that His thoughts are not our thoughts, His ways are not our ways, and His wisdom is infinite.

We must embrace His goodness. God has demonstrated His goodness to Sixth Street Baptist countless times in the past and this is not the time to doubt that His goodness toward us will continue.

And we must pursue His mission. It is good for us, in this time of uncertainty, to draw near to God. It is good for us to allow Him to renew our faith. But ultimately, church, our place is not on the mountain, but in the wilderness and among the people working toward the coming of His kingdom.

I mentioned earlier that Charles Spurgeon spoke of doubt as a time of moving forward or backward. I recently read through a biography of Spurgeon and learned that he dealt with many seasons of doubt and depression in his life. When he became pastor of New Park Street Chapel in London, his ministry was so great that crowds of 10,000 or more were coming to hear him preach. The crowds were so great that the church had to change venues just to accommodate everyone. Everything seemed to be going wonderfully, but Spurgeon also had enemies who saw him as a cult leader or fundamentalist or egotistical preacher who inflated his crowds just to feed his vanity. And at one service, held in the Surrey Gardens Music Hall in order to accommodate the crowd, someone in the back incited a panic by shouting "Fire!" repeatedly. Everyone stampeded to the exits and seven people were trampled to death. Spurgeon spiraled into a depression that he never fully recovered from, augmented by illness that rendered his wife Susanna an invalid as an adult and his own battles with gout and smallpox. Charles Spurgeon did not, though, allow his doubt to overcome him. Instead, he chose to view his depression as a word from God that pointed him not away from God, but closer to Him. He said, "I find myself frequently depressed - perhaps more so than any other person here. I find no better cure for that depression than to trust in the Lord with all my heart, and seek to realize afresh the power of the peace-speaking

blood of Jesus, and his infinite love in dying upon the cross to put away all my transgressions.”⁴

If you are in a time of doubt, run into the arms of your Creator. Trust in His wisdom, embrace His goodness, and pursue His mission. And if you realize this morning that you are in a pit of despair or are full of doubt because you have never turned to the one who made you, you’ve never trusted in Christ as your Savior and given control of your life to Him, now is the time.

⁴ Carter, Matt and Aaron Ivey. *Steal Away Home*. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2017.