What Doest Thou Here Elijah?
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I Kings 19:9
9 And he came thither unto a cave, and lodged there; and, behold, the word of the
Lord came to him, and he said unto him, What doest thou here, Elijah?

King James Bible

James 5:17
17 Elijah was a human being with a nature such as we have [with feelings, affections,
and a constitution like ours] …

Amplified Bible

Being in the ministry is quite an experience. There is no Bible College, seminary, or
institution that can possibly prepare you for the inexhaustible assortment of
circumstances that will be thrown your way as a minister. Just when you think you
have heard it all, someone else walks into your office and blows your mind all over
again. Just when you think you’ve seen it all, get ready, because the realities of ministry will take you down a whole other path you’ve never traveled.

In retrospect, answering the call to ministry probably proved to be the easiest part. After that decision was made is where things really got interesting. While in the service of the Lord we will at times dance on the highest mountaintops, while at other times trudge through the deepest valleys. There are very good days, and very bad days. People align with you, and people align against you. There are days when you feel like you’ve beaten the world, and there are days when you feel like the world has beaten you.

You discover what it means for God to prepare a table for you, but that it’s always in the midst of your enemies. You come to experience the comfort of His rod and His staff, but you realize that comfort is experienced because of the valleys and shadows. Eventually, if you stay the course, you begin to understand that for every John there is a Judas, for every lover there is a betrayer. Eventually, we all learn to really appreciate the words of Jesus when he said, “I was wounded in the house of my friends.”

The Cave of Elijah

It was with this sobering knowledge of ministry that Elijah, the man of God, fled into the wilderness, ultimately finding himself alone in the cave. Or, rather, we should say that God found him there in the cave. It is remarkable to note that when we think of the cave, we think of isolation and loneliness. We think of despair. It is easy to picture Elijah here, probably because we can relate to his situation so very easily. We all know what the inside of the cave looks like. And like Elijah, many times we have run to the cave. Some ministers visit this cave only once or twice. Others go to the cave frequently. Still others have made the cave of retreat their permanent residence. No matter what the case may be, this one thing is true; we are to never stay there.

It is important to point out that the cave of Elijah was not a place of failure or defeat. On the contrary, the cave of solitude came after some pretty spectacular things. It was just prior to all of this that Elijah had issued his challenge to the prophets of Baal. Then, on Mount Carmel, God answered by fire, proving Elijah the true prophet of the one true God. After these false prophets had been slain, Elijah prophesied about the great rain about to break forth upon the land. Finally, we read about Elijah’s footrace with the chariots of Ahab back to the city of Jezreel. And then Jezebel comes into the picture.
In her rage at the slaying of the false prophets, Jezebel forwards her death threats to Elijah, swearing to take his life within a day. And how did Elijah handle this threat? He ran. We can only speculate on why Elijah ran. Was he afraid? Was he tired and exhausted? Was depression setting in? It’s easy to imagine the sheer amount of demonic forces Elijah faced in that hour. How was his mortal body handling all of these emotions and experiences?

Regardless of just why Elijah ran, it is imperative that we as ministers glean vital truths from the life of this man of God. The first vital truth is this: Whenever the power of God moves in demonstration in our ministry, Satan is always present with a follow-up attack. It is essential that we understand this, lest we drop our guard. That’s why it’s called warfare. That’s why it’s called a battle. It’s why we need both a sword and a shield. God moves, and then Satan moves. Perhaps one of the greatest examples of this principle is when Peter walked upon the water, and then sank in the water.

In the Wilderness

On Elijah’s journey to the cave, he finds himself travelling through a wilderness. What a heartbreaking word, the word “wilderness.” We can all identify with the despair of that word. It is in this wilderness that Elijah drops to his lowest, crying out to God that he might die. The emotions that break forth upon our heart when we are cast down are many. Depression. Sadness. Loneliness. Isolation. Desperation. Fear.

The second vital truth we learn is that God, our Father, ministers to us in these times of need. “And as he lay and slept under a juniper tree, behold, then an angel touched him, and said unto him, Arise and eat. And he looked, and, behold, there was a cake baken on the coals, and a cruse of water at his head, And he did eat and drink, and laid him down again.” 1 Kings 19:5-6 – KJV. It would be difficult to find a more beautiful description of God’s love for His minister. Here is the preacher, fleeing through the wilderness and driven by fear, found in his lowest state by the Father. There is no rebuke. There is no chastisement. There is no anger. Only food. And water. And rest.

God always seeks to strengthen us in our weakest times, and His desire is to lift us up when we’re down. He empowers us so that we might go forth again, not in our own strength, but rather in the strength of the Lord. It was in this strength of the Lord that Elijah journeyed for forty days and forty nights until he came to Horeb, the mountain of God. It was here, in the mountain of God, that Elijah found the cave of God.

A third vital truth that we come to understand is that God will always examine the motives of our heart before enlarging His assignment for us. After the Lord’s question
to Elijah, “What doest thou here?” Elijah responds, “I have been very jealous for the Lord God of hosts: for the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.” 1 Kings 19:10 – KJV. It is here that Elijah’s heart opens up. He communicates his passions to the Lord in simplicity and with honesty. God desires that all His ministers would come to him in such a way.

This cave was not a cave of defeat; it was a cave of retreat. It was in this place that God and His preacher met and they then reasoned together. It was in this seclusion that Elijah discovered that God was not in the wind or the earthquake or the fire, but that He was in the still, small voice. We must learn to hear Him in spite of all the distractions, commotions, and disturbances. “And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave.” 1 Kings 19:13 – KJV.

Back to the Battle

A final vital truth that we come to appreciate, when we’ve completed this process of faith testing and soul-searching, is that God stands ready to expand upon our calling. Reading further into 1 Kings we see that God then commands Elijah to go forth and anoint the kings of Syria and Israel. Additionally, the Lord tells Elijah to anoint Elisha to be a prophet in his room. It appears that the Lord wants Elijah to have help, companionship, and support as he ventures back into the battle. God then enlightens Elijah with these powerful words. “Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him.” 1 Kings 19:18 – KJV.

As preachers, pastors, and ministers we will undoubtedly experience great manifestations of the power of God, just as Elijah did. We will also come face to face with Satan’s counterattacks that he launches as a response to God’s goodness. But we are also human. Elijah was subject to the same passions, feelings, and affections that we are subject to. It is important to always remember that in the dark and difficult valleys of ministry is where God desires to show Himself the greatest. There is always a cave of retreat, a resting place, a shelter of safety where we can wait for the still, small voice of the Lord.

And when the Lord asks you, “What doest thou here?” you can answer, “I’m waiting on You. I’m resting in You. I’m trusting in You. I’m waiting for fresh oil, a new anointing, and an expansion of my assignment. I’m jealous for You, Lord, for Your people have forsaken Your covenant. Send me forth, O God, that I might bring an anointing to Your people.”