



## Sermon Transcript

### March 17, 2019

## Finding God in the Hard Place

### When God Does Nothing

I Kings 19:1-18

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on March 17, 2019 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Rev. Michael J. Conserva. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio copy of the sermon on CD is available by request at (860) 563-8286. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at [www.wethefc.com](http://www.wethefc.com).

## Sermon Text

### I Kings 19:1-18

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. <sup>2</sup> 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." <sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> 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." <sup>5</sup> And he lay down and slept under a broom tree. And behold, an angel touched him and said to him, "Arise and eat." <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> 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." <sup>8</sup> 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.

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?" <sup>10</sup> 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." <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> And after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper. <sup>13</sup> 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?" <sup>14</sup> 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." <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> 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."

## Introduction

We are currently in our series “Finding God in the Hard Place” or another way to think of it is being stuck between a rock and a hard place. We are making two assumptions throughout this series. The first assumption is that life is hard. Some of you find yourself in a “hard place” this morning because of forces outside of your control. Others find themselves in a “hard place” because living week to week is just hard and our own shortcomings and imperfections just sometimes complicate life all the more. I think we can all attest to the fact that life is hard and we all know what it means to be stuck between a rock and a hard place. The second assumption is that God can be found in the hard place. In fact, it is often the “hard place” that God uses to show himself to us and it is often the hard place that drives us to God.

This morning we are going to begin by looking at the story of Elijah in 1 Kings 19. (read the text)

Elijah is probably one of the most interesting figures and greatest of God’s saints in the Old Testament. The New Testament makes it clear that He is a prince among believers. After all, Elijah was only one of two men who never tasted physical death: Enoch, who was contemporary of Noah, and Elijah the prophet, who was caught up into heaven. Elijah also appears in the New Testament on the Mount of Transfiguration and spoke to the Lord Jesus concerning His death, which he was to accomplish in Jerusalem. The book of James also points to Elijah as a great man of faith and a mighty man of prayer. Lastly, the book of Malachi predicts that Elijah the prophet will appear on earth before the great and terrible day of the Lord. This is indeed a great man of God.

But here in chapter 19 of 1 Kings we find Elijah in a most awkward moment, where he is neither heroic nor courageous, but he is very, very human. I believe this is why James, says of Elijah, he is a man of like passions or a nature like ours.

Though he achieved such tremendous heights of greatness in his faith and in his conflict with the prophets of Baal, here we find Elijah sitting under a juniper tree disconsolate and dejected.

Elijah is suffering from a disease that is very common to man, a disease known as Juniperitis. It’s also has some generic names, which go by; ‘the Monday morning blues’; ‘the I quits.’ A common symptom of the disease is, “Ah, what’s the use?” or “I’ve had enough,” “I’m done.”

**Big Idea:** Perhaps you find yourself between a rock and a hard place, a dilemma that you

are facing, a crisis of faith whereby we don't understand the ways of God; we begin to question the veracity of God. God seems absent and silent, we feel alone and we wonder if God is even at work at all or if he even cares. What I want you to take away this morning is this; when it appear like God is doing nothing, He is always doing something.

### **His Dilemma (IKings 19:1-4a)**

Chapter 18:1 begins by saying, *"After many days the word of the LORD came to Elijah, in the third year, saying, 'Go, show yourself to Ahab...'"* Elijah challenges them to a contest and he says, Meet me on Mount Carmel! My God can lick your God. You may remember the story of how Elijah laid down the gauntlet and challenged Ahab to summon all the priests of Baal into a contest on top of Mount Carmel. They had built two altars there and the priests had laid a sacrifice upon their altar and Elijah had laid a sacrifice upon his altar. The challenge was that the God who answers by fire and consumed the sacrifice, their God would be the God of Israel.

You may recall the story of how the priest of Baal went around their altar all day long chanting and calling out to their god, Baal, trying to evoke a response. They got so desperate that they began cutting themselves in the flesh and beating their bodies trying to attract the attention of their god. Elijah mocked them, saying, "Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened." Why doesn't he listen to you? Nothing happens. Then it's Elijah's turn. After he rebuilds the altar and puts 12 stones around it representing the twelve tribes of Israel, and then he orders a trench to be dug around the altar and to pour 4 jars of water onto the sacrifice and do it 3 times. The altar is saturated with water. As Elijah prayer, fire came down from heaven and consumed the sacrifice, the altar, the water and everything else. When all the people saw it they fell on their faces and said, the Lord He is God, the Lord He is God. Then Elijah seizes all of the prophets of Baal, 450 of them and he puts them to death to cleanse the nation. It's amazing story.

Notice the last verse of chapter 18, *"And the power of the Lord was on Elijah, and he gathered up his garment and ran before Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel."*

Now why would he do that? Jezreel was the capital. He was a marked man, there was a price on his head and Ahab and Jezebel wanted to kill him. The only reason would be this; either Ahab and Jezebel would repent or the people would rise up against them. But one way or the other, the faith of the Lord would become the faith of the people and Israel would turn back to the living God.

Elijah had done everything he could absolutely do and yet the nation's leaders didn't repent. They weren't even fazed. They weren't even shaken. They weren't even impressed. Ahab and Jezebel didn't repent. The people didn't even rise up. There is no Co-De-Ta. There isn't even a couple of plaquards, No, nothing happened. Elijah sees that, takes stock of the situation becomes fearful because he lost his focus and he flees.

Verse 2. Jezebel sends him a message... *"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."* Elijah became afraid and runs off into the desert, He is running off to Mt. Horeb. Why? We will see that in just a moment.

Interestingly, in verse 3 there is no 'Word of the Lord' instructing Elijah like in times prior. As a matter of fact, the 'Word of the Lord' doesn't show up again until verse 9.

When Elijah runs off, we see the man of God cracking in despair and depression. He is spent. In vs. 3 he lets his servant go, why? Elijah has a servant not because he is a rich man, but because he is a prophet. This is his staff, he is letting his staff go, in other words, Elijah is saying, 'I quite the ministry.' I am out of the ministry. My career is over. And then in verse 4 he looks to God and he says, Take my life.

I know there are people here who have thought about suicide. There is probably a good possibility this morning that there are some people in here who have very recently or the not too distant past thought about suicide. May I point out, that Elijah, even in this situation does not presume that he has the right to kill himself? He does not assume the fact that he has the right to kill himself. But what he is asking for is that God would take his life, which shows he is in utter despair and completely despondent over his circumstances.

### **His Despondency (IKings 4b-8)**

Look at the characteristics of this. I think we can recognize them very easily. **First** of all there was fear, which is evidenced by Elijah fleeing in the desert. Fear indicates that we have ceased trusting in God and start trusting in ourselves and our own resources. In the New Testament how many times does Jesus say to his disciples, Fear Not, Fear Not!

Notice the **second** characteristic of despondency is that we become utterly illogical when we turn from faith to fear. If Elijah really wanted to die, he didn't have to go anywhere. All he needed to do was show himself to Jezebel and she would have gladly accommodated him.

The **third** mark of despondency is self-pity. Elijah says, “*It is enough; it is enough,*” which is an elegant way of saying he is fed up. He has taken all he can take. He’s reached his limit. He doesn’t like how things are unfolding. You see, he was expecting something completely different.

A **fourth** mark of despondency is self-disparagement, when he says, “I am no better than my fathers.” Really, who told him that? We put ourselves down and we love to pick at our own wounds. That’s what is going on here. He is wallowing in self-pity for himself.

Then **lastly** comes self-justification. The word of the Lord comes to him and says, ‘What are you doing here Elijah?’ Now when God asks a question, it is never to get information for him. Down in verse 14 he says the exact same thing, “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...” You see what is happening. He has rehearsed this little story again and again. He has it down pat just in case somebody asks him. Life seems completely bleak. Self has blotted out God and it doesn’t seem like there is any ray of hope for the future. It appears that God has done nothing and apparently plans on doing nothing.

And yet 1 Corinthians 10:13 tells us; “Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction...” Throughout the Scripture, you have again and again, this lesson driven into our hearts by these old stories that when things seem to be utterly hopeless and nothing is happening, I want you to know, the greatest things of all are happening.

We learn this lesson in nature. I love to sit in my sunroom and look out at nature. This time of year you look outside and you see this bleak and wintry landscape covered with snow, not a leaf on the trees, everything is so bare and dreary and desolate looking. It’s this time of year that we long for spring. It seems almost impossible that anything could break the icy grip of winter’s hold. But, you know, spring never did come with a roar. It always comes gently and quietly—that invisible force that is at work that puts leaves back onto the trees, brings back the grass and melts all the snow and sends it all away. This is the way God works. You know what the mightiest force known to man is the silent, noiseless power of the tide, which simply can lift whole cities without any strain at all. Invisible, noiseless, irresistible—this is the way God works.

Now this is the greatest lesson that God wants to teach the prophet and I am sure He wants to teach us—that when God seems to be doing nothing, the greatest things are taking place.

But the Lord wasn't through with Elijah and failure doesn't mean defeat or an end to our ministry. Before God could use Elijah there were some things Elijah had to learn.

Five times in this section the word "*behold*" is used to highlight an important fact or truth of God's dealing with the prophet. (19:5, 6, 9, 11, 13). Against the backdrop of Elijah's failure God is interested in restoring his prophet physically, emotionally and spiritually, regardless of what he had done. Let's look at how the Lord worked to restore the prophet.

### Physically

Look at verse 5, "*And he lay down and slept under a broom tree. And **behold**, an angel touched him and said to him, 'Arise and eat.'*"

The first step in God's resuscitation for his prophet is to feed him and put him to bed. He sends an angel and what does the angel do first with his completely despondent prophet. He cooks. All the angel does is cook and touch him and reflect back his feelings that he is tired and exhausted. Elijah has a physical nature and he lives in a physical world and sometimes you don't need a prayer and sometimes you certainly don't need a lecture or let alone a sermon. What you really need is a good sleep in, a great meal at your favorite restaurant and a nice walk by the sea and a good book. God has ordained sleep and rest as necessary for our survival and ability to function. So the Lord allowed him to sleep. Much of time when we suffer from despondency and dejection, the first step in the cure will be this very thing. God put his prophet to bed.

Look at verse 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.'*"

This was no ordinary angel. This was none other than "the angel of the Lord." It was a Theophany or better yet a Christophany, a manifestation of the second person of the Trinity. This was no less than the Savior who came personally to minister to the prophet. Why?

To show the prophet His love and grace and perhaps to remind us that it was when we were sinners and alienated from God that He send His Son for us. It is a reminder that the Savior never leaves us no matter how far we drift away, God is in the cave with us. He is personally involved in seeking to restore us. God still has a plan for his prophet, just as he does for us when we get out of His plan.

God treats this depressed man with a multi-faceted approach. He treats him understanding all the dimensions in which he lives. He is a physical being, he is a relational being, he is an emotional being, he is a spiritual being.

### Emotionally

Why does Elijah go to Mount Horeb? Which is also Mount Sinai? I believe Elijah goes back to Sinai perhaps for a couple of different reasons. Sinai is the place of holy memories. Sinai stood forever as a reminder to Israel of God's power and God's grace. Mt. Sinai was the place where God first made his covenant with Israel, giving the 10 Commandments. Elijah goes back to a familiar place whereby every stone, every rock, every crag, every cave of the mountain reminded him of God who cared and a God who would act.

But I also believe Elijah went to Mt. Sinai because he wants to know God. He doesn't really understand God. He wants to know who God really is. Here he is confused, scared, disappointed in God. The outcome wasn't what he expected. What just happened doesn't line up with his theology of what he knows about God. Elijah has a head and heart problem. In other words, his faith was placed, not upon God, but upon his knowledge of God and he was trusting in himself. Elijah was willing to go along with God, as long as God was doing what Elijah expected him to do. I think sometimes we too are willing to go along with God when we know what God is up to, but it is when God does the unexpected or things don't turn out as we hoped and as a result we hit rock bottom or we fall apart at the seams. This is what happened to Elijah. This is frequently the cause of our despondency, is it not?

### Spiritually

Look at verse 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?" Verse 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."*

What does God do next, **He listens**. Up to this point, God has been very gracious with his prophet. For a long time all God does is listen. He comes and asks Elijah a question. Now when God asks a question, it is never to get information for him, it is to give you information. It's a soul searching question. His answer shows us that he has not grasped the issues. He was filled with his own importance and angry over the lack of response and help from others including the Lord. I believe he was somewhat bitter because he



had served the Lord so earnestly and yet things didn't turn out as he had hoped, similar to Jeremiah.

Finally God instructs his prophet and he begins to deal with him on a spiritual level. He tells him to go out and stand on the mount before the Lord.

Look at verse 11, "*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. And after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire And after the fire the sound of a low whisper. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.*"

What is amazing about this passage is all the different manifestations in which God shows up. At first He comes as the angel of the Lord. He just touches, cooks, and listens, not sermons, just nearness. But then when he gets to the mountain there is earthquake, wind and fire.

What does all this mean? The message does not mean God is never an earthquake, wind or fire. That can't be what it means because obviously those three things came from God and it reminds us of the number of times God shows up as these things.

Any yet, the most surprising thing of all, the ultimate manifestation of His presence, He shows up as a Still Small Voice or a Gentle Whisper. Elijah immediately recognizes that it is God speaking. What does this mean?

Even God doesn't always operate in the realm of the spectacular. God says, "Go Out." (Vs 11). But notice it is not till verse 13 that he goes out. Why not? A hurricane comes, then an earthquake and then a fire and Elijah isn't touched by any of it. Why not? Because of the Rock! The Rock shields him. The Rock is torn up, the rock is burned. It can't get through and then finally in comes the Word. What does all this mean? Now, on the one hand this means this, God is trying to say, "don't look to the spectacular." Mt. Camel is not the way I usually do things Elijah. You thought that everybody heart was going to be changed. You thought that spectacular answers to prayer were going to change everybody. You thought that miracles, the dramatic was going to change hearts. It didn't! Anymore than the earthquake, wind and fire got into you. It couldn't penetrate their hearts anymore than it could penetrate you when you were inside the mountain. It just couldn't do it.

Don't make the mistake. Divine silence does not mean inactivity on God's part. You see

Elijah had put God in a box. He thought if I do X, Y then God has to do Z. Every time you think that God has to show up as a fire, He will show up as a whisper on you, and every time you think God has to show up as a whisper He will show up as a fire. He showed up as a fire to Moses, He showed up as a whisper to Elijah.

God asks him again, what are you doing here Elijah? Elijah answers the same way. Elijah condemns himself out of his own mouth. Elijah shows us why he has been so despondent. He says I have been very jealous for the Lord of Host, which means first of all, I had the right plan I executed it perfectly, what's wrong with you God. And secondly, He says, I am the only one left. Really, where did he get that idea?

The reason for Elijah's despondency is because He was overly optimistic about his own plan, but he was overly pessimistic about God's plan. He had put God in a box.

God says, "I am not a tame God, I am not a God at hand. You cannot put me in a box." This was the reason for Elijah's despondency. The whole reason why Elijah is so screwed up now is because he is not looking at the world through the Gospel. He is not understanding. He has not been humbled by the earthquake, wind and fire. He put God in a box. God had let him down. Do you believe that? No! His plan has let him down. And he had identified God with his plan.

Do you really want to know what really changes people's hearts? Let me tell you what will actually penetrate and change people's hearts. My voice, my Word, My Spirit through my Word, that's how hearts are changed.

Do you remember there is a famous parable in Luke 16 where Jesus Christ tells about a Rich man who goes to hell. And the Rich man looks up to heaven and sees father Abraham and says, 'Father Abraham send somebody back from the dead to talk to my brothers. My brothers are still alive and I don't want them to go to hell. So I want them to see the truth, I want them to understand, I want their hearts to be changed. Send somebody back from the dead, a miracle, that will do it. And do you know what Abraham says, He says, they have Moses and the Prophets, and if they won't listen to the Scriptures, they won't listen even if somebody comes back from the dead.

Do you take that seriously? Do you what Jesus is saying? If you want to know God, if you want to have your life changed, instead of looking for incredible mystical experiences, instead of looking for signs in the sky, go to the scripture. Go to the scripture and read it as if it is the voice of God. Nothing will change your life like hearing the voice of God through the Scripture.

## His Deliverance (1 Kings 19:15-18)

*“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.””*

All the while Elijah was despairing about the future, God was planning it. God’s says I have Hazael, A powerful and ruthless king over Syria, who I am going to use to punish Israel. God had also raised up Jehu a new king in Israel to purify the land. And then there was Elisha, who had a double blessing of the spirit of Elijah resting upon him to proclaim the Word of God. Plus, there was also the remnant. God always has his remnant, 7,000 men who have not bowed to Baal or kissed his idol.

God recommissions his prophet and puts him back to work.

## Conclusion

God had to teach Elijah some very valuable lessons, but the greatest lesson Elijah had to learn is that even when it appears that God is doing nothing, he is always up to something. His ways are not our ways, his thoughts are not our thoughts. To paraphrase Elizabeth Elliott in her book *Through the Gates of Splendor*. God is God and if He is God then there is no place safe except in his will and that place will be immeasurably, unspeakably, infinitely, beyond any of your largest notions about what He is up to. Listen Trust Him, Trust Him.

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## COMMUNITY GROUPS



### Getting To Know Me Questions

1. Share with another person or the group a dilemma you have faced and how did God meet you in that place? What are some things God taught you? How did He deliver you from the dilemma?
2. What types of things tend to get you down the most?
3. Name one thing that you took away from the sermon this week?



### Diving Into The Word

4. Read 1 Kings 19:1-3, How does fear sometimes create despondency and depression? What type of fears have a grip on your life?
5. Read 1 Kings 19:4-8, Immediately following a great victory, Elijah became despondent. Elijah wore himself out, shut people out, focused on the negative and forgot the faithfulness of God. Of these four, which one is your most common challenge in your own life?
6. One of the most common factors that leads to despondency is wearing ourselves out. In what areas of your life are you exhausted? What are some things you can do starting today to help relieve that exhaustion?
7. Read 1 Kings 19:9-14, God spoke to Elijah with a gentle whisper. Describe a time when God spoke to you with a gentle whisper. What did he say to you?
8. Read 1 Kings 19:15-16, God encouraged Elijah to eat and rest, to believe the truth instead of lies, to listen to His voice and to get back to doing what prophets do. At this season of your life, which of these areas resonate with you most? Why?



### Taking It Home

9. Final thought: Even if your greatest fear or 'what if' occurs in your life, God will be there for you to help rise above it. God will always be enough for you. Spend your remaining time and pray for those in your group that are struggling with despondency and depression, as well as those who are struggling with fears and exhaustion. Ask that God will work in them to remove these feelings from their life just as He did with Elijah.