

Where is God in our Battles?

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Preacher: Derek Lamont

[0 : 0 0] So, for just for a short time this evening, we're going to look back at 1 Kings 19, the passage that Callum read down to verse 18. 1 Kings 19, 1 to 18. I've preached from this passage before here, so I apologize if you've heard a sermon on this theme before, but it is looking at it in a slightly fresh way, I hope, this evening. We just come off the back, as you said, already, of a week of prayer. We've been praying together. And I think sometimes when you pray, and when we pray together, I think we're tempted sometimes to look for spectacular answers. And when that doesn't happen, or when we don't think God answers our prayers at all, we're really discouraged. And we wonder why we bother. It may be that we're particularly aware this evening of spiritual battles. You may be discouraged with church, or with yourself, or with the state of the nation, or with your circumstances. And maybe particularly with a sense of frustration, with a lack of answered prayer in your own life, and the battles that just simply don't seem to be ending. And I wonder sometimes whether it's chapter 18 is the answer we want. If you look back to chapter 18, I'm sure many of you will know what that chapter is, it's when Elijah is challenged about his God with the prophets of Baal. And you know, they set up a sacrifice, and the prophets of Baal, you know, they're running around, and they're singing, and dancing, and cutting themselves, and praying to their gods. And their gods don't answer the sacrifice that's on the altar with fire, which is the challenge. But then Elijah comes, and he pours buckets of cold water, and buckets of cold water on the sacrifice, and he builds a trench around it so there's water all the way around it. Then he prays to the living God that the God, living God would show himself. And God reveals himself with just this startling display of his power, fire from heaven. It licks up the water and burns the sacrifice. And the living God reveals himself in answered prayer. Surely that's what we want. It's an incredible story. What a victory is one for the living God in front of all these witnesses who see and hear this prayer that's answered. Surely nobody could deny the living God then. And in our own prayers, that's what we want for people, that's what we want to see. Our friends and our neighbors and the people we've been praying for this week, and maybe been praying for, for three or four or five or ten or twenty or thirty years that they would see his power and his glory as well. Chapter 18 is the answer, right? That's what we want. We want to see fire from heaven. We want to see the power of God, and amazing answers to our prayers so that everyone will see who he is. And our motives are good, aren't they? That's what we want. Maybe that's what you want, and you're crying out to God. Well,

I don't, I don't understand why you're not answering my prayers. My motives are good. I want you to have the glory, and I want people to see who you are. Well, chapter 19 is the sequel. This is what we have. We have chapter 18, and it's followed by chapter 19. And what are we reminded of in chapter 19? Following this remarkable victory, this amazing answer to prayer that God reveals, it actually didn't make any difference. It actually made very little difference. This incredible revelation of the power and the glory of God, it didn't seem to make any difference. Ahab and Jezebel, king and queen, were still in power. They were still ruling the land and worshipping idols.

In fact, they were even more determined, Jezebel particularly, even more determined in her rejection of Elijah's God. It didn't have the desired effect, and she vowed to destroy him.

This great revelation of God's power was useless for them, and it seemed that the whole episode had been a waste of time. And Elijah saw this. He heard the threat from Jezebel to say, I'm going to make you like the rest of these guys. I'm going to cut your throat. You're gone. And he recognized that nothing really had changed. In fact, things seem to be worse. And he was fearful of that. He was, I'm sure, weary, spiritually discouraged. It seems that he felt like he was a failure.

You know, it's enough now, Lord, he says, take my life away. I'm no better than my fathers. He had real zeal for God and for God's kingdom and God's covenant and God's honor, but it seemed that God didn't seem to care for it. That's what it may have looked like to him. He's broken and he's questioning. And he doesn't want to die at the hand of Jezebel. He doesn't want to give her the final victory. He doesn't mind dying, but he doesn't want to die at her hand. And so he runs into the desert and asks, exhausted and alone, and asks God, just take my life. I'm no real better. Things have gone desperately wrong. And the remarkable answer to prayer doesn't seem to have made any difference. Rather, he was discouraged. He didn't understand why the prayer of God, his prayer and the revelation of God didn't have the desired effect. He seemed overwhelmed by circumstances and by the darkness of the human heart. And he reaches out to God in that. Where are you? Where are your promises? What's going to happen to the covenant that you've made with your people? There's nobody left. I'm the only one left. What will happen to the covenant? What will happen to the Messiah that you've promised? There's no line. It will be the end. What was the value of my prayer? And my contention as we look at this, which is quite different, I think, from quite a lot of the traditional interpretations of this passage, is that Elijah wasn't full of self pity.

[6 : 58] This wasn't a believer who had let his guard down after this remarkable victory and kind of strutted about and said, hey, look at me. Look what I was able to do and then didn't give God the glory.

It's not that he, it's often said that he failed after this encounter with Jezebel and the prophets of Baal. And from the mountaintop experience on Carmel, he descended. He let his guard down and he's kind of in the huff with God and he's full of self pity. He's got what we would say is the poor me's and that God rebukes him. I don't accept that interpretation. I don't think that's what the passage unfolds to us. This is not someone who has disobeyed God in any sense, and he is not cowardly, but he is someone who is wrestling with God's honour and wrestling with the way God has dealt with him, certainly. And I think we see that in God's response and in what's happening here in the passage. So how does God respond? Why does it matter? Because I'm sure some of you feel like that at different points in your lives. We wrestle and we battle with prayer, don't we? And with who

God is and the kind of answers he gives or doesn't give. And we wonder, well, wouldn't it be great if symbolic fire from heaven came down? Maybe even literal, I don't know, but at least symbolic fire for the fire of the Holy Spirit came down and opened the hearts of the people that we've been prayed for and things like that. But how does God respond here? And I think that reveals to us a little bit about the character of God, which is important for us. He gives him sleep. That's implied.

It's not explicit, but we are told that he lay down and he slept under a broom tree. He allowed him sleep. He was exhausted. And then he comes to him. So God comes to Elijah in verse 5. He told an angel touched him, said, arise and eat. And then in verse 7, and the angel of the Lord came again a second time and touched him and said, arise and eat. So it's an angel or the angel of the Lord. And we know the angel of the Lord is very often a representation of God Himself. He comes to him. So God either sends his messenger or he comes himself or both. He comes to him. He comes with food, sleep and food to strengthen him. And he comes with a word. He comes with a word of assurance and he says to him, arise and eat for the journey is too great for you. God knew he was going on a journey. So he was going somewhere. Okay, that's something we don't know up to this point. He's not just running away. He's going somewhere. He's not just running from Jezebel. He's on a journey somewhere. He's chosen to go somewhere. And God says you need to go. It's a long way away. And you're going to need your physical strength to get there and the sleep that you've had. Where's he going?

Well, we're told that he arose and ate and drank and went in the strength of that for 40 days and 49 days to Horeb, the mountain of God. So Elijah's going somewhere. Following what happened on Mount Carmel, he's going another mountain and he's going back to a mountain that's very significant. He's going to Mount Horeb, which is also Mount Sinai. It's just a different name. The place where Moses and God revealed to Moses himself in the burning bush, where the Ten Commandments were given, where the God of the Covenant revealed His covenant with the people of Israel. This place of promises just flowed out of Mount Sinai. And that's what Elijah's going back to. He's going back to the beginning. He's stripping back things and he's going back to the beginning of the relationship of God had with his people, of whom he's a prophet. And God's given him strength to go there. And interesting, isn't it? It takes 40 days and 40 nights. We've heard that before in the

[11 : 22] Bible, haven't we? It's a significant number. It's kind of, it's linked in the Bible. I'm not really terribly much into numerology, biblically and things like that, but there's clearly a link between this number, significant number, in its biblical context. The Israelites were 40 years in the desert. Jesus was 40 days and 40 nights in the desert. Moses was up the mountain for 40 days.

There's significance and it is often related to judgment or testing or a stripping bear or a renewing dependence upon God. And if you look at a map of that part of the world, Neuer was talking about that part of the world, and it's probably roughly, oh, I can't remember how many kilometers it is, but I worked it out that it would be, he would be going roughly to get there in 40 days and 40 nights from where he was to Mount Horeb. It would be about six miles a day, not in the easiest of terrain. He didn't have a car. He would be walking. So God says, you've got time. I'm giving you time, time to think, time to reflect, and time to consider. And then when he comes to Mount Horeb, God asks an open-ended question. He says, what are you doing here? What are you doing here?

Now, you could take that as a rebuke, you know, if your child had the fridge open and was eating what you'd prepared for tea. You say, what are you doing here? You shouldn't be here, or if they were in the wrong place or whatever. And that could be a rebuke.

But God sent him, didn't He? You know, you need this energy for the journey. You need to strength to get to Horeb. And so God's asking, He's asking an open-ended question. It's not a rebuke. He's saying, look, Elijah, what are you doing here? What's the significance of you coming here? Why have you come here? He is opening the opportunity for Elijah to speak back to him.

Absolutely. He said, tell me your heart, Elijah. Why have you come back here following what happened on Mount Carmel? And Elijah does not whine back at God. He doesn't say, oh, it's terrible. I'm the only one left, and it's miserable, and I just want... It's not a whine far from it. He twice speaks significantly of why He has come, because I've been very jealous for the Lord. He's right.

[14 : 09] He's not being cocky or arrogant. The God of hosts for the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only am left, and they seek my life to take it away. He's come back to the God of the covenant on the mountain of the covenant, because the people have broken the covenant, and He's saying, what's the way forward?

I have sought to do what you want me to do, and here I'm at the end of the road. I'm going 90 miles an hour down a dead end street, and the devil's on the sea, and I don't know where I can turn out.

Are you finished with us, God? He asks that question, and God permits that question, and then God reveals Himself in that very famous passage, isn't it? In that very... He doesn't reveal Himself in the power of the wind or in the fire. He reveals Himself in a still small voice as we often translate it, or in a low whisper. So what happens here is God reveals Himself only in a whisper.

You remember what's happened in the previous chapter? God did reveal Himself with fire, but here He only reveals it, and it's awe-inspiring. It's awe-inspiring. Because Elijah responds, we're told he responds, Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak, went out, and stood at the entrance of the cave. There was this sense of the divine here in the whisper.

It wasn't just in the whisper, but it was God was in the whisper. The presence of God was absolutely real. It reminds me of the... You remember the passage in the New Testament, just before Jesus was taken to be crucified, and He was in the Garden of Gethsemane, and the soldiers came to arrest Him, and they were all these soldiers with their swords, they were big, strong Roman soldiers, you know, they were gladiator-type men, and they're standing before Jesus, and they say, we've come to get Jesus. And He says, in that great, powerful divine revelation, I am. He just says, I am. Now, it's just a word, it's just, He may even have whispered it, but they fall at His feet, stumbling and fall. It's not, these are not Keystone cops. This is the most professional army in the world, but they fall down at His feet because He says, I am, and the only explanation is there's a revelation of His divine being as He speaks, and so here, there's nothing magical in His whisper, but simply He reveals Himself. His divine presence is revealed in power and quietness.

[16 : 55] He says, I am as He speaks, and whispers to Elijah, and then He gives a revelatory word to Him, a word of judgment and a word of grace. He still says, there's judgment to be done, and He will send people to judge those who have broken the covenant.

But it's also a word of grace. He recommissions Elijah, you've still got work to do, you're not finished yet. This isn't the end of your story. I want you to go and to commission others to serve. Anoint these kings and anoint your successor, Elisha, and also He will be your companion. He'll go with you. You need His someone. You've been alone, and He commissions Elisha to go with him. Great provision, and He also says, of course, you're not the only one. There's 7,000 that have not yet bowed the knee to Baal. And so He reveals, you know, more of the story, and He reveals that His perspective is the right one, and that Elijah, I guess there's a gentle rebuke in that, isn't there? Or at least there's definitely a sense in which He's saying, look, please trust in me. Please trust my promises. Please believe me. Even in the basis of what I did in the previous encounter on Mount Carmel, please trust, and He reveals Himself. So briefly, what is God like? What are we being taught from this passage? Because I don't suppose we face any of the same exact issues as Elijah, but we can associate with Him, I imagine, maybe with weirdness or depression with spiritual realities, confused about God and His promises, prayer.

You may be found praying this week perfunctory. Hasn't changed anything, you don't think. You may be isolated and you feel nobody understands you, in a sense, a bit like Elijah.

What can we learn from God briefly in these words? I think the first thing is, God knows and we need to know the power of darkness. We absolutely do. He knew the Israelites and they're proneness to idolatry, and they also knew Jezebel, so much so that Jesus in John 3, 19, says that men prefer the darkness rather than the light. He knows that. It doesn't matter what miracles are performed, people still prefer the darkness rather than the light, and He knows that and He appreciates that. If people only needed a flash of lightning to believe, then the cross is redundant, isn't it? Across the, Corey was speaking about this morning, the only way of breaking the spiritual darkness in the hearts of people is not through wind and lightning and revelations of God's power at that level, it's by the great act of crucifixion.

We want drama and people will be saved, and I'm saying, no, that's not right. People need to meet with Jesus Christ, and that brings me, well, I'm not quite actually, I'll come back to that, but He knows the powers of that. He knows the darkness of our own hearts and the stubbornness, but He also knows what we need, and we see that from the way He treats with, deals with Elijah, doesn't He? No, we need food, we need rest, we need time, don't we? We need time to understand God's purposes, we need time to reflect and think through the way He does things.

[21 : 01] We sometimes need desert experiences and the time that they allow us to work our way back to Him, to strip us back to that place where we see and understand Him. He knows we need assurance, and He knows we need companionship. Isaiah 30 verse 18 speaks as He cares that we care, doesn't He?

He says, Lord longs to be gracious to you, therefore He will rise up to show you compassion, for the Lord is the Lord of justice, blessed are all those who wait in Him. He rises up to show us compassion. He cares that we care, He knows what we need.

Zef and I are 317, one of my favorite verses in the Bible. The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one He will say, He will rejoice over you gladness, He will quiet you with His love, He will exalt over you with loud singing. God is a God who knows and who cares, and who wants to hear, He will say to you, what are you doing here? Because He wants, it's an open-ended question, because He wants to hear your complaints and your version of events, and your imperfect knowledge of your own life and life around you. Take them to Him.

He doesn't expect us to have the answers, but He will recommission us. He will remind us we've got work to do, we've got a calling as His children, and that He will never leave her for sake us.

So He knows what we need and He cares that we care, and that's good. But His presence defies our expectation, and that brings me back to this whisper again, and to the need for Jesus Christ.

[22 : 41] I hope I'm not reading too much into this passage by saying that Jesus, I know you can kind of take, you can make Jesus appear in every part of the Bible in a way that's not really very authentic. I don't think this would be inauthentic, but Jesus is the divine whisper. Can I say that? Is that okay to say that? Because in John chapter 1 we say that Jesus was the Word, and the Word became flesh. And I think there is a significant relationship, a relation between what God was saying to Elijah and the coming of the Redeemer, God in the flesh.

It was a whisper, wasn't it? He was unknown for 30 years. He didn't look any different to anyone else. He wasn't this God who was remarkable and God in the midst of His people. He was just Joseph's son.

That's all he was, and he lived his life. There was glimpses of his glory, but he was rejected. And so our redemption is not by a superhero, it's by Jesus Christ, the rejected Jew on a human, on a Roman cross. A one who quietly was raised and who ascended to heaven, who were only a few saw Him. Quiet, a whisper. How often have you asked the question, why didn't more people, why didn't Jesus appear to more people? Why did He die with only 12 followers?

And a rag tag of people, the most unsuccessful evangelist ever was, in many ways. And why? And the gospel being that Christ reveals Himself to us in our conscience, as we put our trust in Him in very un-dramatic ways, as in our knees in prayer and the sacrament through the ordinary means of the 2,000-year-old Scriptures. God speaks through the required work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, ordinary lives, lives of faith and obedience. So you go from here to here, and you whisper the gospel. That's where God speaks, that's where His power is.

When you give the, you know what Jesus talks about, the cup of cold water. Unremarkable, yet the gentle but powerful loving of your neighbor, the quenching of gossip, the compassion and the care. That's where the unmistakable power, divine power is in, as we love God and as we love our neighbor in these remarkable, obedient ways, that's what will inspire worship. That's what will be the revelation, the revolution that will change this world. That's when we will know Him and not just about Him. It's His quiet sovereignty.

[25 : 35] And I do believe God is speaking through this passage with regard to that in terms of our answer to prayers. What are you looking for from God in prayer? What is it? Is it drama?

Is it miracles and visible power? Do we want Him to dance to our beat in answered prayer in the way that the rich man wanted Him, wanted the Lazarus to go back from the grave and appear to his brothers because something as dramatic as that would surely bring them to faith.

And yet God says, no, if they don't believe in the Word and the prophets, if they don't believe in the message and in the gentle whisper of God, they will not turn. And that is important for us to remind ourselves of. And very briefly, we see also His way of sacrifice, He speaks here again in terms of the whisper and the revelation.

It's not simply the cross, is it? It's that we go from here living our lives, laying down our lives for others. Servanthood, the angels, the ministering spirits, Hebrews 1 verse 14, are they not all ministering spirits? The angels sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation. So God sends His angels, His messengers, and we are to reflect that. God comes as an angel of the Lord to Elijah and serves Him, and that is how He wants us to live our lives.

He wants you to be an angel for Him. Whose angel will you be? Who you serve? As you share in that task of being a ministering servant, who will you pour your life out for, for someone else's need?

[27 : 31] Whose prayers are you the answer to? Because undoubtedly, you are the answer to someone's prayers as you serve and as you recognize the incarnate nature of grace as we serve one another in the family here at St. Columba's. And He also reveals, lastly, His reality, then and now, both judgment and grace. And these are important and crucial realities for us. We don't have the full picture. We don't know in whose heart God is working. We know He's still has work to do.

We know we are part of that work. We know His kingdom is coming. And He doesn't want us to go back into our caves. He wants us to recognize that we have a purpose and that we are on the side of victory and that He still has many people, for example, in this city. And so we look to serve Him and recognize that His kingdom is coming and He will return in judgment, in glory. And it will be not a whisper when He returns. And we trust Him with that. And as we finish, I quote two passages, I think which in a sense sum up the God who's revealed to Elijah here. And I hope is revealed to you in your own prayer life and in your own battles. He says in Isaiah 55, My thoughts are not your thoughts. Neither are your ways, my ways, declares the Lord. For as high as the heavens, for as the heavens are higher than they are, so are my ways higher than your ways.

And my thoughts and your thoughts, that's a really important perspective, as is 2 Peter 3, 8 and 9. But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day, the Lord is not slow to fulfill His promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that anyone should perish, but that all should reach repentance. So take this revelation of God from His Word and recognize who He is and how He loves and cares and wants to hear our cries, but will also teach and help us to know Him, not about Him, but know Him better.

I mean, I'm just going to pray briefly. And I mentioned at the beginning, I want to pray first. I want us to keep the momentum of the prayer week going, just for another week, but not meeting together. But can I just urge you and ask you to pray for one specific thing?

Now, this may be flying absolutely in the face of all I've just said, but I hope not. And we'll leave God to provide the answer. But it's praying for a specific need.

[30 : 22] And I think it's a real need for the gospel as we move forward. It may not be what you think is a priority need, but I think in the current climate it is a specific need, which is the Esk Valley, our church plant in Esk Valley, really, it would be really good for them to have their own building.

It's a great bind at this point for them. It's different in different situations, but for them just now, to not have their own building, and I think the frustrations and sometimes the difficulties of renting where they are and not always having it available, and not being able to do things during the week that they would maybe want to move on and consider and develop. So can I ask you to pray consistently this week, very particularly, that God would provide them with a building? I don't know what the answer to that is. I don't even know if it's the right prayer, but that He will make clear absolutely what His answer is to that. And would you pray that every day this week? And pray that God would provide a building for Esk Valley and that it would be just a sign of the moving forward of the work there.

So please do pray for that. We'll bow our heads before we sing our parting song. Lord God, we do ask that you would bless your gospel and your truth and the revelation of yourself.

We're tired very often at this time of year, weary. We may feel frustrated having prayed or not understanding why you don't seem to answer our prayers. Maybe we've been encouraged by you and by the way you dealt with Elijah and by your understanding and your sympathy and yet you're all encompassing glory. And we do pray that you would help us in the little things and the big things in our lives, little things and the big things about us as a church. And we pray for Esk Valley today as we've prayed for Harrington and Cornerstone. And we pray that you would provide them with a building. We know that a building's not the end of all things. It's not the be all and end all. We know that they've done fantastically well, worshiping and growing as a community in the Mining Museum and we recognize that. But we do feel it would be easier for them, Lord, and would enable, not so much easier, but would enable the work to progress if they had a building. And we know it seems impossible and we know that as a team they've been looking at various properties and it just seems impossible. But we cry out to you and ask that you would provide them with what they need. Amen.