

# Elijah's Cave

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*Related Texts: 1 Kings 19:1-14 and Luke 21:1-4*

Times were bleak; times were downright *black* for the nation of Israel. Israel's King Ahab had taken the pagan Jezebel for his wife and queen; and Jezebel, willful and power mad, set directly about to supplant the religion of Israel with her native paganism. She destroyed Israel's holy places. She massacred Israel's prophets, and in their place installed her own. The king and his people – fearful and feckless – merely yielded to her, as good so often yields to evil. And so, a pagan tyrant came to rule the nation of Israel, and paganism became the religion of the land.

But God raised up the prophet Elijah, and through him the courage and conscience of the nation of Israel was rekindled. Elijah mocked and discredited the pagan prophets whom Jezebel had installed and after disgracing them, saw to their execution. He rallied the people to their God. Through Elijah, Jezebel's momentum was halted. Through Elijah, God's mighty cause was all but regained.

But Jezebel was not a woman so easily undone. Swollen with rage at Elijah's defiance of her, she sent him word that far from being mastered, he could rest assured that he would not live to see another day.

The pressure of events suddenly grew too great for Elijah. All his efforts seemed to have come to naught. He found himself confronting godless forces far greater than he had anticipated, godless forces to which he was not equal. In a panic, he fled for his life to Mount Horeb, where, finding a cave, he threw himself to the ground in despair.

But that, of course, was not the end of the matter. In the midst of his despair, the word of God came to Elijah. But it was not, as we might expect, a soothing word, a word of comfort or sympathy or encouragement. "What are you doing here, Elijah?" demanded God. Elijah altogether understandably began to justify himself – "What am I doing here?!" I have given my all for you and your people. I am spent. I am defeated. The cause is now lost. My life is now lost. *What am I doing here?!*" But as desperate as the situation appeared, God would hear none of Elijah's justifications. "Go forth," God bade him. "Go forth."

A life and death struggle between an ancient prophet and a pagan queen. It may seem, to say the least, far removed from the realities we face. I grant it unlikely that any of us in our lifetimes will engage in a life and death struggle with anyone, much less a pagan queen. But at the same time, Elijah's experience should not be wholly lost on us.

Who of us has not felt that godless forces beyond our control determine the course of history, and that despite any effort we could possibly make, there's nothing we can do about it? Pick your godless force. And any one would be enough: Terrorists and rogue governments are in dogged pursuit of nuclear weapons, the Middle East is an explosive tinderbox and there seems no hope for it, a poisoned environment is now poisoning us, AIDS is ravaging Africa, Sudanese civilians are again being raped and butchered....and what in the world are we to do about it?

And the godless forces beyond our control need not be writ so large. We encounter them in our daily struggles as well. What about the unprincipled boss who has stripped our vocations of their value, or worse, stripped us of our vocations all together? What about all the bogus dictates of our thoroughly consumerist, hedonist, vacuous culture that we on the one hand deplore but on the other are seduced by? What about all the disappointments we have known that have banished forever our youthful optimism and idealism? What about the fact that we can't be the people we long to be?

I think we are all familiar, in one way or another, with Elijah's plight, and I think we are all familiar, in one way or another, with Elijah's flight. Do we not, like Elijah, facing godless forces beyond our control, fly to our various caves? Caves of denial? Caves of indifference? Caves of indolence? Caves of cynicism? Caves of comfort? Caves of self-absorption? Caves of escapism? Caves of triviality?

But God's question to Elijah is God's question to us – "What are you doing there?" And all of our like justifications – "The godless forces against us are too great. The problems are too intractable. We can't fix anything. We can't make a difference. What's the use?" Our justifications all receive the same response from God as did Elijah, "Go forth."

God apparently has not despaired of history or of our efforts within it. Perhaps we should consider why we have. Could it be that we have placed the reality of these godless forces before the reality of God? Could it be that we have allowed these godless forces to persuade us that God is not still the sovereign Lord of history, at all times and all places present, working out his righteous and redemptive purposes?

If this is the case, then we have erected an unlikely but decided idol, for an idol is anything to which we bow down that is not God. And like all idols, this one must be toppled. Because God is still the sovereign Lord of history, at all times and all places present, working out his righteous and redemptive purposes. He reigns.

But we would be naïve in our thinking and disappointed in our expectations if we were to require that God's lordship over history entails that God's cause always neatly triumph when it challenges the godless forces that deny him, or that our efforts on God's behalf always meet with clear and instant success. It doesn't take the wisdom of Solomon to know that it doesn't work that way. Those are not the conditions of the existence that God has provided for us.

When we declare God's lordship over history, we must do so with the joint declaration that God's judgments are inscrutable and his wisdom unsearchable. We know God is a God of mercy, forgiveness, justice, truth, peace, good will, and love. For we have seen the ministry of his son Jesus Christ. We know God's victory is sure. For we have seen his son Jesus Christ triumph over sin and death. But God moves through history in a mysterious way. A way we are not given to fathom. A way that we are given to accept in faith.

But once we accept the mystery of God's movement in history, we hold the key to understanding what we may anticipate from our efforts on God's behalf as we emerge from our caves. Our efforts on his behalf may meet with success, and they may not. Our efforts may seem only to end in failure. But through God's self-disclosure in his son Jesus Christ, we may be hopeful and faithful that in his unsearchable, inscrutable, and mysterious way, God uses our efforts – for our own good and for the good of his world.

Rather stiff terms, you may think, but they are terms that will keep us from returning to our caves in discouragement when our efforts seem futile and confounded; and they are terms that will keep us where God wants us – out in his world, working within our spheres of influence, doing whatever we can, wherever we can do it, to live out our faith in God's lordship of history.

When I was a little girl, growing up in a pastor's household, most of the stories my father read me were Bible stories. One of my favorite stories, for some reason, was the story of the poor old widow and her two copper coins.

A poor old widow made her way through the crowded streets of Jerusalem to the temple to make her offering to the temple treasury. When she arrived, people of great wealth and importance were making their lavish offerings to the treasury, offerings which put her pittance to shame. Nonetheless, she made her offering, two copper coins, and she returned home again – invisibly. But not quite invisibly. Jesus saw her. Her humble offering ministered to his spirits. She never knew. I think I liked that story so much because it teaches that acts of goodness are not lost on Jesus; indeed acts of goodness, no matter how small, please and console him.

Let us then emerge from our caves; and let us do so with the hopeful faith that our efforts, like hers, advance God's cause in history and minister to the spirits of Jesus Christ. And let this be enough. Amen.