

Elijah Flees to Horeb

¹ Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. ² So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, "May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them."

³ Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, ⁴ while he himself went a day's journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, LORD," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." ⁵ Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep.

All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." ⁶ He looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again.

⁷ The angel of the LORD came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." ⁸ So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. ⁹ There he went into a cave and spent the night.

The LORD Appears to Elijah

And the word of the LORD came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

¹⁰ He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."

¹¹ The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by."

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. ¹² After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. ¹³ When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

¹⁴ He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."

¹⁵ The LORD said to him, "Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. ¹⁶ Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. ¹⁷ Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. ¹⁸ Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him."

■ 1 Kings 19:1-18

I was nine. We were in Winnipeg. My mother and I were waiting in the lobby for my aunt to pick us up at the pool. She was late. It was late. A boy just a little smaller than I stepped in front of me and started pushing me around. “*Chink*”, he called me. “*Chink, go home.*” He pushed me. His friend laughed. I pushed back and showed my fists. I was bigger. I was stronger. I was meaner. I could fight. Then, behind me, my mother’s voice cut into my rage: “*Christians don’t fight.*”

Am I a Christian? I was only nine. I’m a Chink. I *wanted* to go home. Why wouldn’t my mother help me? I want to fight. I can fight. But Christians don’t fight. Am I a Christian? The boy from Prince Albert whose name I will never forget grabbed my hands and pushed me down to my knees. *Chink*, he said. *Go home.*

I didn’t fight back. I’m not a Christian, I’m a Chink. I want to go home.

The prophets of Baal have just been defeated by fire from the sky. The people have affirmed that Yahweh alone is God. *Yahweh, he alone is God!* The people of Israel put the prophets of Baal to the sword, dancing as the blood runs down the mountain, cheering as they avenge Yahweh’s fallen. *Yahweh, he alone is God!* The rains come, soaking into the parched land, wetting the drought-hardened soil. Elijah hikes up his robes and outruns the King in his war chariot, outruns the coming storm, outruns them all. The sound in the distance is not thunder. It is the sound of the prophet’s laughter as the power of Yahweh comes upon him.

I was seventeen. I had come sixth at Nationals the year before. Since then, I had trained like a madman, averaging more than twenty hours per week honing my body and my mind. I had not missed a single day of training. I was focused. I was strong. I was fast. I was the one they had begun to notice, the one who would next break through and represent Canada—my country, my

home. And I would give all glory to God. It was he who made me fast. It was for his pleasure that I went faster.

I swam my off events first. Eighth in the 400, top sixteen in the sprints. I slept well the night before my best race, the 200. I swam well and qualified for finals—and in position to go faster than ever. I went back to the hotel after the heats and took a nap. When I woke up, I had a fever. It was bad—so bad that I couldn't stand for more than a few seconds before needing to lie down. I was scratched from the finals. I lay in bed as my competitors went fast, faster than ever. I lay in bed and gnashed my teeth. I lay in bed and moaned with pain and cursed God. I was strong. I was fast. And yet I was brought down by something I could not even see with my naked eye. All that I had aspired for now was a heap around me, colourless and broken. *Why? Was it for lack of effort? Was it because I am that wicked that I deserved to be punished? I was strong. I was fast. I was devoted. Why?*

Where does our anger go when God will not answer our accusations? When God will not tell us why our fathers beat us, our mothers desert us, our spouses betray us, our children reject us? Where does our anger go when earthquakes and floods and wars and famine break our backs? Who will hear our complaint? Who will listen to our lament?

Jezebel swears revenge. *"The four hundred and fifty-first prophet to die this day will be you."* Elijah runs on, runs into the desert, runs on his own power. He runs to Horeb, the place where a lot of ragged ex-Egyptian slaves first met their God. He runs to the mountain, finds a single juniper bush, and lies down beneath it. He has run here on his own power, and now he has run out. Tongue sticking to his teeth, eyes blinded by the white sun, Elijah the mighty man of God stumbles into the wasteland a ruined old man, a prophet with a lament on his lips.

"Rav ata, Adonai!" Lord, this is too much!

“Qach nepheshi!” *Take my life!*

“Qi lo tov aniki ma’avati.” *For I am not better than my fathers.*

We all feel sad sometimes. Such is life in a fallen world, a world that groans as it awaits its full redemption, a world that weeps as we await a new Heaven and a new Earth. A boy from Prince Albert pushes me to my knees. Grandmothers sing their Creole laments in gravelly voices while children cry out amidst the rubble. A hotel bed in St. Johns becomes my prison. I show my fists. I am ready to fight. Yet there is no one to hit, no enemy to strike—only phantom pains that search for things I have lost.

Yet these phantoms still can sting us when we least expect it. These phantoms grow stronger as night falls, as I sit on my couch, as I count my bones. The most recent night like that was only a couple of months ago, and on that night, I grit my teeth and prayed: “rav ata Adonai!” *Lord, this is too much.*

The past year was hard, harder than I expected. I had thought for a while that I had beaten them back, that the shadows would no longer swallow me whole. Yet I could not keep the phantoms at bay any longer. They swallowed me. I lay with Elijah under the juniper bush: “rav ata, Adonai.” *This is too much.* The phantoms were real, their claws were sharp and their teeth cold. I wanted out.

Some say that suicidal thoughts are a function of a personality desperate for attention. That night, as I sat alone and considered ending my life, the only thing I was desperate for was to be free of the things I have been carrying for years. I wanted the pain to stop.

An angel appeared at Elijah’s side. “*Get up and eat.*”¹ He gets up and eats, then falls back to sleep and dreams of angels and ravens and creeks that run down the Kerith ravine. He wants to die, but is kept alive by the presence of others. The angel appears again. “*Get up and eat, for the*

¹ Elijah sees “*ugth ratsphim*”, which appears only once in OT and denotes bread baked by “firebolt”. See Harris, Archer, Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. Chicago, IL: Moody Publishing, 1980. p.864

journey is too much for you.” “Lord, this is too much.” “No,” the angel says. “This journey is too much. Get up and eat.”

Elijah gets up and eats. He is strengthened, and goes forty days and forty nights deeper into the desert. It rained forty days of death on Noah’s ark. Moses was on the mountain for forty days. Jesus was tempted in the desert for forty days. Elijah, who by all accounts should have been ecstatic that God answered by fire—should have been happy that things went the way he said it would—goes forty days to Horeb. There is no applause in the desert. There are no more angels. There is only silence and the sun that hard-bakes the earth. There is only the journey through affliction, the pilgrimage through pain.

The angel was not speaking of the journey behind Elijah, but the journey in front of him, the forty days from Beersheba, the abundant place of seven wells to Horeb, to dryness, to ruin, to desolation.² Elijah’s life was threatened, but the journey ahead was even more difficult: forty days of going even deeper into the wasteland.

What kept me from planning my suicide was the thought of those I love suffering even more. I thought of my parents standing by my graveside, shocked and unsure of what they’d done wrong, their hands trembling as they held each other. I thought of my sister trying to hold back her tears as she tried to explain to her son that he would never see Uncle Ed again. And I thought of you, standing around my grave, some of you crying, some of you shaking your ashen faces as you wondered what you could have done better or how you could have cared more. Though you may not think so, it was the thought of all of you that were as bread and water for me. Though you hear of my pain now and probably wish you could have done more, by being for me my lovely little Podunk church, you have been enough. It is still the thought of you that strengthens me for the journey

² Harris, Archer, Waltke, *TWOT*, p.318

through the desert I am in. Yet I also know that this journey is one I ultimately make alone in solitude before God.

After the wind, after the earthquake, after the fire, Elijah hears a thin sound. A voice asks what he is doing there. *“I have been zealously zealous³ for you, Lord! But all for naught. The people, they have rejected you. Rav ata Adonai! I have done nothing but do as you told me to do, and now everything has been taken away. Now, the people want my life as well. Rav ata, Adonai! Lord, this is too much! Qach nepheshi! Take my life away.*

The worst feeling I wrestle with to this day is that I did the best I could. With the resources I had and given the circumstances, we all did the best we could. I was as gentle as I could be, as understanding as I could be, as assertive as I could be—as giving, as honest, as protective, and as honourable. Yet it didn’t make any difference. Zeal didn’t make any difference. I am with Elijah, standing out on the rock, listening for the thin voice of God.

One Sunday, while browsing in a bookstore, I stumbled upon T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*. I remembered that my counselor had recommended I meditate upon his verses, but I had forgotten to follow up on her advice—until now. It was as I randomly thumbed through the long poem that I read this:

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope

For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love,

For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith

But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.

Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:

³ “qna qnati”

So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.

Whisper of running streams, and winter lightning.

The wild thyme unseen and the wild strawberry,

The laughter in the garden, echoed ecstasy

Not lost, but requiring, pointing to the agony

Of death and birth.

You say I am repeating

Something I have said before. I shall say it again.

Shall I say it again? In order to arrive there,

To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,

You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.

In order to arrive at what you do not know

You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.

In order to possess what you do not possess

You must go by the way of dispossession.

In order to arrive at what you are not

You must go through the way in which you are not.

And what you do not know is the only thing you know

And what you own is what you do not own

And where you are is where you are not.⁴

Depression is dyi00.

⁴ T.S. Eliot, "East Coker", III, from *Four Quartets*. (Website Reference: "East Coker", <http://www.tristan.icom43.net/quartets/coker.html>.) First accessed Jan 15th, 2010

ng of a kind. Maybe not the heart stop brain stop that we associate with the death of our physical selves, but I am convinced that something of me is being put to death. I do not know what it is, and I do not know if I ever will, but I, like you, am afraid of death—especially the death of things that are parts of me. I don't know what will fill those spaces where burdens used to lie. And I don't know whether there is such a thing as complete emotional healing in this life. I am on a hard journey of dispossession to a place where I have not gone.

Depression also distorts perceptions. Elijah is asked twice by God what he is doing at Horeb, and both times, Elijah answers wrong. Not all the people have rejected the covenant. Seven thousand have not yet bowed their knee to Baal; a faithful remnant to carry forth God's mission for a world foundering in darkness.

I am depressed. This is how I feel. I am not wrong in my feeling, but I may be wrong about my conclusions. God feels distant, yet I know he is here. I feel alone, yet I know you are here with me. I feel left behind, yet you all have borne me up and taken me along like the cripple being lowered through the roof to Jesus. I know these things—I am not ignorant—yet nothing can stop the death that God himself brings. For if God kills a part of us, this is not lost forever to the Abyss. Rather, it is killed—we are killed—so that we may be raised to life.

“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.”⁵

All ye saints and angels, pray for me!

⁵ Eph 3:10-11