“Come Out of the Cave!”

1 Kings 19:9-18

Turn with me in your Bibles to 1 Kings 19, where I’d like for us to read beginning with verse 9. Some of you might be familiar with a show on the History channel that is called “American Pickers.” It is about a team of antique collectors who travel the country looking through old barns, garages, and thrift stores. If you’ve seen it, then you know that they have come across some really interesting finds. In one of the episodes, they happened to come across an old 1964 International Harvester Metro van that a person dug up out of the woods on their property in Massachusetts. The van had a few unusual markings, and so they traced it back to a guy named Ray Tabano, who happened to be a founding member of the band Aerosmith. He confirmed that it had been the band’s van from their early days when they were playing in small venues around New England. It was found and restored.

In a second-hand thrift shop, occasionally you will come across a rare find. But more often than not, there’s a label on the item that says “as is.” It marks an item with damage or brokenness of some sort. “As is” marks a clock that has stopped ticking, or a piece of furniture with a crack in it. I suspect from time to time many of us feel something like an object marked “as is,” like a broken thing with only a matter of time before we’re discarded. With a sense of defeat, we view our lives through the lens of what has been broken, or what is irreparable, or what might break. We think about all of the stuff behind us, which has left a scar on us, it seems to declare emphatically our status “as is.” Broken down and beyond hope of restoration. But it is not the truth.

I wonder if that is how Elijah might have seen himself at the low point in which we find him here. God finds him under a broom tree “as is.” Tired and exhausted,

despairing of life itself. We saw in verse 1 how Ahab came home to Jezebel and told her all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets of Baal with the sword. In response, she threatens to kill Elijah, which sends him into a tailspin. He runs in fear for his life, comes all the way to Beersheba in the far south where he leaves his servant, and then goes a full day's travel into the wilderness before finally collapsing under a 'broom tree' or juniper tree. He is in a depression. The last three and a half years had been one long struggle for him. In the fog of despair, he begins to question all that and sees himself as being no better than his fathers. But his perspective has become clouded by his fatigue, so that he is looking at God through the lens of circumstance, and not the other way around. God meets him at his place of despair. He lets him take a good long nap under the broom tree, brings him a jar of water and bakes him some 'angel food cake.' He touches him a second time and says, "Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you." He then goes in the strength of that food 40 days and nights until he gets to Horeb, the mountain of God. (Read)

After being ministered to by the angel of the Lord, we read in verse 8 that Elijah wanders around in the wilderness for 40 days and forty nights until he comes to Mount Horeb. It is here that Elijah has an encounter with the Lord who will refocus, restore, and recommission him for future service. As I thought about this, the Lord reminded me of a verse in Isaiah which says of God's Servant, the coming Messiah:

Isaiah 42:3—"A bruised reed He will not break, and a faintly burning wick He will not quench."

Which is to say that the coming Messiah will not despise the broken. Matthew quotes this verse in writing about the ministry of Jesus and the way that He fulfills this:

Matthew 12:18-21—"Behold, My Servant whom I have chosen, My Beloved with whom My soul is well pleased. I will out My Spirit upon Him, and He will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. He will not quarrel or cry aloud, not will anyone hear His voice in the streets; a bruised reed He will not break, and a smoldering wick He will not quench, until He brings justice to victory; and in His name the Gentiles will hope."

A bruised reed He will not break, and a smoldering wick He will not extinguish. In other words, He will not discard nor will He despise the one who is broken and burned out. He will restore the broken. He will reignite the flame of the one who is faintly burning. And that is what He does here in the life of Elijah, who is very much a bruised reed at this point in his life. Things have not gone the way he thought they would, which comes out in his words in these verses. He is in a cave, both literally as well as spiritually. But God is going to bring him out of it.

1—An experience with GRIEF (19:9-10)

"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?' 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, and left, and they seek my life, to take it away."

Having made the forty day trip to Mount Horeb, notice how verse 9 says Elijah came to a cave and lodged in it. Broom trees and caves are the dwelling places of those in despair, and that serves as a fitting picture of what's going on in his mind and heart. Mount Horeb is an important place in the Old Testament, and I'll say more about that in a minute. As Elijah enters the cave, notice God asks him, not once but twice, the question, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" And when

the Lord asks us a question like that, it most certainly implies that we are not where He wants us to be. When He asks us the question, "Why are you here?" It means we're not where we ought to be. Has God ever done that in your life? He finds you in a place where you've been running in disobedience to His will. Who knows the reason? Perhaps it is an unhealthy relationship, a sinful attitude that you've developed, or something that you've pursued against your better judgment. For Elijah, it is nearly 300 miles from the place God had called him to be. He's like Jonah who will later run in the opposite direction of God's call on his life.

But despite that, God is patient in the way that He deals with Elijah. Whatever his reason for coming to Horeb, it is evident that God will meet with him there. When he gets there, Elijah is still in a pit of despair. It comes out in the way that he expresses his complaint to God. Verse 10, "**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." He refers to himself four times. Which means that he is focused completely on himself. He is 'chewing on the cud' of half-truths. What are these half-truths? There are three (I'm indebted to Phil Ryken's insights here):

Self-righteousness

Look at what he says to the Lord in verse 10, "I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts." Was he wrong in saying this? I don't think so. No one had more zeal for God than Elijah did. He had called for a drought, raised the widow's son back from the dead, and went toe to toe with the prophets of Baal. And yet the statement is a half-truth, especially when you consider that he has been running in fear for the last month and a half. He had even asked God to

take his life. Not exactly 'zeal' for the things of God. So he really has nothing to boast about.

It is Elijah's way of expressing his grief and disappointment over the way that things have turned out. He is essentially saying, "I've been zealous for You, Lord. And look at how I've been repaid?" It is an insinuation of how he deserves a whole better than he has received. It is an exaggerated view of his own personal godliness. Honestly, it is his self-righteousness speaking at this point. And I suppose it is a temptation for any of us.

Philip Graham Ryken—*"Apparently, [Elijah] thought that God owed him something for his service. He thought he deserved better…Self-righteousness feeds spiritual depression by making claims on God that will only add to our bitterness when He fails to meet our outrageous demands."*

We think, "After all that I've done for God, this is what I get?" Thinking that we deserve better than what we've received, we make demands on God. Then, when those demands are not met, we sink further into a hole of despair. But we forget that in His mercy, God hasn't given us what our sins rightly deserve!

Self-pity

Elijah goes on in verse 10, "For the people of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, thrown down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword." Again, there is truth here in what he says. The people had indeed done all of those things. And yet, they were not true any more since the events on Mount Carmel. The people were in the dust saying, "The Lord, He is God!" And so Elijah has what we would call 'selective memory' here. He forgets that God is at work, and has convinced himself that things are much worse than they actually are. But he is really just feeling sorry for himself.

When despair runs wild in our lives, it usually involves an element of self-pity where we exaggerate our troubles in our own mind so that they become bigger than they really are. Ryken says:

"We insist that the problems of life are so overwhelming that they cannot be solved. Rather than looking to God and seeing His superior strength and mighty grace, we imagine that our troubles are beyond any remedy. By making our problems seem bigger than they really are and by making God smaller than He actually is, we convince ourselves that our that our situation is [hopeless]."

What if I told you a quarter can eclipse the sun? Take a quarter, hold it close enough to your eye, and you can block out the light of the sun. That's what happens when we let our circumstances eclipse the truth of the God we serve. Problems overshadow everything else so that our minds become convinced that there is no way through.

Self-importance

Look at the last line of his statement in verse 10, "And I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away." I am the only one left standing! Nobody understands all that I've sacrificed. It is just me, Lord. Nobody else cares about serving You. But he's about to find out that he is off in his calculations. In fact, Elijah will have miscalculated the situation by a factor of seven thousand. He's one man, but there are 7,000 other people that he doesn't even know exist who haven't bowed their knees to Baal!

But these are the things that Elijah is telling himself in his own mind. He's chewing on half-truths and distortions of the truth. Is there any wonder he is in a dark place? I read somewhere that 95% of our emotions are determined by the way we talk to ourselves. Call it your internal dialogue. It focuses our attention

on the symptoms of our distress rather than the solutions to it. This only feeds our despair and anxiety. I think about how we can become depressed when we fixate on our:

- Disappointment
- Distress
- Disobedience
- Deficit
- Dialogue

Have you ever found yourself in a cave of despair, thinking that your situation was hopeless? Maybe you wallow in self-pity. You dwell on your pain and misfortune, feeling sorry for yourself and ask, "Why me?" This can lead to a 'victim' mentality that is without gratitude and hinders our spiritual growth. When that happens, bitterness and resentment takes hold. We compare our situation with others, leading to feelings of envy or resentment toward those who seem better off than us. We begin to believe we deserve better than what we are getting. We grow demanding, discontent, and even angry with God. It leads to a self-entitled mindset fueled by pride. When we are self-focused, we become consumed by our problems and fail to see the much bigger picture of what God might be doing in our lives through the situation. Focusing on the negative stuff will make you a negative person. Don't chew your thoughts, <u>choose</u> them!

Philippians 4:8—"Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."

Satan's game plan for your life is to get you bogged down with deception and half-truths. His greatest tool is a lie, to get you to believe something that is not true so that he has power over you. Jesus said that when the devil lies, he is speaking his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44). Since his strategy is based on deception, we must confront that with the truth. We're to put on the whole armor of God (Eph. 6:10-18).

2 Corinthians 10:4-5—"For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ."

Elijah has been allowing his feelings to define his life and determine his actions at this point. And we do the same thing at times, don't we? We shift our focus from external reality to internal dialogue, which then stirs up a storm of emotions within us. Elijah feels like a failure even though he wasn't. He accepted those feelings as facts. What he needed was the anchor of eternal truth.

He's going to have to get his eyes off of himself, off of the problems, and back onto the Lord. What do we need more than anything else in our seasons of grief, disappointment, and despair? And so notice secondly how Elijah has:

2—An encounter with GLORY (19:11-13)

"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. 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. And behold, there came a voice to him and said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Elijah has come all the way to Horeb, which verse 8 refers to as the mountain of God. You may be more familiar with Mount Horeb by its other name, Mount Sinai. This was the place that God revealed His law to Moses. And 40 years before that, it was the place where God appeared to Moses in the burning bush, where Moses received his call to go back to Egypt and lead God's people out. Exodus 3 tells the story, and it was there at this mountain that God told Moses to bring the people back to worship. Exodus 17 the people come to Horeb, but there is no water for them to drink, and so they complain against Moses. The Lord tells him to strike the rock at Horeb and water will come out, and that's what happens. Paul later explains in 1 Corinthians 10 that the Rock is Christ, and the water is a picture of life in Him. But it happened right here at Horeb.

And so Mount Horeb is a significant place, which is why I believe Elijah is here. Moses spent 40 days and 40 nights with God on the top of the mountain. Now, Elijah has his own 40 days and 40 nights as he comes to this place that held many reminders of the faithfulness of God. This is a place where:

His attention is refocused

Notice God says to him in verse 11, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord." Step out of the cave and step into the light! It is the same thing that the Lord had once told Moses. I can't help but wonder if the cave that he enters is the same cleft of the rock where the Lord hid Moses when He caused all of His goodness to pass before him, and Moses saw a glimpse of Him from behind. The same thing is happening again as verse 11 says, "Behold, the Lord passed by." Isn't that an amazing statement? But its something that leaves Elijah

shaking in his sandals. So that the Bible says there was a great and strong wind that tore the mountains and broke the rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake there was a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. I can't think of anything more fearsome and attention grabbing than this. And it shows us the awesome and mighty power of God.

I mean think about how this was the very same way in which God gave the Ten Commandments and established the terms of His covenant with Israel. And remember how terrifying a sight it was for them (Ex. 19:6). Moses recounted it in:

Deuteronomy 4:10-14—"How on the day that you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, the Lord said to me, 'Gather the people to Me, that I may let them hear My words, so that they may learn to fear Me all the days that they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children so.' And you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, while the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven, wrapped in darkness, cloud, and gloom. Then the Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice. And He declared to you His covenant, which He commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments, and He wrote them on two tablets of stone. And the Lord commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and rules, that you might do them in the land that you are going over to possess."

They had come Mount Horeb and God descended on the mountain in a cloud, a fire, and an earthquake. And there's no form, nothing visible, just the voice of God as He speaks to them the words of His covenant. It is this very thing that Elijah is saying to God, "They've forsaken Your covenant." Elijah has come back

to the place where it all began, it is a very significant place. Mount Horeb is a place of revelation and a place where Elijah will regain a sense of perspective.

His affection is rekindled

The Lord was not in the wind, not in the earthquake, and not in the fire. But notice verse 12 says, "And after the fire the sound of a low whisper." I love the way the King James describes it as "a still small voice." After the display of His awesome power and the announcement of His presence, the Lord gently whispers to Elijah. And there is something special about that. Think about the contrast—a wind that is so powerful that it tears the rocks in pieces, an earthquake that shakes the mountain to its foundations, and a fire that consumes anything in its path. But the Lord was in none of those things. Afterward comes the silence of His presence. A hushed stillness settles over the mountain as Elijah hears the sound of a still small voice as God calls out to him.

Compare that to other encounters we read about:

- God speaks to Moses from the fire of the burning bush in Exodus 3
- God speaks to Israel as the entire mountain quakes in Exodus 19
- God speaks to Job from the whirlwind in Job 38

But here, the Lord speaks to Elijah in a still small voice. It illustrates how God meets His people in ways of His own choosing. Elijah needed to learn that God's presence was not confined to the spectacular. God is still present and at work, even when He is not acting in ways that we expect.

Chris Hodges—*"Most of us want God to do something spectacular to rescue us when we're suffering, but often He would rather whisper to us."*

Elijah recognizes the Lord's presence, covers his face, and comes out to the entrance of the cave. And this God who can shake mountains is also near enough to address His weary servant personally. It begins a renewed encounter in which God calls him, corrects his limited perspective, and gives him a fresh assignment. Elijah's renewed response is seen in his willingness to hear and obey the Lord. God often rekindles our love for Him through His revealed Word, as the Spirit helps us see again who God is—holy and powerful, but He is also patient, faithful, and near to the weary. God speaks to us in Scripture. And as we behold the Lord's glory that is revealed in Christ, we're reminded why He is worthy of our trust and love. Then notice a third thing that happens here, and it involves:

3—An exchange with GRACE (19:14-18)

"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.' 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. 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. 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. 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."

Elijah has an experience with grief, an encounter with glory, and then notice how there is an exchange with grace. God speaks to Elijah and gives him grace. The Lord asks him a second time, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" You'll notice his

answer in verse 14 is the same as it is in verse 10. But in His grace, God is redirecting the prophet's focus away from the problem and to the solution as He will remind Elijah of some important truths:

God is faithful despite our failure

That's what the wind, the earthquake, the fire, and the still small voice is all about. Elijah was in the very place where God proved Himself faithful despite Israel's failure. Israel may have forsaken their end of the covenant, but God had not forsaken His. Now at the lowest point in Elijah's life, God is proving Himself to be faithful yet again. Elijah had run from his calling, but God had not ceased being God. And neither will He ever be. It is often when things look the most hopeless that God has just begun to work. So God tells him, "Go, return on your way." Go back the way you came. Get back to the place where I've called you to be and do the work that I've called you to do. Take the next step!

God is good despite our circumstance

While Elijah has been having a pity party for himself, God has been gently meeting his needs. First under the broom tree, and now in the cave at Mount Horeb. The infinite and holy God had passed by Elijah's way, and the wind and the shaking and the fire of His presence had not consumed the weary prophet. Instead, God speaks to him in a still small voice, in a way that communicates His goodness, love, and concern. And isn't that what He has done in your own life time and time again?

How often have I been in a mess, in a dark cave of my own making, having run from the place God wanted me. I have offered Him every complaint and excuse in the book. I've had my eyes on myself, on my problems, on everything else but Him. And yet He continues to be good. He keeps on being faithful.

God is sovereign despite our observation

Look at what the Lord says to him in verse 15, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus. And when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazel to be king over Syria. 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. And the one who escapes from the sword of Hazel shall Jehu put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death. Yet I have reserved seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.” In other words, God is still in control even when it doesn’t seem that way. That’s why we must listen for His whisper, friends. Wait for Him! I thought about the words of the hymn:

Oft I hear a gentle whisper o’er me stealing,
When my trials and my burdens seem too great;
Like the sweet voiced-bells of evening softly pealing,
It is saying to my spirit, Only wait.

When I cannot understand my Father’s leading,
And it seems to be but hard and cruel fate,
Still I hear that heav’nly whisper ever pleading:
God is faithful, God is working, only wait.

When the promise seems to linger, long delaying,
And I tremble lest perhaps it come too late,
Still I hear that sweet-voiced angel ever saying:
Tho’ it tarry, it is coming, only wait.

When I see the wicked prosper in their sinning,
And the righteous pressed by many a cruel strait,

I remember this is only the beginning,
And I whisper to my spirit, Only wait.

Oh! how little soon will seem our hardest sorrow,
And how trifling is our present brief estate;
Could we see it in the light of heav'n's tomorrow,
Oh, how easy it would be for us to wait.

(Chorus)
Only wait; again I hear that whisper,
Only wait, 'twill not be very long;
Even now the Father's hand is leading,
Soon with Jesus we will sing the victor's song!

God wasn't through with Elijah! He still had work for him to do. His life was still full of purpose, though he lost sight of it for a brief season. I'm thankful that God doesn't abandon us or cast us aside in moments of weakness where we lose sight of the eternal and focus on the external. No, in spite of our failure He says to us, "Go, return on your way." Get back to doing what I called you to do in the first place. Despair can reduce us to a 'caveman' existence, like it did with Elijah.

Do you want to come out of your own cave? If so, then you must:

- Remember God's faithfulness in the past
- Trust God's sovereignty for the future
- Embrace God's goodness in the present

God is <u>adequate</u> for our discouraging circumstances. God is <u>above</u> all our discouraging circumstances. God is <u>active</u> in our discouraging circumstances.

He is actively working, and we should be too. That's what we can learn from what He says to Elijah.

Philip Graham Ryken—*"Spiritual depression is a vampire that feeds upon the lies in all the half-truths we preach to ourselves. This is one of the reasons why we need to preach the gospel to ourselves every day. To avoid it, we need to fill our minds with thoughts like these: 'I am a very great sinner, but Christ is an even greater Savior. My troubles are more than I can bear, but Jesus is strong enough to carry them."*

God isn't through with Elijah. Just like He isn't through with you. He doesn't throw away the broken ones. He doesn't cast aside the bruised reed, and He doesn't snuff out the smoldering wick. In His grace and kindness, He patiently deals with us and works in ways to restore us and give us hope. When we've had enough, He is more than enough! When you're depressed with the thought of being 'as is,' remember one day you will see Christ 'as He is!'

1 John 3:2—"Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him <u>as He is</u>."

Brokenness is the way to blessedness. Writing centuries ago, David wrote:

Psalm 51:17—"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise."

Brokenness is usually not something we are comfortable admitting. Whether in us or in other people, it seems we are ashamed of our 'frailty.' We seem to be uncomfortable around broken and grieving people, around defeated and weakened lives. Yet it is by the cross of a broken Savior that we live! "Surely He

has born our griefs and carried our sorrows…But He was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities" (Is. 53:4-5). And His body was taken and laid in the cold, damp darkness of a 'cave' for three days. But on the third day, death could not keep its prey as He tore the bars away and up from the grave He arose! He came out of the grave, and by His grace and power, you can come out of the cave you've been living in. Paul said it this way:

2 Corinthians 4:7-10—"But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body."

Whether we come to God shattered by our own sin, like David, or broken and discouraged by the experiences of life, we are never so near to Him as when we come with nothing in our hands to offer. God's desire is that you come "as is"—weary, defeated, or broken by life. At the cross of Jesus Christ, there is no lost cause or irreparable damage that He can't make whole.