

Questions

GOD ASKS US



What Are You Doing Here?

As we drive on the highway of life, at times we are seriously at risk of running out of fuel. In other words, we sometimes live in such a way that we become vulnerable to exhaustion or the crisis of burnout, as some call it today. Thankfully, we have warning lights that come on when our emotional and spiritual reserves are dangerously low. If we can recognize them, these symptoms remind us to pay attention to the way we are living, to be aware of what is draining us, and to always ensure that our energy resources get regularly replenished....

Are any of these lights flashing at the moment for you (for example, difficulty sleeping, tiredness, or uncharacteristic forms of behavior, such as anger, resentment, or self-pity)? If they are, you may want to reflect on Elijah's experience of exhaustion and burnout and the question that came to him in the midst of his crisis. You will find this part of Elijah's story in 1 Kings 18-19. There you can read about a time in his life when everything came to a standstill and he ran away, deep into the desert. In a lonely cave on a mountain God asked him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (19:13). This crisis in Elijah's life, along with the question that God put to him, opened up for him a number of new opportunities. Let us explore his experience and see what we can learn from it. If you are in a similar state of exhaustion and burnout right now, Elijah's experience could lead you toward new opportunities for yourself as well.

Excerpt from *Questions God Asks Us*, pp. 62-63

Read 1 Kings 18 to learn about the background of this week's passage. The events of our text occur shortly after Elijah's encounter with the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel, where through a great display of God's power the priests of Baal are humiliated. Upon seeing this display of power, we are told that the people of Israel "fell prostrate and cried, 'Yahweh—he is God! Yahweh—he is God!'" (1 Kings 18:39).

Read 1 Kings 19:1-10. Following this victory, Ahab's wife, Jezebel, responds by sending a messenger to Elijah with a death threat that she vows will be fulfilled in one day. Elijah had become a hunted man. He is afraid, and fleeing for his life, he goes to Beersheba. As Elijah withdraws into the wilderness we see his internal struggle, his fears, and his doubts. But this story is not only about the prophet. It is also about the God who meets Elijah and responds to him in the midst of his situation—providing for his needs, and ultimately redirecting him.

An Opportunity to Stop

Even after fleeing to the wilderness, Elijah's words and actions show no sense of relief or safety. He sits under a large desert tree and asks to die, telling God, "It is too much; now, Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors" (19:4). In the midst of this, the first response to Elijah comes through the form of God's provision: the sending of an angel with food and water. Elijah must eat, the angel explains, "because the way is too much for you" (19:7). The quote points us back to Elijah's complaint in verse 4, that his situation was "too much" for him. Elijah does not escape what lies ahead, but after being provided for, he is sent on a way that is also *for* him.

Elijah goes "in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights" (19:8) to Mt. Horeb, where he stops at a cave to spend the night. It is here, in this cave, that God first asks the question, "Elijah, what are you doing here?" Living through a season of life in which he was always on the go, Elijah finally found an opportunity to stop, which enabled him to replenish his spiritual and emotional resources, to listen to God, and to honestly reflect on his own situation. In the excerpt below, Hudson explains the significance of stopping:

One of the few good things about experiencing burnout and exhaustion is that it forces us to stop. Certainly we can see this happening in Elijah's life in his time of crisis. When he took refuge in the cave, he experienced the benefit of stopping. He became quiet and could listen to what God was trying to say to him. His depleted energy levels started to be replenished. Most importantly, he was able to take a hard look at the question that God asked him, "What are you doing here?" He was able to open up to God about those events and experiences that had brought his life to this point.

There are many good reasons to stop. Stopping gives us time to renew our energy and to replenish our emotional and spiritual resources. It's almost impossible to reflect thoughtfully on our lives when we are continually living at full speed. Before we realize it, we find ourselves operating on autopilot, going from one activity to another without much thought. In contrast, stopping enables us to recognize more clearly those destructive patterns of living that push our lives beyond their God-given limits and then to make clear choices to live in a more healthy and life-giving way.

Excerpt from *Questions God Asks Us*, pp. 64-65

An Opportunity to Listen to God

Read 1 Kings 19:11-14. Of course, God knows what Elijah is doing there. He is hiding, running, escaping from Jezebel, from conflict, and from the mounting struggles of life. God commands Elijah to go and stand before God on the mountain and await God's presence. Elijah then witnesses a powerful storm, an earthquake, and a fire. Through these powerful events, one might expect God to speak in a dramatic way, but to Elijah's surprise, God's voice and presence are made known after the storm passes, in a gentle whisper. God speaks in the calm after the storm, a striking contrast given the power and noise of what Elijah had just seen and heard.

In response to this situation in Elijah's life, the text reveals something about the basic character of God. God is active in human affairs. God listens, speaks, and acts, but not always in "obvious" ways. God honors commitments made to chosen leaders and people. More specifically, God does not leave Elijah alone. In response to God's whisper, Elijah emerges from the cave and again hears God ask, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Hudson reminds us that God sometimes speaks so quietly that we have to move close to hear God's whisper:

Once we have learned to stop we can begin listening....Usually a time of burnout and exhaustion forces us to find the time and space to move closer to God. This is a good thing because, as Elijah's experience teaches us, God usually prefers to speak quietly in a gentle whisper. Nothing gets our attention more than a whisper does. God's still, small voice means that we need to move much closer and to become much more still if we want to hear what God may be whispering to us. There is no better opportunity for us to slow down and to listen to that when we are tired and worn-out.

Excerpt from *Questions God Asks Us*, pp. 67

An Opportunity to Get God's Perspective

Read 1 Kings 19:15-18. Elijah has gone into the wilderness, escaping (he believes) from his troubles. He has had a time of rest, a time when he has received care and nurture. Now it is time to come out of his cave and return to life, to the work God has laid out for him. God's response to Elijah reminds him that his work is not yet complete. God still has much more in store for Elijah's life.

One of the beautiful things about this story is the way God's compassion comes through. After providing for Elijah in the wilderness, God seems to follow Elijah up the mountain and into the cave. God knows Elijah's spirit is broken, his faith weakened, his despair deep. God not only asks Elijah what he's doing in the cave; God reaches into the cave to find Elijah and offer him a new beginning and new direction: "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus" (1 Kings 19:15). Elijah also thought he was the last faithful man left standing. But the words Elijah heard from God told a much different story. Elijah rejoiced in being told that he was not the only faithful person left, and that there were thousands of others who had not turned away from God.

Elijah discovered that God was with him all along, but God did not comfort Elijah just so he would go back into his shelter and sleep better at night. Hudson writes, "In effect, God was saying to Elijah something like, 'What are you doing here, Elijah? See things from a new perspective. Your work has not been completed. I still have faith in you. I still want to use you.'" Like Elijah, God calls us out from our places of despair, out into the world where we find purpose and meaning. And as Hudson reminds us, like Elijah, in moments of exhaustion and burnout, we have a choice to make:

We can choose to evaluate our lives by conventional human standards, or we can choose to see things God's way. A few simple questions can help us determine the difference between these two perspectives.

- Does God call us to be successful or to be faithful?
- Is God more interested in quantity or in quality?
- Does God take a short-term or a long-term view?
- Is God more concerned about things or about people?

When we view these questions in the light of God's conversation with Elijah, the answers are obvious. In each of them the second option is always God's perspective.

You may be able to identify with Elijah as he sat in the cave. Will you hear the question, "What are you doing here?" as a challenge to begin to see things from God's point of view?

Excerpt from *Questions God Asks Us*, pg. 69

Answering God's Question¹

“What are you doing here?” Assuming that you resonate with Elijah’s experience, I invite you to tell God how you have come to be where you are at this moment. Events and experiences may have knocked you down or exhausted you. Disappointments and failures may have robbed you of energy. There may be “drivers” in your life that make it difficult for you to stop and be still.

1. **Tell God about these things, and then be quiet and try to hear what God may be wanting to say to you through them.** The question also challenges us, as it did Elijah, to get God’s broader perspective on what is happening in our lives. Remember that from God’s point of view, certain things are more important than others. Faithfulness matters more than success, quality more than quantity, the long term more than the short term, people more than things.
2. **As you look at your life through God’s eyes, share with God those instances where you have allowed outside pressures and conventional human perspectives to shape your life more than God’s perspective.** What would it mean for you to change perspective in these areas?

In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson gives a wonderful interpretation of Jesus’ invitation in Matthew’s Gospel to those who are exhausted and burned out:

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.” (Matthew 11:28-30)

Here we find the real antidote to our weariness. Respond from your heart to this invitation, and discover the rest that God wants to give you as you travel on the highway of life.

Discussion

1. When have you experienced exhaustion or burnout? What was it (or is it) like? How do you feel like God used that in your life – what do you think God was doing in those seasons?
2. Prior to Elijah’s journey to the cave, God provides Elijah with food and sleep. How does this story help us see the deep connection between our spirit and body? What role does our physical well-being play in our spiritual health? When do you take time to stop and how have you learned to do that?
3. We’re often looking for God in the wind, earthquake, and fire – but often God’s ways are much more ordinary. How does God meeting Elijah in a gentle, quiet whisper go against much of our Christian cultural expectations that God tends to work or speak to us in extraordinary ways? How does God speak to you? How do you know it is God speaking?
4. How will you respond to God’s question this week? Think of ways that you can intentionally stop, find rest, tell God about the things on your heart, and then listen for God’s still, quiet whisper.

¹ Portions of this section are excerpted from *Questions God Asks Us*, pg. 70-71