

# OpenTheo

## October 5th: 1 Kings 19 & 1 Peter 3:8—4:6

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Elijah goes to Mount Horeb. Following in the footsteps of Christ's victorious sufferings.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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## Transcript

1 Kings 19. Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time to-morrow.

Then he was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life, and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom-tree. And he asked that he might die, saying, It is enough now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my father's.

And he lay down and slept under a broom-tree. And behold, an angel touched him and said to him, Arise and eat. And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water.

And he ate and drank, and lay down again. And the angel of the Lord came again a second time, and touched him and said, Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you. And he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights, to Horeb, the mount of God.

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, am left, and they seek my life to take it away. 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? 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 Nimshah you shall anoint to be king over Israel. And Elijah 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. So he departed from there and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, who was ploughing with twelve yoke of oxen in front of him, and he was with the twelve.

Elijah passed by him and cast his cloak upon him. And he left the oxen and ran after Elijah and said, Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you. And he said to him, Go back again, for what have I done to you? And he returned from following him, and took the yoke of oxen, and sacrificed them and boiled their flesh with the yokes of the oxen, and gave it to the people, and they ate.

Then he arose and went after Elijah and assisted him. In 1 Kings chapter 19, right after Elijah's apparent moment of great victory over the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel, he is driven out. He is plunged into despondency and he wishes for death.

The richness of scriptural meaning can often be seen through the interplay of the melody of a given narrative and the various counter-melodies that play off against it in a way that produces rich harmony. Most people are only reading the text at the level of the melody of the narrative, and they don't consider what counter-melodies might be present in a text and what they might mean. For instance, in 1 Kings chapter 17 and the story of Elijah declaring the drought, the counter-melody is primarily the story of Noah, which is played in a transformed way in the background.

When the melody of the surface narrative of the chapter is read alongside it, a remarkable harmony emerges, a harmony which will likely change the way that we hear and understand the melody. A similar thing happens here in chapter 19, and the counter-melody that we hear here is quite surprising. If we had been listening carefully, it won't have been the first time that we have heard it.

Back in chapter 17 we met a Gentile widow and her son. Their supplies were on the point of running out and the woman was gathering sticks and preparing for her son to die. This might remind us of Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis chapter 21 verses 14 to 21.

So Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder along with the child and sent her away. And she departed and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba. When the water and the skin was gone, she put the child under one of the bushes.

Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bow-shot. For she said, Let me not look on the death of the child. And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept.

And God heard the voice of the boy, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Up, lift up the boy, and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make him into a great nation. Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water.

And she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink. And God was with the boy, and he grew up. He lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow.

He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt. In Elijah's story, Elijah visited the widow of Zarephath, much as the angels had visited Abraham and Lot. The widow and her son were blessed for their hospitality, and Elijah by making them provide for him saved their lives.

However, the widow's son died, and Elijah had to take up the son to the upper room,

laying him out before the Lord and praying that the Lord would raise him up. It is a sort of binding of Isaac in reverse. In chapter 19, however, Elijah finds himself in a rather different sort of position.

Jezebel, the wife of his master Ahab, the king, seeks to kill him, and he has to flee. He comes to Beersheba, and he leaves his servant there, literally the lad. This is the same language that is used of Ishmael.

He then wanders in the wilderness and gives up on life and wishes for death. He sits down under a broom tree, as Ishmael was placed under the bush. The broom tree is associated with the territory of Kedar.

In Psalm 20, Kedar was one of Ishmael's sons. He is provided with water, as Hagar was in the wilderness. He is raised up from the point of death, as was Ishmael.

He is provided for by the angel. He is given a cake and a vessel of water, which is exactly what he requested from the widow of Zarephath. However, now, in many ways, he is in their position.

He is identified with the Hagar and the Ishmael characters. While he might have expected, after the events of Carmel, to be the victor, to be the champion, in fact, he is more like Ishmael and Hagar, expelled from the land. He travels for 40 days and 40 nights and he comes to a cave and lodges there.

This might remind us of Lot. That's where Lot ends up after the destruction of Sodom. In chapter 17, Elijah was more like the messenger angels, declaring the judgment.

But now he finds himself more in the position of Lot after the destruction of the city of Sodom. This was not what his great victory was supposed to look like. His story is also a bit like Moses.

He is pursued by the king on his chariot, threatened by the falling waters, which occurs after the great demonstration of God's power against the false gods in the previous chapter. And now he flees into the wilderness, travelling 40 days and 40 nights, much as Moses went 40 days and 40 nights on the Mount of Sinai. He meets with God at Sinai.

And he intercedes against Israel. Moses interceded for Israel in chapter 32-34 of Exodus. And it seems that Elijah is both taking up the pattern of Moses and in certain respects inverting it as well.

He is a man of zeal, like the characters of Moses and Phinehas. Both of those men were zealous for the Lord. But both of those men enacted that zeal in a way that protected people from the full force of the Lord's wrath.

In Moses' case in chapter 32-34 of Exodus, he told the Lord not to be angry against his

people, and enacted the anger of the Lord against his people himself. He breaks the tablets of the covenant. He destroys the golden calf, grinding it down to dust, which he scatters on the waters and makes the Israelites drink it.

He rallies the Levites to himself and kills 3,000 in judgment for their sin. All of this, however, is designed to prevent the full wrath of the Lord breaking out against the people. He enacts zeal so that the Lord won't have to.

Phinehas does the same thing. He stops the plague against the people with his act of zeal. He kills Cosbi and Zimri in order that the whole people might not suffer God's wrath.

Elijah, however, who speaks of his zeal for the Lord as the motivating factor for his actions, is working very differently. Rather than being a man of zeal who saves the people, in many respects he is a man of zeal who seeks the destruction of the people. The story of Noah played in the background of the story of Moses interceding for Israel as well.

He was not prepared to be the only one left. He was committed to gather the people to himself to identify with them so that the Lord would not destroy them. There might be some irony to be seen in the fact that Elijah has ended up in a cave, which is exactly where Obadiah hid the prophets in the preceding chapter.

The Lord is determined that Elijah will not be the only one left. He has determined to save a larger remnant. Elijah was preserved in his cocoon for a while, but the Lord wants to use him to save more people.

He brought the widow of Zarephath and her son into Elijah's cocoon of protection, and now he is going to use Elijah to spearhead a movement of judgement but also of protection for his people. He appears to Elijah on the mountain in ways that might remind us of the theophany of Exodus chapter 19 and 20, with wind, earthquake and fire. In his zeal, Elijah has focused upon these sorts of elements, these great dramatic judgements of God.

He has looked for this great drought upon the people, and then he has also looked for fire to come down from heaven. But God's presence is found primarily in the sound of the low voice. God's purpose in the history of Israel and Judah will be achieved not so much through dramatic displays of strength and natural power, but through the persistent voice of the prophets.

The Lord charges Elijah to anoint successors. Hazael, the king of Syria, Jehu the son of Nimshi as king over Israel and Elisha the son of Shaphat as prophet in his place. Elijah will only anoint one of these people, in this chapter itself, Elisha the son of Shaphat, who will replace him.

In many ways the Lord might be preparing to bench Elijah here. Elijah's zeal is remarkable. He is truly a man of God, but he also has a few lessons to learn about the way that God deals with the world.

The Lord had passed by Elijah earlier in the story when he was at Mount Sinai, and now he passes by Elisha and casts his cloak upon Elisha, the same cloak that he had covered himself with when the Lord had passed by him. Elisha is ploughing with twelve oxen, representing Israel we must presume. He will be the one that places Israel under the yoke of the Lord once more.

He will plough the land and plant the seed. In time Elisha will later replay many of the key miracles of Elijah in a significantly different form. A question to consider, what lessons about zeal might we learn from the story of Elijah? 1 Peter 3.8-4.6 Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind.

Do not repay evil for evil, or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing. For whoever desires to love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil, and his lips from speaking deceit. Let him turn away from evil and do good, let him seek peace and pursue it.

For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil. Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed.

Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you. Yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that when you are slandered, those who revile your good behaviour in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is eight persons, were brought safely through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven, and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities and powers having been subjected to him. Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh, no longer for human passions, but for the will of God.

For the time that has passed suffices for doing what Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties and lawless idolatry. With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you, but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. For this is why the gospel was preached even to them who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does.

1 Peter chapter 3 verses 8-12 concludes the section of instructions that began in chapter 2 verse 11. It presents six characteristics of faithful Christians, unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, tender hearts, humble minds, and blessing rather than reviling. Unity of mind is a common theme within the New Testament.

If we have the mind of Christ we will be united and we won't be constantly at odds with each other. We are called to have sympathy or compassion, entering into other people's joys and sorrows, weeping with those who weep and rejoicing with those who rejoice. We must have love for brothers and sisters in Christ.

Throughout the New Testament this is one of the defining characteristics of the people of Christ. We must have hearts that are tender, kind, open to being moved. Our hearts must not be closed to people, they must not be calloused.

Christians must have humble minds, meekness, concern for others before ourselves, not thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought, a sense of the greatness of God and the needs of our neighbours, and a sense of how small we are in the light of God's greatness. This should inform all of our thinking. In the activity of our minds we can often be puffed up and proud, but yet true wisdom is found in the fear of the Lord.

It begins with this posture of humility and it never ceases to be characterised by this. We must have a posture of blessing towards others. We have been called to obtain a blessing and as Christians we participate in the giving of what we receive in the Gospel.

We are forgiven, so we forgive. We have been blessed, so we bless. We have been given the Spirit as the people of God, so we minister the Spirit to others.

And to solidify this point he quotes at length from Psalm 34. As Charles Cranfield notes, Peter has rephrased the quotation to accent its reference to the age to come. The life that the Psalmist, as quoted by Peter, desires to love is not so much the life of the present day but the life to come.

And blessedness which we await from the Lord comes to those who follow the instructions of the Psalmist. And verse 13 continues the thought of the quotation from Psalm 34. It could be translated, And who is he who will be doing you evil? This follows on from verse 12, But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.

If we are zealous for what is good and wholehearted in our pursuit of it, no evil can ultimately harm us, no matter how fiercely it might assail us. This is similar to Paul's point that he makes in Romans chapter 8 verses 31-39. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all? How will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies, who is to condemn.

Christ Jesus is the one who died. More than that, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written, For your sake we are being killed all the day long.

We are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Indeed, in addition to the fact that no suffering will ultimately harm us, we are promised that if we suffer for righteousness' sake we will be blessed. Here he takes up the point of Jesus in Matthew 5, verses 10-12 at the end of the Beatitudes. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you, and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. He charges his hearers, Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy.

This is taken from Isaiah chapter 8, verses 11-13. For the Lord spoke thus to me with his strong hand upon me, and warned me not to walk in the way of this people, saying, Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. But the Lord of hosts, him you shall honour as holy.

Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. These are the verses that immediately precede those concerning the stumbling stone, which he has already alluded to in the preceding chapter. We should also note that Christ the Lord fills the place where the Lord of hosts was in the original quotation.

Such uses of Old Testament texts in the New Testament is an important line of evidence for the deity of Christ. The New Testament authors were prepared to take Old Testament scriptures that were clearly about God himself, and use them to refer to Christ. Christians are charged to give an answer for their hope.



Maybe this is an actual trial in the case of persecutions, or just when we are questioned by our neighbours and others around us. We must think diligently so as to be able to answer such questions well when we are put on the spot. And we must do so with gentleness and respect.

These themes have been central throughout. These are characteristic of the way that Christians relate to their neighbours. We also act with a good conscience.

We maintain blameless and exemplary lives. We are transparent in our godliness. We aren't driven by fear, resentment or anger, as Cranfield argues, but by integrity.

Over time this can put false accusers to shame. Once again, as he did when he spoke to slaves about their suffering, he speaks of the goodness of suffering for doing good. As he says in chapter 2 verses 19-20, For this is a gracious thing, when mindful of God one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly.

For what credit is it, if when you sin and are beaten for it you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. And from here, as he did previously, he moves into the example of Christ's sufferings of the righteous one suffering unjustly. Christ's suffering should be our model.

The suffering of Christ, however, is redemptive. It brings us to God. It opens up a new and living way and removes the obstacle of sin.

Christ was put to death in the flesh. He took the Adamic weak flesh that was under judgment and bore the judgment that lay upon it. But he was made alive in the spirit, in the resurrection.

Peter's distinction between flesh and spirit is much the same as Paul's is. The verses that follow are some of the most debated in the whole of Peter's writings. Who are the spirits in prison? What does it mean that Christ proclaims to them? Various theories have been put forth.

Some talk about people being in spiritual bondage. Others have seen here the doctrine of Christ's descent into hell. Others still have seen a reference back to Genesis chapter 6 and the angelic sons of God who took human women and had relations with them.

This story was narrated in more detail in the apocalyptic intertestamental text, the Book of Enoch. It seems to me that this event is also referred to in 2 Peter 2 verses 4-5. For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment, if he did not spare the ancient world, but preserve Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others, when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly.

And then also in Jude verse 6, and the angels who did not stay within their own position

of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day. Considering that the spirits are associated with the time of the building of the ark, considering the use of the term spirits, and considering references to this narrative elsewhere in the New Testament and particularly within the writing of Peter, it seems most likely to me that this is a reference back to Genesis chapter 6 and the stories surrounding it. What then does it mean that Christ preached to the spirits in prison? And when does that take place? Their disobedience took place in the days of Noah.

But it seems to me that Christ's preaching to them occurred in the spirit during the period between his death and his resurrection, or perhaps some might argue after his resurrection and ascension. The preaching in question is Christ's declaration of his victory over them. It is not a preaching that can lead to salvation.

It is rather a preaching that seals their defeat. Reading passages like this in Revelation chapter 12 verses 7 to 12, we should remember the cosmic dimensions of the work of Christ. Christ is defeating the rebellious angels and he is reordering the heavenly realms.

During the time of the rebellion of these angels, prior to the flood, God's patience waited and the ark was prepared, but only a few, a remnant of eight people were brought safely through the waters. Peter makes a remarkable comparison of this with baptism. Just as Noah and his family were delivered through the waters of the flood, so Christians are delivered through the waters of baptism.

The waters of the flood drowned the old world and the enemies of the people of God, and the waters of baptism symbolically drowned the old world and all the devils that pursue us. It is an exceedingly strong claim to say that baptism saves us. What might Peter mean? Some have tried to empty this statement of its force, but while Peter is concerned to say how baptism saves us, he does not make the statement only to empty it.

For Peter, it seems, the rite of baptism is truly saving. He makes clear what he does not mean by this. It does not save as a removal of dirt from the body.

It is not just a physical rite that works in a magical way, as if you could wash your flesh in the waters of baptism and instantly be saved. That is not how baptism works. Baptism's efficacy does not reside in mere water.

Rather, baptism saves as the answer of a good conscience towards God, and its efficacy comes through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The efficacy of baptism is like the efficacy of a wedding ceremony for a loving union between a man and his wife. While a baptism or wedding ceremony can create a formal relationship, the true efficacy of such ceremonies depends upon a wholehearted self-rendering over time, as we faithfully live out the meaning of what we have been committed to in the ceremony itself.

In the case of baptism, we are baptised into Christ, we are baptised into his death, buried with him, in order that we might be raised with him on the last day. That event of burial with Christ in baptism is a marking out of our bodies for that future event of resurrection. Baptism suspends us between the event in the past, the death of Christ, and the event in the future, the resurrection of our bodies that we anticipate.

And the efficacy of baptism is the efficacy of resurrection itself. That is where baptism gets its power, from the future in which it will be confirmed by God raising us from the dead. This Jesus Christ who was raised from the dead has gone into heaven.

He has triumphed and been exalted over all angels' authorities and powers, which are now subject to him. He will reign until all things have been put under his feet, as Psalm 110 verse 1 declares. Recognising the pattern of Christ and his sufferings, we must take the same course.

Peter describes in generic terms the way that the person who follows Christ's example will behave. Whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh, no longer for human passions, but for the will of God. Although people's former way of life might have been characterised by a pursuit of their passions, now that they have taken on the mantle of Christ, they follow a very different course, they have ceased from sin.

That pattern of behaviour that they once gave themselves to is no longer habitual for them, and now they live for the will of God. There is a watershed point in their lives between before and afterwards. In the before time, they had all the time that they wanted for living as the Gentiles do, for sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties and lawless idolatry.

All of these practices that brought no profit, and the people who continue to practice these things, are surprised when Christians don't join them in them. Yet these behaviours are a sort of flood of debauchery, that they are being drowned under, and though they speak ill of Christians, their judgement is near at hand. They will have to give an account to the one who will judge the living and the dead.

Verse 6 is another difficult verse to understand, for this is why the Gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does. Is this a reference back to the spirits in prison that were mentioned previously? I don't believe that it is, rather I think it relates to the preceding verse. Christ is going to judge the living and the dead, and the Gospel has been preached even to those who have died, even though they have suffered the consequences of death in the flesh the way that people more generally do, they might live in the spirit the way that God does, and they will be raised on the last day.

Concerns about the death of Christians seem to have been common within the early

church, as it wasn't entirely clear to some how those who died prior to the second coming of Christ would participate in his resurrection. Here, as Paul does in chapter 4 of 1 Thessalonians, Peter wants to assure his hearers that those who have died in Christ, who have heard the Gospel and responded to it, will also live in the spirit with them, they will also be raised up. A question to consider, Peter here uses the story of the flood as an example of the salvation that Christians have received.

The story of Noah and the ark and the flood more generally is referred to on a number of occasions in the New Testament as a paradigmatic example of judgement. What are some of the other occasions when it is used as an example, and what lessons can we learn from it for understanding the judgement of God?