

What is Elijah doing in that cave? Why does he look so weak and defeated?

From the very start, he's been a mighty messenger of God. At his first appearing, he infuriates an evil king. As time goes on, he performs astonishing miracles: He provides food that doesn't run out, and he even raises a boy from the dead. The climax is that awful day on that mountain, a showdown with a cult! A horrific battle of good and evil between him and the prophets of Baal. But there, the Lord faithfully shows His power and defeats His enemies, delivering His called servant. The visible victory is apparent just for a day or so; then the world is back to persecution as usual. For this mighty man of God, there is 40 days in the wilderness without food as he is miraculously sustained. After that, and after the miracles and the defeat of evil, he finds himself in a cave, forlorn and forsaken, wishing that it were his tomb.

The Lord appears to Elijah and asks him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

One can hear the despondency in the reply: "I have been zealous for the Lord God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life." It should be a lesson to all Christians: In the battles of life, even the most godly believer can be reduced to near-total despair. Elijah the prophet feels far from victorious; besides the victory over the prophets of Baal at Mt. Carmel, the enemy seems to be winning all the time.

As He must do for His children again and again, the Lord teaches Elijah not to trust in appearances. He summons him out of the cave, to stand on the mountain. He brings forth a great wind that breaks rocks in pieces, an intimidating display of force; but God isn't in the wind. He shakes the earth with a powerful earthquake, unsettling and terrifying; but He isn't in the earthquake. The Lord next brings forth fire, implacable and consuming; but He isn't in the fire, either. No, those things look impressive, powerful, intimidating; but that's not how the Lord serves His people.

What is next? The still small voice: "What are you doing here Elijah?" There's no help from God in the wind, the earthquake or the fire; but the Lord always *speaks* to His people. Elijah repeats his complaint from before, that he is the only one left who is faithful to God. But the complaint is revealing; beaten up and beaten down by sin and persecution, Elijah isn't all that faithful at the moment.

But the Lord is, always. So He tells Elijah to continue his tasks as prophet; and He assures him that he is not alone: "Yet I have reserved seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him" (1 Kgs. 19:18). The Lord guarantees that He will have His people, and that they will not be wiped out.

He will have His people, for they are part of His plan for salvation. Out of His faithful people one will be born, one whose life Elijah is already prophesying by his own. The One who will be born will infuriate an evil king at the very start. He will also spend forty days in the wilderness without food. He will miraculously feed thousands with just a few loaves and fish, and he will also raise a young man from the dead. He will defeat the enemies of God on a hill one day, after which He will be placed into a cave, seemingly forsaken.

But three days later, He will rise from the dead. He will ascend into heaven and sit on the right hand of God the Father almighty.

He will do this because, whatever Elijah feels, God is faithful and will send the Savior.

And because of the One to come, Elijah is forgiven for his sinfulness and doubt. Because of the One who is coming, Elijah will ascend into heaven in chariots of fire.

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So what is Jesus doing on that cross? And why does He look so forsaken and defeated?

Like Elijah on Mt. Carmel, Jesus is on that hilltop, winning the battle; but it's a strange victory indeed. He cries out in a loud voice, but His words sound more like Elijah in the cave: "Eli, Eli lama sabachthani?" "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?"

It always sounds strange to us: God the Father wouldn't really forsake His Son, would He? Jesus must just mean that He feels forsaken, or far away; or that He's playing the part of someone forsaken, but isn't really. Right?

Wrong. Of the seven last words of Christ, these are probably the most astonishing. Pay close attention, because these words declare to you the full, literal Gospel--the incalculable price that has been paid for your redemption. Jesus Christ, true God--begotten of the Father from all eternity, is on the cross. He who declared "I and My Father are one" (John 10:30) is being crucified. He is not dying as an example, or an accident, or to make us feel guilty.

He is dying our death; and I don't just mean our physical death. He is suffering eternal death for the sins of all the world. God is unleashing all His wrath for all sin upon His Son, and His Son is suffering an eternity of hell as He hangs on that cross.

At the cross, God condemns His Son in our place.

This is what St. Paul says in a most amazing statement: For [God] made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. (2 Cor. 5:21) God makes His sinless Son to be sin; and because the Son now bears the sins of the world, the Father forsakes Him and condemns Him at Calvary. And because the Son bears all the wrath, there is no wrath left for you. Jesus was forsaken so you could be accepted.

We need to hear this over and over, because no one is immune from despair. King David was a mighty man of God, yet he wrote tonight's psalm, which is filled with the language of suffering. Along with Moses, Elijah is the foremost of prophets in the Old Testament; yet both of these mighty men felt forlorn and forsaken at times, unwilling to go on.

It is true: Even the most godly Christians may encounter defeats and fears that are so devastating that they can't even open up their Bibles anymore. Even the most faithful believers may be driven to a point where they cry out, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?"

Because such times may lie ahead for any of us, we do well to learn now from Elijah and our Lord.

We learn from Elijah as he stands outside the cave. The Lord is not present in the wind or the quake or the fire. These calamities tell Elijah nothing about who God is or what He wills; they are simply terrible, intimidating things. And after they have come and gone, the Lord speaks to Elijah in a *still small voice*. After all the frightful phenomena, the Lord gives Elijah His Word. God is saying to his prophet, "Don't look for answers in the disaster—look for answers in my Word. Don't interpret your circumstances as the way I feel about you—listen to what I have told you Myself."

And what has He told you? He points you to His Son who cries out, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" He reminds you that He has forsaken His Son, so that He can welcome you as His child. And just as Jesus was raised from death, you too will be raised and are already lifted up, with the innocence and holiness of Jesus credited to your account. Listen to the still small voice saying, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." (Isaiah 43:1)