

Elijah Listens

Pastor Orban Bellamy

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Good morning! How are y'all doing today? See, this is why I never trust music stands that don't have a bolt in them. They just don't quite hold up the large print editions that some of us older folks need. That's all right. I'm far-sighted anyway, so that's about the right height. It's a joy to be with you again today. If you don't know who I am, my name is Pastor Orban Bellamy. You can forget the "Pastor." Or perhaps I should do it this way: [speaks Ukrainian] Oh, all right. We were missionaries in Ukraine for 13 years, and that was often how I introduced myself. "Hi, my name is Orban, son of George," because they use patronymics there, and I'm a teacher. And I am a teacher at heart. And for a little more than 13+ years, God had us in Ukraine teaching in churches there. Kind of a missionary to the church in Ukraine. Helping them to understand how God sees the church and ministering in churches across the country. I was a bible college instructor there for several years until God decided, "We're gonna switch." Let me ask you a question: what do you do when you're a teacher at heart, and God takes away your school? Hmm. What do you do when God takes away something that you built your life around? Kind of ironic.

We sang a song here this morning: "Christ is Enough." Hmm. I used to teach in bible school the book of Colossians. I can sum it up in a simple mathematical equation – actually, two equations: Jesus plus *anything* equals nothing. But Jesus plus *nothing* equals everything. He took the school that I was teaching away. Okay. "Orban, you teach that I am enough. What if I take away your school? What if I take away your students?" [exclaims] "You say I'm enough, Orban. Am I really?" [exclaims] You know, for eight months we sat on the mission field. We knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that we were supposed to be in Ukraine. We'd been there for about five years at this point in time, and we *knew* we were supposed to be there. Everybody else had left. I mean, over the space of about 21 months we said goodbye to 19 families and people that we had been part of and known, and we were the only missionaries that we knew left in our city. We were the only foreigners that we knew in our city of two million people. "God, what on earth are You doing?!" And for eight months He left us in a fog. Kind of like trying to see through the mist of the early morning. The curtains were drawn. I mean, I could give you lots of clichés and idioms and pictures, but the simple fact is we had no idea what we were doing there. And then, finally, the Lord began to open up some of the curtains and we began to see. And He began a ministry for us of itinerant teaching, and that's when I began teaching across the country in bible schools for mission organizations, in churches. I had one pastor come up to me once, and said, "Orban, thank you so much for this Centre of Christian Learning." That's what we transitioned from. From [Ukrainian name] Bible Institute to the Centre of Christian Learning. He says, "Thank you so much for the Centre of Christian Learning." I looked at him, I said, "You're welcome. Why?" He says, "You've touched 150 people in my church today. At the bible school, you touched 20 or 30 a year." Which was true – we were a small school. And that's why the Lord decided to move on, is because the last year we weren't touching 20 or 30, we were touching 5. With a faculty of 8, that didn't make a whole lot of sense!

Sometimes God changes things up on us. Sometimes He puts us through things that we don't understand. We sing these wonderful songs, "Christ is Enough." "Through the

storm, I will have joy in my heart.” I trust you never go through a storm that robs you of that joy, but trust me, there are storms out there that make it really, really hard to find that joy. Really hard. Is Christ enough? He *should* be. We sing it. It is true. But is it true in our own lives? That’s really the question.

Well, that was mostly for free. It’s not in my notes, anywhere. It’s not part of the regular introduction, but... storms! We’re still talking about storms. I started a series – you can tell I’m not the regular pastor here, because my series has lasted a couple of years and it’s only five messages long. [laughter] And there’s no sketch board up here, for those of you who were at the retreat, so there’s no painting going on today. If you missed the retreat, you missed a good time. You missed a time of fellowship and of just kind of hanging out together. It was a lot of fun. My wife and I were privileged to be at your retreat, and I was privileged to entertain the troops Sunday morning with a word from the Lord.

But I want you to remember back with me, if you would, to some of the storms that we’ve talked about, way back when. I’m not even sure exactly when. I could look in my notes, but... We began talking about this storm theology. Little did I know that I would ever be invited back, and be invited to continue this series. But way back, we talked about Jesus asleep in the boat. The gospel of Mark. *If* you remember back that far – I do because I have notes – you remember that we talked about we have a choice to make. We have a choice whether to be controlled by our fear, or controlled by our faith. Now, let me contradict one of these beloved songs that we have. Fear is not our enemy. Choosing to be controlled by it *is*. Fear is a natural response. Without fear, I would walk out onto the Anthony Henday, because I’m not afraid. Well, fear is a good thing. It keeps me alive. But it’s when I’m *controlled* by that as opposed to faith that I get into trouble. It’s only natural to feel fear. Stand on the edge of a cliff, look down, and feel a gust of wind behind you – I guarantee you’ll feel fear! Unless you’ve got a parachute on. It’s natural. But don’t let it control you. And that’s what we talked about in the very first storm. The opposite of fear isn’t courage in a Christian’s life; the opposite of fear is *faith*. Do you trust God in this storm? Do you trust God in the middle of it?

The next storm we talked about was after Jesus had fed the 5,000+ people, and He was such a nice guy, Jesus. Wasn’t Jesus a nice guy? Oh, He was such a nice guy. He said, “You know what? You, my disciples, you go off. Go ahead. You know, you go off, you guys can head home. I’ll clean up.” We all like that after a busy day of ministry, don’t we? We’ve had a big banquet or something, and somebody says, “You go home. I’ll clean up.” Okay! Cool! I’m out of here! I usually don’t have to be told twice. I used to be a dining room manager – I know what it’s like to be the one who has to stay to lock up. Ugh. I’m out of here! The disciples are gone! Jesus dismisses the crowd, goes up into the mountains to pray. Of course, what had Jesus sent the disciples into? [laughs] A life-threatening storm. Jesus knew that storm was there. He knew that storm was coming. And He sent the disciples out into the teeth of the storm. Sometimes, the storms that we find ourselves in are directed by God. Sometimes, we’re in a storm *because* we’ve done *exactly* what God wants. Sometimes, we’re in a storm because that’s where God wants us to be, because He’s got a reason for it. He may never tell us the reason – that’s His business. Always remember... One of our favorite question words: *WHY?* That’s God’s business, not mine. “My ways are not your ways.” Isaiah 55. “My thoughts are not your thoughts. For as high as the heavens are above the earth,” declares the Lord, “so far are My thoughts above your thoughts and My ways above your ways.” Sometimes, I’m real glad God doesn’t tell me why, because I think I would run screaming into the night.

Sometimes we're in a storm because that is where God has placed us for His glory and our own benefit. In the midst of that storm, what did Peter find? Do you remember? The most amazing opportunity recorded in scripture, as far as I'm concerned. I mean, apart from our whole salvation narrative. How many people – you don't have to give me exact numbers – how many people raised the dead that we know of through scriptural history? Jesus plus...others? Absolutely. I mean, if you were with us at Cowboy Church on Friday night... By the way, I am a pastor. I pastor at a church called the Cowboy Church. Officially entitled Strathcona County Evangelical Free Church. So, we are a part of the Evangelical Free Church Association, but yeah, normally I am here in a hat and that's...some of you guys are going, "Oh! That's what's missing!" We meet Friday nights because the people that they surveyed when they were planning this church didn't want to give up Sunday mornings. They like to sleep in. Okay. We'll meet Friday nights, then. Of course, when I get together with my pastor friends, usually they say, "So what do you do on a Sunday morning?" Go to brunch, sleep in, make all my pastor friends green with jealousy. I don't have to give up my Sunday mornings, either, unless Pastor Kim calls. [congregation laughs] It is a joy to be with you folks, and I love being here, so...

Now, where were we? We were talking about Jesus and the storm and Peter's opportunity. How many people healed the sick? Lots of people, right? How many people walked on water? One person other than Jesus. One! And that was in the middle of a life-threatening storm that God had sent Peter into. Peter said, "If that's You, tell me to come onto the water." Peter, are you an idiot?! Think...I mean... We just finished a series not too long ago in our church on the epistles of Peter and the life of Peter, and I know you folks did some of that here, as well, with 2 Peter. I love Peter because I can relate to him. I mean, most of the time, he opened his mouth to switch feet. He didn't put one in; he traded them. I mean, he was Mr. Impulsive. Engage brain before acting, Peter! Come on. You can't walk on the water in your bathtub let alone in a life-threatening storm. What are you thinking? And yet, Peter had the audacity to say that. Whether his brain was connected at that moment or not, we don't know. But then he got out of the boat when Jesus said, "Come on. Let's go for a walk. We'll meet these guys on the other side. Let's go. You and me Peter, okay?" Peter got out of the boat, and Peter walked on the water. Yes, he lost his faith, he dropped it to his circumstances, he started to sink, Jesus rescued him. We all know that, we all obsess about that. But the simple fact is Peter had enough guts and faith to get out of the boat in the middle of the storm. Sometimes, our greatest opportunities come in the middle of the storm, when God invites us out to walk on the water. Now, never try to walk on the water unless God invites you first. [chuckles] That's the critical part. If you're in the middle of a storm and you think you can do miracles, you better make sure that God has asked you to do them first, because otherwise, guess who's going down. And that was the second storm.

Third storm, a little bit different again. A man by the name of Jonah. Actually, Jonah was the second storm, wasn't he? I was going, "Wait a minute – did I go Old Testament, New Testament?" I didn't start with the Old Testament. So, okay, yeah. Jonah was the second storm. Walking on water – Peter walking on water was actually the third storm. See, I told you I remember because I have notes, and my notes are closed. That's why I don't remember. "Jonah. Go to Nineveh." "I hate them." Sorry, Bill. I've got to pick on you for a minute. I noticed up here that he likes to watch hockey, and that we're supposed to ask him about his near-death experiences. I'm convinced that's watching the Oilers play in Calgary. [congregation laughs] As an Oilers fan who married a Flames fan, um, we don't go to hockey games together. We did once, and our marriage survived...just! Whoa. And that's because it ended in a tie after overtime. Neither one of us were happy! [sighs]

“Go to Nineveh.” “NO!” This was incredibly deliberate, and we know that because Jonah had to leave his home and make a journey to the port and take out all of his money and buy a ticket to the farthest place that he could go to. Oftentimes, we get confused with Tarsus and Tarshish. Tarsus was around the corner of the Mediterranean Sea. Tarshish is in Spain! Across from the Isle of Gibraltar. It’s as far as he could go. And he was going. Incredibly deliberate choice of a man of God. Jonah is a prophet, and Jonah says, “I don’t want to. I don’t like them. Because, see, God, I know what you’re going to do. As soon as I give them the message to repent, they’re going to repent and You’re going to save them and not going to destroy them. Well, I’d rather see a column of smoke, thank You. [in ominous voice] I want to see them destroyed.” I mean, let’s get down to it: that’s what Jonah wanted! He hated them! Kind of like the Flames and the Oilers. Or the Eskimos and Stampeders. See, I grew up, I lived 8 blocks from the coliseum, 5 blocks from the stadium when I was in high school or elementary school and junior high, so... I was one of those ones that used to go lie down on the ground and watch the football games underneath the fence from Commonwealth Stadium.

Jonah chose to disobey, and God threw a storm at him. Was that to judge him? No. It was not to judge him. What was it to do? Because if it was to judge him, God would have let him die. God would have just punished him there and then and said, “Okay, I’ll send somebody else.” “Jonah, I have a job for you to do and I am *not* letting you get away from Me that easy.” Kind of like when one of your kids was really little and they just really didn’t want to obey, and you just kind of wrapped them up in your arms and said, “You can wiggle and squiggle all you like, but I’m stronger than you, and you’re not going until we have this chat.” The whole storm was to get Jonah’s attention. Jonah thought he’d won. Middle of the storm, Jonah says, “Throw me overboard. The storm will stop.” In Jonah’s mind, he’s thinking, “I still win. I get thrown overboard – what happens? I die. The message still doesn’t go to Nineveh. Yes!” Little did Jonah realize that God had a submarine waiting. Of course, it had fins, a tail, and a complete digestive system that was housing Jonah for three days. Ugh!

But sometimes the storm we find ourselves in is because we’ve chosen to walk away from God, and God is trying to get our attention. God is saying, “Hey – come on. I’m over here.” The beautiful thing about this story is what happened after the fish vomited Jonah – and I’m not adding to that word, that’s the word in the text – vomited Jonah back onto dry ground? What did God say to Jonah? “You stupid little rat – now I gotta go find somebody else.” Right? “Get outta here, you’re useless to me.” Is that what He said? No. “Jonah – glad to see you made it! There’s Nineveh. You remember them, don’t you?” “Ugh, yeah.” “Well, get going. I’ve still got a job for you.” See, a lot of times, we think that our sin disqualifies us from our service. Not necessarily the case. Peter denies Jesus three times. Swears and says, “I do NOT know this man!” John 21. “Peter, do you love Me?” “Yes.” “Cool, then feed My sheep. Peter, do you love Me?” “Yes.” “Good, feed My sheep. Peter, do you love Me?” And Peter breaks down. “You know everything, God. You know everything, Jesus. You know that I love you. “Good, then feed My sheep.” See, the sin and the storms that God puts us in to get our attention doesn’t necessarily disqualify us from God’s service. Sometimes it prepares us for more effectively understanding the hearts and lives of the people that He’s called us to minister to. So that’s 1, 3, and 2, in that order.

We're going to take a look at another storm today. A storm that we have kind of already sung about. As a matter of fact, we're going to take a look at three storms today. They were little, they were small, but they were significant, and I think we can learn something from them. If you have your bibles, turn with me to the book of 1 Kings. So we're back into the old testament. I've done this as a series in several different churches, I've done this as a seminar lecture. I'm pulling notes from all over the place, so we'll see where God takes us today. [laughs] 1 Kings Chapter... actually, you know what? We're going to start at Chapter 17. The story that we actually want to see is in Chapter 19, but we're going to walk through some of the context earlier in order to see that. But before we do that, let's pause for a word of prayer.

[praying]

Father, as we open Your word together today, I ask that You would be our teacher. Lord, please speak to our hearts. Bring calm and stillness so that we can hear Your voice. May we hear, may You speak in ways that we can hear and understand, and Lord, may we be willing to listen to hear what You have to say and to obey it. May You find in us today the responses that You're looking for. For Your glory, Lord Jesus, and in Your holy name, amen.

I want to change my mind here a little bit, and let me ask you another question before we look at 1 Kings. Why do storms happen? We've talked about the purpose of these storms, the simple fact that sometimes we're in a storm because that's exactly where God has placed us because we've done all the right things. Sometimes, we're in a storm because we've done all the wrong things. But why do storms happen? Any thoughts? By the way, I introduced myself at the beginning – I'm a teacher at heart, which means when I ask a question and pause...listen for the pause...it's your turn to talk. So, why do storms happen? Yes, that's the pause. [laughter] [inaudible responses from congregation] All right. We're going to go a little simpler than that. Genesis Chapter 3 – what happened? “Oh, that fruit looks good. *snorts, makes eating noises* Here, Adam, have some.” “Isn't that the-“ “Yeah, have some.” “But...” “Mm-mm, it's good, have some.” “Okay.” God curses the earth because of Adam and Eve's sin. We see that in Genesis Chapter 3. The earth is not what it was made to be, folks. Some meteorological phenomenon, while it's true, is not working the way it's supposed to be working, because something changed on our globe. Something changed on our earth that shifted everything on this earth more than any other event since the creation. And that is: sin came into the world, and God said, “That can't happen. That absolutely should not happen.” And God cursed the earth because of Adam. “In toil and grief you will sow,” He says. “It's going to give you thorns! And mosquitoes!” Well, He doesn't actually name mosquitoes, but I'm convinced they're part of the curse. [laughter]

Romans Chapter 8 gives us another little picture of this. It kind of puts a little bit of emotion onto our earth. Verse 20 of Romans Chapter 8 starts:

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. And not only this, but also we ourselves...

(NASB)

All of creation is groaning, waiting for the remaking. Waiting for the new heavens and the new earth. Storms are part of that. Storms come because we live in a cursed and a sin-sick world. This world is not healthy. Why? Because of sin. That's why. We live in a sin-sick and cursed world. Why don't our bodies work the way they're supposed to? Because they don't! God said, "You know what? If we let these people live forever, in their current state of fallenness, ugh. There's no end to the degree of evil and misery that will come. We've got to get them out of the garden." And so He took them out of the garden to prevent them from living forever on earth in a human form that isn't designed to support us forever. We live in a sin-sick and broken world, folks. Storms happen.

Elijah. "These are the days of Elijah." Wow. I hope not. I know he means well with that song, but if you look at the days of Elijah, King Ahab was the most wicked king in all of Israel at this point in time. His queen was the worst. These were *horrible* days. God did some amazing things. These were nasty times to live in – if you were trying to be a true follower of God...whew, these were nasty times.

1 Kings. We look at starting at Chapter 17 and Elijah shows up on the scene, and if you want to know more about the life of Elijah, come out Friday nights to Cowboy Church. A couple weeks ago we actually started a series on the life of Elijah, so... We're just getting started so you haven't missed much. Elijah shows up and says to King Ahab, "Ahab..." Remember, this is one of the worst kings in all of Israel's history. Now, you've got to get this right: Israel, not Judah. It's a split kingdom now – we're talking about the northern kingdom, which had *no* good kings. None. The southern kingdom, Judah, had almost as many good kings as bad kings; they had the royal line of David. The northern king had none of that and had horrible kings, start to finish. They got carried away, almost 200 years sooner than the southern kingdom of Judah. And God brought the descendants back from Judah, not from Israel. Interesting. Anyway...

So we see Elijah as a prophet to King Ahab. It says about 55 years since the death of Solomon. I would ask you how many are 55 or over, but I'm not going to embarrass some of you that way. [in funny voice] I'm not that old yet. If you are 65, you're old enough to remember back to when Solomon would have been king. That's how short a time distance this has taken. There has been about five kings in the meantime in Israel. One of them lasted for seven days before he was assassinated. We're talking violent. We're talking horrible. And then Ahab comes along and it says he was the worst one yet! Elijah walks in to King Ahab's throne room and says, "Ahab, as surely as the Lord the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, I am a man of God, Ahab. As surely as the Lord the God of Israel before whom I stand lives, there will be neither dew nor rain on this earth until I say so." Wow. That's a promise that God had given them. "You obey Me, you follow My commandments, you keep Me as your God, and I will keep your land. I will prosper you. You disobey Me, you abandon Me, you choose other directions, and guess what? It ain't gonna go so well." "I will make the heavens like iron," one of the passages says. Elijah is simply saying, "God is bringing about what He said He would do. There ain't gonna be no rain." So God sends Elijah off to the brook to be watered by the brook and to be fed by ravens. Mmm, yum yum. You ever seen what ravens eat? God provided, but... [exclaims]

The brook dries up. “God, what now?” I mean, Elijah is affected by this lack of rain as much as anybody else. The brook dries up, he’s got no more drinking water. “What do I do now, Lord?” “Go to Zarephath.” Now, we have no clue about this. I mean, we don’t have this image in our heads - it’s not like me telling you to go to Leduc and you know exactly where it is and how long it’s going to take you to get there. Simple fact is the brook Cherith was on the east side of Jordan – okay, the Jordan River. Zarephath is a coastal town on the Mediterranean Sea. Not only that, it’s north of Israel in a country called Sidon, in a region called Sidon. So he’s got to go all the way across Israel, and then up the coast until he finds this town called Zarephath. Who was famous – who was Zarephath’s most famous person at this point in time. Er, not Zarephath – Sidon? The region of Sidon that he’s going to, who was the most famous person from that region. Do you know? A lady by the name of Queen Jezebel. She was daughter of the Sidonian king. [laughs] God sends Elijah right into her home territory and says, “There’s a widow there that will take care of you.” “Okaaaay.” And she does. In the process, her son dies, Elijah brings him back to life – well, God brings him back to life through the prayers of Elijah.

Huge confrontation on Mount Carmel. We all know that part about Elijah, don’t we? Elijah standing on Mount Carmel which, again, is a mountain range up the coast by the Mediterranean Sea. And Elijah stands there and challenges the prophets of Baal and we know the story. All of the buckets of water that were poured on God’s sacrifice, and dancing around the altar were the prophets of Baal and doing all kinds of horrible stuff to try to get their god’s attention, and their god is just silent. And Elijah, [laughs] Elijah is sitting there watching them. “Hey, maybe he’s asleep. You better yell a little louder.” [Gasps] Our scripter doesn’t say this because it’s too polite, but the Hebrew says this: “Maybe he’s in the bathroom.” It’s what it means. You read through that. That was one of the insults that Elijah threw at these prophets. “Maybe he’s in the bathroom! He just flushed. He can’t hear ya. Maybe he’s in the shower. Maybe he’s having a rest. Maybe...” “What’s your problem, boys? No fire?” See, Elijah is just *pumped* right now. He is so high on adrenaline. Whoo! And then comes the time for the evening offering, right? Pour the water on. “We built the altar of Israel there as it was supposed to have been built.” Sacrifices the ox, cuts it up, puts it on the alter, and just prays a simple prayer: “Lord, if you are God here and You are awake and alive, please send down fire and consume this.” [makes explosive sound effect] Fire fell from heaven. Consumed the alter, the wood, the water, left the trough dry that was full of water around the alter. What a victory! “Hey! Don’t let them get away!” And they capture all of the prophets of Baal and they take them down to a brook and they execute them. It’s a tough thing being a spiritual leader, especially if you’re following the wrong god. The one who isn’t alive and who doesn’t show up when you pray. Kills all of them, hundreds of them.

Of course, these are all intimately connected with Jezebel and her plans for this kingdom, so Jezebel says, “Elijah, I vow that you will be the same as my prophets you just killed by tomorrow of this time.” This great, amazing man of God walks into Ahab’s castle and says, “It ain’t gonna rain until I say it does.” Powerful! Courageous! What does Elijah do when this empty threat from Jezebel comes? [screeches] [makes explosive sound] Gone! He tucks tail and runs! See, sometimes fear is very, very real.

Let's pick up the story. Chapter 19 of 1 Kings. So yeah. So far, we've made it through Chapters 17 and 18. I take a little bit longer at Cowboy Church – it's taken us three sermons to get to Chapter 17. Ahab told Jezebel - Chapter 19 verse 1 of 1 Kings - Ahab told Jezebel *all* that Elijah had done and that he had killed *all* of 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 one of them by this time tomorrow." Then, he was afraid. And he arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah. So, he's left the country. He's fled the country so far. He's crossed the border, he's now in a different country. He's in 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.

Have you ever been so weary in the Lord's service that you just wanted God to kill you? Elijah did. This is called coming down after. [laughs] Except Elijah didn't have a stop point; he just spiraled. And the depths of despair that he hit – you know what? It gives me courage sometimes. He asked that he might die, saying, "It is enough now, oh Lord. Take away my life for I am no better than my fathers. I have just turned tail and run from this evil woman. I've had this amazing mountaintop experience –that's where we get the phrase "mountaintop experience." Mount Carmel, God showing up doing amazing things, and this is Elijah's crash afterwards. And he laid 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 he drank and laid 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 40 days and 40 nights to Horeb, the mount of God. Here's just a little aside for you: sometimes the most spiritual thing you can do is take a nap. Sometimes, your body is just worn out. And you just need to sleep. Not all the time! Read Proverbs – it'll sort you out. But sometimes, you just need to sleep. And eat. [makes slurping sound]

Then he came there to a cave and lodged there; 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 zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away."

(NASB)

"Poor me." I mean, this is where Elijah's at emotionally. He is burned out. He is stressed to the max. He is just... "God, just kill me now and get it over with before they catch up to me. I'm the only one left." Which, by the way, if we read far enough, isn't true. There are hundreds of prophets still alive in Israel at this exact point in time. But Elijah doesn't see any of that. "I, even I, only, am left, and they seek my life to take it away." And God said to him, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord." By the way, "Lord" in your bible - what kind of font is used there? What kind of text, what does it look like? [inaudible feedback from congregation] Why is that? Oh, you mean there's a reason? [laughs] When you see the word "Lord" in small caps that way, or all in caps, you know what that means? It means it's the personal name of God. It's not some deity up there; this is the way Yahweh is translated. This is the 4 letters that the Hebrews use to indicate the person of God, the great I Am, the one who is a person. It's not "some god, some deity." It is a person. It is a real-live person. Just a little aside there for you.

So He said, “Go forth and stand on the mountain before the Lord. [Yahweh]” And behold, the Lord [Yahweh] was passing by! And a great and strong wind was rending the mountains and breaking in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake...

(NASB)

Trust me, you do not want to be in a cave in a mountain during an earthquake!
[exclaims]

...but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire

(NASB)

[whispering] A still whisper. [speaking regularly] Have you ever been on a storm out on the water? Or out at WEB Retreat? [laughs] Saturday afternoon. And the storm blows through and you wonder if it's going to start to spin. And suddenly, it gets really calm afterwards. [whispering] And there's no sound. It's just silent. [speaking regularly] And on that silence, there's a tiny little whisper. And after the earthquake, a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire, and after the fire, the sound of a low whisper.

When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave. And behold, a voice came to him and said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Then he said, “I have been very zealous for the Lord...”

(NASB)

And on he goes. Some things that I want us to note here. Sometimes, we're in a storm because God creates a storm and puts us in it by obeying Him. Sometimes, we're in a storm because we create the context of disobedience and God says, "I'm not going to let you get away that easily." Sometimes, we're in a storm simply because storms happen. Sometimes, there is no deep spiritual reason for the storm. Sometimes, it just is. Why did my father suffer with dementia for as many years as he did before God finally took him home? I don't know. Was there any deep, significant spiritual reason for that? No. His body just outlived his mind. Why do things happen to us? Our first question is often: God, why me?! That's what I've been saying sometimes. God, why me?! [laughs] God asked me a question: why NOT you? Ooh. What makes me so special that storms shouldn't happen to me when they happen to people all around me? What makes me so special? Well, I'm a child of Yours... "Yeah, so?" Doesn't exempt us from the storms that exist because we live in a sin-sick, broken world. Sometimes, storms happen to us because storms happen. Sometimes, there's no other reason than that. We go looking for sense. We try to make sense of this. "God, why did I lose my job? Why are You doing this to me? I mean, God, You're sovereign. You're in control of all things!" Yeah, He is. But that doesn't say He's going to guide my path around every hardship. James Chapter 1 tells us:

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance [patience].

(NASB)

You know, if I haven't gone through some of the storms that I have gone through, I couldn't relate to some of the folks in my congregation. When we were in Ukraine, I remember chatting with a young man, and he's like, "I just, I can't find work. There's just no work for me." And I said, "Well, what are you looking for?" And he said, "Well, I'm a teacher. I've been to bible school, I've been to seminary, so I'm looking for a church, a place to teach, whatever..." And it's like... "Well, so? Get a job! Come on, man!" He says, "Well, you're a teacher." I says, "Well, you know what, I've been a telemarketer. I've been in retail. I've been in food services. I've..." Yeah, I was one of those nasty guys that called you at supper time. Yes, I was. I've been a courier. I've done all kinds of things just to pay the bills! Because that's what we as men do! We take care of our family. Some of those jobs were very hard to come by [laughs] in the times and eras that I was looking for work. And sometimes you take what you can get, right?

But, see, oftentimes, we can relate to other people better because of the storm. Does that mean that's why we're in the storm? No. We're in the storm because – here, do me a favor, take these two fingers, 'kay? Hold them up alongside your neck. You feel anything there? Oh, Bill, I'm sorry. Do we have an EMT in the audience? [in a low voice]: Is there a doctor in the house? [regular voice] If you feel a pulse, guess what? You're not exempt from storms! You're in a storm because you're alive! And maybe for no other reason whatsoever. Sometimes, we're in a storm simply because storms happen. And if you're trying to find some deep, spiritual significance in your storm, sometimes it just isn't there. And we try to manufacture something to make it easier on us. There's got to be a reason! Well, sometimes there just isn't.

I heard a conference speaker when I was in bible college. She had been through... She had been a missionary, she had lost her husband, her husband had bene killed, not that she couldn't find him again – he had been killed. She had been raped. She had been taken captive. She had been... She went through sooo much. She was crying out to the Lord, "God, why?!" God asked her a single question - I hope I will never forget this, but because of the dementia in my family history, I can't promise that. "Will you trust Me if I never tell you why?" Ouch. See, we've talked about our faith in the midst of the storm, and our faith to hold us fast in the storm. Do we have enough faith to get us through to the other side when there's no other reason than we live in a broken world? We live in a broken world, folks. Let me ask you a question: what keeps a tree standing strong in a storm? [inaudible responses from congregation] I love asking this question, because everybody says that, and it's the wrong answer. Sorry. [laughs] I've seen trees with *massive* root systems blown over. And you see this huge thing of roots sticking up. How come it fell over? Because of the soil. It's what you're rooted *into* that makes the difference. We need roots, absolutely. And we need deep, strong roots. But if those roots are in the wrong thing, guess what? The storm is going to blow us over just as easily as it'll send a plastic pylon across the parking lot. If our roots are not in God, we are in trouble. Bigtime.

A couple of verses that'll help us see that. Colossians. Colossians Chapter 2. I'm just going to read a couple of verses here. Colossians Chapter 2 starting at verse 6:

Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him...

(NASB)

Rooted into Him. Ephesians says something very similar:

... being rooted and grounded in love...

In His love. Folks, if we don't have that relationship with God, we are in *big* trouble. We're hooped. I mean, sorry. [laughs]

I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

(NIV – emphasis added)

Bupkis! That's my interpretation. There is nothing of value that I can accomplish without being attached to the vine. I have to be rooted into Christ. I have to *know* Him. I have to be in a vital relationship with Him. Because, you know what? There are some times when the emotions and the lows come, and you just want to curl up in a ball and say, "God, just...just...yeah. Just do it."

You see, Elijah looked to God at that point in time, and God looked to Elijah, and they had conversation because they had a relationship. You remember how this all started. In 1 Kings 17 verse 1. Elijah enters Ahab's throne room and says:

"As the Lord, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand..."

(NASB – emphasis added)

"I'm a man of God." Which means I have a relationship with Him. He's my master. I'm His servant. I look to His hand for directions. He is the one in control of my life. He is the one who is the one that I trust. Who *is* the one I obey. It's all about Jesus. It's all about the Lord. It's all about our God. Sometimes, storms happen simply because we are alive. And we're not exempt, as children of God. Do you have the relationship with God to get you through to the other side, even if He never tells you why?

Some of us are struggling in a storm right now. How do we tell? How can we know if this is a storm because I'm obeying God or because I'm disobeying God or just because? I want to give you some practical advice. Real practical. And you can take it from your bible, so it's not from me. Psalm 139. Go ahead and turn there. If you've never looked there before, go ahead. Some of you are going, "Oh, yeah. I like that psalm." I like it, too. Psalm 139. I'm going to read it because the versions that I have memorized are not the ones that I am reading today, so... Psalm 139 verse 23 and 24:

***Search me, O God, and know my heart!
Try me and know my thoughts!
And see if there be any grievous way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting!***

(ESV)

Search me, oh God, and know my heart. Test me, and know my thoughts. See if there is any grievous way in me – any hurtful way, any way where I am stepping wrong – and lead me in Your path.

Careful of that verse. Many of us have looked at that verse and have beaten ourselves up with it. Because we keep looking until we find something, don't we? And given the day, it doesn't take me very long to find a list. All right... [exclaims] Do you notice that's not what it says? It doesn't say, "Search yourself and see if there's any hurtful way." It says, "Search me, oh God." Search me, oh God. Lord, shine Your spotlight. *You* search me, and *You* point out if there's anything that You're trying to draw my attention to, any lesson that I'm supposed to be learning, any opportunity that You're trying to give me, any sin or something that I'm running away from. And if there is nothing, quit looking and start trusting. See, we look until we find something, but God doesn't necessarily. Sometimes, there are things that I bring up to God and say, "God, what about these things?" And He says, "Hey, hey, hey, hey, relax. I'll get to that when I'm ready, but for now, follow Me. Trust Me. Walk with Me."

Search me, oh God, and know my heart. Try me and know my anxious thoughts, and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. If God doesn't point out anything, then trust Him. Leave it at that. Tell Satan to take a hike, because the One who has the right to accuse you – Jesus Christ, who died for us – isn't accusing you. He's forgiven you already.

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

(ESV)

Romans. None. Okay? Search me, oh God, and know my heart. Lord, this storm: why? It's okay to ask why – just don't get hung up on it. Don't [in ferocious voice] demand an answer. "God, I'm not moving until you tell me why." Wow, we're gonna be here for a while. Search me, oh God, and if there's nothing wrong, if there's no other reason, help me to walk in faith today, trusting that You will get me through the storm. Let's pray.

[praying]

Heavenly Father, You are our God. You are the one who knows all, who created us, You are the one who knows each storm present today here in this room. You know those who are there because You're trying to give them opportunities. You know the ones that are here today because they're running. You know the ones that are in a storm today simply because they have a pulse. Father, I ask that You would open our eyes to Your plans for us, and that we would trust You. That we would let our roots go deep into You through Your word, through fellowship with others, through our quiet times with You. May our roots go deep into You so that when those storm winds blow, we are swayed, we are rocked back and forth but we are not toppled. Be our anchor, Father. Be the rock that holds us firm. For Your glory and in Your holy name, Father, I ask for each one of these, that they would find You to be the good soil that they are so deeply rooted in, that the joy never leaves when the storms come, and that You, Jesus, are always enough. Amen.