

St. Paul: Weekly Devotions

*Devotions on week's readings
for 08.23.15 (Pentecost 13b)*

Day One: 1 Kings 19:9-18

There [Elijah] 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?"¹⁰ 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."¹¹ 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.¹² And after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper.

"Dear Jesus, give me the words to speak." I can't begin to tell you how many times I have prayed those words.

Every preacher wants to change the hearts of his hearers. We want people to

listen and to be moved, to be changed by the gospel. And to that end we often wish that we could wake people up, shock them with a miraculous healing, with special effects, or at least with a loud shout. This is why I have often wished that I had a powerful baritone voice. Or lacking that, I want to find just the right words, the perfect story, even a good joke to command attention and gain a hearing for God's word.

But it's not in our words. It is not power or volume or "shock and awe" that will cut through the people's indifference. It is God's whisper.

Elijah's ears are filled with his own complaint. His woes are all he can hear. But God's whisper gently calls him to hear. God doesn't force him to follow – he comforts him and leads him to listen.

Prayer: *Father, I have wished that you would impress me, speak to me loudly and clearly. I have longed for you to shout at the evil in this world. But give me ears to hear your gentle, loving whisper. Open my heart to the whisper in your word, which has been waiting for me. Amen.*

Day Two: 1 Kings 19:9-18

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.¹⁶ And Jehu the son of Nimsbi you shall anoint to be king over Israel, and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

Elijah brings his complaint before the Lord. I've done my very best! I've worked hard! But now "I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away." Does God give him a solution?

No. He tells Elijah three things. 1) I'll give you the privilege of anointing a new king over Israel, and even a new king over Syria. 2) I've chosen a new prophet to take over from you. And 3) I still have 7,000 faithful believers who will continue to fight when you are gone.

We need to hear God's message to us in those words. God appoints earthly rulers – not just church leaders. And those whom you fear will go away and be replaced by others – in my time.

God chooses his servants. He chose you. Is there no one else who could possibly do the work you do – care for your children – do things right? God can and will appoint a successor to your most important tasks. Your child will find a spouse or mentor, a brother or sister in Christ. It's not all up to you.

And our Father has more servants than you know. You are not alone. This is why we worship! This is why you should be in church – because there we see some of the 7,000 who are our partners. God will use them and us to build each other up, and to overcome our enemy.

Prayer: *Dear Lord, I often feel like Elijah, as if I'm the only one. Wake me up to see that you are in charge. You rule the world even when you use evil to punish evil. You called me and you call others to serve. And you have for me partners in faith. Grant that we may build up one another. Amen.*

Day Three: Eph. 5:22-33

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For Christ is the head of the church, his body... Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church...

This text seems to be about marriage, but in reality it's about something deeper. It is about the power of serving others just as Jesus served us.

Rev. Mandla Khumalo was once a student radical in South Africa. In protest of apartheid rules, he helped to burn down buildings, and he marched in the street, boycotting school. He rejected religion because he believed that God was a white man who cared nothing for him.

Then, during a police crackdown, he was hiding in a church and he attended a service. That night God convicted him of his sin. And the next day he turned himself over to the police.

When he told them his story, they didn't believe him. They thought he was playing a trick. "You think you are being clever!" they said. "But we're on to you." And they turned him loose. When he

went home to tell his family about his newfound faith in Jesus, they were alarmed. "The police are looking for you," his mother said. But he said, "Mother, don't worry. God has taken care of that."

Mandla told many people this in his preaching, "The problem with Africa is not white. The problem with Africa is not black. The problem with Africa is sin." And the answer to sin is Jesus.

Sometimes we want to solve our problems by making or changing the law. Like beating our heads on a wall, we try to force our way through a problem. But the only way through the problem of sin is by submitting to God's solution, confessing our sin, and being washed by God's Spirit.

Out of reverence for Jesus, we submit ourselves to one another. We serve each other. And we find the joy that Jesus had in serving us.

Prayer: *Dear Jesus, I want to serve you because of your amazing love for me. But I confess, I often want to serve myself more. Lord, help me see how precious your love is, and then lead me to share it with others by serving. Amen.*

Day Four: Mark 7:1-13

[Jesus said,] “You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.”

“Actually, officer, *technically* I wasn’t breaking the law.” Does that argument work for you?

There are videos on YouTube about how to assert your rights with the police, how to refuse to show your ID, how to keep from getting a speeding ticket, even how to avoid paying your taxes.

In the videos it always works! How far do you think you would get if you really tried these tactics?

Probably not far, but we try it a lot. We know what is right, and we want to *mostly* obey, but we love to find some loophole, some excuse, some way out of complete obedience. We like to bend the law.

The same applies in our spiritual lives. We know what God expects of us, to love him with all our heart and soul, but we hope to substitute an occasional prayer, a once-in-a-while worship, and some offerings. We know what God commands, that we love our neighbor as ourselves. But I

hear people insist that this means they have to be sure to love themselves first, and somehow it seems like they never get very far past that first step.

Jesus accused his enemies of doing this very thing. They switched human rules in place of God’s law. Human rules are easy to follow. They only involve a surface obedience. But God’s law is impossible for us to obey.

Jesus did not obey reluctantly or “technically.” He didn’t go half way. He gave his entire self to fulfill God’s law for us.

Where are you looking for loopholes today? How might there be more blessing in obedience?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, I won’t make excuses. I won’t offer explanations or reasons for my disobedience. I won’t try to pretend. I need your forgiveness, and I want you to change me. Take my life... all of it. Amen.*

These devotions help us to think ahead about the Bible verses we will read in worship next week. They are written weekly by Pastor Don Neuendorf. You can learn more about our worship or our church at stpaulannarbor.org