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1st Kings 19:1–13, NIV, abridged.

19 Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. ² So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, “May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them.”

³ Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. He went a day’s journey into the wilderness. He sat down under a bush and prayed that he might die. “I have had enough, LORD,” he said. “Take my life.” ⁵ Then he fell asleep.

All at once an angel touched him and said, “Get up and eat.” ⁶ He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again.

⁷ The angel of the LORD came back a second time and touched him and said, “Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you.” ⁸ So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. ⁹ There he went into a cave and spent the night. And the word of the LORD came to him: “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

¹⁰ He replied, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. Now they are trying to kill me too.”

¹¹ The LORD said, “Go out and stand on the mountain, for the LORD is about to pass by.”

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. ¹² After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. ¹³ When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

The 7,000.

When I was a faculty member, I once had a dentist in my class. Perhaps he was an oral surgeon; to be honest, I don't remember what sort of degree he had. He was a researcher, studying the human jaw, teeth, and surrounding bone, muscle, and other tissue. We'll call him Joe. He was taking my 3D modeling and animation class because he wanted to model the human head as part of his research. We would often talk after class, and he would tell me about his work. I am, of course, as always, changing details to protect his privacy. One day after class he and I were talking, and he seemed stressed out. I asked him if everything was okay. He started to say yes, everything was fine, then he interrupted himself and said, "No, things are not okay. The people who are funding my research think things are moving too slowly. They're not happy with my progress right now." I said that this is a complaint that many researchers make. Whether your funding is from the National Science Foundation, the military, a corporation, or a non-profit, they always want you to fix the world tomorrow. This often drives researchers to exaggerate the impact of their research. Many times, I have reviewed an academic paper and concluded that the work was solid, but the authors were dramatically overstating the significance of their work. He told me that he understood all of this, and he knew that he just had to keep working and

hope that he could satisfy the people who were funding him. The hard part, he said, was how depressed it made him to keep getting negative feedback. He said that he thought about it all the time, that he was having trouble sleeping, and at times, he didn't even want to continue as a researcher. I will get back to Joe.

Our Bible passage today concerns a prophet named Elijah, who prophesized in the 800's B.C. The King at the time was Ahab. His queen was Jezebel. In 1st Kings, Jezebel is a pagan who worships the god Baal. She works aggressively to displace the Israelites' God and make Baal the new god of the Israelites; and her husband, King Ahab, tries to please both her and the religious leaders of Israel by worshipping both Baal and God. But, because of Jezebel's influence, people who speak out against the policies of the king and how they deny the one, true God, are persecuted. So, God sends Elijah to King Ahab to deliver a message: there is going to be a drought. The people of Jerusalem and the surrounding areas survived on subsistence farming, and so any drought would be widely lethal. By the way, there is good historical evidence that a drought did happen in Israel and surrounding areas at that time. The followers of Baal believe that Baal controls the rain, and so this prediction by Elijah would show that God is indeed more powerful and is the true God. But because of this statement from the prophet, the king becomes unhappy with Elijah and so God tells Elijah to leave Ahab's

territory and to head to Phoenician territory for his own safety. God makes sure that Elijah has enough to eat. Eventually, God decides to end the drought and sends Elijah to King Ahab with the message that rain is on its way. Ahab has been searching for Elijah, though, and now, Ahab accuses Elijah of stirring up trouble in Israel. King Ahab wants to be able to worship both God and Baal, and that is that. Ahab agrees to test the relative power of God and the pagan gods that his wife worships. This debate reflects the division between the people of Israel who have split into two opposing groups, depending on who they primarily want to worship. The spiritual salvation of the people of Israel is at stake. Elijah confronts the People of God, telling them that they are going to have to make a choice, that they cannot have two gods. The test is this: which god will bring rain? A group of pagan prophets initiate a frenzied ritual where they dance and shout, and even cut themselves, in order to bring rain. Nothing happens. Elijah makes fun of them. Then Elijah orders the pagan prophets killed. Elijah warns that the real God will now soon send massive rains. Indeed, the sky grows black, the wind rises, and a heavy rain starts falling. Elijah tells Ahab to come home quickly, so he doesn't get caught up in the downpour. The king is in an area that is easily flooded when it rains. Elijah ends up having to flee Jezebel who has learned from the king that her prophets have all been executed. So, although he has shown

that the pagan god is powerless, Elijah ends up on the run for his life. Elijah was probably also disappointed: the big test, whereby Baal was shown to not be God because the one, true God did bring about a dramatic end to the drought, didn't cause the people of Israel to completely abandon their paganism and return to God. This is where our quote comes in. It is abbreviated from Scripture:

³ Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. He went a day's journey into the wilderness. He sat down under a bush and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, LORD," he said. "Take my life."⁵ Then he fell asleep.

All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat."⁶ He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again.

⁷ The angel of the LORD came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you."⁸ So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God.⁹ There he went into a cave and spent the night. And the word of the LORD came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

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¹¹ The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain, for the LORD is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake.¹² After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.¹³ When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

Elijah goes into the Judean wilderness to die because he thinks he is a failure. But God sends an angel to take care of him. He sleeps. He eats. Feeling better, he travels for forty days and nights to get to Mt. Horeb, which is another name for

Mt. Sinai. He is at the place where Moses received the Ten Commandments from God, where God initiated his relationship with the People of God. He tells God that he has been zealous in his service of God, but he has failed. He feels alone and he is depressed. Earthquakes, wind, and fire are all associated with God's appearance on Earth in the Old Testament. But God is not present personally in any of these things. They simply mark the coming of God. God does appear, however - as a gentle voice in the mind of the prophet. That is how the prophet knows that it is time to take action. Elijah comes out of his depression when he realizes that he is not a failure. This is what then happens:

¹⁵ The LORD said to him, "Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. ¹⁶ Also, anoint Jehu king over Israel, and anoint Elisha to succeed you as prophet. ¹⁷ Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. ¹⁸ Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him."

God tells the prophet Elijah that a faithful remnant of the Chosen People remains.

The number is 7,000. Importantly, 7 (or 70 or 700 or 7,000) all represent perfection in the Bible. God tells Elijah that he is not a failure: he has succeeded.

The researcher who took my modeling class is no different than any of us. We all periodically get the feeling that we have failed at something. We look back and conclude that whatever it was that we were trying to do, whatever it was that

was so important to us, we were not able to do it. We didn't succeed. It could be a job. It could be raising a child. It could be trying to protect our health. That sense of failure can cause us to want to give up and tell God: *I have had enough, Lord.* When that happens, we can do what Elijah did. We can find a quiet place, maybe somewhere in nature. We can rest. We can eat. Figuratively, we can do what Elijah did and we walk for forty days and then wait for God. Then, instead of looking around at all that has gone wrong, we must look upward at God.

Notice that God did not tell Elijah that all of the Israelites have abandoned the pagan gods and returned to their faith. God only says that a remnant has come back to the one, true God. The number 7,000 is symbolic. It means that although there is only a fraction of the people who have completely abandoned idolatry, it is exactly what is needed. 7,000 people finding their way back to their ancestors' faith means that their religion will survive. It is a foundation on which new generations of believers will be built. Right now, there have been tremendous losses in Christian churches. But all we need is 7,000. If we can get that core to hang on, to renew their faith and remain determined to keep their eyes turned toward God, then the foundation will be there. It might be long after our lifespans have ended, but I do believe, as has happened many times in the past, there will be a revival. We don't want people pretending to believe, to be

coming to church only because it is expected of them. What we want is a solid Church consisting of people who truly believe. We want a core that ensures stability. Maybe the apparent size of the church in the sixties and seventies was an illusion. Maybe only a fraction of them truly believed. Maybe while they were pretending to follow the one, true God, they were only Sunday Christians, and the other six days of the week, they were worshipping Baal by living only for the things of this world. We should focus on building that core – not on trying to do what even Elijah couldn't do – and that was to solve the problem all at once and magically bring everyone back to the faith.

I had a long talk with that dental researcher one day after class. He was very down on himself. He felt he had failed. He wasn't going to be able to produce results fast enough to keep his funding. He would have to lay off members of his research team. Complete failure would be just around the corner. I suggested that he focus on his work, do his best, and have pride in whatever results he was able to have. Yes, he needed to work at selling his research to the folks who were funding him, but he should avoid out and out exaggeration. But first, I said, relax and take a day or two off. Get some rest. Make sure you're eating right. Then just get back to work. I assumed that like most academics, he was not a believer, so I didn't get Christian on him. Then, he

volunteered that although he had not been to a church in many years, he did believe in God. He said he had tried to pray about it. I told him that I am a Christian and connecting with God was a great idea. Maybe God would convince him, I said, that what really matters is his relationship with God, not his relationship with the people who funded him. Maybe God would give him the peace he needed to relax and have that major research breakthrough.

That remnant that we must leave behind us doesn't have to be gigantic. We need to hand off to the next generation a core of believers that is big enough to keep the Church alive, to be that seed that will one day blossom into a major renewal of faith in this nation. One of the reasons that I am confident that this core exists is that as a chaplain at the hospital and in my everyday life I have met so many people like that dental researcher, people who do indeed believe, who have turned away from the official church, but when trouble hits, they discover that their faith is still very much alive. There are many, many more believers out there than most of us realize. Please pray with me.

God, when we have failure, when we see darkness surrounding us, let us find peace and security in you. Let us know that you are there, that you will walk us through our worst days and our scariest nights. And God, thank you for counting us among the 7,000. Amen.