

## Before You Quit

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I was serving a church in a university town—two blocks from the campus. It the end of the school year, and the senior minister was on vacation. I got a call early Sunday morning: "Jim, there's no electricity in the church."

"Has the custodian opened up, yet?"

"I think so. The door was unlocked, and I can hear someone moving around."

I hurried over to do what I could. We lit candles all over the place. The organ wouldn't work. The PA system was down. I ran around for two hours improvising and calming upset people. Ten minutes before time for the service to begin, the lights came on; but I felt awful—unprepared, disoriented, angry. I staggered through the service, thinking to myself, "I hate this place!"

As I was greeting people after the service, three students said, "We're all graduating this week, and we were just saying that some of our best memories will be the services we've attended here. We just wanted to thank you."

Later, as I reflected on the morning, I thought, "That's so typical of God: you get to the point that you're ready to throw in the towel because it's all so absurd, and then God sends you three girls with a message like that!"

So I decided to stick with the ministry another week.<sup>1</sup>

Here's another story about one who was ready to quit.

<p><b>1 KINGS 19:9-15 (NRSV)</b> <i>At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"</i> <sup>10</sup><i>He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, <b>thrown</b> down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."</i> <sup>11</sup><i>He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that <b>it was</b> splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earth</i></p>	<p><i>quake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake;</i> <sup>12</sup><i>and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the <b>fire a</b> sound of sheer silence.</i> <sup>13</sup><i>When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"</i> <sup>14</sup><i>He answered, "I have been very zealous for the <b>LORD</b>, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."</i> <sup>15</sup><i>Then the LORD said to him, "Go back the way you came."</i></p>
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Elijah was strange: lived in the desert, wore animal skins and ate insects. I picture **Christopher Lloyd**—the professor in "Back to the Future." Here's the story:

Ahab, king of Israel, married Jezebel as part of a political alliance, and she brought her gods with her: sacred candles on the coffee table; phallic symbols on

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<sup>1</sup> This opening story and the title come from Dr. Will Willimon. I had a very similar experience when serving as associate minister in First Christian Church, Edmond, Oklahoma; but Dr. Willimon tells it much better than I.

the nightstand. She got the government to build temples to her gods, and she brought in 450 priests from back home.

Elijah confronted Ahab: "What are you doing?" Ahab responded, "Who am I to judge? I mean, it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you're sincere. Besides, we're all trying to get to the same place, aren't we?"

*Mt. Carmel/Priests of Baal... Fire from Heaven (runs ahead to Jezreel)*

Jezebel puts out a contract; Elijah runs away—all the way down to **Mt. Sinai**.

Today's text: "Wind/Earthquake/Fire"

When at last God speaks it is in the still, small voice (KJV). And what does this calm, gentle **voice say?** "What are you doing here, Elijah? Go back to work."

Elijah wanted a mountain top experience. God didn't give him one. Elijah wanted to see God in the fire or the wind or the earthquake; wanted to know that God was ready to wage war against the powers of darkness and evil.

God sent him out of the sanctuary—without the fiery inspiration of an evangelist or the pumped-up wind-in-the-face celebration of a praise band. God never even turned on the sound system. He spoke in that still, small voice: "What are you doing here, Elijah? Go back to work."

A lot of people today live on the edge of burnout: insane schedules out-of-control. Sometimes success is measured, not so much by accomplishment as by survival—just getting through another week.

And if we ever sit down to catch our breath—and too often that's not until depression or health issues force us to do so... If we ever sit down to catch our breath, sometimes reality catches up to us. "What am I doing here?"

I was counseling a mother of three elementary children. Worn out. Her daily routine went something like this: rise at 4:30, get ready for work, fix breakfast for the family and school lunches for the kids. Then after her eight-hour workday spend several hours taxiing the kids to soccer practice, music lessons, scout meetings, dance lessons, Karate lessons, youth choir... Back home in time to prepare dinner and clean up afterward, help the kids with homework, get them ready for bed, and straighten the house in time to be a sex kitten at bedtime.

Meanwhile, "Bubba" works eight hours and comes home, grabs his rifle and heads for the deer woods—or his golf clubs; or his fishing tackle... Home from play, he peels off his shirt to flaunt his hairy beer belly, lays on the couch with a beer in one hand and the remote in the other, shouting, "When's my supper gonna' be ready? Can't you do something about these kids? They're driving me nuts!"

If my counseling load over the last decade or two before I retired is any indication, that describes a significant number of marriages in America. *No wonder*

*the divorce rate is soaring!* Sometimes I am embarrassed to be a male.

Still, no matter how sympathetic we may be to her situation, she had options she was not exercising. And there is no way you can modulate the human voice to make a whine sound pleasing to the human ear; much less to the divine ear.

You want to hear whining? Attend a typical Ministerial Alliance meeting. We pastors struggle to justify our role in a society that's increasingly apathetic to what we do. We give in to the pressures of job security, and give up any semblance of a prophetic voice, and settle for being spiritual caretakers—a voice of suggestion whose authority falls somewhere below Mom's unwanted advice.

What we offer is seen as negotiable, and we begin to feel like accessories: fuzzy dice hanging from the rear-view mirror. Folks brag on us and love to be entertained when the fire falls on Sunday morning. Then they all shout "The Lord is God" and for a moment chase the priests of Baal around the altar.

But by Tuesday it's all gone. And when the Ministerial Alliance meets the excuses start to come out. When I attend those meetings, I just want to ask, "Why are we talking about this again?" So, I seldom participate, anymore.

But Jezebel is screaming. They're angry at the prophet. For all of Sunday's quaking and fire and wind, the queen is still on the throne and the prophet is exhausted and depressed; and the elders and the committee chairs and the CWF president along with the prophet.

*"I have been very zealous for the Lord. The Israelites have ... put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."*

But the hand of God gently lifts Elijah's chin; and in that still, small voice asks: "What are you doing here, Elijah? Go back to work."

Elijah—as we—must trust what God promises: "I know you feel alone. You think I quit before the battle was won, but I'm still fighting. Go back to work."

And then God said, "Go anoint Elisha to be your apprentice. He's plowing that field over there." And God already had prepared Elisha's heart. Elisha killed his oxen, used their yoke to build a fire, cooked the meat and fed the others who were plowing in the field. Then he left it all behind and went with Elijah.

Isn't it beautifully ironic: Elijah, the burned-out prophet, went looking for a mountain top experience because he was sure that's what he needed. But God delivered to Elijah's doorstep just what he really needed all along. He didn't need a mountain top experience; he needed an Elisha. And God provided.

Sometimes all a worn-out pastor (or Board Chair or elder or committee chair or CWF president) really needs is one, whole-heartedly committed helper. Just one. *Just one!* **Are you** an Elijah, or an Elisha? God will provide.