

The Mission of God's people? To glorify and enjoy God

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[0 : 00] Now, if you have a Bible, a paper one, or on your phone, if you could open it to 1 Kings 18, we will begin thinking about the mission of God's people as we find it in the Old Testament.

And we're going to begin thinking, big picture, about our call as people, Old Testament, New Testament, through all history, to give God glory. I guess there are two vital questions when we think about mission, when we think about any mission. We need to think about the question of identity, who am I, who are we? And we need to think about purpose, what am I here for?

We can think about an army mission as an example. A soldier needs to know his identity, what troop does he belong to? What nation is he representing? Who is he fighting for? What is he here for? Peacekeeping mission or otherwise? Who to fight for? Who to fight against?

Well, the mission of God's people begins with our identity, that we are called, we are saved by God, we become children of God. God is our Father. We are united to the Lord Jesus by the power of God's Spirit.

That being our identity, what's our purpose then? Our purpose is to be a people who are sent. We are sent. We are sent into the world, Paul says, as God's ambassadors, representing him, speaking for him. That is our mission. Or we can think about the end of Matthew's gospel, where we were in our community groups on Wednesday. We are called to be disciples of Jesus, followers of Jesus, who make disciples of Jesus. Or if you know your Westminster Shorter Catechism, you can think of the first question, what is man's chief end? What is our primary purpose for being here? Our chief end, our primary purpose is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

[2 : 24] So we are called to give God glory. And that brings us to one of the great truths that we find throughout almost every page of the Old Testament, and indeed the New Testament, that our God, the God of the Bible, is a God who has glory and therefore deserves glory. Glory, the idea of weight and worth. Now we see that all through the Bible. We can begin at the very beginning. Go to the book of Genesis chapter 1. We are presented with the glory of the one true living creator God. Now go to the book of Exodus. We are presented with the glory of our powerful Redeemer God, who listens to, cries for help, and gets involved to keep his promises and to save people. We just read, sang rather, Psalm 96.

The book of Psalms are full of God's people praising or God's people being called to praise. Psalms 93 to 100, we've been in them a few times this morning and this evening, remind us over and over of the glory of God. Our God who reigns over nations, who reigns over nature. Our God who saves, our God who deserves worship. Now we go to the prophets towards the end of the Old Testament, a book like Isaiah, prophet like Isaiah. He spends so much time reminding the people of his day of the glory of the eternal, powerful, living, gracious God in comparison to the idols they were so prone to create or to chase after. So given that our God is glorious, our mission as God's people is in the first place to see that glory, to respond to it personally, faith and obedience, to celebrate it.

God's glory should cause us to have joy and worship as we consider this great God has called us to be his. And then part of our mission is also to share the reality that there is a God and he has glory and he is working out his purposes in the world and he is looking to save people.

So the glory of God directs our mission, especially when we think about the glory of the gospel, this wonderful news that although we are sinners, God in his grace and love has sent Jesus to be that light of the world to reveal God's light, God's truth, his salvation plan in sending his own son to be that sacrifice for sin for sinners. So the glory of God is both the engine of God's people that should drive us day to day, but it's also that fuel that we need constantly to keep us moving on mission. So we don't grow cold to our God and we don't grow complacent about our mission and our calling in the world. So that's the one big truth that we need to remember, that God has glory.

But then, especially in the Old Testament, but indeed in the New and indeed in our own hearts, we see there's one great problem that we need to identify, and it's the problem of idolatry.

[5 : 39] One of the great tragedies when you read the Old Testament, you read the history of God's people, what did we discover? We discover a people who are incredibly privileged. God chose them by sheer grace. They didn't do anything to deserve it. God acted in history to save them time and time again.

God sent different people to speak to them, and sometimes he spoke to them directly. When they prayed in distress, God listened to them and protected them and kept his covenant promises to them. But despite all those privileges, we see so often God's people don't live for God's glory, and instead they turn to idols. They're called to be a light to the nations, but instead they become just like the nations. They don't live differently to attract people to the one true God. Rather than having devotion to God, they try and mix their worship between God and the false God, so they rob God of glory.

David Wells, a biblical scholar, reminds us that that wasn't just a problem for back then, that's a problem very much for today. He said, the heart, no less the modern heart, is an idol factory.

Something Calvin said way back in the 16th century, idolatry consists in trusting some substitute for God to serve some uniquely divine function. We are made to know God, but so often we find ourselves looking for God's substitutes and asking them to have a God-like function in our lives.

So the mission of God's people is to give God glory and to call others to give God glory too, but it's set against that backdrop of idolatry. And that takes us to our story today. It takes us to the story of the prophet Elijah in 1 Kings 18 and this confrontation that happens on Mount Carmel. Apparently, if you go to Mount Carmel, you discover there is a great big statue there of Elijah, a reminder of this really significant confrontation as Elijah goes on this mission to confront a king and a nation, looking to call them back to true worship and to show them God's infinitely great glory. So some things to consider in Elijah's story that are of great relevance to us today. First of all, let's recognize the fact that Elijah lives for God's glory in a society full of idols. So we just need to get our bearings for 1 Kings 18 just for a moment.

[8 : 30] The setting in which this takes place is during the reign of King Ahab, who was a son of Omri. Some of us maybe are really good at history and we hear those names and we instantly think, oh yeah, I know who that king was. But if you don't, let me read just a couple of verses from 1 Kings 16 to give us a sense of their rule. This is Omri, first of all. 16 verse 25, Omri did evil in the eyes of the Lord and sinned more than all those before him. He followed completely the ways of Jeroboam, son of Nebat, committing the same sin that he'd caused Israel to commit so that they aroused the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, by their worthless idol. So there's Omri, the most evil king that Israel's had so far, leading the people to idolatry. And then Ahab becomes king after him. Ahab, verse 30 of chapter 16, son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him. He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam, son of

Nebat, but he also married Jezebel, daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians, and began to serve Baal and worship him. He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. So the king who is supposed to represent the one true God is worshiping false gods, then builds a great big temple to the false god Baal. And what you probably recognized in chapter 18 is that Baal, the false god Baal, comes into particular focus. He's one of those idols that the people are constantly being pulled towards. Baal, who was, importantly, I think, the god who was seen to be over the weather and connected to that the god who was over the crops and the fertility of the land. Now think about that when Elijah appears on the scene, chapter 17, verse 1. First time we meet Elijah. Now Elijah the Tishbite from Tishbe and Gilead said to Ahab, as the Lord, the God of Israel lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word. So Elijah comes from nowhere, appears on

Ahab's court, and says to him, in effect, you think you worship the weather god? Well, my god, the one true god says there's not going to be any rain. And there isn't rain for three years. Baal has no power.

And after our story, after God sends fire and burns up the sacrifice, chapter 18, after three years, who sends rain, who restores crops to Israel? It's not Baal. It's the god of the Bible. So God is engaged in this battle of the gods in which there is only ever going to be one winner because there's only one true God. And God has chosen Elijah. He's given him this job as prophet to announce a message of judgment on Ahab and Baal and a nation that's turned away from God and to be part of this battle of the gods that we see. And now, given all of that is true of Elijah, what about us and what about our day? Isn't it the case that as the people of God, we too are called to live for God's glory in a society in a society full of idols? There were so many problems at the time of Elijah's ministry.

And isn't it true, as we look around our society, that we see so much brokenness? And we see so much moral chaos. Whether it's announcements of record levels of drug deaths in our country. Whether it's the escalating rate of marriage breakdown. Whether it's gender confusion. Whether it's online hate. We see so many problems in our world. And we recognize, too, in Edinburgh and in many cities where there's globalization where we're multicultural society, there are many gods being worshipped. There are many competing moral claims. And there are also many, many idols of the heart. So, in that context, not so different from Ahab's day, from Elijah's day, to be honest, what's our mission as God's people?

[12 : 53] Well, it's the same as Elijah. We are called as the people of God to live with loyalty to God. To be devoted to God. To be committed, regardless of how society is living, that we're going to live God's way. And we're going to pursue the glory of our God. Whether we're in our families or whether we're in our workplace. Whether it's leisure. And when we come to church, we want to be about the glory of God. Jesus came, John tells us, to be the light of the world. Jesus himself said he was the light of the world. But he also said to the church, you are the light of the world and you are the salt of the earth. We are supposed to, in the way that we live, in our devotion, obedience, love towards God, to show there is a different way to live. To show there is a better way to live. To be a counter culture that is attractive, that is life-giving, that has Jesus at its foundation.

Not to just look like everybody else and try and blend in and keep our heads down. Rather, we are to be different to the glory of God. What will that involve? Well, it must involve us being a community on mission.

Remember those words from the Bible, they will know we are Christians by our love. People need to see how we live together, how we love one another, how we encourage one another, how we bear one another's burden. We can't do that unless we're actually doing those things.

If we're not committed to one another, then our witness is weakened. By necessity, we are called to be a community of faith and on mission. Our lives together should be seen by others. So, we need to live on purpose in community. We need to be committed to one another.

It's also going to involve us at times graciously declaring and defending the uniqueness of Jesus. We spoke about that this morning. Jesus isn't just a great moral teacher or some kind of moral guru.

[15 : 16] He's not just one of the prophets. He is the eternal Son of God. And He is the only way of salvation. And we need to be clear on that and we need to be ready to defend that. It may well involve, and Elijah came to discover it in his life, some heat, some struggle, some opposition.

We may find ourselves isolated. We may face mockery as we represent a God of glory. When all that's true, we desperately need to keep our eyes fixed on the Lord Jesus. We need to see the glory of our God so that we do not lose heart. We need to be persuaded of the wonder of the gospel, of the certain hope of eternal life, of the privilege of belonging to God, of the power of God at work in us if we are going to be on mission for Him. So just like Elijah, we're called to live for God's glory in a society full of idols. But then, and this is where we'll get to chapter 18 and the verses that we read. What do we see from Elijah? We see Elijah declares God's glory and he calls for true worship.

Look with me again, if you have your Bibles at verses 16 to 18, there's that really important question as Elijah appears before Ahab once again. The question is, who is the person who is bringing trouble for Israel? So King Ahab, worshiping his idols, he says, well, Elijah, you're the problem because you were the one that brought God's message saying there'd be no rain. Ahab says, God's man, he's the problem. Sometimes we see that in our society. Christianity is the problem.

You're so intolerant. You're so judgmental. The world would be a better place without Christianity. We hear that. We recognize that. Well, Elijah takes a different view, doesn't he? Elijah speaks for God and he says, well, the real trouble is with you, Ahab, because you've led God's people away from true worship. So they're not seeing the glory of God, rather they're following idols. And that leads him then towards announcing this confrontation, this challenge. Verse 19, summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel and bring the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah. So three aspects of Elijah's mission to see as the people gather at Mount Carmel for this great confrontation. The first thing to see is that Elijah exposes the weakness of idols.

We see that first in the trouble that has come to Israel. These three years of drought were because of idol worship. They're following this false god Baal who claims he's in control of the weather, but the weather God cannot make rain. There is weakness there. And then the test itself, verses 22 to 24, Elijah almost seems at pains to say, well, look, it's just me. It's almost like him against the world.

[18 : 36] It's me against 850 prophets. It doesn't seem like an equal playing field. And when he sets the test, verse 24, let's each call in the name of our gods and the God who answers by fire, he is God. People are happy with that. Again, remember, if Baal's the weather God, then he's in charge of lightning. So fire from heaven, that should be no bother to our God, so they think.

But then the test begins. And the prophets of Baal go first and they're praying and there's no answer and they're dancing and nothing's happening. And then the taunting begins. Something you see from the prophets in the Old Testament, mockery of the folly of idolatry. What does Elijah say? Well, perhaps your God is deep in thought. Perhaps he's busy. Perhaps he's traveling. Perhaps he's inconvenienced. Perhaps he's unavailable to take your call. And the point of Elijah and the point of the Bible writer is this is a lifeless God who cannot hear, who cannot answer, who cannot act.

And the truth is made plain in this test that at crunch time, the false God fails. There is no rain, there is no fire, there is no life, there is no power. And that points to a deeper reality, that at the moment of crunch time, the moment of crisis, if we are depending on something other than God, ultimately that will fail us at some point, especially when it comes to the greatest test of all, at what will give us hope, not just in this life, but also in death.

Anything other than God will fail us in that moment. So, Elijah exposes the weakness of the idols. And then having done that, Elijah declares God's glory. So, this is from verse 30.

After there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention, Elijah calls the people to him, and he sets about to turn them back to God. The first thing he does is he rebuilds the altar of the Lord which had been torn down. What's he saying there? He's saying to the people, there is the need for right and proper worship. We don't worship false gods, and we don't worship the true God in a false way. In taking these 12 stones representing the 12 tribes of Israel, there's that visual reminder of the God who had rescued them, the God who had kept his promises to his people, who had built those 12 tribes into a nation. Israel's big problem wasn't the drought. Israel's big problem was the sin that had seen them turn away from God, walk away from the God who loved them and saved them. So, there was the altar. And then there's the water. In verses 33 to 35, the altar is built, the wood is arranged, the bulls on the top, and then there's these 12 large water jars that presumably are gathered from the Mediterranean Sea, which is near to Mount Carmel, and they are brought up, and they're poured on the sacrifice. And what's happening there? He's heightening the drama. He's making it impossible, humanly speaking, for that sacrifice to be lit, so that only a powerful God can do it.

[22 : 20] And then comes the prayer, verse 36. Prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed, Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, Lord, so these people will know that you, Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.

He wants to show them who their God is. So, he brings to their mind the glory of God's covenant promises, those promises to Abraham and Isaac and Israel, to bless them and make them a great nation and to give them a land and make them a blessing to the nations of the earth. In his prayer, he reminds them of God's faithfulness. He reminds them, too, of the glory of God's restoring grace.

The people by this point know that they have wandered far away from God, but even here, Elijah is reminding them that there is a God who is willing to restore them, who will act in powerful grace to turn their hearts back again.

And then after the prayer, what happens? We see God's glory on full display. Verse 38, as the fire of the Lord fell and burned up sacrifice, wood, stone, soil, and licked up the water in the trench. God's glory is revealed. One other aspect of Elijah's mission, and it comes early on, and we'll return to it, is that Elijah calls for wholehearted loyalty. So, they're up Mount Carmel.

Ahab's there. All the prophets are there, and the people are there, too. And Elijah said, how long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him, but if Baal is God, follow him. It's a powerful challenge. And at this stage, it's met with painful silence.

[24 : 22] Elijah is reminding us that the battle of the gods is played out in human hearts, as well as on the stage of history. Who is the one true God, and will I follow that God with undivided loyalty?

Elijah is saying, divided loyalty is no better than idolatry. God demands and deserves all of our heart. And so, the question is, who is the true God? And if you know who God is, follow him truly with all of your heart. Jesus would say the same thing in a couple of places in the New Testament. He'd say in Matthew 6, we cannot serve God and money. We must choose our master and show that master loyalty.

Jesus would want us to show loyalty to God. And then in Revelation, Jesus comes and brings this vision to John. And it's a message of judgment that comes on a church in a place called Laodicea.

And the judgment is that they are lukewarm. They're neither hot nor cold towards Jesus. And Jesus says, so I will spit you out of my mouth. There is judgment that comes because there is no true loyalty there. So, that was Elijah. But what about us? How do we declare God's glory and call for true worship in our day, in our situation? Well, one really important way is that we must, in our own hearts and by a sense of conviction, believe that God is greater and that Jesus is better, as we've just been thinking about in the book of Hebrews. I read a story this week, which is both simple and profoundly powerful and encouraging, I think. There was a lady who came to faith simply because a friend of hers spoke about the fact that she prayed to God and that God answered.

Now, as Christians, especially when we've been Christians for a while, we accept that as part of our experience. We pray to God and God answers prayer. But when this news came to this lady that particular day, she broke down in tears. She couldn't believe the fact that there'd be a God who would be personal, who would listen, who would answer. And so, she wanted to know, how can I know this God for myself?

[27 : 05] She came to faith simply because she had a friend who prayed to a God who hears and answers. Now, that's a great encouragement, isn't it? That doesn't require us to be experts in evangelism and sharing our faith, but it requires us, in our everyday conversation, to be talking about how God deals with us. To believe that God is greater means that we are persuaded that in God we have a greater love. We have love from God that is sacrificial and never selfish, a love from God that is eternal and not temporary. We must be persuaded ourselves that in God, in trusting Jesus, we have a greater hope.

We have a hope as we face death. As the Apostle Paul would say, death has lost its sting because death is not the end, but is for the people of God an entry into God's presence for all eternity, recognizing that God's love in Jesus never fails.

We need to be persuaded and to share the fact that in knowing Jesus, we have a greater peace. To know that we have a God who is for us and not against us, who is with us always.

One who hears us, one who speaks to us. In the Bible, God who rules for his people's ultimate good. We need to be convicted and convinced of these realities if we are to be on mission, calling people to see that glory too. We also need to worship in such a way that we declare God's glory.

We spoke about this a little bit this morning. I mean, one of the big challenges churches face in the consumer age is that idea that you can have church your way. There can be that temptation in the face of so much competition for people's attention and people's hearts to try to be relevant.

[29 : 03] If we just have the right branding or the right strategy that people will come. Our need is to be fixed on God's Word and on the gospel of the Lord Jesus, on worship that gives God glory, that reveals God's glory, that keeps pointing us towards our great Savior.

Our great need is prayer, really. Prayer that God would move in power. It's God that saves people. It's God that opens hearts. It's God who transforms lives. And so, we need to pray that God would be moving in power, moving people to become worshipers of the one true God.

And again, when we think about worship, our need is that our hearts and our lives would be delighted to worship. That we'd have joy in knowing Jesus and representing Jesus.

Again, a very simple but really encouraging story I read this week was of a man in his 80s who came to faith. His son-in-law is a Christian minister who'd been trying to share the gospel with him at home for years.

Well, this summer, or last summer I think it was, they went on holiday. And as was their custom, the pastor and his wife, they went to church and the father was there and he went to church with them. And after being in that worship service, that was the point where he realized, wow, there are people who really believe who God is. They really believe that knowing God makes a difference. They really love one another. And so, that simple act of seeing true, heartfelt worship was used by God to transform that person's life. So, we are called to worship that declares God's glory. And we are called to follow God with all of our hearts. We must be clear on our identity. Who are we? We are children of God.

[31 : 17] We must be clear on our purpose. We are here to give God glory, to be disciples who make disciples. And we need for that to transform us and give our life its direction.

God must have our hearts. Jesus must have our hearts. Our great joy must be the love of God revealed to us in Jesus, that we are united to Jesus, made children of God by faith in him. And we are sent by him. And we don't go into the world by ourselves. We know that Jesus is with us by his Spirit.

I came across this story from the Atheists in Kenya Society. There was a tweet that went out and made news headlines a few months ago. Their secretary resigned. And the tweet said, Seth has found Jesus.

He has found Jesus.