

The Unexpected work of God through ordinary obedience - 1Kings 18- 19

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[0 : 00] Before Seth comes up to us to bring God's Word, we'll just spend a few moments in prayer for a few things.

Obviously, Johnny is away in America, and after a few unexpected layovers, a layover he had, he's there now. So we'll just pray for him as he goes over and just encourages people in Redeemer Bible Church.

They came over to us last year. We had a lovely time with them. It was a privilege to meet them, and now Johnny's going over, and we pray that he would be an encouragement to them. We'll just pray, too, for the Christianity Explored, an opportunity just to share Jesus with others, and for the upcoming Munster Bible College.

So let's just bow our heads and just spend a few moments in prayer. Father, we do thank you that you have brought Johnny and Kirsty and the family into Carragalline.

Thank you for the way that they minister to us. I thank you for the great teaching that you've given Johnny, and that week by week he is faithful to your Word as he brings it to us.

[1 : 13] Thank you for the way that we've been able to grow by hearing your Word week by week. Thank you for his humility, his service, his willingness to spend time in your Word to be able to speak each week to us.

Thank you for the opportunity that he has to go over to Redeemer Bible Church. May he be an encouragement to them as he meets different people, different believers, people who also have a desire to hear your Word, to bring praise to you, who also will be on bended knee bringing their praise to God and their Saviour.

I pray, indeed, that it would be an encouragement to him that you'd keep him safe, keep him from tiredness for the next few days. I thank you for what he's able to do. I thank you for the Christianity Explored course.

I thank you for the way that has been put together, for how faithful it is to your Word. We thank you that we can learn from the Gospel of Mark, and even though we might be familiar with so much of it, that we still see new things by your Spirit showing us different things and how wonderful that is.

May, indeed, we be renewed and refreshed as we opened up the Gospel once again, never believing believing that we know it all, but always having an open heart and willingness to learn more and more.

[2 : 29] We thank you, Lord, for what we read in it, what we have read about you and the authority that you have over sickness and nature and death and sin.

How amazing that is. We do thank you for us as members here in Carragalline. Thank you that we have a desire just to be joined together, to commit ourselves, to be able to spend time hearing about the different ministries, about different decisions.

I pray, indeed, that our hearts will be always open to you, that we would not be just led by our own nature, but led by you, that we would be led by your Spirit as we make decisions.

We do thank you for the opportunity for a further Bible study in NBC. Thank you for the last four years. Thank you for all that people can learn, for the opportunities people have.

And even coming up in March, when Michael comes over, I pray that there will be many who have a desire to get into the Old Testament, to learn more. We just think of how the Old Testament can be such an example to us, that we can learn so much for it, Lord, and yet so often we don't delve into it, but indeed that our hearts will be changed, that we'd have a desire to do that, and that indeed that it would be a blessed week, a week where people will be excited at what you have done and

what is recorded for us in your Word.

[3 : 56] Lord, we do thank you that Seth has come along this morning to be able to bring your Word. I thank you for the work that himself and Jessica are involved in Carrick Tool. I thank you for their desire to plant churches, to draw alongside people, to share Jesus with people.

Thank you that their desire is to see believers grow. May you bless that work, that it may be of your work, Lord, not the work of man, but the work of God, so that it will prosper and grow, and that in years to come we will praise you for a church there in Carrick Tool.

I thank you for his desire for your Word. Thank you that his desire is to be a workman approved unto you. Thank you for the work and the time he puts in, and as he comes up in his short while, indeed that he would speak your Word, that we would be encouraged, that we would be challenged, even rebuked and disciplined where necessary.

May our hearts be open to your Word. May we not desire to just stand still in our faith, but to continually grow. May we be teachable believers, those who want to know more of you.

So we thank you for Seth. Thank you for your Word. In Jesus' name. Amen. So Seth, thank you very much for coming up. Well, thank you very much.

[5 : 16] It's wonderful to be here, as always. We're big fans of this church. And if you want to turn to 1 Kings chapter 18, we'll be in 18 and 19.

And if you're in one of the church Bibles, that's on page 359. That's better.

I'm just not quite as tall as this. I wonder, have you ever wondered why God doesn't intervene more often with, like, really powerful demonstrations, like big miracles, just really show up in big, clear, undeniable ways more often than he does?

I mean, he's God. He can do that any time. And yet, if you look at history, even if you look at the history of the Bible, with so many miracles recorded, still there are long, long periods of time without them.

It's more rare than we'd like. God seems to do most of his work, actually, in other ways. And sometimes that leaves us scratching our heads, wondering why he doesn't seem to be answering our prayers for the things that seem really good and really right and really needed.

[6 : 41] When the Bible says that God's ways are higher than ours, it's not kidding. But what I'd like us to look at this morning is actually a time when God did do incredible miracles and did answer big prayers, did make a big demonstration of his power.

And yet, alongside that, the unexpected way that he chose to actually complete his work. So, we're going to start with 1 Kings 18, but we'll get there in just a minute, because I want to tell you quickly what James tells us about Elijah.

In James 5, you don't have to turn there, but he says this, Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain. And it did not rain on the land for three and a half years.

So, the point that James is making is that Elijah was a normal person. Just like us, he prayed a big prayer and he was answered by a big God.

We can pray to the same God, and that's amazing. We have the same access. It wasn't about Elijah being a particularly, like a different class of person.

[7 : 56] He has access to the same God. He prayed earnestly and God answered. We have the same God. But here's the question. Elijah prays earnestly for something big.

The big thing that he prays for is for it not to rain. Now, I can understand that living in Ireland. Sometimes we might want it not to rain.

But even here, if it doesn't rain for three and a half years, we're going to be in trouble. I mean, if he's going to ask for something big, if he's going to pray earnestly for something, why would he pray earnestly for something that will cause a famine?

Why not pray earnestly for a really miraculous big bumper crop? I think we have to understand the setting that Elijah is in.

At this time, the nation of Israel is caught up in the worship of a false God called Baal. And Baal was supposed to be the God who sent rain.

[9 : 02] He was the God of rain. He was also the God of lightning and thunder. So Elijah prays that God would hold back the rain because that would show very clearly that Baal was not the real power.

Israel was worshipping Baal, but Baal was not in control of the rain. God was. Elijah knew that as long as the rain came, the people were going to credit that to Baal.

So what they actually needed more than rain was to know God, even if the only way to get there was through a famine. And God answers, for three and a half years it does not rain.

That's actually quite a miracle. That's a big thing. But God does even more. When he's finally ready to send the rain, he only does it after one more very big, impressively clear demonstration of who the real God is.

So we'll read through this. It's because I can't describe it as well as it's described here. 1 Kings chapter 18, starting in verse 22. Elijah said to them, I am the only one of the Lord's prophets left, but Baal has 450 prophets.

[10:24] Get two bulls for us. Let Baal's prophets choose one for themselves and let them cut it in pieces and put it on the wood and not set it on fire. I'll prepare another bull and put it on the wood and not set it on fire.

Then you call in the name of your God, I will call in the name of the Lord, the God who answers by fire. He is God. Now, remember, Baal was supposed to be the God of lightning.

This is his department. If he can do anything, he should be able to do this. And all the people said, what you say is good. So Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, choose one of the bulls, prepare it first, since there are so many of you.

Call in the name of your God, but do not light the fire. So they took the bull given to them and they prepared it. Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. Baal, answer us, they shouted.

But there was no response. No one answered. So they danced around the altar they had made. At noon, Elijah began to taunt them. Shout louder, he said.

[11:25] Surely he's a God. Perhaps he's deep in thought or busy or traveling. Maybe he's sleeping and he must be awakened. So they shouted louder and they slashed themselves with swords and spears as was their custom until their blood flowed.

Midday passed and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time of the evening sacrifice. But there was no response. No one answered. No one paid attention. Then Elijah said to all the people, come here to me.

I think maybe Elijah was from Cork. He said, come here to me. They came to him and he repaired the altar of the Lord which had been torn down.

Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob to whom the word of the Lord had come saying, your name shall be Israel. With the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord and he dug a trench around it large enough to hold two sears of seed.

He arranged the wood, cut the bull in pieces, laid it on the wood. Then he said, fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood. Do it again.

[12:31] And they did it again. Do it a third time. That's twelve jars of water that are going on this. The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench. At the time of sacrifice, the 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, that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command.

Answer me, Lord. Answer me. So these people will know that you, Lord, are God and that you are turning their hearts back again. Then the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones, and the soil and also licked up the water in the trench.

And when the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, The Lord, he is God. The Lord, he is God. And Elijah commanded them, Seize the prophets of Baal. Don't let anyone get away.

They seized them and Elijah had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and slaughtered there. And Elijah said to Ahab, Go, eat and drink, for there is the sound of heavy rain.

The rain is coming. God had been withholding it in answer to Elijah's prayer. Now it is coming. And now that they know the source, now that they have seen this clear demonstration, God sends the rain as well.

[13:51] Now, this is a big miracle. This is a very clear sign of who God is, who is the real God. Baal had not been able to send rain.

Now he is not able to send fire. Even though these are supposed to be the things that he is in control of. So at this point, Elijah believes, understandably, that he is one.

He believed that the worship of Baal and Israel is done. It's over. And after a victory like that, you wouldn't blame him. I mean, how can anyone deny God now?

How can anyone continue to worship a God like Baal after he's been shown, proven to be so powerless? But there's one sentence that turns Elijah's world upside down.

And it's in chapter 19. He turned the page. The first verse of chapter 19. Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword.

[14:59] 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 one of them.

So even with all the evidence that you could ever ask for, literally falling down out of the sky in front of them, Jezebel and Ahab will not submit to God.

And even though the people had just seen these incredible things, had seen this incredible display of God's power, it's actually not long before we see them worshipping Baal again.

It's unbelievable. It seems incredible. But it's true. And to be honest, we're not so different today.

Evidence alone, by itself, no matter how overwhelming it is, is actually not enough to change sinful hearts so that they turn to God.

Even really big, even impressively clear demonstrations like this are not enough in themselves to change our rebellious hearts.

[16:10] Instead of dealing with the reality of what had just happened, Jezebel and Ahab, they try to erase the evidence by killing Elijah.

And Elijah starts to wonder, what's the point of this? What have I accomplished here? Look at 19, verse 3. Elijah was afraid and he ran for his life.

When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there while he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die.

I have had enough, Lord, he said. Take my life. I'm no better than my ancestors. Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep. Things have really turned around, haven't they?

He's basically saying, this isn't working. I've done all I can do. How could you even possibly make it any clearer than we've made it? And yet it wasn't enough.

[17:13] And he says, I give up. I might as well be dead. What more can I possibly do? I'm done. And I think we can understand how he feels.

God had answered his prayers and it should have worked. But now he's being hunted. And the whole thing looks completely different than what he thought, how he thought it should have gone. Elijah feels like he's done. But God is not done. God is still working. Even though Elijah can't see it. Elijah is so discouraged, he just wants to die. But God is not actually finished with Elijah either. He's still going to use him. But I think it's important, before we get to where God calls Elijah on, it's important to note what he does before he does that.

Before any new instructions come, look at verse 5. All at once an angel touched him and said, Get up and eat. He looked around and there by his head was some baked bread over hot coals and a jar of water.

[18:24] He ate and drank and then lay down again. 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. So he got up and he ate and he drank.

Strengthened by that food, he traveled 40 days and 40 nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. Then there he went into a cave and spent the night. God doesn't scold Elijah for being sad and discouraged and depressed and wanting to die.

Instead, he sends an angel to give him food and water. And then he waits and he gives Elijah time to sleep. He gives him food a second time.

And verse 8 tells us Elijah was strengthened by that food. Elijah was wrecked. I mean, he's just been through this huge emotional rollercoaster, this huge victory, followed by this complete turnaround that left him literally running for his life.

But God doesn't just drive him forward. Elijah is tired in every way. But God gives him time and space for food and rest.

[19:41] And sometimes when we feel awful, actually one of the most spiritual things we can do is eat and sleep. Psalm 103 celebrates the fact that God knows how we are formed.

He remembers that we are dust. even though God himself is infinite and strong, he doesn't forget that we are not.

He doesn't roll his eyes and turn up his nose at our weakness. He reaches down to give us his strength to dry our tears. He could have chastised Elijah for being depressed, but he doesn't.

He gives him food and he gives him rest. And he draws him in to show him how he's been working in ways that Elijah had never seen. And he shows him that God still has a role for Elijah in his plan, even if it's a different role than Elijah expected.

So he goes on this journey. God sends him to Mount Horeb, which is another name for Sinai, the mountain where Moses received the Ten Commandments, or the law, the whole law.

[20 : 50] And God speaks to him. So if you look in 19 verse 9, the word of the Lord came to him, What are you doing here, Elijah? And Elijah replies, 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. I'm the only one left, and now they're trying to kill me too. The Lord said, Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.

Then, a great and powerful wind tore the mountain apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord. That's a powerful wind.

But, the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind, there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake, there came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire.

And after the fire came a gentle whisper. Then, when Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

[22 : 00] Then a voice said to him, What are you doing here, Elijah? 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.

I'm the only one left. Now they're trying to kill me too. The Lord said to him, Go back the way you came and go to the desert of Damascus.

And when you get there, anoint Hazael, king over Aram. Also anoint Jehu, son of Nimshi, king over Israel. And anoint Elisha, son of Shephat, from Abel Melhub, to succeed you as a prophet.

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. Yet I have reserved seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal, and whose mouths have not kissed him.

So, here on the mountain of God, God listens to Elijah's complaints twice, patiently, the exact same complaint. He doesn't even answer directly, but he does answer.

[23 : 09] He sends these powerful things. He sends a wind that breaks stones. He sends an earthquake. He sends a fire. But the Lord was not in those powerful things, the wind and the earthquake and the fire.

And then he sends a gentle whisper. See, Elijah had expected God to destroy Baal worship in Israel through overwhelming miracles, which happened.

Fire from heaven. So impressive. But God says his power is actually working in what was happening in the background, in the quiet of much more ordinary things, like seven thousand people who never had worshipped Baal, who never had bowed down to him, even before the miracles.

Elijah thought he was the only one. He didn't even know these people existed. But God was working in them, quietly, under the radar. Then he gives us the second part of his answer to Elijah. He gives him what seems like fairly ordinary jobs, anointing ordinary political and religious leaders. No more fire from heaven, but God is working through these ordinary things.

[24 : 27] In fact, I don't have to turn there, but 2 Kings 10 describes how Jehu, who Elijah is sent to anoint, was the one who put an end to Baal worship in Israel.

2 Kings 10 18 says specifically, Jehu destroyed Baal worship in Israel. Elijah himself was not the man who would accomplish what he wanted to see happen.

But God gives him an important role, and the miracles are part of that role. But God actually finishes the job of destroying Baal worship in Israel through Elijah's obedience to ordinary tasks that God gives him.

See, God had been working under the surface long before the miracles ever happened. And his work continued under the surface in spite of the people's rejection of those miracles.

And he would continue his work in the same ways normally through ordinary quiet means going forward. Now Elijah lived a long time ago, but our God is the same God, and our ministry comes down largely to the same things.

[25 : 41] We also are calling people back to God, trying to show them the greatness of his power, of his love, of his salvation. He's the same God. He has the same power that was displayed by fire on Mount Carmel.

He can do that any time. But in our prayers for God to do his work, we don't have to wait for some massively impressive sign from heaven for our friends to see.

In our prayers for God to do his work, we don't have to wait for those things. We don't have to worry if God doesn't answer our prayers for big demonstrations of his power. We already have the biggest sign of all.

We have a Savior who came down from heaven to die, die for our sin, and rise again in victory over it. And he's still working. God's still small voice, his gentle whisper, is still speaking life into rebellious hearts.

And really, the biggest and most beautiful miracle is when God's power reaches into a cold, rebellious human heart and makes it bloom with the beauty of his love and his life by the power of the cross.

[26 : 57] And that's a miracle that he is doing now. And he's been doing it all along. But often it's done under the radar. no matter what seems to be going wrong around us.

See, Elijah, Elijah couldn't see anything good from his perspective. All the headlines were bad. His personal life was, I mean, he was running for his life.

He was a fugitive. And yet God shows him that God has been working in ways that Elijah couldn't see and couldn't have even imagined.

and that God will continue to do his quiet, incredible miracles in the hearts of people. And he's going to keep doing that until Jesus returns.

So don't think, don't think for a second that God is not working. Just because you may not see the powerful demonstrations and answers to prayer that we long for, the good things that we ask for, or the impressive miracles that we want, Elijah saw those answers.

[28 : 06] He saw those demonstrations of God's power. And yet he also saw that people still refused to accept God. They still rejected him, even with all the evidence literally coming down from heaven.

He saw that what people really need is not a big display of power out there. We need a miracle in our hearts. And that's a miracle that God is doing right now.

It's a miracle that he chooses to do through our ordinary, unimpressive obedience to seemingly small, mundane things as a means to his greatest work.

God is not limited, he's not caught off guard, even when things seem to be going wrong. Often God is doing his quiet work behind the scenes in ways we never would have thought to look for.

So my encouragement for you this morning is just to relentlessly hang on to him. No matter how small it may be, just simply take the next small step of obedience as he leads.

[29 : 16] We have a God who chooses to use that small, simple obedience more often than he chooses to use the big, impressive miracles. people.

His still small voice, his gentle whisper is still at work through his people, through you. So don't discount your ordinary obedience.

Jeremiah says, do not despise the day of small things. Our God loves to use small things, unimpressive things, weak people doing small, unimpressive, obedient things to do his greatest work.

Amen. Amen. Thank you, sir.

often when we hear God's word, so we quick to just move on to a song, to something else. Let's just take a few moments just to think and dwell on the things that Seth has been talking about.

[30 : 35] We'll be going out of here, we'll be doing ordinary things in our lives this week. We'll be going to jobs, we might be minding children, we might be going to college, we might be meeting people, but in all that it's amazing to think that God is still working.

We don't always see what God is doing, but we can take encouragement from his word that he is working. What a wonderful picture as well of that gentle voice of God just whispering into a cold heart, changing them from being a rebellious, sinful human being, blossoming into a child of God,

someone who is loved by God as they repent of their sin and turn away and turn to Jesus.
let's just pause in our seats, just close our eyes, maybe bow our heads and we can thank God that he does work in the ordinary things in life, not to be discouraged when we don't see these big exciting things because we're people who have lost our awe of things.
We see so much on the internet, on television and we've lost that sense of awe of things and we want really something big to happen, but God works in those small things. So let's just bow our heads, perhaps even to pray that God would work a miracle in those that we love, who do not know Jesus yet, that he would change that cold heart, a heart of stone to be a heart of love for the Lord. Let's just respond in quietness before God. Thatale