

Elijah's prayer part 1

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[0:00] Well, a week ago I was in bed unwell and it gave me a chance to watch all sorts of movies that are out at the moment on Netflix and Amazon Prime and things like that.

And one of them was this one. I promise no spoilers. But it's a film called The Bank of Dave. And I thought, really, a film about a man starting a bank? Can that be interesting in any way?

And it was, actually. I highly recommend it. This man called Dave is a man from Burnley and he decides he wants to set up this local bank.

But there's lots of challenges if you want to set up a bank in this country. And he's up against the FSA, who apparently haven't approved a new bank for 150 years.

And they have power and they play a bit dirty and trying to stop him. And that's what the film is about. It's a bit of an unfair contest, really.

[1:11] Dave up against this big financial organization. Dave trying to set up this little local bank and this big London people trying to stop him.

And in this passage that we come to, we have another contest. Who is the real God? And it seems to me a very unfair contest.

It's the true living God against Baal. And yet, as we read through 1 Kings 18, it kind of feels like the odds are stacked against Elijah.

Kind of 450 to 1. And yet, Elijah is out to show the people of Israel, who have turned away from the true and living God, Yahweh, to a false God.

He's out to show who is really God. Who can really hear and answer their prayers. Who will hear people pray?

[2:24] Who will answer by fire? That's what this passage shows us. And it's a very helpful passage for us to be in. We've come to the end of our week of prayer as a church.

We've been spending more time together praying than we would usually. But who is the God that we've been praying to? Does he really hear and answer our prayers?

And crucially, should we keep praying to him? Should we keep meeting to pray? We have opportunities to do every Wednesday evening and every Sunday morning.

Should we continue to do that? Well, hopefully these questions and maybe more will be answered this morning as we look at this passage.

And hopefully we'll see how great and mighty our God is. We've been singing about his greatness this morning. And we'll see more of that in this passage.

[3:27] The great God that we get to pray to. So what's the situation in 1 Kings 18? Will we come and join Elijah at a time for God's people when the kingdom has been split into two?

You've got Israel, ten tribes of Israel in the north and then two tribes, Judah in the south and Elijah's in the northern kingdom of Israel. And it's under the rule of King Ahab, a wicked king who has married this foreign lady called Jezebel, who has come and introduced the worship of all sorts of foreign gods, including this god Baal.

And Baal, apparently he's the god of lightning and fire. He's a god who provides rain.

He's a god who brings life, a god of fertility. And yet it seems like Baal hasn't been doing his job over these last three and a half years because there's been a drought in Israel.

But Elijah knew all about it. And the living God knew all about it too. It was sent by God as a judgment upon them for turning away from him and turning to worship this false god Baal.

[4:53] But during these three years, God has really been looking after Elijah. Elijah has experienced God's faithfulness.

So Yahweh, God, stopped the rain. He's provided for Elijah and for the widow of Zarephath all that they need to live and to eat.

He's brought life to the widow's son who died. And Elijah prayed to the Lord that he would work. And God indeed did work and brought life to the widow's son.

God has still been working. Even as it seems to the people like Baal has not been working. And they've been through this hard years of drought.

The people of Israel, their hearts have turned away from the Lord. And so Elijah comes in and he says this to them in verse 21.

[5:57] He went before the people and said, How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him.

But if Baal is God, follow him. But the people said nothing. Elijah poses this question to them. Who is God? Whoever it is, follow him. They have divided loyalties. He's talking about them wavering.

But a better word apparently would be limping. They're limping. And some of our translations may even say that. They're limping around, not following one God or the other.

As I was preparing to preach this, I saw down London Road, a limping pigeon, which was a very good visual way for me to see this in action.

[7:03] A pigeon who was limping around with these other pigeons. He couldn't really join in properly with his pigeon friends. He couldn't really get down and eat. Because limping means you're not really living at all.

You're not really able to live properly. You're struggling. It's a struggle. And this word, limp, should come again in verse 26.

It doesn't in the versions of the Bible we have. But it would be a better translation. It talks about the prophets of Baal dancing around the altar. Apparently that word should be limping as well.

It's showing that worship of anyone other than the true and living God is like limping. It's not really living life to the full at all.

It's false worship. And trusting anyone, anything other than the true and living God, it's like limping.

[8:10] And this week, as we've been meeting to pray as a church, as we've been expressing our trust in the living God, it might be that some of us are kind of limping.

Maybe some of us aren't really trusting in the Lord as God, as we should be. We're putting our trust elsewhere. Maybe you haven't met to pray because actually you don't think it's going to make much difference praying to God.

And maybe really you're limping. You're not living life properly because you're not looking to the Lord and trusting Him as you should.

So the question to ask ourselves is, as Elijah asked these people, how long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him.

Pray to Him. Live for Him. But if Baal is God, if something else is God, follow Him. Follow that. So Elijah sets up this contest.

[9:19] Verse 24, this is the result of the, should be the result. The God who answers by fire, He is God. That's the challenge.

Which God is going to hear? Which God is going to answer by fire? That's what Elijah sets up here. But it seems unfair to me. It seems like the odds are really stacked against Elijah because these people, these prophets of Baal, they're on home turf.

They're on Mount Carmel. This is the place where they would be worshipping Baal. It's a bit like when Brighton, who will be playing football just this afternoon against Liverpool, playing on home turf, familiar territory, familiar grass, in front of their own fans who are cheering them on.

They have home advantage. So do Baal and his worshippers here in this passage. Not only that, but they are outnumbered. Verse 22, Elijah says, I'm the only one of the Lord's prophets left, but Baal has 450 prophets.

450 to one. Elijah's outnumbered. Not only that, but Elijah gives them first pick of the bull to put on the altar.

[10:43] It's very generous. And not only that, but later on we read of Elijah pouring water all over, all over the altar.

I don't know much about starting fires, but I believe water is how you get rid of fires, not how you start fires. The odds seem stacked against Elijah.

So what happens? Well, verse 26, at six, we see that Baal and his worshippers start calling out to Baal. Then they called out to the name of Baal from morning till noon.

Baal answer us, they shouted, but there was no response. No one answered, and they danced around the altar they had made. They began calling out to their gods.

But nobody answers. Nobody seems to respond. There seems to be no sign of fire, not even a little spark somewhere. So Elijah taunts them a bit.

[11:50] Verse 27, at noon Elijah began to taunt them. Shout louder, he said. Surely, surely he is a god. Perhaps he is deep in thought or busy traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.

It's like you calling someone up on your phone and they're just not answering. You call them again and no answer. So you text them and still no answer.

Maybe they're asleep. Maybe they've gone away. Maybe they're on the toilet. Maybe they're busy. There is no answer. And there is no answer for these prophets of Baal from Baal.

There is no sign of fire. But they don't give up. They carry on. Verse 28, so they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears as was their custom until blood flowed.

Midday passed and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time came for evening sacrifice. But there was no response.

[12:59] No one answered. No one paid attention. They worked themselves up into a frenzy. They even start cutting themselves.

And blood flows. It's a sad and sobering thing to read. Such desperate lengths and yet nobody answers. No one hears their cries.

No one pays attention. Their cries, their prayers go up to a God who cannot listen and who cannot do anything. They're limping.

This isn't living. They're suffering. Blood is flowing. It's desperate. Many in our world long to be hurt. Many in our world are desperate for hope and help and for answers and yet their cries seem to go unheard. Nobody seems to answer.

[14:06] Nobody seems to care. Maybe there might be even some here this morning who feel that. But what about Elijah's God? What about the God that we've been singing praises to this morning?

Does he answer? Is he any different? Let's have a look at what happens. Verse 30. Elijah said to all the people, come here to me.

They came to him and he repaired the altar of the Lord which had been torn down. He took 12 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.

He begins to rebuild this altar. He takes 12 stones. He's doing this in front of Israel and he's reminding them that they are God's people.

the 12 tribes of Israel together. And he builds this altar and as we go on we read of how he pours water on it.

[15:18] I mentioned it earlier. Verse 33. He arranged the wood. He cut the bull into pieces. He laid it on the wood, the sacrifice. And then he said to them, fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood.

Do it again, he said. And they did it again. Do it a third time, he ordered. And they did it a third time. The water ran round the altar and even filled the trench.

Not even Bear Grylls with all his survival skills could start a fire out of this. No chance.

It was soaked. But then Elijah calls on the Lord. Verse 36. At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed, Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, the covenant-keeping, promise-keeping God.

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, answer me so that these people will know that you, Lord, are God and that you are turning their hearts back again.

[16:38] Elijah comes to the Lord with great confidence and says, answer me, Lord. He doesn't work himself up into a frenzy like these people.

He just calmly, through this sacrifice that he offers up to the Lord, says, answer me, Lord. And then, verse 38, the fire fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones, the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench.

The fire falls. The whole thing, despite it being drenched with water, has been set on fire and there's nothing left. God has shown himself to be God, not Baal.

God listens. He hears the cry of his people, of his prophet, Elijah, and he answers.

And the people, verse 39, when all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, the Lord, he is God. The Lord, he is God.

[17:52] Our God is the living God who answers by fire. And this is the God we have been praying to this week. And we can be assured that over these last few days, these nine prayer meetings we've had this week, that he has heard and he is answering our prayers.

But we want to continue to pray. And we need to continue to learn to pray. And so just in our final few moments looking at this passage, let's learn from what we can learn to pray a bit more from Elijah.

What can we learn from him? Four things. Firstly, come through sacrifice. Elijah comes through a sacrifice. We heard at the beginning how Israel were limping between following Baal and following God.

The prophets of Baal were limping as they were around that water. God was not pleased. And Elijah, as he comes to God, he knows that he is like them.

He is a human being, a human being who sins. Israel, his people, have wandered away from him. But the way to come back is through a sacrifice.

[19:25] And we see that in the Old Testament. We see Old Testament sacrifices for sin. An animal in the place of a human so that we don't have to die, but something has to die in our place to approach the most holy God.

God. And in other parts of Scripture we see fire coming down. We saw that at the beginning of our service as we read those words as the temple had been built and sacrifices again had been offered to God.

And God is seen to be God in that. His glory revealed. But the point is it's through a sacrifice that sinful people can worship a holy God.

And we as Christians this morning we haven't had to sacrifice a bull to be able to meet here and worship because we look to another sacrifice.

We look to the sacrifice as the Lord Jesus on the cross who died as a sacrifice in our place for our sins and so as the writer to the book of Hebrews encouraged us we can draw near with confidence to the most holy place to the Lord God.

[20:44] We do that not because of ourselves but because of the Lord Jesus who died in our place. So as we pray as we continue to pray this year let's remember we come through the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus.

Secondly we come utterly dependent on God. We've talked about it a bit already but Elijah covers that altar with a lot of water.

Not just a bit but a lot. Four large jars of water. It's a lot of water. But hang on you might just be thinking isn't that a bit irresponsible of Elijah?

This was a time of drought. isn't that against the ancient hosepipe ban? Well apparently the Mediterranean Sea wasn't far away and apparently on Mount Carmel there were springs of water. So in some way he must have arranged it. We trust responsibly to drench this altar in water. but surely he scuppered his chances of fire coming down at all and yet as we saw God is powerful and God heard and answered his prayer and did answer by fire.

[22:14] But as he does that Elijah is showing yes Elijah built the altar but it's God who alone can answer by fire. It's God alone who hears and answers our prayer.

It's not about what Elijah did to get that thing on fire. It's all about God. He's utterly dependent on God to answer his prayer.

And it's complete opposite to what Baal and his worshippers did. They danced around, they even cut themselves, they frantically prophesied, frantically trying to get Baal to answer.

And maybe at times we're more like those prophets of Baal than we are like Elijah. Maybe at times we think we have to do something more and then God will answer our prayer.

Just if I was a bit more obedient, just if I said words better to my friend who's not a Christian, then maybe God will work. work. But we come completely dependent upon him.

[23:31] Yes, we do do our bit, we do build an altar like Elijah. We do go and we tell people about the Lord Jesus. But only he can change hearts.

It's not really us. We do our bit but we trust God that he will work in people's hearts. On Wednesday we were praying about future accommodation for a potential future elder and that seems a huge task.

I think on the Wednesday morning we were thinking as we were chatting we were just thinking about the impossibility it seems in Brighton. What a hard place. But we pray and we depend on him, the God who can provide even in the impossible situations.

And so we must continue in prayer. We must continue to be utterly dependent on our God to answer as he can mightily.

He can even answer by fire. So let's keep meeting and expressing our dependence on him as we have this week. Let's continue to do that.

[24:48] Thirdly, as Elijah prays, he prays and asks God to do this so that people will know that he is the Lord.

Verse 37, answer me Lord, answer me so that these people will know that you Lord are God. As we pray, let's pray that God will be made known to be God in different situations that we pray about.

That's what Elijah prays. Remembering there's this limping going on amongst the people. They're not really worshipping the Lord as their one true God, as they should.

and we live amongst the people in this city who are not worshipping the Lord as we would love them to. Who serve their own bales, their own gods.

The God of self seems to be the big one at the moment. It's all about me. It's all about what I want.

We pray that God would work, that God would answer our prayers so that he would be made known in our city.

[26:07] As Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he pointed out to them, the Pharisees who stand in the street corners and kind of say, look at me, look how great my prayers are.

Yet that's not how our prayers should be. We should pray, praying that look how great God would be as he answers.

Not how great we are, but how great God is. Seek his glory. We pray hallowed be your name so that God's name, not our own name, would be made known and honoured.

As we pray, one of the things we've been encouraged to pray over the last few weeks is for a team of elders. Let's pray that and ask that God would supply that so that his name would be able to be made known more effectively in Brighton, so that people would come and know God for themselves, so that people would say if you go to Calvary Church you will meet with the living God.

And final, final lesson that we can learn from Elijah here, answer so that you will turn hearts back to you. That's what Elijah prays for here.

[27:30] Verse 37 again, answer me Lord, answer me so that these people will know that you are Lord, that you Lord are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.

He prays that hearts would be turned to the Lord, back to their God. Stop limping and wavering between other gods, that's his concern.

Don't be like that limping pigeon that I saw, that's his concern. And is that our concern in prayer? As we pray to God, as we pray about different situations, pray that God would turn people's hearts back to him.

And you know, as we saw, the Lord did answer by fire in verse 39, when all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, the Lord, he is God, the Lord, he is God.

Not Baal, not the God of self, not God of money, of work, of family, no it's God, he is God. The Lord, he is God.

[28:45] And it's him that we want people's hearts to be turned towards. There's a wonderful verse that we'll look at this evening in James chapter 5, where it says that Elijah was just a human being like us.

And yet God worked in him and answered his prayers. And he graciously turned these people's hearts back to him as they cried, the Lord, he is God, they saw that the Lord is God.

He graciously uses us, human beings, our prayers, in his work to turn hearts back to him.

But there's an urgency to this, because we read verse 40 as well. Then 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.

It's a verse which may make us feel uncomfortable, which may make us sigh, maybe makes us feel a little bit angry as we read of God's judgment on the prophets of Baal, whose hearts hadn't turned back to him.

[30:13] But as we read that, we remember to that God has been gracious to these people, that he has shown himself to be God's.

But even then these prophets didn't turn back to him. He's warned them of his judgment over three and a half years of drought. He could have destroyed them back at the beginning, three and a half years before.

He could have not shown them his great answer to Elijah's prayer. And yet he did. The people of Israel, they fall on their faces and say he is God, but those prophets of Baal are slaughtered and they die.

And we live in a world that does not worship the Lord. Many don't. Many are heading towards death and judgment. And unless the Lord changes hearts, that's where they will go.

And so it gives an urgency to our prayers, an urgency to us praying, Lord, make yourself known and turn hearts to you. And maybe some of us have been praying for years for family members or friends to turn to him.

[31:34] Let's keep praying urgently for them. for God to work because he can.

He can hear and answer prayer and he can answer even by fire. So as we have prayed this week, let's continue to pray earnestly to the Lord throughout this year, that people in our city will see that he is God's, that hearts might be turned to him.

We have seen four lessons of prayer as we've looked to this passage. We've seen we come through sacrifice. We come through the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus to the most holy God.

What a privilege. We come utterly dependent on God, utterly dependent on him to work. we pray, answer our prayers so that people will know that you are God's.

Answer our prayers so that hearts will turn back to you. Let's pray now and then we'll sing.