

The God Who Answers

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Today's scripture reading is from 1 Kings chapter 18, verses 1, verse 17 through 39, and verse 45 as printed in your liturgy.

After a long time, in the third year, the word of the Lord came to Elijah. Go and present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the land. When he saw Elijah, he said to him, Is that you, you troubler of Israel?

I have not made trouble for Israel, Elijah replied, but you and your father's family have. You have abandoned the Lord's commands and have followed the Baals. Now 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 who eat at Jezebel's table.

So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. Elijah went before the people and said, How long will you waver between two opinions?

[1 : 29] If the Lord is God, follow him. But if Baal is God, follow him. But the people said nothing. Then Elijah said to them, I am the only one of the Lord's prophets left, but Baal has 450 prophets.

Get two bowls for us. Let Baal's prophets choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces, and put it on the wood, but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bowl, and put it on the wood, but not set fire to it.

Then you call on the name of your God, and I will call on the name of the Lord. The God who answers by fire, he is God. Then all the people said, What you say is good.

Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, Choose one of the bowls and prepare it first, since there are so many of you. Call on the name of your God, but do not light the fire. So they took the bowl given them and 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. And they danced around the altar they had made.

[2 : 35] At noon, Elijah began to taunt them. Shout louder, he said. Surely he is a God. Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.

So they shouted louder and 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 for 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. 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 sayas of seed.

He arranged the wood, cut the bowl into pieces, and laid it on the wood. Then he said to them, Fill four large jars with water, and pour it on the offering and on the wood.

[3 : 41] Do it again, he said, and they did it again. Do it a third time, he ordered, and they did it the third time. The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench.

At the time of the 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, 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. 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.

When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, The Lord, he is God. The Lord, he is God. Meanwhile, the sky grew black with clouds. The wind rose.

A heavy rain started falling, and Ahab rode off to Jezreel. The grass withers and the flowers fall. The Lord, he is God. We have battled through marathon traffic, found a parking spot, and some of us may have even run this morning.

[4 : 56] But we're here today to worship. We're here, as Andrew said, to honor Isaac and the Lee family. We are here today to have a congregational meeting, which I know all of you are excited about after this worship service.

It's kind of old school church for a really long time today. But it's going to be great. We hope you'll stick around. We're also on, you know, 10 weeks of having preached about revival.

And this simple prayer, Revive Us. And that means that Andrew and I have one more shot apiece at convincing you that this is something we should be praying about and preparing for.

And so we've chosen some of your favorite texts in the scriptures to preach on. First Kings and Second Chronicles next week.

So you can be excited about that. But we've been looking at the last five weeks at Moses and his prayer for revival. And we're shifting today to talk about Elijah and his prayer for revival.

[6 : 01] And I just want to remind you some of the definitions we've used to describe revival. Revival is a visitation from on high. A great religious awakening.

The unusual outpouring and manifestation of the Spirit of God. That's Martin Lloyd-Jones. Revival is a movement of the Holy Spirit bringing about a revival of New Testament Christianity in the Church of Christ and its related community.

That's Edwin Orr. Allow me to just answer this question. What's the context for this revival that we see happening in 1 Kings 18?

It's the 8th or 9th century B.C. Ahab and Jezebel are the king and queen of Israel. And they've organized a deliberate effort to make the people of God religiously pluralistic.

They've been encouraging the worship of Baal. This nature god and this rain god in Canaan. And they've been spreading this idolatry around Israel. And so the Lord sends his prophet Elijah with a message.

[7 : 11] And the Lord says, I'm going to send a drought. And you're not going to have a drop of water. And this is God's challenge to Baalism. And he basically says, we'll see who's the lord of the rain.

We'll see who's the lord of the storm. And so a drought comes for three years. And their economy is ruined. They're way beyond inflation. They're way beyond recession. Life is extremely desperate.

And that's where verse 1 opens up our story. After a long time in the third year, the word of the Lord came to Elijah. Go and present yourself to Ahab and I will send rain on the land.

What happened when Elijah showed up? Verse 17 says that Ahab met Elijah. And when he saw him, he said to him, is that you, you troubler of Israel?

I have not made trouble for Israel, Elijah replied, but you and your father's family have. You have abandoned the Lord's commands and have followed the Baals. Now this is interesting because when people have abandoned the Lord and his commands, they often misinterpret prophetic accountability.

[8 : 19] And they misinterpret prophetic challenge as troublesome. Prophetic truth becomes irritating and annoying. And that's why the prophets of Israel suffer as they do.

But Elijah doesn't waver. He's not deterred. And we see that in verses 19 to 20, he says, Come and meet me on Mount Carmel and bring all the prophets of Baal, bring all the people of Israel, and we're going to have a contest to see who's the true God.

And what does Elijah say to the people when they get there? In verse 21, Elijah 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. That word waver means to go lame or to fall down. How long will you fall down? How long will you keep sinking between these two thoughts?

How long are you going to sit on the fence? How long are you going to have a foot in both camps? How long are you going to have two minds, two loyalties, two sets of priorities?

[9 : 30] Do we see how this describes perhaps the North American church in the 21st century? I hope that as we explore this story, you'll see the necessity of making up our minds and choosing this day whom we will serve.

And I think the message for us today, our message today is that the church needs altar repair and revival prayer to the God who answers.

That's what I want to say today. The church needs altar repair and revival prayer to the God who answers. First of all, the church needs altar repair.

The problem is not that Christians have rejected the Lord, but that we have idols alongside the Lord. And that's what's happening in Israel.

They worship the Lord, but alongside the Lord, they follow the practices of the Canaanites and especially this nature cult. And everybody in Israel is basically saying, well, what's the problem with that?

[10 : 36] We're just going along with what everybody else is doing. And as Christians, we say, well, you know, we worship the Lord, our God, with our heart, our soul, and our mind, but not necessarily all of our heart and all of our soul and all of our mind.

We don't want to worship Him exclusively and close off all our options. We also worship other things in our life. We worship our reputation. We worship money and success.

We worship our family and the dreams of our kids. We worship our leisure time and our comfort. Ask yourself this question. Do I have any priorities that compete with the worship of God?

Do I have anything when God's gathering His people together that's keeping me from worshiping Him? Do I have any priorities that's keeping me from prayer?

If you do, you probably have an idol. An idol is not just worshiping something other than God. It's worshiping something alongside God. What's the first commandment of the Ten Commands?

[11 : 41] It's, you shall have no other gods before me or beside me. Now, isn't this also the position of the New Testament as well?

What does Jesus say in the Sermon on the Mount? He says in Matthew 6, No one can serve two masters. You'll either love the one and hate the other. You'll despise the one and be devoted to the other. But you cannot serve both God and fill in the blank.

And in that particular moment, He says you cannot serve both God and money. In Revelation 3, Jesus is speaking to His church and He says, I know your deeds, that you're neither cold nor hot.

I wish you were either one or the other. So because you are lukewarm, because you're neither hot nor cold, I want to spit you out of my mouth, Jesus says.

But you see, Elijah's not lukewarm. Elijah is not double-minded. He's not divided in his loyalties. He sees the nominal faith of the people of God.

[12 : 42] He sees that they're being assimilated into the surrounding culture. He sees that they're syncretized and pluralized and confused. And he says, this isn't the real thing.

And it will not hold up in a contest with the real thing. And so Elijah takes this bold risk. He puts himself in a vulnerable position. Here he is as the one prophet of the Lord versus 450 prophets of Baal.

And he says, let's have a test. Let's have a test between the true and the false. And he says in verse 24, he says, then you call in the name of your God, and I will call in the name of the Lord.

And the God who answers by fire, he is God. But something needs to happen before Elijah calls on the Lord. And what is that that needs to happen?

We see down in verse 30. Then 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. And Elijah 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.

[13 : 53] And with the stones, he built an altar in the name of the Lord. The authentic biblical faith that's been revealed to the people of God, the authentic biblical faith of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is in need of repairs.

It has become broken down. The people of God are no longer thinking biblically about God. The youth in Israel, the children of Israel, they couldn't really even tell you who God is.

There's massive spiritual decline and moral decay. There's very few true prophets left. And what does that mean for us? I think it means that we too need to repair and rebuild the altar of the Lord here in the Bay Area.

Why did this altar come to be in such disrepair? Why did it come to be so broken down? It says in verse 31 that Elijah took these 12 stones, one for each of the 12 tribes descended from Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord had come.

And that's the problem, that the people of God have been neglecting the word of God. They've been neglecting this word of the Lord that had come to their fathers and mothers in the faith. They've been ignoring the word of the Lord that came to the 12 tribes of Israel, and now they've forgotten that word.

[15 : 27] And they're basically a biblically illiterate people. And instead, what they have on offer to them are these words that are uttered by these false prophets, bankrolled by Queen Jezebel, who take these false prophets, they take the authentic biblical word of God, and they dumb it down as something less exciting and less intoxicating than these new words and these new ideologies from the prophets of Baal.

And they basically create a compromised faith that's not bound, that's not defined by biblical truth. And Elijah sees what's going on among the people of God.

And what does he do? He rolls up his sleeves, and he starts to restore the authentic biblical faith, repairing the altar, rebuilding the altar of the Lord, stone by stone by stone.

And do you see how this applies to us and to our lives at Christ Church? How might we need to roll up our sleeves? How might we need to break a sweat on these fallen altars of the Lord here in the Bay Area where the reviving fire of the Lord is supposed to fall down?

Have you built an altar to the Lord in your home where you begin your day? Have you set up sacred stones, a sacred place, a sacred time where you listen to this word of the Lord that came to Israel and came through the prophets?

[17 : 05] Do you take the time to listen to the word of God that came in Jesus and came through his apostles? This is the urgent and the desperate need of the Bay Area that Christians would repair the torn down altar of the Lord, that we would rebuild this biblical faith, that we would restack these stones of Scripture, and that we would reconstruct the deconstructed word of God.

In the history of the church, it's always a necessary prerequisite to a season of revival that the people of God recover the word of God. We need to be preparing stones where the fire of God's power can come down from heaven.

We need to be creating a landing strip, as it were, where the Holy Spirit can be poured out and can actually touch down and come and be at home among us. Amen?

Amen? Amen. The church is in need of altar repair. But the church is not only in need of altar repair, the church needs revival prayer.

The church needs altar repair, but it also needs revival prayer. Why do we need God to revive his people? Because the rivals that are set up alongside the Lord are so attractive and so seductive.

[18 : 35] What was the attraction of Baalism in its day? I'm guessing that not many of you are tempted to worship Baal. It's disappeared in history long ago, but what it stands for is alive and kicking.

And I want to read this to you from an Old Testament scholar. He says, Baal worship offered an appeal of relevance, an ability to touch felt needs. What, after all, did Baal theology claim about its premier deity?

Baal was the storm and fertility god who bestowed upon man and soil the blessings of fruitfulness. He sent forth lightning and fire and rain. He gave grain and oil and wine.

He could revive the dead and heal the sick and grant blessings of progeny. What could be more relevant in the life of any Canaanite farmer anxious over his wheat crop and his cattle shed?

When Baal was in top form, the world was pregnant with life. Oh, bounteous Baal. You see, Baalism is where you went for prosperity and success.

[19 : 39] Do you want to have a fruitful family? Do you want to have vitality in your vocation? Do you want to have bounty in your community? Well, don't rely solely on the Lord of Israel. Don't waste your time praying to him about those needs.

Go to the Baal gods. And they'll meet all your practical needs. And the bonus of Baal worship is that Baal's sex ethic is pretty loose.

He doesn't put limits on your desires. He appeals to your sensuality. He says, Do whatever you want to do. Do what feels right to you. Get your needs met. This is the cult of Baal.

Baalism combines both prosperity and broad-minded moral permissiveness. And we see many forms of Christianity in the 21st century that combine these elements, do we not?

We see ideologies creeping into the church where Christians are worshiping the Lord, but alongside of that we're worshiping money and sex and power. We see Christians bowing down and worshiping the market and business and all the prosperity that it can give to us.

[20 : 47] We see Christians bowing down and worshiping the state and politics and all the freedoms that it can protect for us. And my friends, idolatry is taking these good things and turning goods into gods.

Money, sex, and power, these are good things, but they're not ultimate things. The market and the state, these are wonderful servants, but they're terrible masters. And the people of God here in this moment, they want the best of both.

They want to worship the Lord, and they want to worship at the altar of prosperity and liberty. They say, we want to worship God, but we also want self-indulgent lives like all of our Canaanite neighbors are living.

And they're wavering between these two opinions, these two loyalties, these two sets of priorities. Now, how do we know that we have a Baal in our lives?

How do we know that we have this false God in our lives? Well, look at verse 26. Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon, Baal, answer us.

[21 : 56] They shouted, and there was no response. No one answered, and they danced around the altar they had made. You have to go before this God, and you have to perform for it.

You can't be assured that you have a relationship. You can't know that you have a friendship with this God. You have to put on a face. You've got to put your makeup on. You've got to go and impress this God and do your dance steps and get everything right so that this God will give you what you need and what you want.

You have to work very hard for this God. Verse 27. At noon, Elijah began to taunt them. Shout louder, he said. Surely he is a God. Perhaps he's deep in thought or busy or traveling.

Maybe he's sleeping and must be awakened. You know you have a false God in your life when you change places with that God. You switch roles with that God so that you're the one who has to be in control.

Because God might be on a journey. God might be distracted or asleep. And so you have to do everything for him. You have to know better than he does what you need.

[22 : 57] And you have to provide all the information to him because he's clueless. And you have to put pressure on him to get what you deserve. Do any of us sometimes pray like that?

That's not the Lord. That's Baal. Verse 28 says that, So they shouted louder and they slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed.

You see, we try to be in the driver's seat. But we can't get what we want or what we need. And our God fails. We get angry and we just start slashing ourselves. I find this shockingly contemporary.

And relevant for our lives three millennia later. And I hope you can see why Elijah is praying for revival. Right?

Here comes Elijah the Tishbite. Elijah the prophet from Gilead. Elijah the troubler of Israel. And what does he have the audacity to want? He wants the people of God to know God.

[24 : 04] He wants the people of God to experience the reality of the living Lord. He's coming to them and saying, you don't need to perform for him. You don't need to help him.

You don't need to bleed for him. All you need to do is come and pray by faith. And we would think that this would be absolutely no contest. Right?

Because here are all the prophets of Baal. They have all the resources. They have all the status. They're the clear majority. Elijah's a minority of one.

And he's put himself at a distinct disadvantage. Right? What in the world is he doing in verse 33? Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood.

Now do it again, he said. And they did it again. Now do it a third time, he ordered. And they did it the third time. The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench. Why in the world would Elijah have 12 jars of water poured out on this altar?

[25 : 09] I mean, lighter fluid? Yes. Water? I don't know. I think it's because Elijah's so confident in the Lord.

And he wants it to be clear that when he comes down in power, that nothing is too difficult for him. Absolutely nothing is impossible for him.

And so what does Elijah pray for? Finally, he prays in verse 36. At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and he 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. Answer me so these people will know that you, Lord, are God and that you are turning their hearts back again. What a contrast to these prayers to Baal.

It's just a simple, direct address to who? To the Lord. And we learned the meaning of that name last week. The Lord, Yahweh.

[26 : 20] I am who I am. The self-existent one. The covenant-making, covenant-keeping redeemer. The one who comes down to save.

And Elijah is saying to him, Lord, show that you and you alone are God over against these false gods. Lord, show that your truth and your word and your commands are good over against these false prophets and their words and their commands.

Lord, turn the hearts of your people back again. Give them a heart knowledge of you, the living God. Let them experience you as the God who is a consuming fire.

And isn't this a prayer for the revival of the church? Lord, turn their hearts back again. This prayer is undergirded by faith that though God's people are mostly dead.

God, Princess Bride. That though God's people are mostly dead, God can come and raise his own suddenly from spiritual death.

[27 : 30] And brothers and sisters, if you've gotten nothing else from this sermon series on revival, I hope you've gotten the fact that revival historically does not come until men and women of bold faith step up to this water-saturated altar of impossibility and they pray, Lord, all things are possible for you.

Awaken the sleepy. Enliven the dead. Quicken the lethargic in your church. Come down in power. Pour out your Holy Spirit upon us.

Turn our hearts back to you again. Make us to know, Lord, that you and you alone are God. Christ Church, are you willing to keep praying that prayer with me until it happens?

Can we keep praying that prayer together until revival comes? The church needs altar repair and revival prayer to the God who answers.

Right? We need altar repair and revival prayer to the God who answers. What happens in verse 38? 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.

[28 : 55] Then all the people saw this. They fell prostrate and they cried, The Lord, he is God. The Lord, he is God. Verse 45. Meanwhile, the sky grew black with clouds.

The wind rose and a heavy rain came on. And Ahab rode off to Jezreel. What is this fire contest? It's a prayer for lightning.

Right? Baal is the God of the storm and the rain and the lightning. But God caused this drought to come to show that, No, actually, he's the Lord of heaven and not Baal. He's the Lord of the storm.

He's the Lord of the lightning. He's the Lord of the rain. He says, I sent you three and a half years without water, and now I'm ready to send you water with a thundercloud, with bolts of lightning.

And maybe you too have found that God sometimes sends events into your life that, you know, singes the hair off your eyebrows, like it did for these people, that it sort of knocks you off your feet and wakes you up and tries to save you from your own spiritual blindness.

[29 : 58] And what we see is that God answers in a way that reveals his amazing power in this moment in a few different ways.

And I'll close with this. One of the things we see is we see the Lord's power in this praying life. Right? And in verse 24, Elijah says, Then you call the name of your God, and I will call on the name of the Lord.

And the God who answers by fire, he is God. The main point is that the Lord is a God who answers. He's not dumb, and he's not deaf like Baal.

He speaks a living word, and he answers prayer with power. And we should not think that this is the first time that Elijah's ever prayed this prayer.

Because he's just passed through a painful three-and-a-half-year season of wilderness preparation before this prayer. If you go back to chapter 17, Elijah's had to trust in God through this drought for his daily bread.

[31 : 01] He's had to live under this corrupt government, this corrupt queen and king. He's had to experience intense loneliness and humiliation. And in the midst of that, for three-and-a-half years, he's waiting on God in prayer.

And he's crying out for revival. And he's bowing down. And he's saying, Lord, make it known that you are God. Lord, turn the hearts of your people back to you. For three-and-a-half years, he had to pray that.

How long might we have to pray? We don't know. But he didn't just start praying on this day. And that's where we see the Lord's power in this praying life.

But we also see the Lord's power in the turning of hearts. I want to point out that the pastor in this story, he did not bring the fire. Right?

Elijah did not bring the fire. That was something that God did. That's not Elijah's job. That's God's job. And it belongs to God and God alone. And in the same way, Elijah can't turn the hearts of the people back again.

[32 : 02] That's not his job either. That belongs to the sovereignty of God. To turn a human heart is the greatest supernatural miracle.

And Elijah and all the people, really, are desperately dependent on God to sovereignly send revival. And that's what we see is that the Lord, the giver of fire, and the Lord, the giver of rain, the sender of the rain, he's also the turner of hearts.

And that's what revival is. It's the Lord working simultaneously on many hearts all at once. So that we fall down and we worship and we say the Lord and the Lord alone is God.

That's how you know revival has come. When all the people of God are doing that together. And the final thing I want to point out is that we see the Lord's power in this praying life.

We see it in the turning of these hearts. But we also see the Lord's power in this bleeding sacrifice. Look at verse 29. It says that midday passed and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice.

[33 : 16] But there was no response. No one answered. No one paid attention. What a devastating verdict. That this sacrifice for sin was found unacceptable.

Right? Nobody responded to it. And yet the Lord honored Elijah's altar repair and his revival prayer and he accepted his sacrifice for sin. And what I want us to remember, friends, as we come to this Lord's table is that we have a far greater sacrifice for our sins.

That the gods call to us and they say, dance for me. Slash yourself for me. Bleed for me. But there's only one Lord who has slashed himself for you.

He didn't go up Mount Carmel. He went up Mount Golgotha. And his blood ran red for you. Every other God will make your blood run.

But there's only one God who's caused his own blood to run. Out of love for you. At the cross, the fire of God came down in justice upon Jesus.

[34 : 27] In order that the fire of God's love might come down on us. And when the church is revived and the church comes to a fresh sense of the power of that truth, we begin to sing out with all of our hearts and we say, He left his father's throne above.

So free. So infinite his grace. Emptied himself of all but love. And he bled. He bled for Adam's helpless race.

Tis mercy all. Immense and free. For oh my God. It found out me. The Lord. He is God. The Lord Jesus Christ.

Who died on the cross for you. He is God. He is God. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.