

1 Kings 18 (PM)

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[0 : 0 0] What a wonderful story we have. It's so great to be able to look at 1 Kings 18 together this evening. Now you probably remember from last week when we introduced this book, 1 Kings is the story of a kingdom in decline. It's a kingdom in decline and what God is going to do about it. And Israel is in decline because the kings and the people have abandoned God's law. They've added other gods to their portfolio. They've broken the covenant and they've strayed away from the Lord. And what God does about it is to speak his word and his will through his prophets to confront and call the people back to him. So last week we met two different characters that really represent these two themes. So Ahab represents decline. He's the worst king of Israel yet. He married Jezebel from Sidon and she brought with her her false god, Baal Hadad. And together they become a Baal worship power couple. So they decide Baalism is going to be the new state religion of Israel. And this is going to solidify and prop up our rule by changing the religion and having us be at the top of the pyramid. So they abandon the commandments. They abandon worshiping the Lord. Jezebel starts killing all of God's prophets, although some of them survive in hiding. Out with the old, right? And in with the new, they import new prophets, new priests, they build new altars. And Baalism is the way in Israel.

And 1 Kings is clear throughout that this drift of Israel is the result, their decline is the result of them drifting away in this way. So that's the decline. Elijah represents how God is going to respond. Elijah arrives on the scene and declares God is going to send a double drought. God's word is withheld. As Elijah leaves the country and rain is withheld to show that Baal, God of storms, is powerless.

And both things were meant to call Ahab and the people to repentance. The droughts are actually God's mercy. He's saying to his people, wake up, come back to me, pay attention. So that's the run-up to tonight's passage. That's our background. And I'm going to preach this passage tonight in three parts.

The first is the Lord returns. The second, the Lord alone. And third, the Lord who answers. So the Lord returns. Returns from where? Well, God, through Elijah, has been at work outside of Israel in Baal country. So you remember this lovely reversal we heard about last week. Israel, trusting in Baal, is in this double drought. But overall, over out there in Baal territory where Elijah is, God is speaking and he's doing things and he's working powerfully. And there's this foreign widow out there. And she has more faith in God than his own people do. But in this chapter, God sends his prophet back. He says, go show yourself to Ahab and I will send rain upon the earth. And so with Elijah, God returns promising rain, desperately needed after three years of drought.

[3 : 1 4] But the return is not just a visit. It's not just rain. It's a confrontation. It's a reclamation of his people. God comes back in power. And we saw that in the beginning of that passage. There's kind of this conversation between Elijah and Ahab. And this is the second time they meet and it's not a good meeting, is it? Ahab says, is that you, troubler of Israel? And Elijah says, right back at you, I haven't troubled Israel, but you have. Because you've abandoned the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals. So there's two different takes here on who has troubled Israel with this drought. Ahab says, it's Elijah. He's stuck in the past. He keeps on going on about the Lord. He keeps cursing us with this drought out of his pure stubbornness. And Elijah says, it's Ahab. The drought is the Lord calling his people to repent for abandoning him and following Baal. So behind the drought, the question is, who is the true God of Israel? Can that title be shared? And God is actually the one that calls the question here through his prophet Elijah, not Ahab. Ahab is content to just kind of kill Elijah and just have

Yahwehism fade away. As long as there's rain, of course. But Elijah is the one that comes in and proposes this showdown. He's like, we're going to sort this out. It's going to be me and you and 450

prophets of Baal and all of Israel. So by all of Israel, he probably means representatives and leaders from all of the tribal groups are going to come to witness this showdown. It's going to happen at Mount Carmel, which is right in between Israel and Baal territory. This is a holy place to both of them.

There are already two altars on the top of this mountain, and we're going to meet in that place, which is kind of a contested place, and we're going to figure out who's the true God. We're going to offer sacrifices, which are implicitly asking for rain. But we're also going to reveal by fire who the true God is. So all of Israel is going to gather, and they're going to decide between the troubler and the true God. So that's the Lord returning. Let's talk about the Lord alone. Everyone's gathered, and Elijah addresses the people, and this is just great, isn't it? How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him. But if Baal, follow him. And the people did not answer him a word.

And one of the themes in this passage is what we might call God's jealousy, or the exclusivity of Yahweh, the Lord. He demands all of their worship in his way, or he will receive none of it. And I know at first that strikes us as strange, but the reason is really simple, actually. It's because he's God.

There are no other gods. It's not that people don't worship other gods, or that there's no spiritual forces at work. We know that there are. But the God of Israel says, I am the creator of all things. [6 : 26] I'm all-powerful. I'm in control. I rightfully rule all people and all things. And that's either true, or it's not true. There's no in-between on that kind of claim. The people know him as the Lord, or they just don't know him. There's no halfway. And Elijah says to Israel, you are limping between two opinions on this. The image in the Hebrew is that there's a fork in the path, and they're kind of not able to choose which way they're going to go. So in English, we would call this sitting on the fence. My lived experience of this is visiting Metrotown Mall, and I just utter disorientation, right? I don't know where to go. Elijah says, time's up. No more limping. The true God is going to be revealed today, and you'll make your choice one way or the other. And this is the exciting part, right? Team Ball goes first, 450 of them. They lay out their sacrifice. They pray all morning, oh, Ball, answer us. And this must have been loud and exciting, at least at first. Can you imagine 450 people going around this altar and crying out to their God? But then there's no voice. There's no answer.

Team Ball limps around the altar. That's a deliberate choice of wording there, just like Israel's faith is limping. So just like these prophets' prayers and antics are accomplishing nothing as they limp around the altar, so Israel's divided loyalty is accomplishing nothing. They don't get half-blessing from God and half-blessing from Ball. They just have nothing, because God alone is the Lord. Then Elijah mocks them. Hey, guys, what's Ball up to? Is he on vacation? Is he on the toilet? Is he taking a power nap? Maybe if you yell louder, he'll answer. It's pretty good. The prophets heckling from the sidelines. So these prophets, the prophets of Ball, they up the ante.

They begin cutting themselves. And there's, I mean, in my mind's eye, this is insane. Like this mad, ecstatic, bloody dance. 450 bleeding, ranting, and raving prophets. Ball, Ball, Ball. If we just give him enough, if we hurt ourselves enough, if we act, if we do enough, he'll do something. Verse 29, there was no voice. No one answered. No one paid attention. Because, of course, Ball is not there. And so he cannot speak, and he cannot act. The Lord alone is God. Our intensity of belief in something, or our sacrifice for something, doesn't make that thing true. Just because I really want it to be true, it doesn't make it true. Just because we make something God, it doesn't therefore become God.

[9 : 39] American author David Foster Wallace captures this idea perfectly in a speech he gave back in 2005. He says like this, there is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of God or spiritual type thing to worship is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are the, where you tap into the real meaning in your life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough. If you worship your body and beauty and sexual allure, you will always feel ugly. Worship power and you will end up feeling weak and afraid. And you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect. Being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out.

Anything or anyone we put in God's place will fail us. Whatever promise these things seem to have, they will falter. They will betray us. And we need our ball the most in the moment of crisis. He will be

mute and powerless.

But idols don't just fail us, they also cost us. They enslave us. We give them our lives. We give them our worship. We give them our blood. And in return, they give us nothing. God demands our whole life in order for us to gain life. Idols demand our whole life and they always give us death.

So, we put our trust instead in the Lord who answers us. That's our third point. Elijah stands back and watches Baal's prophets exhaust themselves. And then he calls the people to come near around the broken altar of Yahweh. And he picks up, I mean, it's been, this altar has been decimated through this program of destruction that Jezebel and Ahab have been on. So, he starts picking up the stones and putting it back together. He takes 12 stones representing each tribe in Israel. He takes those stones and he rebuilds the broken down altar. Because God's people are broken down and destroyed in this moment. And now God is going to rebuild them. He calls them back in this action of building.

And he says, essentially, he picks up each stone. You're a part of it, right? You're a part of it. You're a part of it. They see themselves being rebuilt as this altar is rebuilt. Now, Baal's altar would have been tinder dry after three years of drought. We remember what this last summer was like with wildfires, right? It would have only taken a spark and that thing would have been an inferno.

[12:39] Yet there's nothing. But here, Elijah digs a trench. And then he absolutely saturates the wood and the animal and the earth. And not only does it make this kind of fire miraculous that it's able to kind of catch on fire at all, but imagine after a three-year drought pouring out more than 80 gallons of water onto the sacrifice over and over and over using all of the water they have, pouring it onto the ground. That's Elijah's confidence that God will answer by fire and eventually by rain.

And then, Elijah prays. So there's so many of these prophets of Baal, and they do a lot. But Baal does very little, actually nothing. And here, Elijah does very little, really. And then the Lord does the rest.

There's no ritual here. There's no limping. There's no bloodletting. He simply speaks to God, the living God, who listens, hears, answers.

I don't know if you noticed what he prayed for. I'm going to read it again for you. Let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and I am your servant. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that you are Lord, that you have turned their hearts back. So he doesn't actually pray for fire, which is interesting.

Of course, it's implicit in the setup of this whole contest. But he prays for something that's a much greater miracle. He prays that his people would be reconverted to him, that they would return to him, their hearts would turn back to him, that they would know that their Lord has returned to claim them, and that he is the Lord alone, that he's going to rebuild them.

[14:29] That's the prayer that he prays. And the Lord answers with fire. And this is just, again, such an amazing image, burning up the sacrifice and the wood underneath it and the stones underneath that and the dust and then the water in the trench. I mean, there just must have been like a circle of bare rock where there used to be an altar.

It's something that only the hand of God could do. So the Lord sends fire, but he also answers Elijah's prayer. When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, The Lord, he is God. The Lord, he is God.

The Lord has answered Elijah's prayer, and he, by his power, has turned their hearts back. We hear it in their words, and then we see it in their actions when they slaughter the false prophets, which signals their undivided obedience to God's law once again, which commanded in Deuteronomy that false prophets must be put to death.

Elijah promises rain, and once again he bows down in prayer to the God who answers. The book of James looks back on this passage, and out of all the things that James could use to kind of talk about prayer, this is the passage that he talks about.

It's right here in 1 Kings. So this is what the book of James says. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours.

[16:06] In other words, he was nothing special. That's James' take on it. That's good to hear, isn't it? It says, He prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth.

Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit. Now next week, we'll hear exactly how weak Elijah is.

He's a prophet. He seems like a pretty impressive guy. He's still just a person. Next week, you're going to see him flee for his life, afraid, depressed, burnt out. And yet, God listened to him when he prayed.

God answered when he prayed. So, don't waste your time pouring your lifeblood out to a God that doesn't listen.

Pray to the God who answers. If you saw these prophets of Baal limping around the altar, and you saw yourself limping around whatever your altar is to another God, then you can also pray to the God that answers, because he's the one that's able to turn our hearts back to him.

[17 : 23] The Lord returned to his people in Israel because he is merciful, because he wanted them to be his people. He wanted to be with them. He wanted to give them life. He alone is the Lord.

He is the Lord who answers our prayers. So, let's close by praying to him now. Lord, we know by your word that you are God, and there is no other.

Cast down the idols that entice our hearts. Turn our hearts back to you, Lord, and send down your Holy Spirit's fire to fill us.

Amen. Amen.