

1 Kings 18

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[0 : 0 0] Father in heaven, we ask that as we meet together under your word, that you by your Holy Spirit will fall upon us, opening our hearts to your word, changing our hearts, turning them to Jesus Christ, who is our Savior and our Lord. In his name we pray. Amen.

Amen. Please be seated. Well, we're continuing in our passage, our sermon series on the life of Elijah. And it'll help you to turn to 1 Kings 18 because we're going to go through that. And you heard it read. We're not looking at the whole chapter. We've left a bit out.

But the thing that we're doing in this short sermon series is we're looking at the life of Elijah. And we're looking at him because he is one of the great heroes of God's people from the Old Testament until now.

It's the darkest of times in Israel. And this is when great heroes arise, heroes of faith. It's a time where the whole country, where the whole people of God are turning away from God and giving themselves over to the nature worship of Baals, which were fertility gods, rain gods, and what they considered the cultures around them to be the king of gods.

It was a religion and a lifestyle full of sexual immorality and violence and greed as well. Ahab, the king of Israel, who's supposed to be God's chosen one, is leading people off this cliff.

[1 : 4 3] And he is doing it partly through his wife Jezebel, who's the leading figure of Baal worship. And she's determined to kill off all God's prophets, as you see in verse 4. But what happens through Elijah is one of God's most amazing rescues. He saves his people from sure spiritual death to again know him and serve him. And this is why Elijah is great.

He is great, as we heard last week, because the word of God is great. And he carries God's word. And we heard how he announced this famine to Ahab, how the word of God went out to the wilderness as Elijah was sent out.

And then he is brought into the heart of Jezebel country in a place called Zarephath. And in this little home with this widow and her young son, who are starving to death, he lives with them.

And this whole family sees God personally sustaining them day by day as they trusted his word. And you remember at the end of last week's sermon, this incredible miracle of this woman's son being resurrected from the dead.

And through this all, the widow really sums things up, where she says her last words of chapter 17. Now I know, Elijah, you are a man of God, and the word of the Lord is in your mouth.

[3 : 1 6] Well, in this chapter, that truth is going to be revealed to all of Israel in the most spectacular way. It's an account that many of you know well. It's very well suited to a Sunday school lesson.

There's lots of drama. There's humor. There's action and danger. It's sure to hold the attention of even the most distracted child. I remember it very well when I was in Sunday school, one of my favorites.

But it's not just one of the most important events in Israel's history. And a spectacular saving by God. It is tremendously relevant to you and to me this morning.

Because in this chapter, Elijah calls Israel to give up idols and to come back into a living relationship with the true and living God.

He is calling you and I to this same thing. And he does it in three ways that we'll go through. The first way that Elijah does this is through an invitation.

[4 : 18] And secondly, it's through a prayer. And third, it's through an answer. And in all these ways, God is the one who is initiating.

So let's look at the invitation first. In verse 1, God's word leads Elijah to go to meet Ahab because God's finally going to bring rain. And when they finally meet, Ahab blames Elijah for all the problems in Israel.

It is desperate. We can't imagine on this rainy weekend how desperately short of water they were in Israel. It's your fault, Elijah. You are the troubler of Israel.

But in verse 18, Elijah answers, You see, following these gods means abandoning God's word.

He has left the covenant relationship with God, Ahab has. And he's been using all of his power to make all Israel do the same.

[5 : 29] And so Elijah says now, there's got to be a reckoning. We have to settle this. And in verse 19, he says, Therefore, send and gather all Israel to me at Mount Carmel, and the 450 prophets of Baal, and the 400 prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table.

Well, Ahab must have thought these were pretty good odds. 850 prophets to Elijah. And so that's the only thing that I can think of for why he said yes to it.

He did get all the people together on Mount Carmel. And when the crowd gathers in verse 21, Elijah comes near to all the people. Which shows, it really tells us of God's word coming near to his people.

And God's word is near to us as well, as we're meeting this morning. And when they gather, Elijah says this, How long will you go limping between two different opinions?

How long will you go limping? And that word, limping, means literally hobbling on crutches. You're doing a dance, hopping from foot to foot, and you're not going anywhere.

[6 : 48] It's really a picture of pretending to be God's people, but giving yourself over to the worship of idols. How can I live like...

And really, their question is, is not how can I please God? How can I love God with all my heart, mind, and soul? The question of Israel is, How can I be as much like the world as I can, and still look like I am following God?

Now that's a temptation for us as well. How can I look and fit into the world as much as I can, and still look like I'm following God? Elijah says it's a dead end.

You are missing out on the life of God. And that's why Elijah says, How long are you going to try to be on both sides, hedging your bets? You are actually disabling your walk with God.

Your spiritual limp means you cannot follow Him. You are in grave spiritual danger. Elijah says you've got to do something about it. If the Lord is God, follow Him.

[7 : 53] If Baal, then follow Him. And you know what the answer of the congregation was? Complete silence. They did not answer Him a word.

They were clinging to idols. They were considering what it would mean to give them up. It is a very, very thought-filled moment.

What does this mean for me in my life? They are really like our current cultural thought, thinking that there are multiple gods, and I choose which ones are going to be most convenient for me.

But Moses is saying, No, there are many idols. There are many false gods. There are many impressive religions created by people because people know in their heart that there is something more than them.

But there is only one true God. He created all things and sustains them. He alone is God, Elijah is saying, and you need to decide if you will follow Him.

[8 : 53] Now, that's a critical invitation because we, like the people of Israel, are prone to idolatry. Our hearts are moved towards that.

An idol is whatever you live for that you feel that you cannot live without. It's the thing that brings approval.

It's the thing that brings satisfaction. It's what I've got to have. It's what my bottom line is. And it starts in the heart. It starts with a craving, a wanting, an enjoying, a being satisfied with anything that you treasure more than God.

That's what an idol is. Well, that opens it up to a whole range of things for you and I. It's not just something that's a wooden or metal structure.

It is anything that you would treasure in your heart more than God. And that is what, if you remember from our Colossians series, Paul calls covetousness. And all of us have a daily battle with idolatry.

[10 : 03] It can be something that's on display for all of us to see, or it can be something that's hidden. It can be material wealth or the approval of others. It can be sexuality, which is a huge idol in our age.

It can be success in business or good grades or having a boyfriend or girlfriend. It can be our family. The worship of idols instead of God causes a spiritual atrophy within us.

That's what Elijah is telling us. We are hobbled. We cannot walk. And so God invites us to choose every day, stop limping between idols and God.

If Jesus is God, follow him. And I think that this is what was going on in the wilderness for Elijah and in Zarephath, is that Elijah is learning what does it mean to follow God alone?

What does it mean to trust him with all of who you are? He depended upon God's word every day of his life, and especially in that time in Zarephath with his little family.

[11 : 15] God strengthened Elijah during that time, and his confidence in God grew. He was able to walk very strongly with God, and that's why he was able to make that bold invitation before all Israel and a tyrannical king.

Now, I believe that God stretches us and that he grows our godly muscles as we know him by his word and we serve him.

Because as you hear his word, you know him. As you obey him, you actually experience the living God working in your life. You gain confidence in him.

We cannot make this daily choice, though, to follow God in our own power. And that's why this next part is so important, because without God's grace and without his help, we will hobble.

We will be in a hopeless situation. Your prayers, therefore, the prayers of the church, are crucial for one another. And so that's why there's not only a strong invitation to renew relationship with the living God, Elijah prays for his people who are hobbled, who are prone to worship idols.

[12 : 29] And it's one of the great prayers of the Bible. Look at verses 36 and 37. Now, there are three things that Elijah is praying for.

And I think this instructs our prayers at a church. We should pray in this way. The first thing he prays for is that the people would know God's name.

Where do we get that from? Moses begins by saying, O Lord, let it be known that you are God. And then later in verse 37, he prays that the people will know you, O Lord, are God.

That word, Lord, is a special name. It is the name for God. In the English Old Testament, it's the covenant name for God that is pronounced Yahweh.

Even though we really don't know how it's pronounced, only the priests could pronounce it. And then after the temple was destroyed, it was never heard again. But it was a sacred name.

[13 : 50] It means that God in his love has chosen his people to belong to him. And that they would be his people and he would be their God.

And to make known that name is to remind the people that God loves them with a steadfast love, a hesed love, that he speaks to them, that he calls them to obey him and to love him with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength.

It is a precious name. And that's why when people often come to faith, they often change the way they talk pretty quickly. They stop using God's name in vain.

Now, the first church I was at was at a small town in Pender Harbor. And I belonged to the fire department there. It involved practice every Tuesday night. And it was great.

It was a great time. I really enjoyed the guys that were there. But one of the features of the time together was that the language was very blue. It was like there was a contest to see how many profanities you could fit in one sentence.

[14 : 58] And the thing that was noticeable, too, is that this wasn't actually probably normal for them. Because if one of the wives came into the practice, suddenly the language changed.

It was like a light switch being turned off, cleaned right up. But one night, the language reached a crescendo, I should say.

And a couple of guys said to me, right in the midst of it, they said, now, how can you as a minister deal with this? They said, are you offended by what we're doing here?

And I said, you know, it's kind of like listening to a foreign language and getting used to it. I said, it really doesn't bother me. But I said, there are two words that really bother me.

Well, all the guys listened quite closely. What are the two words? And I said, when you use the name of God and Jesus Christ, that hits me pretty hard because those names mean a lot to me.

[16 : 03] They actually are all about who I am as a person. And to their credit, they used those words far less.

Didn't stop, of course. And they actually apologized from time to time when they used it. They'd catch themselves. But why would I feel that way? Why would I say that to them?

It is because that name is so precious. It is a name that has to do with God's commitment to us, to you and to me.

He is the God who has brought you and I into a relationship with him so that you belong to him. He is your God. You are his person. He is your only hope in life and death.

And his purpose is to bring the world into that relationship as well. You see, the steadfast love of this God who is named endures forever.

[17 : 02] And this is the crucial difference between all false gods, between all false religions, and the one true God.

For false religion and idol worship, the all-important question is, how committed are you? How committed are you to that God or to that idol? And this so easily affects our own faith in the true God.

It can become all about how committed I am. And you see this in the actions this morning. You couldn't fault the commitment of the 450 prophets of Baal. They repeated prayers to Baal over and over again.

Answer us. Answer us. And then when Elijah asked them if maybe Baal was thinking about other things or going to the washroom or asleep or on a journey, they got even more serious about their commitment.

So they cried out and they cut themselves so that the blood flowed and they raved until the evening. You see, false religion is all about getting the God to act for you or to accept you through your commitment to it.

[18 : 14] But this is the empty way. This is the way to death. We see in verse 29 this really telling phrase, no one answered.

There was no voice. There was no one who paid attention. It is a lifeless religion. It is the lifeless religion where there is no reality in it.

But the center of true religion, of true faith, of the true God is very, very different. It is all about how committed God is to us.

That is what the name of the Lord is. His commitment is revealed fully in that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that all who believe in him should not perish but have eternal life.

Jesus took our sins upon himself and died to that sin once and for all, so that nothing can separate us from the love of God. Nothing can change the fact that you are his person and that he is your God.

[19 : 23] Nothing can separate us from God's love. That's the new covenant for the forgiveness of sins. That's the covenant that we are going to be experiencing and seeing in communion in just a few minutes.

In it, our sins are forgiven. We are reconciled to God. And Elijah is praying for that to happen, that people will know God's name, who is so committed to us.

Now, secondly, he prays that the people will know God's ministers. And I want to say that this is a very important thing that affects all of us. He says this.

He says, he prays that they would know that I am your servant and that I have done all these things at your word. You see, this is telling us that God's true minister is one that is faithful to God's word.

Very simply. God always takes the initiative. He has spoken and the minister obeys. So, God tells Elijah to remake the altar with 12 stones and douse the altar and wood on a sacrifice with 12 jars of water.

[20 : 33] You know, three trips with four jars to signify that God was restoring the 12 tribes of Israel in their relationship with God. Elijah diligently obeys him before he prays.

He hears God's word before he prays. And the fruit of his obedient service is that God's work will be seen in a moment. A minister is God's faithful servant who baptizes with water, as Jesus does.

But only God baptizes with the Holy Spirit and with fire, changing a person from the inside out. And it is not just the ordained person who are ministers.

I love the fact, and we missed this. You can go home and read the rest of chapter 18. But the rest of it talks about Obadiah. He's prominent. He has a career in politics.

He works in Ahab's court. But he is faithful to God's word in a very tough workplace. He single-handedly hides all these prophets of God from Jezebel, who's trying to kill them.

[21 : 40] It was dangerous for him to set up this meeting with Ahab as well, with Elijah. But despite his fears and his reluctance, in the end he obeys God's word and he sets it up.

God's faithful minister at the workplace, in politics, of all places. Faithful ministers are essential for God to renew the faith of Israel and our faith as well.

You and I speak words to people that alone can renew their faith and draw them, turn their hearts to God.

That's why Roman 10 says, you know, how will they call on him who they have not believed? How are they to believe in him whom they have never heard? How are they to hear without somebody preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent?

As it is written, how beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news. God's people are sent out by God's word.

[22 : 41] And then finally, that prayer, the third part of that prayer is that the people would know God's power. And this is what, this shows God's love, Elijah's love for the people.

He says, answer me, Lord, answer me, that the people may know you, O Lord our God, and that you have turned their hearts back to him. You know, back to God.

You see, Elijah's praying that by his great power, God will change the hearts of his people, giving them new living hearts and releasing them from idolatry. It is God's powerful, gracious work to change our hearts and to turn our hearts to him.

And this should be our prayer for one another and for ourselves. And wonderfully, as we close this passage, there is not only invitation and a prayer.

There is an answer. There is an answer so powerful and immediate that it is unmistakable. Fire utterly consumes the sacrifice, the wood, the altar, the water.

[23 : 45] Even the stones and the dust are vaporized. So it can't be explained away. There's no way to try to say, well, this was how it was done. It was all fixed and it wasn't real.

This is the reality of God, the living God. And I think that it's even more powerfully shown in the next answer. And that is that God indeed changed Israel's hearts.

And when all the people saw it, it says, they fell on their face and said, The Lord, he is God. The Lord, he is God. That is the greater miracle. It is God changing, turning hearts of his people to himself.

It is him giving new life, really like a resurrection to his people, restoring them, reconciling them to God. And then God brings an end to the priests of Baal and their destructive work immediately.

In his judgment, God ends their lives through Elijah. And then finally, God gives physical life to all of Israel. He gives rain.

[24 : 52] He gives physical life, bounty from creation. Baal, the God of rain, is shown to be empty. And only the true God can create and sustain his world.

So as we leave this passage, what are we to do? You know, what we have seen that the true God is the one who speaks, who hears his people and answers them according to his promises.

And God reminds us here that he alone is utterly committed to you. That he speaks to you through his word. That he listens to your prayers.

And that he powerfully acts through them to bring life. Spiritual life. Physical life. Changed hearts. His commitment to us and to Israel was to continually renew and heal their relationships with him.

And most perfectly and wonderfully, this is gloriously revealed to us in Jesus. For if he is for us, who can be against us? If that is true, may we let go of idols and cling to Jesus, the author of our life.

[26 : 03] May we know that God, in all of his glory, as we hold fast to his word, may we experience him and his new life as we serve him and obey his true word.

Jesus' dear friend, John, sums it up well. What God has done for us in our response in his first letter. And I'll close with this wonderful verse from 1 John 5, 21.

And we know that the Son of God has come. He has given us understanding. So that we may know him who is true.

And we are in him who is true. In his Son, Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols.

Amen. Amen.