



The Message of Elijah

(11) Elijah's Prayer

1 Kings 18:1-2, 22-24, 30-37

Text: Verses 32b-37

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We are working our way slowly through the stories in 1 Kings in which Elijah is an important character. For the last number of weeks we have been considering the story in which Elijah has challenged the prophets of Baal to a contest which would demonstrate whether Yahweh, the God of Israel or Baal, the pagan god of the Sidonians, was the real God/god. Both Elijah and the prophets of Baal were to prepare a sacrifice on an altar and whichever God/god sent fire from heaven would demonstrate that he was the true God. So far in our study we have seen that the prophets of Baal were not successful in getting their god to send fire from heaven. This demonstrated the futility of worshipping Baal and when we considered that part of the story we saw the futility of any God-substitute in our lives.

So now it is Elijah's turn. Last time we only considered the few verses that describe him rebuilding the altar of the Lord. This morning we will mostly consider his prayer. But before Elijah prays and asks the Lord to send fire from heaven, he did something to make sure that it would be clear that when the fire came it was not the result of some trick. He built a trench around the altar of the Lord and then had some helpers pour so much water over the altar and the sacrifice and the wood that the trench was completely filled with water. The whole thing was soaking wet. If that wood was to light on fire it was going to take some serious fire and could never happen through some kind of trick.

Elijah wants to make it as obvious as possible that no trickery would be involved. Either the wood on the altar would be lit by fire from heaven,

or it would not be lit at all. If the wood was going to be lit on fire, it would clearly be a miracle from God.

So Elijah prays to the Lord. Notice how both he and the narrator of the story make connections to the orthodox worship of Yahweh. Elijah begins to pray, “at the time of the offering of the oblation.” Why would Elijah begin to pray at that particular time and why would the person relating the story in the book of 1 Kings make a point of including that little detail in his telling of the story? It is because they want to make a connection to the worship that was going on at the temple in Jerusalem. Elijah timed his prayer so that it would coincide with the evening sacrifice at Jerusalem. Elijah and thus also the God he represented wanted to see the whole people of Israel united in the worship of Yahweh. The worship of Baal intensified the separation between the two tribes and the ten tribes, and the God of the twelve tribes wanted to see his people united together again in the worship and service of the true God.

The same point is made by the first words of Elijah’s prayer. He addresses God as the “God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel” The God of Israel was the God of all Israel. And Elijah, by addressing God as the “God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel,” is reminding the people of their roots, history, identity and calling as the people God had called to be his people. I spoke about this last week and so I won’t repeat that now. I mention it because it is there in the text and to show how significant these details are that we can so easily overlook.

Elijah’s prayer is short, and each part is very significant. It contrasts with the long, loud and dramatic prayers of the prophets of Baal. One is reminded of Jesus’ words in Matthew 6:7-8, “And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”

The contrast between the prayers of the Baal prophets and Elijah is very significant especially when we think of them in the light of Jesus’ words that I just quoted. The prophets of Baal prayed for hours and hours. They prayed loudly and long and cut themselves with swords and lances. This all suggests a lack of confidence on their part. Elijah gives

the opposite impression. He is calm and confident. He knew that his God was the real God. He knew what Jesus would later teach that the true God knew what Elijah needed before he even asked. He knew that the God of Israel was aware of everything that went on in the lives of his people. He knew that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was always ready to hear the prayers of his people. And so Elijah did not need a lot of words. Certainly there was urgency in his prayer, but there was a quiet confidence as well.

This is an important point for us to consider. The effect of trusting in idols is anxiety even for us. Our idols are different but when we trust anything but God to take care of us and provide for us we are placing trust in things that cannot be counted on deliver and so there is always anxiety. But if we are trusting in the Lord we can be calm also in our prayers because we know that he is real, he is there, he knows us inside and out, and as Jesus puts it, "your Father knows what you need before you ask him." This is why we can have peace and confidence amidst the uncertainties of life. Our God actually exists. He knows what is going on in our lives. The hairs of our heads are numbered. He has given Jesus as our Saviour. He will also give us whatever else we need. Therefore we do not need empty phrases and many words when we pray.

Notice next that Elijah does not pray directly for fire from heaven. He prays for what he wanted the fire from heaven to accomplish. He prays, "Let it be known this day that you are God in Israel..." And in verse 37, "Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God...."

This is what the people needed more than anything else. They needed to know that Yahweh, the God of Israel was God. They needed to know that he was the true and living God. They needed to know that in a way that would transform their lives. The point is that if we truly know that the God of the Bible is the true God, it will change our lives.

Now there is knowledge and there is knowledge. Some things we can know without that knowledge making much of a difference in our lives. We can know the name of a certain kind of tree and life carries on much the same way that it always has. But really knowing God is very different because of who God is. Because God is our creator and

because he is so great and because we belong to him and are accountable to him, if we have any true knowledge of this God, he becomes the most important reality in our lives. Everything is seen and understood in the light of God. This is simply a matter of seeing the truth. It is simply a matter of seeing reality as it is. If God is who he says he is, the meaning of everything is how it relates to him. The most important thing about a tree is that it is his tree. The most important thing about a person is that that person is made by God for God. The most important thing about you is that you were made by God for God. Nothing exists independently of God.

The idea of knowing God is very important in the Bible and that knowledge begins with knowing that the God of the Bible is the only true and living God. The idea of knowing God is mentioned many times in the stories that describe the beginning of Israel as a nation – the stories that tell of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt and all that happened to bring her to the Promised Land.

Listen to what God told Moses way back in Exodus 6 when he told him of the task he was to perform as the leader of the nation of Israel. Exodus 6:6-7, God says to Moses, “Say therefore to the people of Israel, ‘I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians ... I will take you to be my people and I will be your God and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians....”

In the book of Deuteronomy, which described many aspects of the relationship between God and his people, God reminds the people of how he had delivered them from Egypt and then he says in Deuteronomy 4:35, “To you it was shown, that you might know that the LORD is God; there is no other besides him.” These are just a few of many verses that show the foundational importance of knowing that the God of the Bible is the true God and knowing what he has done.

This is the first thing that Elijah prayed for as he spoke to God on that day on Mount Carmel. He was asking God to send fire from heaven to light the wood of the sacrifice so that the people might come to know that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was the true and living God.

It is very significant that Jesus describes salvation in terms of knowing God. John 17 records a prayer that Jesus prayed to his Father shortly before his crucifixion and in verse 3 of that chapter he says, "And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." On the other hand, Paul, a number of times in his writings refers to the unsaved world as people who do not know God. For instance in 2 Thessalonians 1:8 Paul speaks of the return of Jesus Christ at the end of time "in flaming fire inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ."

What we see in Elijah's prayer is that being right with God involves the knowledge of God – knowing that the God of the Bible is the only true God and knowing something of what he is like. As this idea is developed in Scripture we find that true life involves not only knowing about God, but knowing God himself and Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

This is a fundamentally important truth about life from a biblical perspective. Life and wellbeing are associated with knowing God while death and emptiness are associated with not knowing God. Listen to this wonderful passage from the book of Jeremiah that sums up this point. Jeremiah 9:23–24, "²³Thus says the Lord: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, ²⁴but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord.""

What Elijah prayed for was the greatest need of the people before him. And it is our greatest need as well as the way to fullness of life. We were created for this. And this is the goal of salvation. Jesus died so that those who believe on him might receive eternal life and eternal life, says Jesus, is the knowledge of God and of Jesus himself. We can understand the significance of this if we think of how much knowing other people is associated with life and wellbeing. Well, more fundamental than this is knowing God.

What Elijah prayed for the people of Israel on that day on Mount Carmel expresses the greatest need of those who are living without a

relationship with God. You need to come to know God through faith in Jesus Christ and the transforming power of the gospel. And for those of us who do have some knowledge of God through the saving grace of God, the way to growth is growing in the knowledge of God. This is one of the key prayers that Paul prayed for the Colossians as recorded in Colossians 1 – that they might increase in the knowledge of God.

Now I have mentioned before that the Bible is progressive in its revelation of the truth. The truth of God and about God is revealed with more and more clarity as the story of the Bible progresses. And so it is with this truth of the great significance of the knowledge of God. And as with every other theme in Scripture Jesus Christ is the climax in one way or another. In connection with this idea of the knowledge of God, Jesus Christ is the fullest revelation of God. There are lots of ways that God reveals himself to us – in the Bible and in the creation, but the greatest and clearest revelation of God is Jesus Christ himself. Paul expresses this truth in a wonderful way in 2 Corinthians 4:6, where he writes, “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” Jesus Christ is the supreme revelation of the knowledge of God to us. In his face we see the glory of God.

And so while it is life-giving to dwell on the glory of God in the creation and to dwell on the glory of God in the Old Testament, the Bible itself directs us to dwell on Jesus for the clearest and most comprehensive knowledge of the glory of God.

But this was not the only thing that Elijah prayed for on that day on Mount Carmel. He also prayed that it might be known “that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word.” Of course, fire from heaven would accomplish that. If God send fire from heaven, it would be a powerful confirmation that Elijah was God’s servant and that this whole meeting with the people of Israel on Mount Carmel had been orchestrated by the word of the Lord. Elijah had only been doing what the word of God had told him to do.

It was very important for Elijah that the people understand that he was representing God in his ministry among them. The nature of what he was trying to do among them required that they be convinced that he

was not coming to them with his own ideas and by his own authority. He was claiming to speak for God. He was claiming to call them to repentance by the authority of God himself. In order for his ministry to be affective among them it was necessary that the people were convinced that God himself had sent him. And God sending fire from heaven to consume the sacrifice on the altar would accomplish that goal.

Then they would know that everything that Elijah had done from announcing the famine to organizing this confrontation on Mount Carmel had been done at the direction of God through his word.

This is a frequent subject in the Bible because God usually leads his people through human leaders and for that arrangement to work, it is necessary that the people are convinced that by following their leaders they are following God. The Bible has lots to say about men who claim to be speaking for God, but are not and so this whole matter of God authenticating those he calls to leadership over his people is an important subject.

Quite often God did that through miracles. One of the most important purposes of miracles in the Bible is to authenticate some leader as truly sent by God. That is why for instance, Moses was given the ability to throw his staff to the ground and it would become a snake and grab the snake by the tail, and it would become a staff again. This was also part of the reason for Jesus' miracles. On the day of Pentecost, Peter said of Jesus, "Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know..." (Acts 2:22). The letter to the Hebrews also speaks of the miracles that the apostles did in a similar fashion.

Hebrews 2:2-4, "For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will."

This is one of the great purposes of miracles in the Bible – to authenticate those whom God calls to speak for him and bring his word – exactly what Elijah was praying for in our text.

This principle is still important today, although God no longer uses miracles for this purpose. The reason is that the Bible is complete. Before the Bible was completed God used miracles to authenticate those who spoke his word to the people, but once the Bible was complete the record of those miracles would serve the same purpose as the original miracles had served. We have the record of the fire coming down from heaven in answer to Elijah's prayer and the miracles of Jesus and the miracles of the apostles. Even as we come to the end of the New Testament we no longer read of miracles. It seems that God decided that the miracles he had given in Bible times were sufficient for all time and that the Bible as we have it is self-authenticating. The Holy Spirit now grants certainty in the Bible through the power of the Bible itself. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:18 "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

But the principle of the importance of people knowing that a leader in the church is called by God remains. This no longer happens by means of miracles – but rather through a careful process by which a person's calling to office – whether minister, elder or deacon, is evaluated in the light of the Bible. A person may be given a sense of call, but whether it is truly a call from God is evaluated by the church, both leaders and regular members by considering their lives and giftedness in the light of the qualifications for leadership set out in the Bible.

This idea is conveyed for instance in the official document of call that a minister receives when he is ordained and installed. The document says that the existing elders and the members of the congregation are "confident that we have been led to you by the Holy Spirit as one whose ministry shall be profitable to our spiritual interest..." The same sentiment is behind the process for ordaining elders and deacons.

And the point of all this is the same point that Elijah expressed in his prayer that day on Mount Carmel. In order for his ministry to the people of Israel to be affective it was vital that they understand that Elijah was

not speaking in his own name, but that he had been sent to them by God. It is just as important today that the congregation has the same confidence that her leaders are placed over them by God himself.

It is important for you to understand that the careful process by which men are called to office is there to ensure as much as his humanly possible that the men who serve in these offices are called by God. That means that God has chosen these men to lead you – to bring you his word, and to watch over your souls and to lead you in the ministry of mercy. That gives the whole matter of leadership over the people of God a certain seriousness. We do not have our offices of our own initiative. We are called by God to lead you according to his word.

There is one last part of Elijah's prayer to consider. In the final word of his prayer Elijah prays that "this people may know ... that you have turned their hearts back." Elijah wants God to send fire from heaven so that the people might know that the God of Israel is the true God and so that they might repent of worshipping Baal. He also wants them to know when they have repented, that that repentance came from God. Elijah was the one who was calling them to repentance, but he wanted the people to understand that true repentance can only come from the Lord.

And so it is for us. We have been studying idolatry by studying the ministry of Elijah. The sermons on this part of Scripture have been calling us to discern idolatry in our lives and repent of it. We are to repent of the God-substitutes in our lives and give God his rightful place by loving him with all our hearts. If that has been convicting to us and if there has been any repentance, it has come from the Lord.

Repentance is a good thing because the wages of sin is death and the way of obedience is the way of life and blessing. But we are not able to repent in our own strength. We need the work of God in our hearts to give us the desire and the strength to turn from our sins. And what becomes clear in the New Testament is that this gift is rooted in Jesus and what he accomplished for us by his life, death and resurrection. In Acts 5:31 we read of Jesus, "God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins."

Repentance may sound negative, but it is positive in that it is a turning away from the way of death and turning to obedience to God which is the way of life. Israel in Elijah's time was walking the way of death. The parched fields of the famine were evidence of that as well as a symbol of that. To worship other gods leads to death. To live for the things of this earthly life apart from God is the way of death. Elijah's ministry to Israel, calling her to repentance was an expression of the grace of God. And the repentance, when it came, would be a gift of God.

Praise God, if he has given you the grace of repentance so that repenting from idolatry is an ongoing reality in your life. It is an expression of God's mercy and goodness towards you. And for us it is clear that this gift is rooted in the saving work of Jesus on our behalf. He died and rose again, that we might live, and repentance is a sign of life. If repentance is not a reality in your life – if you are not fighting against sin and turning from it to God, I urge you to come to Jesus and trusting in his enablement to turn from your sins and embrace the way of life which is the life of service to God. It is by far the best way to live in the here and now and it is the way that leads to the fullness of life in the presence of God in the hereafter.