



# The Message of Elijah

## (10) Elijah Repairs the Altar of the LORD

1 Kings 18:1-2, 17-24, 30-32a

Text: Verses 30-32a

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These stories in the Old Testament describe a world very different from our own. These stories that we are studying from the life of Elijah take place in the 9<sup>th</sup> century before Christ and so they take place about 2800-2900 years ago. The religions they describe are very different from what we are used to. And yet through these stories God speaks to us and calls us to faith in him and repentance of our sins. The reason that God can speak to us relevantly through these ancient stories is that God has not changed, human nature has not changed, the meaning of life has not changed and the fundamental principles concerning our need of salvation and the way of salvation have not changed either. And so while there is a lot that is different between the time of Elijah and our time, there is also much that is the same when it comes to the things that matter most about life and our relationship with God.

Also one of the things about the Bible that adds immeasurably to its richness is that it is ultimately the product of one mind – the mind of God. It is true that many human beings were involved in writing the Bible and the whole thing came into being over a very long period of time, but the Bible claims to be God’s word to man. The apostle Peter gives a classic description of the nature of the Bible when he says in his second epistle, “[M]en spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21). The Bible is a very human book. It is actually sophisticated literature in many places, including the narrative sections. But at the same time it is God’s communication to mankind,

and it shows throughout that it ultimately comes from a single mind, the mind of God.

And that is why we see consistency in the way it addresses us. It is always the word of one God and that God is consistent and so what God said to ancient Israel is just as true for us as it was for them. And one of the characteristics of the biblical story is that there is progression. God introduces a theme earlier in the Bible and that theme is developed as the Bible progresses. There are many themes for instance that anticipate Jesus Christ and the salvation that he accomplished. Furthermore, the people of Israel anticipate the people of God in the New Testament and beyond. That is how it is possible for the Bible to be an ancient book and very up-to-date at the same time.

We will see how this works in the few verses that we are going to look at this morning. We are in the middle of a story in which Elijah as the prophet of the true God has challenged the prophets of the false god, Baal, to a contest. They would each in turn prepare a bull as a sacrifice to their god/God. They would place wood upon an altar, kill the bull and place it on the altar, but they would not light the wood on fire as was normally done. Instead they would each pray to their god/God to ask him to send fire from heaven to light the sacrifice. The God/god who would send fire from heaven would demonstrate that he was the true God. We saw last time how Elijah allowed the prophets of Baal to go first. They prayed and prayed and prayed. Elijah gave them all kinds of time, but nothing happened. Baal could not answer them and send fire from heaven, because he did not exist in reality. He was a false god, the product of the imaginations of sinful men.

So finally it was Elijah's turn. Verse 30 says, "Then Elijah said to all the people, 'Come near to me.' And all the people came near to him. And he repaired the altar of the LORD that had been thrown down." This little detail is very significant. Elijah "repaired the altar of the LORD that had been thrown down."

Now there is some question about whether that altar should even have been there in the first place, because the Lord had commanded his people to make sacrifices to him at Jerusalem and not anywhere else. Deuteronomy 12 contains the Lord's instructions concerning this. There

Moses told the people to destroy all the places where the nations made sacrifices to their gods and they were to make their sacrifices to God at Jerusalem. Deuteronomy 12:4ff says, “You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way. But you shall seek the place that the LORD your God shall choose out of all your tribes to put his name and make his habitation there. There you shall go, and there you shall bring your burnt offerings and sacrifices....”

This raises the question of the lawfulness of having this altar on Mount Carmel at all. The answer to this question is that there were times in Israel’s history in the land of Canaan when it was not possible to worship the Lord at Jerusalem. Before Jerusalem had been taken by David, for instance, Samuel made sacrifices at other places. And after, the breakup of the kingdom into the southern kingdom of Judah and the northern kingdom of the ten tribes, it would have been very difficult for the faithful remnant to travel to Jerusalem and so it is thought that in those circumstances the Lord allowed sacrifices to be made in places outside of Jerusalem. Anyway in this instance it is clear that the Lord had mandated a sacrifice on this altar. All of this was happening according to the word of the Lord.

It is significant that the altar was broken down. What this shows us is that syncretism cannot work. The idea behind syncretism is that you can worship more than one god. But the broken-down-altar shows what happens when the people of God try to worship another god alongside of the Lord – the true God. The true God will be neglected in favor of the false god. Now it would not be acceptable even if the true God was not neglected because the true God requires that we worship him alone. But it is nevertheless significant that when Israel began to worship Baal, the worship of the true God was neglected.

Jesus makes this point explicitly in Matthew 6:24, “No man can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other.” This is the message of the broken-down-altar. Israel thought that she could worship Baal alongside the worship of Yahweh, but the broken-down altar showed that she ended up being devoted to Baal and came to despise Yahweh.

This belongs to the nature of things. And this principle applies to us as much as it did to ancient Israel.

You see, idols will take over our lives if we let them. Remember for us, we are talking about things like money and pleasure and comfort when we are talking about idols. Idols are things that take the place of God in our lives – often they are things that are good in themselves, but they become idols if they become God-substitutes. The broken-down altar teaches us that if we are not fighting against idolatry in our lives, the idols will take over – they will squeeze out the worship of God. If we have an excessive love for our reputation or a hobby or some version of success, those are idols and they insist on taking over. It is interesting that there is a sense that idols do not exist as gods, but there is another sense in which they do exist in our minds as gods and behind these gods there is demonic influence and idols are therefore powerful and enslaving gods that demand our hearts. That well-known saying about sin in general is also true of idols. The saying I am referring to is that if we are not killing sin, sin is killing us. That is true of idolatry. If we are not controlling the temptation to idolatry, we are being enslaved by them. You control them, or they control you.

And the broken-down-altar shows us what happens to the worship and service of God when something besides God becomes too important in our lives. God is sidelined. And this principle helps us to see the idols in our lives. What is it in our lives that crowds out the worship and service of God? What goals and passions in our lives contribute to the neglect of God and crowd out thoughts of God? If idea of an altar represents the worship and service of God, is our altar broken down? Hear again what Jesus says about this and consider the effects of God-substitutes in your lives. “No one can serve to masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other” (Matthew 6:24). What kind of shape is your altar in?

That leads us to another thought about the altar. What is the significance of an altar? An altar was a place of sacrifice. An altar was some kind of raised surface, in this case made of stone, and it was on that raised surface that sacrifices were made and offered to God. It is

clear that altars were used in pagan religions, but they were also mandated in the true religion of the Bible.

Now in the Bible there were different kinds of sacrifices. There were sacrifices of thanksgiving. There were fellowship offerings where the idea was table-fellowship with God. And there were sacrifices of atonement which were sacrifices for sin. All of these belonged to the worship of God in Old Testament Israel and all of them have corresponding acts of worship in the New Testament situation. This offering that Elijah was preparing was a burnt offering, according to verse 33 and that means that it was a sacrifice of atonement.

This makes sense because the story is all about Israel's sin in forsaking the Lord and worshipping Baal. Elijah is calling the people back to the Lord – he is calling them to repentance. And the altar speaks to the necessity of atonement for sin in order for God to be reconciled to his people. All of this is a key part of the message of the Bible and we must understand this in order to understand how we can be in a relationship with God.

God was angry with Israel for disobeying by worshipping Baal. And the way back to God involved turning away from Baal and returning to submission to God. But bare repentance was not enough. God required that atonement be made for Israel's sin. God's justice required that the sin be punished. God required that the sentence of death be paid. But instead of insisting that the sinner be executed, God had provided a way of atonement through the sacrificial system. An animal could be offered in the place of the sinner. God was willing to accept the death of the animal in the place of the death of the sinner.

And all of this pointed to Jesus Christ. We need to understand the significance of animal sacrifices for sin in order to understand the sacrifice of Jesus for sin. When John the Baptist saw Jesus he said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrifices of atonement. When we believe in Jesus, we receive forgiveness for our sins on the basis of the sacrifice of Jesus. The epistle to the Hebrews in the New Testament has a lot to say about how Jesus fulfills the Old Testament sacrifices for sin. It tells us that the sacrificial animals of the Old Testament period did not

actually atone for sin. God accepted them because they foreshadowed the sacrifice of Jesus. Hebrews 10:4 says “For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” But then verse 10 of the same chapter says of believers, “[W]e have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” What this means is that believers have been made holy in the sight of God through the offering of Jesus Christ. It means that our sins are forgiven and that we are accepted by God as if we had never sinned.

This shows us how this story from a very different world from ours speaks to us today with as much power and relevance as the people for whom it was first written. Because the Bible’s ultimate author is God, there is a consistent message which first anticipates Jesus and then shows how he fulfills and surpasses the Old Testament anticipations.

So in our minds we can take our place among the people of Israel watching Elijah repair the broken-down altar. We may not have embraced idols to the extent that the people of Israel had embraced Baal. But then again perhaps we have. Perhaps we have seen in our study of this section of Scripture that we live for our idols more than we live for God. In any case, what will be true of all of us is some degree of idolatry. There are things in our lives that are more important to us than God is. Not one of us is free from idolatry. It may be money and the things that money can buy. That covers a lot of territory. It may be our reputation, or our family, or a hobby, or just enjoying the good life in the prosperous West. The sin is not in the thing itself, much of the time at least, but in our excessive love for it compared to our love for God. So we can all place ourselves in the crowd that watched Elijah rebuild the altar of the LORD. To a greater or lesser extent we are all idolaters.

But the altar is the place of reconciliation with God. The altar is the place of forgiveness. It is the place of atonement. And this is God’s idea. The significance of the altar and what it represents is not that it is man’s attempt to find forgiveness for his sin. It is God’s provision for our sins. The whole of the biblical teaching about the altar and sacrifices for sin is an expression of God’s initiative in providing us with a way of forgiveness. This meeting between God and wayward Israel took place at God’s initiative. Elijah here is representing God before the people.

God through Elijah is rebuilding the altar. And it is in the light of God's initiative that we are to understand Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of the sacrifices by which reconciliation is made. As John writes in John 3:16, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." This is the truth that we see in an anticipatory way in our text.

And that is huge for us as we consider our own idolatry. Perhaps you feel something of the seriousness of your inordinate passion for something other than God. Perhaps you feel how offensive that is to God. Perhaps you feel the weight of wrong priorities in your life. Look at Elijah representing God rebuilding the altar – providing a place of atonement and consider how this story anticipates what Jesus Christ would do for sinners. Here is the place of forgiveness. Here is the place of reconciliation with God. Through trusting in Jesus, God accepts you as righteous. Here is the place of confessing your sins and being embraced by God as sinless for Jesus sake.

Finally we will consider the fact that Elijah rebuilt the altar using twelve stones. Verses 31-32a. "Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD came saying, 'Israel shall be your name,' and with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD." Clearly this is very significant. In order to grasp its significance we need to review two pieces of background.

The text refers to Jacob and the story in which he received the name Israel for himself and his posterity. It is told way back in Genesis 32 in the story in which Jacob wrestles with God. Jacob was one of the patriarchs of Israel. He was the grandson of Abraham who was the beginning of the line which would become Israel. Jacob is number three in the line of promise. That meant that Jacob was number three in the line of people through whom God was going to work out his salvation for the world. Jacob was not a nice guy for much of his life. His name means "deceiver" and he lived up to his name.

But something mysterious happened to him one night. Jacob was alone at night and a man wrestled with him all through the night. We learn later that this mysterious wrestler was God in the form of a man. At

some point Jacob clued into that fact and it was then that he prayed the famous prayer, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." That is when God gave Jacob a new name. Genesis 32:28, "Then he said, 'Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed.'" This is the origin of the name Israel for the Old Testament people of God. And the author of 1 Kings refers back to this incident in the story of Elijah rebuilding the altar.

That is the first bit of background. The second is that by the time this story happens, Israel had divided in two. There had been a split. I have referred to it a number of times. 10 of the twelve tribes had broken away from the Davidic king Rehoboam because of his onerous tax burden. The people that Elijah was calling back to the Lord belonged to the ten tribes which came to be known as the northern kingdom or Israel while the remaining two tribes were known as the southern kingdom or Judah. This story of Elijah rebuilding the altar was taking place in the northern kingdom, the break-away kingdom of the 10 tribes. And so it is very significant that Elijah built the altar of the Lord of twelve stones representing all twelve of the tribes of Israel and referred back to the patriarch Jacob through whom Israel had received her name.

So Elijah was reminding the break-away kingdom of her history and thus of her identity of the twelve tribes according to the number of the twelve sons of Jacob and as her identity as Israel the posterity of Jacob who was given the name Israel. The name Israel pointed to the fact that God had turned Jacob into Israel. God had changed Jacob from a deceiver to a man who had wrestled with God and received a new name and a new identity.

Elijah was reminding the people before him of their roots in the transformation of Jacob from a headstrong and self-reliant person to one who had been transformed by God and given a name that would forever remind the people of their dependence on the choice and grace of God. And the point of the twelve stone reminded this people that the chosen people of God consisted of 12 tribes and not just ten. It was a call to them to return to their roots and their identity as the people of the promise, the offspring of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Now there are a number of take-aways from this. One is the rootedness of our relationship with God in the history of God's dealings with his people. When we go astray and worship other gods, we are embarking on a path that is separate from the history of God's dealings with his people through history. God's plan for our salvation is a plan that goes all the way back to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is a history of turning Jacob's into Israel's. And its purpose is that we might serve the Lord and be a blessing to the nations. We are a people with a long history rooted in God's saving purposes and it is our calling to extend that history another generation.

The narrator of this story is pointing us to that fact by making the connection between the 12 stones and the origin of the name Israel. Salvation means being part of that history. It means being part of that people. We can be born into it through covenant succession, or we can be incorporated into it by being saved out of the world, but we are called to be faithful to God in our generation and so be part of the history that leads from Abraham to the culmination of God's saving purposes.

And the reference to the twelve tribes of Israel is a reminder that God's work of salvation is not focused on isolated individuals, but on a people and clearly God is concerned about that people as a whole. God here through Elijah reminds the people that they consist of twelve tribes and not just ten. It is significant that when Jesus came to earth he gathered around himself 12 disciples through which the New Testament people of God would be constituted as the new Israel.

Salvation involves living together as the people of God. It involves the unity of the people of God. The concern that Elijah expressed by building the altar from 12 stones is the same concern that Jesus expressed when he prayed that his people would be one in John 17. And the way to be one in biblical terms is to maintain the continuity with the biblical story of salvation. It is by turning away from idols and returning to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is by living in continuity with the past in which we find our identity as people of God.

We are living in a time in which the God of the Bible is rejected, and the gods of our own time are worshiped and served. That has always been a

temptation as this story shows us, but one of the prominent themes of our time is valuing what is new and despising what is old. But the Bible calls us to live out of the biblical story and to value all that God teaches us in this ancient book. It does not call us to reject everything that is new – but it does call us to live in the light of things that do not change – regarding God and morality and salvation and the good life. The gods of this world are always inviting and attractive as Baal was in the time of Elijah. But part of Elijah’s message through the altar was to remind the people of their roots in the history of God’s dealings with them. And that same message is addressed to us.

So let us not forget the history that defines us as God’s people. It is the history of salvation. Leads to Christ and flows from Christ and its goal is life with God in the new creation. It involves rejecting the gods of this world and remaining faithful to the God of Scripture and the Bible insists in all kinds of ways that that is the way of life.