



The Message of Elijah

(12) Fire from Heaven

1 Kings 18:1-2, 22-24, 30-40

Text: Verses 38-40

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We've been working our way through the passages in the biblical book of 1 Kings that deal with the ministry of Elijah. Elijah was a prophet of God who ministered to the tribes of Israel which had broken away from the rule of the Davidic dynasty and had set up their own kingdom. During the time that Elijah was active, Ahab was the king over that kingdom, and he was an evil king leading the people into the worship of the pagan god, named Baal. Elijah's ministry consisted largely of calling the people to turn away from worshipping Baal and return to worship the God of their ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

In order to punish his people for abandoning him and in order to motivate them to return to serving him, the true God of Israel had sent a drought that lasted longer than three years. Finally God sent Elijah to confront the worshippers of Baal by organizing a contest in which the followers of each god/God would build an altar, put wood and a sacrifice upon it, and pray to their god/God to send fire from heaven. The God who would send fire from heaven would demonstrate that he was the true God. Failure to do so would demonstrate nonexistence. So far in the story Baal had demonstrated nonexistence, because when his prophets called upon him to send fire from heaven, there was no answer. Then it was Elijah's turn. He rebuilt the altar of the Lord, prepared the wood and the sacrifice upon it, had it doused with water and then he prayed to the true God of the Bible to make himself known. And this is where we pick up the story this morning.

Verse 38 says, "Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the

water that was in the trench.” A rather convincing demonstration of the reality and the power of God. Also a rather convincing demonstration that this God is involved in the lives of his people and hears their prayers. And it had the desired effect. Verse 39 says, “And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, ‘The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God.’”

Now last week we considered Elijah’s request in his prayer that God would, by sending fire from heaven, convince the people that he was truly God’s servant who was bringing God’s word and not just his own words. In connection with that we considered the importance that those who are sent by God to bring his word to his people and to the world are authenticated as such. We saw that in Bible times this was often communicated through miracles. We also saw that after the Bible was completed, this happens in other ways, such as by existing church leadership carefully evaluating a person’s sense of calling in the light of the biblical teaching about gifts and qualifications. In that part of the sermon I said that God no longer does this by means of miracles since the Bible has been completed. That statement was too absolute. For the purpose of the point that I was making, it was close enough because since the completion of the Bible God usually does not authenticate his servants through miracles, but through church leaders evaluating their calling in the light of his word. But I was called out for saying that God never did or does miracles after the completion of the Bible and rightly so.

So I will take the time now to give a more nuanced treatment of the subject of miracles in the Bible and today. The fact is that miracles are a rare occurrence, both in Bible times and today. Most of God’s people for most of history have lived without ever witnessing a miracle. That includes Bible times. The miracles of the Bible are concentrated in a few short periods of time - during the time of Moses, during the time of Elijah and Elisha, during the time of Jesus and during the early time of the apostles. The vast majority of miracles happened during these few periods which means that the vast majority of the people of God during biblical times never saw a miracle. And after the time when the Bible was complete, miracles were even more rare. Many of the accounts of miracles during the history of the church are clearly false – strange

things associated with Roman Catholic superstitions for instance. Many of the accounts of miracles today are clearly false – the type of chicanery associated with faith-healers and the like. But there are some credible accounts of miracles in situations where the gospel is being introduced in new environment. There are sometimes things that happen in answer to prayer that may be miracles. So it is not correct to say that God never does miracles anymore, but the fact of the matter is they are few and far between both in the history recorded in the Bible and in the history after the Bible.

I like how John Frame expresses his opinion in his discussion of miracles in his book, *The Doctrine of God*. “One might, therefore, describe my position as semi-cessationist. I believe that miracle in a broad sense (that is, providence) continues, and I am not skeptical of reports from reliable witnesses of more spectacular miracles. But I do not think that spectacular miracles are a normal part of the Christian life.” (p.263-264)

So we have a miracle in the Bible like God sending fire out of heaven in answer to Elijah’s prayer. The purpose of this miracle is clearly to convince the people before Elijah that Yahweh was the true God and not Baal. In this situation, the Lord determined that a miracle was the method he wanted to use to convince the people of his existence and to authenticate Elijah as his prophet. Most other people do not get to see a miracle. The majority of the time God expects people to believe his message on the basis of his Word, which we have in our Bibles.

So then concerning miracles, what we have mostly is the record of miracles, either in the Bible or we may have heard or read from a trustworthy source the account of a miracle. And especially when it comes to the Bible, God expects us to believe that the miracles happened on the basis of the accounts that we find in the Bible. God’s overall method for using miracles to authenticate his word is to have the miracle witnessed by a relatively small number of people who in turn tell others. The miracles recorded in the Bible were witnessed by some people, written down by the biblical authors inspired by the Spirit and they are to serve for us the same function that they served for those who actually witnessed them. The fact of the matter is that miracles only convince those who are willing to believe what God is saying through them.

In the time of Jesus, many people saw his miracles but did not believe in him. So miracles strengthen the faith of those to whom God gives faith, but they do not convince everyone. They clearly serve a purpose in God's way of revealing himself to the world, but that purpose is fulfilled for the most part by means of the record we have of them in the Bible.

Jesus made this point powerfully in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. In that parable, both the rich man and Lazarus died; the rich man ended up in hell and Lazarus ended up at Abraham's side. The rich man asked if Lazarus could be raised from the death to warn his five brothers – to “warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.” (Luke 16:28). And these are the words that Jesus puts in Abraham's mouth as the conclusion of the parable. “If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.” In other words, if they are not convinced by the word of God, they will not be convinced by a miracle either.

So miracles have served their purpose in the Bible and in some situations beyond the Bible. But the vast majority of believers through time, have believed in God on the basis of the testimony of God's word which includes accounts of miracles. The miracles still serve a purpose even if we have not witnessed them directly ourselves. They teach us something of the power of God. They teach us that God is not limited to his usual way of directing what we call nature.

So, this story calls us to believe in the reality and power of the true God of the Bible and to be convinced of the futility of idols. The miracle of God sending fire from heaven is part of that. We did not see the miracle ourselves, but we have a record of it from the most trustworthy source, the Bible. And it is that record that God has given to us in order to both produce faith and to nurture the faith of believers. The God of the Bible is real and one of the ways that he has confirmed that he is real is through the miracles that he has done which are recorded in the Bible.

Now the greatest miracle of them all is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. But remember what Jesus said to Thomas after Thomas had expressed his faith in Jesus' resurrection after Jesus had invited him to see and touch the wounds in his hands and his side. John 20:29, “... Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who

have not seen and yet have believed.” Jesus is saying here that we are blessed when we believe in the resurrection of Jesus on the basis of the testimony of eyewitnesses without having actually seen the risen Christ ourselves.

The next thing that we will consider from our text is the response of the people who witnessed God sending fire from heaven in answer to the prayer of Elijah. 1 Kings 18:39 says, “And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, ‘The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God.’” So the miracle had the desired effect. The people acknowledged that the God who had sent fire from heaven is the real God.”

The question is raised whether this response of the people was the fruit of a genuine change of heart. It certainly did not lead to a general return to the Lord of the whole people of the 10 tribes. In the story that follows, both in the short term and in the longer term, there is no widespread and genuine repentance on the part of the people. But it is significant that the text here does not dwell on that question. It puts the reaction of the people in a positive light without analyzing the depth of their change. This moment is a victory for the LORD and for Elijah. God had demonstrated his reality and power as well as his attentiveness to the prayer of his servant and the people responded by confessing that “the LORD, he is God; the LORD he is God.” The text invites us to celebrate that confession rather than to question its sincerity.

What we have here is an expression of God’s grace to his people. The fire that came from heaven fell upon the altar and consumed the burnt offering, the wood and the altar itself. And it did not consume the people.

That is an important point of this picture. We see in our minds, the fire coming down from heaven, consuming the altar with its sacrifice and we see the people unharmed, confessing that the God who had sent the fire was the real and true God. This is a picture of the grace of God. The fire of God’s wrath falls upon the altar and not on the people and the people confess that the God who did that is the true God.

This is one of the fundamental truths of the Bible. The people of God are spared the wrath of God by means of a substitute dying in their

place. The wrath of God is poured out upon a sacrifice instead of being poured out upon the people. The people deserve to die. The people deserve to experience what the sacrifice experienced. God would have been wholly just had he poured the fire of his wrath upon the people. But he does not do that. The fire consumes the sacrifice and everything close to it and the people are unharmed and reconciled to God.

This is a key to the biblical way of salvation. We are all sinners. We all deserve the wrath of God. But through faith in Christ, if we are believers, Jesus is our substitute. The bull on the altar is an anticipation of Jesus Christ. It is a foreshadowing of Jesus Christ and his death on the cross. Jesus on the cross is prefigured here by the bull on the altar. On the cross, the fire of God's wrath descended on Jesus instead of we who believe. Just as the bull here died and was consumed in the fire of God's wrath instead of the people, so Jesus died on the cross and absorbed the fire of God's wrath in the place of those who believe on Jesus.

Now this is an odd and even a grotesque idea to the modern mind. The idea of Jesus dying on the cross as a sacrifice for the sins of his people is very familiar to us, but it is one strange idea to our modern way of thinking. But part of the response expected from us to the message of salvation in the Bible is that we humble ourselves to accept this very strange idea as the basis for our acceptance by God. It has always been a difficult idea to accept. Remember what Paul says 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." In the next verses he writes, "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe." The message of the cross is folly to the world. It is strange. It is very odd. It is even grotesque.

And yet it is the most precious thing for we who believe. It belongs to God's design that his way of salvation requires us to humble ourselves and accept as precious something that our natural inclination is to avoid as ridiculous and gross. We see an anticipation of Jesus' sacrifice for us in our text where the sacrifice is consumed by the fire from heaven while the people are spared what they deserve and instead are

reconciled to God. We see here a picture of God's way of salvation for sinners. And if we have, by God's grace seen the beauty in the grotesque idea of Jesus dying in our place, we will echo Paul words in Galatians 6:14, "But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Indeed the whole story is a powerful demonstration of the love and grace of God. For in it the Lord is pursuing his sinful and rebellious people. He was pursuing them by means of the famine. He was pursuing them by means of Elijah meeting them, calling them to repentance and organizing this contest. And he was pursuing them by means of sending fire from heaven to demonstrate his reality and power over against the nonexistence of Baal. And what we see here is the message of the whole Bible in miniature which is all about God providing a way of salvation instead of just allowing us to go our own way which is the way of death and destruction.

Finally we consider the part of the story in which Elijah tells the people to kill the prophets of Baal and they do so. Verse 40, "And Elijah said to them, 'Seize the prophets of Baal; let not one of them escape.' And they seized them. And Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon and slaughtered them there." How are we to think of this?

Well we could recoil in horror and denounce Elijah for his failure to be inclusive and his barbarity as many people do and have done. But that is to place ourselves above the Bible and to interpret it without attempting to understand it – which many people do and have done.

First of all we must understand that Elijah here and the people following him were simply obeying the law of God which commanded that prophets who lead the people of God in idol worship must be put to death. Deuteronomy 13:1-5 says that "If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you ... and if he says, 'Let us go after other gods' ... that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has taught rebellion against the LORD your God..."

This was the Lord's way during the period of the nation of Israel in the Old Testament. There is a lot of killing that goes on in the Old Testament and quite a bit of it happened in obedience to God's commands. This

was one of the ways that God meted out his justice in the Old Testament times and those who died in that way were getting what they deserved from the Lord through the hands of his people. This underscores the serious nature of sin. The result of the influence of these prophets of Baal had been devastating to the people of Israel. They had led the people away from the Lord to worship the false God Baal and that, in the biblical way of looking at things, was as serious as murder – indeed it was a form of murder because it was the way of spiritual death. To follow or not to follow God is a matter of life and death in the Bible. And God took the sin of leading his people to follow other gods very seriously. One of the reasons that we might be revolted by the thought of Elijah having all these prophets killed is that we fail to appreciate the great evil that they had done and would continue to do if they were allowed to live.

Furthermore this penalty of executing the false prophets was an expression of God's mercy for his people both in that generation but also for all the generations to come because Israel was the bearer of the line of promise that led to Jesus Christ. God's passion to keep his people from being absorbed into the pagan nations was part of his passion for saving his people through the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. One of the reasons for God's punishment of these prophets was to preserve Israel as his people so that through them the Christ might be born and through him the world saved.

Now we no longer kill false prophets. The followers of God are no longer required to kill those who lead people astray. Since the coming of Christ, God's kingdom is no longer identified with a particular state and there is no longer a mechanism for capital punishment for religious crimes. The state, according to the New Testament has the power of the sword for maintaining law and order, but the sword is no longer an instrument that God uses to punish false teachers and idolaters.

After the coming of Jesus Christ there is no longer a nation that is the covenant people of God. The fulfillment of Israel in the New Testament situation is the church. The church of Jesus Christ is the new Israel, but it is not organized as a nation. It is not a state. No state after Christ is identified with the people of God.

This is why it would not be proper today for a state to execute false teachers and idol worshippers. The Old Testament law requiring capital punishment for leading people into idolatry should not be followed by any modern state. That penalty in Old Testament Israel had to do with the fact that Israel was God's holy people. God's holiness required that such grievous sinners be purged from the land. That rationale is completely absent from any modern state. Modern states should execute first degree murderers because of Genesis 9:6 and Romans 13, but capital punishment for a sin such as being a false prophet is not required or acceptable.

But within the church it is a different story. The church of course, has no calling or authority to execute anyone. But it is called to purge unrepentant sinners from membership in the people of God. The principle behind capital punishment in Old Testament is fulfilled by excommunication in the New Testament church. One of the purposes of excommunication in the New Testament church is to purge unrepentant sinners from the fellowship of God's people. And the principle is the same the principle behind the death penalty in the Old Testament. A holy God cannot dwell with a people in whom unrepentant sin is tolerated.

Paul teaches this idea in 1 Corinthians 5. In that situation sexual immorality was being tolerated among the people of God. There was a man living in sexual sin and nothing was being done about it. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 5:6-7, "Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened." Then he writes in verse 13 "Purge the evil person from among you."

Here is how Tremper Longman expresses this idea: "As has been traditionally recognized, the proper analogue to the nation of Israel is the Christian church. God chooses to make his special presence known in the assembly of the saints. He will tolerate no blasphemy, heresy, or idolatry in the midst of his priestly people. God has given spiritual weapons to his spiritual people to fight a spiritual enemy. The church does not seek the death of blasphemers who are in the church but their excommunication."

These passages in the Old Testament that impose the death penalty are very relevant to us today because they teach us the holiness of God and the seriousness of sin. And while the church is not to literally execute people who refuse to repent of their sins, it is to declare through its preaching and through the process of discipline that to live apart from God is death. The penalty of sin is the death penalty. God is a holy God and he has decreed that the penalty for sin is death. "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

Thankfully there is hope for sinners who humble themselves before God and repent of their sins and seek forgiveness. Jesus Christ received the death penalty. He did that in the place of those who trust in him. He died the death that we deserved to die so that we might go free. God is holy and that must always be taken seriously. To live apart from God is death. Our God is a consuming fire. But he is also merciful and in Jesus Christ he has suffered the death penalty himself that we might live in his favor as his beloved people.

The wonder of salvation is seen in the light of what we are saved from. The death penalty in the Old Testament laws give us insight into that wonder.