



The Message of Elijah

(13) Ahab, Elijah and Prayer

1 Kings 18:1-2, 41-46

Text: Verses 41-46

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Last week we considered the story in which God sent fire from heaven in response to Elijah's prayer and the people of Israel confessed the God of Israel to be the true God. This part of a larger story in which Elijah the prophet of God was confronting the people of Israel because of her worship of the pagan god Baal and was calling her to repentance. Following the Lord's directions, Elijah had organized a contest between the prophets of Baal and himself which would demonstrate who was the true God and who was the false god. Each side would prepare an altar with a sacrifice and ask their god/God to send fire from heaven. The prophets of Baal prayed and carried on for the better part of a day and nothing happened. Elijah calmly asked the Lord to demonstrate his reality and power and he send fire from heaven that consumed the sacrifice and left a pile of smoldering rubble.

God had withheld the rain for more than three years as a judgment against Israel's idolatry. Now that the people had once again confessed the true God as God, the rain would soon return. The part of the story that we will consider this morning tells how God sent the rain in response to the prayer of Elijah.

There are two main subjects in the verses that we will look at this morning. The text is interested in the relationship between Ahab and Elijah and it is interested in the relationship between Elijah's prayer and God sending the rain.

First we see Elijah ordering Ahab around and Ahab complying. Verses 41-42b. "And Elijah said to Ahab, "Go up, eat and drink, for there is a sound of the rushing of rain." So Ahab went up to eat and drink." Now

Ahab was a king. He was a powerful man. But here he is clearly in the presence of a greater authority. Elijah is issuing the commands and Ahab is following them. The story is reminding us who is ultimately in charge. And it is not Elijah himself, but the God whom Elijah represented. Elijah was the prophet of God. He spoke for God. And Elijah is in control of this situation.

This is a reflection on the greatness of God over against human authority figures. As the king of Israel Ahab had considerable power. But he is a very little man in the presence of God's servant. And this is one of the main messages of the Bible – the greatness of God and the littleness of even the most powerful of men compared to God. Powerful men can be full of themselves. They may think that they are great and powerful – and they can be powerful compared to other men. But before God they are nothing. Think of what Jesus said to Pilate in the story of Jesus' trial. Pilate had said to Jesus in John 19:10, "Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?" This is what Jesus said in reply: "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above."

And listen to how Psalm 148 speaks to the kings of the earth. "Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth! ... Let them praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted; his majesty is above earth and heaven." This is behind the way that the relationship between Elijah and Ahab is described in our text. Ahab is a very little man before the greatness of God. And that is true of every human leader who is alive today. Isaiah 40 describes God as the one "who brings princes to nothing and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness."

So Elijah tells Ahab to grab a bite to eat because the rain is coming. A little later on Elijah tells Ahab, "Prepare your chariot and go down, lest the rain stop you." And in between these two commands, Elijah goes higher up the mountain to pray. The words of his prayer are not mentioned this time, but he assumes the posture of prayer. "And he bowed himself down on the earth and put his face between his knees."

The contrast between Elijah and Ahab is striking. Ahab is eating and drinking. Elijah is praying. It is true that Elijah had told Ahab to eat and

drink. But it is still striking that Elijah is praying and Ahab is not. There is no sign of repentance on the part of Ahab. He was responsible for promoting the worship of Baal in the land. He had just been given a powerful demonstration of the reality of God and the impotence of Baal, but there is no sign of repentance. There is no indication of any interest in reconciliation with God. All he can do is take care of his physical needs. There is no interaction with God.

This contrast is also an important theme in the Bible. The human race is divided up between those who have a relationship with God and those who do not. The people who do not know God may worship false gods, but their great concern in life is with the here and now – with life on a horizontal plane - with eating and drinking. And so there is no prayer. They live as if God does not exist.

The Bible presents a picture of God who is real and who has relationships with people who believe on him. The Bible calls us to live in the light of the reality of a God who wills to be acknowledged and prayed to. Elijah is concerned with a whole dimension of reality of which Ahab is a stranger. That is why he is praying, and Ahab is eating and drinking. God is real to Elijah. If there is going to be rain, it is going to come through God's answer to prayer. And so Elijah prays. The life to which the Bible calls us is a life lived in contact with the living God and so a life in which prayer is a significant activity.

Now this particular instance of prayer is very helpful in the light of one of the greatest problems that we face with prayer and that is the problem of the relationship between prayer and the plan of God. The Bible teaches us that God has a plan for every single thing that happens in the history of the world. Ephesians 1:11 speaks of "the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will." On the basis of biblical teaching we confess in the WSC 7 that "The decrees of God are His eternal plan based on the purpose of his will by which, for his own glory, He has foreordained everything that happens." And yet we are told to pray. We are told that prayer matters, and that God hears and answers our prayers.

But it is hard to be urgent in prayer if we know that God has foreordained everything that happens. Elijah's example here is very

helpful and encouraging in the light of this dilemma. Elijah knew that God was going to send rain. God had told him. Back in 1 Kings 18:1 we read that God said to Elijah, “Go, show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain upon the earth.” So God had told Elijah that he was going to send rain. And yet, Elijah does not just stand there and wait for the rain to come. He prays. And from the look of it, he prays with some urgency.

This is confirmed by a passage in the book of James in the New Testament, which refers to Elijah’s prayer in our text. James 5:17-18 says, “Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and 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 the heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.” On the basis of Elijah’s example, James tells us, “The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.”

So Elijah knew that God was going to send rain, but that knowledge did not keep him from fervent prayer and the Bible itself tells us that there was a relationship between Elijah’s prayer and the coming of the rain. This is a very important point for us in connection with our thinking about prayer. The problem that we tend to have concerning the relationship between God foreordaining everything that happens, and our prayers is not treated as a problem in the Bible. In our text, it is clear both that God had already decided to send the rain and that God sent the rain in response to Elijah’s prayer and there is no hint that there is a problem. And that should not be a problem for us either.

Our prayers matter. Our prayers make a difference. God does things in answer to prayer that he would not otherwise do. As James puts it, “The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.” We are to pray knowing that God hears and answers prayer. That does not mean that God will always give us exactly what we ask for. If that were the case, we would be in control and that would be a disaster. And yet, God tells us to pray and he assures us that our prayers matter and that God integrates our prayers into his way of doing things on the earth.

One of the ways of understanding the relationship between God foreordaining everything that happens, and our prayers is to see that God foreordains that he will do something in answer to prayer. Concerning the story before us, God did not only foreordain that he was

going to send the rain, but he also foreordained that Elijah would pray and that he would send the rain in answer to Elijah's prayer. And so Elijah's prayer here was necessary and meaningful. The rain would not have come if Elijah had shared a meal with Ahab instead of praying. God had ordained to send rain, not no matter what, but as an answer to Elijah's prayer and so Elijah had to pray if the rain was going to come.

So this story is a great encouragement for us to pray. The fact that God has foreordained all things does not mean that those things will happen whether or not we pray. Some things will happen whether or not we pray, but God has also foreordained many things to happen through prayer. And therefore our prayers really matter – they really make a difference.

One area in which this is particularly important is in the fulfillment of God's purposes concerning his kingdom. We know from the Bible that the final victory of the kingdom of God is foreordained. In 1 Corinthians 15:24, Paul writes of a time when Jesus "delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power." And yet Jesus, in the Lord's Prayer, teaches us to pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). Our prayers are an important factor in the coming of the kingdom of God. The success of the preaching of the gospel and the witness of the church is related to the prayers of the people of God. Where God foreordains conversions and church growth, he also foreordains the prayers of God's people. And so it is vital that we pray, and we can be assured that our prayers matter. The fact that God has foreordained all things takes nothing away from the significance and the urgency of prayer.

And that includes persistent prayer. In our text we know that God had foreordained rain and that Elijah was praying fervently for rain. He also kept at it when the rain did not come the moment he began praying. After he had been praying for a while, Elijah sent his servant to go to a certain vantage point and look out towards the sea. And the first six times there was no change in the sky. It was only the seventh time that finally there was "a little cloud like a man's hand ... rising from the sea."

And then we are told in verse 45, “And in a little while the heavens grew black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain.”

The fact that God knows what he is going to do before we pray and the fact that he has ordained to accomplish certain things through prayer, does not mean that he will answer the moment we begin to pray. Elijah had to keep at it for quite a while before the answer came. It was not only necessary that Elijah pray to the Lord to send the rain, he had to continue in prayer for quite a while before God answered his prayer.

The necessity of persistent prayer was part of Jesus’ teaching about prayer. Jesus told a parable of a persistent widow which is recorded in Luke 18. He tells the story of a widow who appeared before a judge seeking justice for some wrong done to her and when she did not get what she asked for she kept on returning until the judge finally answered her because he was tired of her persistent requests. This is Jesus’ encouragement for persistent prayer. God is not like the unjust judge. And yet he does sometimes require that his people persist in prayer a long time before he answers them. No doubt he has his reasons. God has good reasons for all of the difficulties and challenges he sends into our lives. He has good reasons for sometimes requiring us to pray for a long time before he answers. The example of Elijah in our text and Jesus’ instruction in the parable of the persistent widow are a great encouragement for us “always to pray and not lose heart” (Luke 18:1).

The Bible itself in the passage from James that I quoted earlier holds up Elijah as an example of the power of prayer and thus as a wonderful encouragement for us in our prayers.

Our text and chapter 18 of 1 Kings ends with an account of Ahab and Elijah leaving Mount Carmel and returning Jezreel. Jezreel was the location of Ahab’s palace. The text describes a rather strange behaviour on the part of Elijah. “And Ahab rode and went to Jezreel. And the hand of the LORD was on Elijah, and he gathered up his garment and ran before Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel.” It seems that God gave Elijah supernatural speed and endurance so that he was able to run some 18 miles keeping ahead of Ahab who riding in a chariot pulled by horses. Clearly there is a reason that this detail is included in the story.

There is not a lot of certainty as to what the reason is. The best guess is that it has to do with the relationship between Elijah and King Ahab in their official capacities as prophet and king. There is something symbolic about Elijah running before King Ahab and his chariot. It was a practice of ancient kings to have forerunners to go before them when they travelled to announce that the king was on the way. It is that practice that is behind the role of John the Baptist as the forerunner of Jesus. The few commentators that bother to comment on this verse think that Elijah prompted by the hand of the Lord was fulfilling the task of forerunner for King Ahab. In the light of the prior relationship between Elijah and Ahab, it is likely that the purpose of this was to announce to the people that the relationship between God and the people had been restored and it also expressed the hope that the prophet and the king would now work together for the wellbeing of the people of Israel.

But until now, Elijah had confronted Ahab with his sin and Ahab had been resisting Elijah's message. But the happenings on Mount Carmel had changed the situation at least for the moment. The people had confessed that the God of Israel was the true God. They had obeyed Elijah in executing the prophets of Baal. Ahab had at least not intervened to save the prophets of Baal. And at some level he was submitting to the word of the Lord through the prophet. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that that situation was not going to last, but for the moment there had been a breakthrough and there was some hope that Elijah and Ahab would work together for the wellbeing of the people. The return of the rain demonstrated how God would bless the people if the king would follow the word of the Lord through the prophet. Elijah running before the chariot of Ahab by the power of God suggests hope for harmony between the king and the prophet.

Sadly this state of affairs was not to last. Chapter 19 tells of what happened when Ahab told Jezebel his wife about the execution of the prophets of Baal. Jezebel threatens to take Elijah's life and Elijah flees the scene. But for a short while there had been hope that things had really changed in Israel and that the king and the prophet would lead the people according to the word of God.

Now all of this is part of the larger story of the decline of Israel until she was taken into exile. There are these moments of hope along the way, but they do not last, and the decline continues. And the point of the whole story of decline is that God was going to have to do something greater and more radical than he had done so far, if his plan for the salvation of the world was going to be realized. God's purpose for Israel was that through her the rest of the world would be blessed. For that purpose to be realized, Israel had to attract the nations by living in obedience to God and demonstrating the blessedness of living in submission to the authority of God. What this story shows is that even God sending fire from heaven to prove that he was the true and living God was not enough to bring any permanent change of the situation.

Elijah must have been hopeful as he ran before King Ahab's chariot that he and Ahab would work together to lead the people in the way of the Lord. And yet that was not to be. By the next day Elijah would be running again, but this time he would be running for his life. And it is in the context of the failure of the prophets to truly and permanently turn the people away from their sins that God began to make promises of a leader who would come who would be greater than any leader had been.

For all Elijah's greatness and faithfulness, he did not succeed in turning the people back to God. But his running before Ahab chariot as his forerunner, reminds us of the person in the Bible who is more familiar to us as a forerunner and that is John the Baptist who was the forerunner of King Jesus. He did not run before Jesus chariot as Elijah ran before Ahab's chariot, but he is presented to us in Scripture as the forerunner of Jesus.

The gospel of Mark presents John the Baptist in the light of a prophecy in Isaiah concerning a messenger who would prepare the way for the Lord. Mark 1:2-3 "As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

The contrast between Elijah running before Ahab and John the Baptist fulfilling the same function for Jesus helps us to understand the purpose

of the story that we are considering in the light of Jesus. The story that we are considering about Ahab and Elijah is a story that illustrates the power of sin and its devastating effects. It also illustrates the necessity of godly leadership over God's people and the destructive influence of ungodly leadership. And this short single verse description of Elijah running before Ahab illustrates a hope for change that will soon be disappointed. What this story illustrates is the need for God to act in a new way if there is ever going to be lasting change. The story as a whole illustrates that sin leads to famine and death and the fact that it will take more than even something as spectacular as fire from heaven to make a lasting difference.

And Jesus Christ is the answer to the dashed hopes that are a recurring reality in the history recorded in the Old Testament. Israel could have had it so good. All they had to do was live faithfully with God and they would have experienced heaven on earth. And God sending prophets like Elijah to them to call them back and to remind them spectacularly of his presence and power was not enough. Something more was necessary than everything that God has done to encourage his people to obedience and that something more was a someone – namely Jesus Christ.

Israel needed a king who would be much different than Ahab. She needed a king who would be able to lead her in the ways of the Lord. And it is that king that John the Baptist announced. This is what John the Baptist proclaimed, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Jesus turned out to be greater than even John the Baptist understood. And his accomplishment was far greater than anyone understood until after Jesus had completed his work on earth. King Jesus turned out to be God himself in the flesh come to deal with the power of sin once and for all. This he did by his perfect life and his death on the cross. His resurrection signaled that he had defeated sin and death and his ascension was his route to his place at the right hand of God from which he sent the Holy Spirit to actually change the hearts of his people so that they would finally be enabled to obey.

That is the hope that the biblical story provides as the answer to the disappointment of the history of Israel in the Old Testament. The part of the story that we have been looking at illustrates the power of sin and the famine in the story illustrates that sin leads to barrenness and death. The hope of the biblical story is in the defeat of the power of sin which Jesus accomplished. And when that hope is fully realized in the new heavens and the new earth, the citizens of Jesus' kingdom will experience the fullness of life which is life in the presence of God and in his favor. As followers of Jesus, we experience the beginning of that now already to the degree that we overcome sin in our lives by the power of the Spirit. Jesus is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. He has won the victory over sin and those who follow him share in that victory which is eternal life in the presence of God.