

Prayer Week 2019

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. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, “The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God.”
(1 Kings 18:38–39 ESV)

The Fire Of God
January 6th, 2019
1 Kings 18:1-46
Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning church! I want to invite you to open your Bibles this morning to 1 Kings 18; that’s on page 299 in your pew Bibles. This morning we begin our annual Week of Prayer and we are going to be talking tonight about a revival in the country of Nepal – I hope you can come back for that. But that got me thinking about revival in general. That’s sort of what Prayer Week is for – Prayer Week is about praying for God to move and to flow and to EMPOWER all the things that we believe that he has called on us to do in 2019. We don’t want this church to be a MACHINE that we have built – we want it to be a BODY that the SPIRIT OF GOD INHABITS – amen? And that’s what revival is. Revival is a time or a season when the Spirit of God MORE FULLY empowers the regular ministry of his people. Revival is THE FIRE OF GOD meeting the worship and ministry of his people.

We want that don’t we?

And let me tell you something – there is nothing CHARISMATIC about wanting the fire of God. Or maybe its better to say, there is nothing INAPPROPRIATELY CHARISMATIC about wanting the fire of God. We are all supposed to be charismatic – in the Biblical sense, aren’t we? The word charismatic literally just means “one who has been gifted or graced by God” – well that’s a good thing right? We want the grace of God – we want the gifts of God – we want the POWER OF GOD to be flowing through this place do we not?

Now the problem of course is that in our current moment in church history we are all a little bit jaded I think towards all things charismatic. If I could switch metaphors for a moment I would say that the FIRE of God is like an injection of TURBO FUEL into the engine of your regular ministry BUS. The problem is that if the bus has mechanical issues – a loose wheel or bad breaks or wonky suspension – and if the bus has a poorly trained driver then an injection of TURBO FUEL may actually result in a really wild ride followed by a steep plunge off a bridge into a river – which I think is a perfect description of the charismatic movement in the 1980's and 90's. I think there was something of the FIRE OF GOD in that movement but there were so many mechanical problems and so many deficiencies in the human drivers that it very quickly became a rolling tire fire didn't it? And so now we are all a little bit OVER the FIRE OF GOD.

But I wonder whether in the long run, that wasn't an act of kindness on the part of the Lord. I wonder if he didn't send a quick little burst of TURBO FUEL just to show us how poorly prepared we were as a people. That was our warning. God was telling us, I think, YOU ARE NOT READY FOR WHAT I WANT TO GIVE YOU.

I believe that.

I think we need to work on our bus. I think we need better drivers. I think we need a more solid vehicle if we are ever to receive and make proper use of the FIRE OF GOD in our generation.

I believe that.

I'm not a "charismatic" but I'm not "NOT a charismatic" either. I'm a Sovereignist and a realist. By Sovereignist I mean that I believe in the Sovereignty of God. God can do whatever he wants. God can give whatever he thinks will be useful. God can give whatever he thinks we can handle or whatever he thinks will humble us and give us a greater hunger for his power among us. God can do that. He's done it before and he can do it again. I believe that.

By realist I mean that I believe in the depravity of human beings. I believe that we ruin things. I believe that we leak. I believe that we fall apart, therefore I am REALISTIC about what we could do in our present state with the FIRE OF ALMIGHTY GOD. I want it – but I'm aware that if he

gave it we would probably spin out of control and plunge to our death off the very next bridge in the road.

Nevertheless, I'm not prepared to let the matter go and so I want to come back to the topic today but I want to do it within the confines of Holy Scripture. That's my intention this morning. So with all that being said, I hope you have your Bibles open now to 1 Kings 18. This is a story about the Fire of God. Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 1:

After many days the word of the LORD came to Elijah, in the third year, saying, "Go, show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain upon the earth." 2 So Elijah went to show himself to Ahab. Now the famine was severe in Samaria. 3 And Ahab called Obadiah, who was over the household. (Now Obadiah feared the LORD greatly, 4 and when Jezebel cut off the prophets of the LORD, Obadiah took a hundred prophets and hid them by fifties in a cave and fed them with bread and water.) 5 And Ahab said to Obadiah, "Go through the land to all the springs of water and to all the valleys. Perhaps we may find grass and save the horses and mules alive, and not lose some of the animals." 6 So they divided the land between them to pass through it. Ahab went in one direction by himself, and Obadiah went in another direction by himself.

7 And as Obadiah was on the way, behold, Elijah met him. And Obadiah recognized him and fell on his face and said, "Is it you, my lord Elijah?" 8 And he answered him, "It is I. Go, tell your lord, 'Behold, Elijah is here.'" 9 And he said, "How have I sinned, that you would give your servant into the hand of Ahab, to kill me? 10 As the LORD your God lives, there is no nation or kingdom where my lord has not sent to seek you. And when they would say, 'He is not here,' he would take an oath of the kingdom or nation, that they had not found you. 11 And now you say, 'Go, tell your lord, 'Behold, Elijah is here.'" 12 And as soon as I have gone from you, the Spirit of the LORD will carry you I know not where. And so, when I come and tell Ahab and he cannot find you, he will kill me, although I your servant have feared the LORD from my youth. 13 Has it not been told my lord what I did when Jezebel killed the prophets of the LORD, how I hid a hundred men of the LORD's prophets by fifties in a cave and fed them with bread and water? 14 And now you say, 'Go, tell your lord, 'Behold, Elijah is here''; and he will kill me." 15 And Elijah said, "As the LORD of hosts lives, before whom I stand, I will surely show myself to him today." 16 So Obadiah went to meet Ahab, and told him. And Ahab went to meet Elijah.

17 When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, "Is it you, you troubler of Israel?" 18 And he answered, "I have not troubled Israel, but you have, and your father's house, because you have abandoned the commandments of the LORD and followed the Baals. 19 Now 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."

20 So Ahab sent to all the people of Israel and gathered the prophets together at Mount Carmel. 21 And Elijah came near to all the people and said, "How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." And the people did not answer him a word. 22 Then Elijah said to the people, "I, even I only, am left a prophet of the LORD, but Baal's prophets are 450 men. 23 Let two bulls be given to us, and let them choose one bull for themselves and cut it in pieces and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. And I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood and put no fire to it. 24 And you call upon the name of your god, and I will call upon the name of the LORD, and the God who answers by fire, he is God." And all the people answered, "It is well spoken." 25 Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many, and call upon the name of your god, but put no fire to it." 26 And they took the bull that was given them, and they prepared it and called upon the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, "O Baal, answer us!" But there was no voice, and no one answered. And they limped around the altar that they had made. 27 And at noon Elijah mocked them, saying, "Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened." 28 And they cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them. 29 And as midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention.

30 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. 31 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," 32 and with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD. And he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two seahs

of seed. 33 And he put the wood in order and cut the bull in pieces and laid it on the wood. And he said, "Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood." 34 And he said, "Do it a second time." And they did it a second time. And he said, "Do it a third time." And they did it a third time. 35 And the water ran around the altar and filled the trench also with water.

36 And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near and said, "O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. 37 Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back." 38 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. 39 And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, "The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God." 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.

41 And Elijah said to Ahab, "Go up, eat and drink, for there is a sound of the rushing of rain." 42 So Ahab went up to eat and to drink. And Elijah went up to the top of Mount Carmel. And he bowed himself down on the earth and put his face between his knees. 43 And he said to his servant, "Go up now, look toward the sea." And he went up and looked and said, "There is nothing." And he said, "Go again," seven times. 44 And at the seventh time he said, "Behold, a little cloud like a man's hand is rising from the sea." And he said, "Go up, say to Ahab, 'Prepare your chariot and go down, lest the rain stop you.'" 45 And in a little while the heavens grew black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain. And Ahab rode and went to Jezreel. 46 And the hand of the LORD was on Elijah, and he gathered up his garment and ran before Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel. (1 Kings 18:1-46 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Now I know we've already read a lot of Scripture – that was a long passage – but before I pull out some principles here I want to take you to one more passage. Flip forward in your Bible to James 5:13-18, that's on page 1013 in your pew Bibles. Now the reason I want you to see this is because I think you are sitting here thinking, "What in the world does this have to do with us as Christians in 2019? I don't have any intention of executing the local pagan prophet and I don't know if I even want literal fire to fall from heaven upon my sacrifice – I own a bar-b-q so I'm just not sure what we're talking about here" – if you are thinking that or some version of that then this is for you. I want you to SEE James 5:13-18.

Listen to verses 13-16:

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. 14 Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. 16 Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. (James 5:13-16 ESV)

Alright, so here we are talking about regular, run of the mill human suffering. People are hurting. People are sick. And James is talking about the elders coming over and praying over these people, anointing them with oil AND PEOPLE ARE GETTING HEALED! People on their death beds ARE GETTING UP!

Now notice that this **INCREDIBLE POWER** seems to be flowing through very **ORDINARY MEANS**. This is regular church stuff right? Elder visits, prayer, confession of sin – this is run of the mill church stuff – but with extraordinary **POWER** and **DYNAMISM**.

Now listen to where James goes to ground this picture, listen to verses 17-18:

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. 18 Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit. (James 5:17–18 ESV)

James says, “I’m talking about **ELIJAH POWER**. I’m talking about **FIRE FROM HEAVEN**. I’m talking about **MAKING IT RAIN!**” That’s what I’m talking about and apparently that is something we should **DESIRE** for our churches in the New Testament era.

The Apostle James was no charismaniac – he wasn’t rolling around on the carpet or falling down drunk in the Spirit – James was known in church history as a man of prayer – they say his knees looked like the knees of a camel. So that’s what we’re talking about here. We are talking about **PRAYER** that **CAN BRING DOWN THE POWER OF GOD** for the help and blessing of **HURTING PEOPLE** ultimately so that they will **STOP LIMPING BETWEEN TWO OPINIONS** and give themselves **FULLY** to the worship of God through Jesus Christ. That’s what we’re talking about here.

Are you interested?

I’m interested.

So in the time we have left let me just pull out a few principles from this story about the Fire of God in the Old Testament. These will be short and I think obvious to anyone who has read the text.

The Fire Of God:

The first one I think is really obvious:

1. The fire of God cannot be summoned or manufactured

That's seems to be the point in the contrast between Elijah and the prophets of Baal. Listen to what they were doing:

And they cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them. And as midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention. (1 Kings 18:28–29 ESV)

That's paganism in a nutshell! Paganism is the idea that the gods are not terribly interested in human beings so you have to go to great lengths to get their attention and you have to do crazy stuff to convince them to help you. By the way, this is where child sacrifice comes from in the ancient world. Have you ever wondered why in the world people would sacrifice their own babies? It was because they were trying to show the gods how **SERIOUS THEY WERE**. They thought that if the gods knew that you **REALLY NEEDED** their help and if you sacrificed the thing that was **MOST PRECIOUS TO YOU IN THE WORLD** then the gods would be obligated to give you what you asked for.

That's insane.

That is just a wrong headed understanding of who God is.

God is not disinterested in us. God is not a withholding God. God loves us and wants to give us the things that **HE KNOWS** we need. That was part of what God was trying to communicate to us through the cross. The Apostle Paul said:

He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? (Romans 8:32 ESV)

You see the cross is God trying to **CHANGE** how people think about him. He is not a disinterested **DEITY**. He knows you, he loves you and he is prepared to give you all things.

So you don't have to jump up and down like an idiot.

You don't have to FAST for a month – do you know that there are no fasts commended in the Bible of more than 2 days duration. You know why? Because you need food TO LIVE. God is not trying to kill you. You don't have to try and get his attention by starving yourself. You don't have to SHOUT or repeat yourself. Jesus said that, he said:

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. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. (Matthew 6:7–8 ESV)

That's what Jesus said. You don't have to shout. You don't have to sacrifice your babies. You don't have to jump up and down. God is not a disinterested Deity. He is your heavenly Father.

So securing POWER from God for a healing or for a miracle or for anything is not about TWISTING HIS ARM or WAKING HIM UP or PUSHING THE RIGHT BUTTONS. That is paganism and this story is yet another reminder that we mustn't try and do it that way.

The second thing I think we can safely say here is that:

2. The fire of God can be anticipated and prepared for

So it cannot be SUMMONED – we can't DO THIS and ENSURE THAT – God is not a machine with an UNLOCK CODE – but the story does seem to commend PREPAREDNESS. Look at what Elijah does:

he repaired the altar of the LORD that had been thrown down. 31 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," 32 and with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD. (1 Kings 18:30–32 ESV)

Elijah prepared for the fire of the Lord by putting things back in order. If the FIRE OF GOD is the extraordinary presence of God upon and IN our ordinary worship and service – then we are going to need to REBUILD our worship and service. We need to do it right. We need to put things in place.

That's what Elijah did.

He did what God told people to do. He made things right. So that God could come and make things GLORIOUS.

Do you see that?

So often we skip this part of the process. Nothing is set up properly, none of the ordinary things that people are supposed to be doing are being done – but still we’re praying for revival. We’re asking for ROCKET FUEL when in reality what we need is a COUPON for the repair shop.

We need to do like Elijah did.

We need to repair the altar of the Lord.

The third thing I think we can say here is that:

3. The fire of God convicts and convinces the conflicted

Look at verse 21. Elijah says to the people:

“How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.” (1 Kings 18:21 ESV)

That’s who Elijah was after here. His country was filled with people who were UNDECIDED – they were HEDGING THEIR BETS. They were not opposed to God but they were also heavily invested in the worship practices of their Canaanite neighbours. The text mentions Baal worshippers and Asherah worshippers. Baal was the Canaanite fertility and storm god – by the way, that’s why God turned off the rain in this story. It was a direct assault on this particular form of idolatry. You want to worship the God of rain – I AM THE GOD OF RAIN! He says. Asherah was the Mother goddess of the Canaanites and was also associated with fertility.

You understand that to people in those days the things you prayed about the most were your kids and your crops. You needed rain and you wanted babies who would grow up healthy, strong and happy. But the people didn’t know who to pray to.

That's what this was about. You've got a bunch of people – good people – who want good things – but they don't know who they ought to turn to.

Is that ringing a bell?

Brothers and sisters that is our country in a nutshell.

There is this Christian memory that seems to pop to the forefront of people's minds when their kid gets sick or their health is threatened – but most of the time they are worshipping at the alter of self and science – they are LIMPING ABOUT BETWEEN TWO OPINIONS. That is why Elijah wanted the fire of God – because when it comes the limpers come leaping to the Lord.

And that's what he was after. And that's what we're after too.

Finally, the fourth thing we can say here is that:

4. The fire of God results in reformation and renewal

Reformation can be messy. Look at verse 40:

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. (1 Kings 18:40 ESV)

If you are going to reform a culture then some stuff is going to have to be torn down and thrown out to make room for that which is good and true and beautiful. There is no way around that. But when it happens, it clears the way for times of renewal and refreshment to come upon the land. We see that in verse 44. Elijah prays for rain in a land that hadn't seen rain in three years. And the text says:

"Behold, a little cloud like a man's hand is rising from the sea." (1 Kings 18:44 ESV)

And sure enough – the rains came and the land was refreshed and renewed. The Apostle Peter seems to be drawing on this story in Acts 3 when he said to the people of Jerusalem:

Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord (Acts 3:19–20 ESV)

That's what we're after in our culture – in our city – and in this church. Times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord. A fire that falls and a rain that renews.

O God make it so in our day – let's pray together.