

6.2.24 Journeying with Elijah Do All You Can & Pray the Fire Falls 1 Kgs 18.17-39

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Have you ever said or heard someone say in the face of a difficult situation, “All we can do is pray.” That statement implies we’ve come to the end of our ability, knowledge, or power to influence a situation; that there’s nothing else we can do but cry out to God to intervene and act. It can also make prayer sound like a last resort after trying everything and anything else first. However, there still may be things we can do before or in addition to praying to impact a situation. For example, we can seek the best medical care possible and pray for wisdom, guidance, courage, healing, and comfort. Often God won’t do for us what God’s given us the power and ability to do, but when **you do all you can and pray** for God to act, sometimes that’s when amazing things can happen. That’s what happens in our Elijah story for today from 1 Kings 18. It’s a story about the **courage to confront, the conviction to challenge, and how worship moves our hearts to follow.**

We’re in our second of three weeks journeying with the prophet Elijah and learning about three key moments in his life and work. Last week we heard about how a mighty God of abundance provided not only for his needs but for the needs of a widow and her son, even restoring the son to life. Today, we’re hearing about the courage and faith of Elijah as he confronts Ahab the king of Israel who has failed to follow the commandments of the Lord and has led the nation astray. Ahab calls Elijah a troubler of Israel because the prophet is telling the truth about Ahab forsaking the God of Israel and following and worshiping the gods of his wife’s people. You may want to follow along in your Bible or in a pew Bible because I’m going to begin by noting some things we heard in 1 Kings 18:17-29, before I read the second section.

In any situation, but especially difficult ones, doing all we can often requires **courage**. The first thing is to acknowledge and appreciate is the courage of Elijah in confronting the king. It’s not easy speaking truth to power, it’s not easy when you’re up against *four hundred fifty prophets of Baal*” and *four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel’s table.*” 850 to 1 aren’t great odds in any arena. How much courage and conviction does it take to confront a powerful person as Elijah did with King Ahab? How

do we cultivate that kind of courage in our own life? If we wish to be courageous in big moments it begins with choosing courage in smaller situations.

There are always people like the prophets of Baal and Asherah who will do anything to have a taste of power or a seat near the powerful even if that means selling their soul, honor, or integrity to support individuals, like Ahab and Jezebel who are terrible people and bad leaders. Like a villain in a James Bond movie, Ahab knows Elijah is against him, but he doesn't kill him, and he even does what Elijah says and gathers the 850 prophets and all Israel at Mount Carmel. Just as an aside, the first time I heard this story when I was little boy, I was amazed that there was place that was a mountain of caramel and I imagined something like a massive ice cream sundae. Sadly, I was told that wasn't the case.

Once everyone is assembled at Mount Carmel, Elijah **"came near to all the people,"** he's taking the initiative and is reaching out to them to show he cares and is concerned about how they're living and he has the **conviction to challenge** them with a question, ***"How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him."*** Notice that Elijah doesn't say, if the Lord is God, **worship** him, he says if the Lord is God **follow** him. Imagine if you were trying to walk or run somewhere and your legs had two different opinions about where you were going. That wouldn't work very well. There are consequences to whom we choose to follow in life. Elijah is asking the people to make a choice. Elijah has the courage to choose to worship the Lord and not to follow the herd mentality even at the risk of his own life. How do the people respond to Elijah's challenge? **The people did not answer him a word.** They didn't have the courage or conviction to go against the king and queen. They didn't have the courage to swim against the tide of those following Baal and Asherah. Some people would rather follow gods or idols in their own image or who don't make demands upon them but just tell them what they want to hear. As followers of God and Jesus, we'll be faced with decisions that require courage and being in the minority position, like Elijah, and I pray God grants us the courage we need when those moments arise and that we won't be deceived or led astray by an Ahab or Jezebel.

After challenging the people, Elijah issues a **challenge** to the prophets of Baal that involves sacrificing a bull with the stipulation that the god who answers by fire is God. Then the people who were silent when confronted by Elijah speak and say, “Well spoken!” because there are always people who are drawn to a spectacle, even if they lack the courage to do the right thing with Elijah at this moment. The prophets of Baal go first, and nothing happens, even when they cut themselves and cried aloud, **“there was no voice, no answer, and no response.”** Then it’s Elijah’s turn, listen to **1 Kings 18:30-39**.

³⁰ Then Elijah said to all the people, **“Come closer to me”**; and all the people came closer to him. **First 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 with the stones **he built an altar in the name of the LORD. Then he made a trench around the altar**, large enough to contain two measures of seed. ³³ **Next he put the wood in order, cut the bull in pieces, and laid it on the wood.** He said, *“Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood.”* ³⁴ Then he said, *“Do it a second time”*; and they did it a second time. Again he said, *“Do it a third time,”* and they did it a third time, ³⁵ so that the water ran all around the altar, and filled the trench also with water.

³⁶ At the time of the offering of the oblation, the prophet Elijah came near and said, *“O LORD, **God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel**, let it be **known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant**, and that I have done all these things at your bidding.* ³⁷ **Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so 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, the wood, **the stones**, and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench. ³⁹ When all the people saw it, **they fell on their faces and** said, ***“The LORD indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God.”***

Elijah begins by inviting all the people, a second time, to come closer to him and they did. Then he repaired the altar of the LORD that had been thrown down; Elijah took twelve stones, and he built an altar in the name of the LORD. **Worship is a priority** because the first commandment is (Exodus 20:3), *“You shall*

have no other gods before me.” The altar had been thrown down and needed repair because worship was no longer a priority for the people. It can seem like the worship God not being a priority is a new or more recent phenomenon, yet it’s present 800 years before Christ. We can worship a lot of other things than God and when we do it’s like taking a stone out of the altar and tossing it aside. Every time we participate in worship, whether in person or online, it’s like adding a stone to the altar. Much like adding to a cairn somewhere on a hike, when we worship God, we’re building an altar of praise and devotion whose purpose is to cause us to follow. Worshiping God is a first step, not the final one, following God’s commandments, following Jesus in his way of life, this is the desire of God for our lives.

The rest of Elijah’s preparations are done to make it clear that it’s not by his hand, skill, or power that the fire falls, it’s all God. So, he does something you and I would never do if we were planning to grill beef over a wood fire in our backyard. He has water poured over the beef and the wood, not once, not twice, but three times, so the wood is soaking wet and there is a trench like a little moat filled with water all around. Boy Scout Troop 77, the troop sponsored by our church, had a campout this weekend and I can guarantee you they didn’t teach the Scouts to build a fire by dumping water on the wood three times!

Elijah does all he can in terms of cutting the bull and arranging the wood, but he soaks it with water, so the glory and credit go to God. He prays in 1 Kings 18:37, ***“Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.”*** And the Lord answers immediately, powerfully, and dramatically. The fire of the Lord fell, and it not only consumed the wood and the burnt offering, but the fire also consumed the stones, the dust, and the water. I don’t know how hot it needs to be for rocks to be consumed, but I’m guessing it’s higher than any setting on our oven. When all the people saw it, ***they fell on their faces*** and said (1 Kings 18:39), *“The LORD indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God.”* If we believe the Lord indeed is God, then our task is **to follow the Lord.**

Last Sunday, I shared the news about our Leadership Council recommending to the congregation that we invite the Rev. Nate Ryan to become part of our staff here at

BBC. People have been positive and enthusiastic about that news. I'd like to share two more pieces of information with you. Some of us who have been part of this process have been praying that Nate's wife Jennie would be able to get a music teaching job on the Cape. I'm happy to tell you today that not only was Jennie offered a music job, she was offered the opportunity to be the general music teacher and choir director at the Nauset Regional Middle School! Another question some folks might have is can the church financially handle adding Nate's position. This past week as part of their worship and following the Lord, a generous BBC family gave a \$50,000 gift to the church which obviously helps us in a situation like this one. This gift and Jennie's new job are, to me, like the fire falling from heaven to show the Lord indeed is God.

I hope like Elijah we can live with **courage and conviction, doing all we can to worship and follow the Lord and inviting others to choose to do so as well. I hope each of us will do all that we can do and that we'll all be praying for the fire to fall from heaven in ways that make it clear that the Lord indeed is God so more people will believe, have their hearts turned to the Lord, and follow him.**

Prayer: Almighty God, you call us to prayer and offer yourself to all who seek your face. Pour out your Spirit upon us today, and deliver us from coldness of heart, a wandering mind, and the Baals of our time that deceive unsuspecting souls and lead them away from you. By the power of your Spirit, grant us wisdom and courage for the living of these days, that we fail not our sisters and brothers nor our Redeemer. Fill us with courage, devotion, faithfulness, generosity, and steadfast love, so we may be attentive to you and serve you with all our lives, so that people will know that you, Lord, indeed are God. Amen.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. How much courage and conviction does it take to confront a powerful person as Elijah did with King Ahab? How do we cultivate that kind of courage in our own life?

2. Elijah asks the people (1 Kings 18:21), “How long will you go limping with two different opinions?” Why is it important to be clear about your priorities and who receives your allegiance, devotion, support, or worship?
3. What do we learn about faith and trust from Elijah’s challenge to the prophets of Baal that “the god who answers by fire is indeed God.” Is that something Elijah could make happen on his own?
4. Why do you think repairing and building an altar to the Lord is the first thing that Elijah does? What does that tell us about the importance of worshiping the Lord?
5. Elijah does all that is in his power to do and then he prays to the Lord. Why does he want the Lord to answer him? Hint See 1 Kings 18:37
6. What is the result of Elijah’s courage, faith, diligence, and prayer? What change do you see in the people who are present?

Scripture 1 Kings 18:17-39 (NRSV)

¹⁷ When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, “*Is it you, you troubler of Israel?*” ¹⁸ He answered, “*I have not troubled Israel; but you have, and your father’s house, because **you have forsaken the commandments of the LORD and followed the Baals.***” ¹⁹ Now therefore have all Israel assemble for me at Mount Carmel, with the four hundred fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel’s table.”

²⁰ So Ahab sent to all the Israelites, and assembled the prophets at Mount Carmel.

²¹ Elijah then **came near** to all the people, and said, “***How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.***” **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 number four hundred fifty. ²³ Let two bulls be given to us; let them choose one bull for themselves, cut it in pieces, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it; I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. ²⁴ Then you call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of the LORD; the god who answers by fire is indeed God.” All the people answered, “Well spoken!” ²⁵ Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, “Choose for

yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many; then call on the name of your god, but put no fire to it.”²⁶ So they took the bull that was given them, prepared it, and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, crying, “O Baal, answer us!” But there was no voice, and no answer. They **limped** about the altar that they had made.

²⁷ At noon Elijah mocked them, saying, “*Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.*”²⁸ Then they cried aloud and, as was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them.²⁹ As midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, **but there was no voice, no answer, and no response.**