

1 Kings 18:41-46

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Preacher: Chris Roberts

[0 : 00] And if you flip back to the passage that we read earlier, 1 Kings chapter 18, that would be helpful. I want to focus on the little section at the end of chapter 18, so verse 41 to the end tonight.

And as we look at this passage there are lots of interesting details, lots of things that make us stop and think, why was it like that? Why was that? Why did it happen in that way?

But I do want to focus tonight, in the time that we've got, on what I think is a long drawn out prayer session, really.

As Elijah waits for this blessing of rain as he puts his face to the ground, I think in the study that this is him praying here in a long prayer session.

And I want to highlight what this passage shows us tonight about the challenge and the character of prayer. Let me give you three highlights from this short passage.

[1 : 05] Number one, the humiliation of prayer. The humiliation of prayer. On his knees, Elijah comes to pray for the rain that has been promised.

And if you were here last or two weeks ago in the evening, this is a great contrast, isn't it, from what we've seen of Elijah, this great man, this great prophet. A couple of weeks ago, he was the bold, bombastic blaster of Baal and his cronies.

And here he is, bowed down, face between his knees, with his face down to the earth. Notice the humiliation of it, the dishonour that he endures.

This is the man that we've just read of giving orders to King Ahab. Dictating the terms of the Baal God contest. Dictating the drought back at the beginning of chapter 17.

Elijah is the one who commands kings. And he commands peoples. And he has this great sense of power, doesn't he? He has raised someone from the dead.

[2 : 20] He's performed great miracles. But we see the powerful man pleading in humiliation and in weakness and in prayer here.

But this isn't new for him, is it? This is the way of his ministry. He's done it before. Do you remember earlier in the portions of Elijah, he raises the widow's son, but he cries out to the Lord for his life, almost in desperation it feels like.

His prayer last time, his sincere, humble prayer for the fire to fall and burn up this burnt offering. And now for rain. He is a powerful man, Elijah.

He is a praying man. He is powerful because he is frequently humiliating himself. And he can walk into kings' palaces and give them their marching orders, but because he kneels in God's presence.

And I don't think humiliation is too strong a word either, because the whole experience for him, especially here, is a stripping down of any self-confidence and of any strength.

[3 : 40] There is a vulnerability and a frailty to him here, isn't there? It is an exhausting and draining and demanding work, this prayer session. Do you see, as he puts his face to the ground, he looks for rain, or he gets his servant to look for rain, but there is none, is there, to begin with.

And so he continues to pray. And again, there is no rain. Again and again and again and again. Seven times. And the narrator builds up this sense of agony and of suspense.

Prayer is not some kind of spiritual slot machine. And he isn't some sort of super spiritual man who just gets the answers that he always wants.

He doesn't take anything for granted. He doesn't presume. And he has to treat God as God in every aspect. And he has to struggle here because God is going to answer Elijah in the way that God wants to answer him.

He may answer immediately, just like he did with the burnt offering. He may make him wait. He may not answer him at all. He may deny him.

[4 : 58] He may deny him the request, like he'll do in a few verses a time in chapter 19. So prayer here is not passive. It's an agonising and it's a draining work.

But it is this draining work of prayer that provides this great source of power in his ministry. And I wonder whether we have sort of forgotten this about prayer.

That it is a very exhausting thing, isn't it? Maybe this is something that we've experienced ourselves. We struggle to pray because prayer is a real struggle.

For any human being to come to God, it is, and it should be in a way, an exhausting process. Now just think about the Lord's Prayer.

Such a simple prayer, isn't it? On the one hand, it's so easy to pray. It doesn't require a great amount of words. A child can pray it.

[5 : 57] It doesn't require anything or anyone special to pray. But the more you pray the Lord's Prayer, and actually the more you dive into the depths of its meaning and its contents, the more you're faced with your own mind which opposes what you're saying.

And your own will which opposes what you're praying. And it ends up more like a battle, doesn't it? Than a prayer. It's like a spiritual workout. If I pray, thy will be done, God, I've got to give up my own will.

If I pray, give me my daily bread, give us our daily bread, Lord, I've got to fight against self-reliance, haven't I? To pray, forgive us our sins, means I've got to stop cherishing my sins.

And the two can't exist at the same time. As we forgive those who sin against us, we've got to let go of resentment. Do you see, prayer is a battle of self-humiliation, of self-mortification.

Even the Lord's Prayer, one of the simplest prayers in the whole Bible, is a tenacious, draining act of humiliating ourselves, isn't it? Humiliation of our pride and of our own wills.

[7 : 25] In prayer, we have to agonisingly push away our own desires. We have to push them aside and seek the desires of God.

And so here is the dynamic, assertive, charismatic, bold servant of God, Elijah. And we see folk like that, don't we, other Christians, and we think that they are such models.

Such powerful people, such gifted people, such strategic thinkers, such bold speakers. But actually, all Elijah can do, and all any of us can do, is really, is pray.

All Elijah can do at this moment is to pray, and that's all he does do, really. And when it comes to the key moments of Elijah's ministry, when he does what he's called to do by God, and he keeps going, he keeps going because he frequently stops, and he accepts the limits of his ability.

Do you know, if you read through 1 and 2 Kings, it would be a very boring book without prayer. Because arguably, nothing would happen without prayer.

[8 : 42] Elijah or Elijah wouldn't be able to do anything. And so it's a humbling and self-denying experience, even for the most gifted servant of God. It is to drain all hope in self.

And that is a struggle, isn't it? Paul says to the Romans, Strive together with me in your prayer to God on my behalf.

He has a struggle for the Colossians in prayer. The Greek word he uses there is the word that we use for agony. His fellow servant, Epaphras, he says in Colossians, struggles, agonises in prayer.

Jesus says we ought always to pray and not lose heart, because he knows it is a struggle. We struggle to pray, and this is one of the reasons why. You're too busy.

You're too tired. You're too washed out. Actually, do you know, we say that they're bad reasons. But they are good reasons, actually, because prayer is harder than watching TV, isn't it?

[9 : 56] Prayer is harder than eating dinner. Prayer is even harder than reading a book on prayer, or listening to a sermon on prayer. Prayer is a most humiliating work.

Because in it, we finally have to admit that we are not God, and we have to treat God as God. And when we're used to walking with our heads held up high, trusting in ourselves and our own gifts and our own skills, that is a very painful and very draining experience.

To do what Elijah is doing here, and to put our faces to the ground, and to bow before God, it's the humiliation of prayer. Secondly, though, number two, the wonderful dignity of prayer.

The humiliation of prayer, the wonderful dignity of prayer. It is an agonising process, isn't it? But, masked behind Elijah's weakness and his lowliness, and the struggle here is something incredibly dignifying, as he has his face to the ground.

There is something glorious about what he is doing here. Far more dignifying than it is humiliating. Let me try and show you something here.

[11 : 20] What is interesting is why Elijah bothers to pray in the first place, and why he feels the need. What's he praying for? He's praying for rain, isn't he?

For the drought to end, that they've endured. He comes to God as one who gives blessing, and who supplies need, and we can do that.

But, did you notice that before he prays, he already knows the rain is coming? He asks for what he knows is coming. Look at verse 41. He says to Ahab, Go up and eat and drink, for there is a sound of the rushing of rain.

Or you could say, the rumbling of approaching rain. Rain is coming, Ahab. So, if he knows the rain is coming, why bother to pray for it?

Why get down on the earth and ask for the rain? If God is going to do it anyway, why does he bother praying for it? What we learn here is that this is the dignity and weight that God has invested in the prayers of his people.

[12 : 36] There's a bit of a tension, isn't there, here? The rain is coming, but it doesn't come until Elijah prays. God's will is that it should come, but it won't come until Elijah, this little creature, prays for it.

It gives us an insight into the fuel of prayer. He is praying according to what he knows God has said has already, he's already said will happen.

And we know that specifically for him, because right at the beginning of chapter 18, if you look back there, right in the very first verse, God promises to Elijah that he is going to send rain.

He's had a specific promise. God decides what he's going to do, and he gives the red button, doesn't he, to Elijah to press. God's will is to send rain.

But he says, and so he says, I'm going to do that, and that can't be changed. But I want to do that in answer to your prayer, Elijah. Now, of course, God can work in any way he chooses, can't he?

[13 : 49] He's not bound to work in this way. He's free to do as he pleases, just as he pleases. But it's as if he prefers it this way. Prayer is the channel that God seems to prefer to work through, even though he doesn't have to.

And so he's dignified the requests and the prayers of his people with power, with real power. God decides what he's going to do, and then he moves his people to pray for that thing.

He says, I'll let them ask me for it. They can ask me for what will definitely happen. Now, I was trying to think of an illustration for this.

It's not easy, but it might be something like this. It might be like when mum and dad in a family decide that this Friday is treat night.

It's going to be fish and chips on Friday. And that is the decision. Mum and dad have come to that choice. That is the decree. That Friday is going to be treat night.

[14 : 59] But on the way home from school, mum says to one of the children, go and ask dad if you can have fish and chips tonight. And she does that with a kind of wry smile on her face, doesn't she?

Anticipating the response from the father. Oh, so you want fish and chips, do you? Yes, of course you can. We thought that would be a good idea too.

Go and ask dad if you can have fish and chips on Friday. Now, why do that with a child? Well, you want the child to have the joy of asking and of receiving, don't you?

And to dignify that child with the excitement of that, of receiving the father's gifts. Seeing that he is a giver.

And that is how prayer works. We get to see that God is a giver. It's how we see prayer working through all of scripture. Where prayer is constantly fuelled and informed by the anticipation and the excitement of what God has already said would happen.

[16 : 11] Isaiah says that the earth will be full of the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. That is going to happen, God has said. And yet, we are to pray, Lord, may your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

It's how the Bible ends, isn't it? Jesus says in Revelation 22, I am coming soon. that's my will, that's going to happen. And no sooner has he said that and his people have heard that with their ears, they say, Amen.

Come Lord Jesus. Asking for what has already been promised. And this is how prayer works often, isn't it?

Where the language of prayer, prayer, what we say and how we say it is a language that God has taught us by speaking promises to us.

And if I struggle to pray, it can be because I've forgotten this language of God's promises. I don't know, I often quote Eugene Peterson, but sometimes he has some helpful stuff and he talks about the process of learning any language, a little bit like what we said with the children.

[17:27] He says, when it's done naturally, we don't remember learning it at all when we learn it at home. It's not that we take the initiative to sort of try and learn the language that our parents speak.

We don't wake up one morning and think, I need night classes in English, do we? Rather, we learn how to speak any language as it is spoken to us.

He says, at birth, we're plunged into a sea of language, then slowly, syllable by syllable, we acquire the capacity to answer back. Mummy, Daddy, yes, no.

All speech, he says, is answering speech. We all speak because we're first spoken to. And it's a similar thing with prayer, isn't it?

When we plunge ourselves into the sea of God's promises and the language that he speaks to us in the Bible. And we listen and we study and we hear his promises and then we can answer in response.

[18:34] We speak because we've been spoken to. And we take what God has said and we give it back to him and we say it back to him. Go and ask your father if you can have the Holy Spirit, Jesus says.

Go and ask your father if you can have a new creation. Go and ask your father if you can have me, Jesus says. Of course you can.

I was thinking just the same thing. It's been said before that prayer is to get God's promises and rub his ears with them. It is a draining experience, isn't it, when we have to lay aside our will and seek his.

But in that moment as we close our eyes, actually we wake up. We wake up from the nightmare of our own fears and our own demands and see the reality of a sea of promises before us.

Father, can we? Of course you can. And that is the dignity that God has invested prayer with. That he gives the red button to his people to bring about his will.

[19:54] He gives real power in prayer. The blessing that he is ready to give comes through the joy of this communion with him and of anticipation in knowing the answer.

Ask your father for these things. So the humiliation of prayer but the dignity of prayer and thirdly and lastly the pioneer of prayer. The pioneer of prayer.

A couple of weeks ago we saw in the God contest between Yahweh and Baal Yahweh shows himself to be the real God doesn't he? And he shows himself to be the good God who gives a sign of renewed relationship.

Do you remember the burnt offering was given on the twelve stones that represent the twelve tribes of Israel. And that feels like the bit that we always remember isn't it in the stories of Elijah.

It's the Baal God contest with Yahweh and it is a great moment. But actually if we think that this chapter is all about that we kind of miss the point because the Baal contest comes in the context of a promise of rain.

[21:11] That's how it begins as we've seen in verse 1 and that's how it ends isn't it as the rain comes in verse 45. And so what we see is that in between those two moments the promise and the fulfilment is the stuff that happens in between that needs to happen to bring that blessing about.

And so what do we see in between the promise and the fulfilment? We see that God's covenant blessings will be enjoyed and received by the giving of a burnt offering on Mount Carmel by sacrifice and by prayer.

In a priestly act of offering sacrifice and a prayer to God. When one man, Elijah, calls down blessings on behalf of his people and blessings come don't they because somebody agonises in prayer here and offers a sacrifice.

Now of course there is something unique about Elijah, he's not the average Christian is he? We are not Elijah. And he has a unique role in mediating God's blessings.

He acts as a sort of go between God and his people. And of course the more and more time we spend with Elijah, the more we see the Lord Jesus Christ.

[22:40] It's why some people mistook Jesus Christ for a sort of returned Elijah figure, isn't it? The miracles and the works and the blessings that he brings to people.

people. But just as Elijah strives here on behalf of the people, Jesus agonises in prayer. He was to give the sacrifice of his life, not just a bull on a burnt offering on a mountain. And he gave it in the context of humble, lowly, humiliating prayer actually.

Do you remember he agonised in prayer? He was known for his exhausting prayer sessions, wasn't he? The disciples couldn't stay awake.

Particularly as he came to give his life. The Lord Jesus was a mighty prayer. And at several key points of his ministry he withdrew to pray.

[23 : 42] Even as son of God in his humanity, he was a powerful man only because he was a praying man. And he relied on the power of the Holy Spirit.

Hebrews tells us that in the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears. He agonised in prayer in the garden of Gethsemane.

As he prayed, he became sorrowful, even to death. You see, the prayer that he prayed there, that prayer session, that experience was stressful enough that the stress alone would have been enough to kill a man.

He was truly a man who struggled in prayer. Lord, may this cup be removed from me. Not my will, but your will be done.

man who pushed out every ounce of desire for self-preservation in prayer. He struggled in prayer.

[24 : 50] He prayed the forsaken man's prayer, didn't he? My God, why have you forsaken me? He was humiliated and drained and exhausted, more than any other man could have been in prayer.

prayer. And as Jesus prays, they are not just prayers to sort of make him feel better, are they? But his prayer ministry is especially agonising and draining because he prays like Elijah does here, as a go-between.

And he prays on behalf of his people for blessing. Did you notice that while Elijah is praying, Ahab is eating here? Isn't he? Ahab is eating and drinking and enjoying a sense of renewed relationship with God, I'd want to say.

And as Elijah is running on his feet, Ahab is riding to Jezreel. You see, it's Elijah who does the hard work here, isn't it?

And Ahab reaps all the benefits. He does the hard work of prayer and the Lord Jesus, he does the real hard work of perfect prayer.

[26 : 03] And of giving the perfect offering of himself. He says in Luke 22, Simon, Satan demanded to have you, but I've prayed for you that your faith may not fail.

John tells us that we have an advocate with the Father, a defence lawyer, who prays for us, the Lord Jesus. And Jesus prays with his disciples in earshot, doesn't he?

I am praying for them, Lord, and I'm not praying for them only, but for those who will believe in me through their words. It's not that Jesus had to change his father's mind, that he had to agonise and make the father sort of feel sorry for him, so that he would give him what he asked for.

But just like Elijah, the Lord Jesus also prayed for the things that God had said would happen, and he knew he would receive from him. He knew passages like Isaiah 53, didn't he?

Which promised that his soul, as it made an offering for guilt, he would see his offspring. He would receive a people. He knew that. He knew Psalm 2, where God the Father speaks to his king and says, ask of me and I will make the nations your heritage.

[27 : 23] language. You see, the Lord Jesus had drunk in the language of his father's promises. And he had spoken out what had been spoken into him by his father.

And he was humiliated in and dignified by prayer. But it's him saying, isn't it, much harder prayers and giving a much greater offering that has made the way that we might enjoy the very same things.

That same moment of closing our eyes and waking up to see a reality of a sea of promises that Christ has won for us.

And that we as weak, lowly people might have this great source of power in getting the Lord's promises and rubbing his ears with them. And as we speak as we're spoken to.

So, tonight let us close our eyes. Let's bow our heads. Let's put our faces to the ground if necessary. Let's pray.

[28 : 41] Father in heaven, we're grateful.