

A Praying Prophet and a Gracious God

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[0 : 00] Now, we come to our Bible reading today, and you can find that in the book of 1 Kings, chapter 18. 1 Kings, chapter 18. Phil Copeland has been preaching through this book for some time now, and we're continuing through the life of Elijah this week, picking up after that great showdown between the prophets of Baal and the prophet of the Lord on Mount Carmel.

So we'll read together from chapter 18, going from verse 41 through to the end of the chapter. So verse 41.

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 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. 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. And at the seventh time, he said, Behold, a little cloud like a man's hand is rising from the sea.

[1 : 30] And he said, Go up, say to Ahab, prepare your chariot and go down, lest the rain stop you. 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. And the hand of the Lord was on Elijah. And he gathered up his garment and ran before Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord. And may he bless it to us this morning. Well, good morning, everybody.

I'm pleased to have your Bibles open to 1 Kings 18. That would be really helpful. If you go down to London and go into the British Library, you will find that in the British Library, they have an exhibition that is always running called The Treasures of the British Library.

And it's a room full of extremely rare and seriously precious documents from history. And I remember the first time I visited it, I went in, I saw things like the Magna Carta document.

[2 : 56] I saw sketchbooks by Leonardo da Vinci. I saw music manuscripts handwritten by Handel. I saw Agatha Christie's notebooks with all of our notes inside it.

And most importantly, I saw really, really early copies of the Bible. You can even see a little shard of papyrus from the 3rd century with a bit of John's Gospel on it.

I saw all of these things and more, and I was totally blown away by it. And I'm not a history buff. I was totally blown away by this room. It was amazing.

I remember standing there thinking, what an absolute privilege. But you know, at one point, I just looked over, and I saw a staff member who was on duty walking towards me. You could tell from his uniform that this guy had worked there for a long time.

And let me say, when I was astounded, this guy looked the most bored man on all the earth. He was walking around, and he just looked so disinterested.

[3 : 55] And it's probably because he'd seen all of this stuff a million times before. He'd become so familiar with this wonderful place that he just started taking it for granted.

I was astounded by the room. He thought it was dull because he'd taken it for granted. And friends, as Christians, I think actually, there's a real danger that we can start feeling the same way about prayer in the same way that the security guard or staff member felt about the room of treasures.

Prayer is an immense treasure. It is an immense gift, a wonderful privilege. One of the best things about being a Christian is you can cry out to the Lord's God at any point.

But isn't it the case that often we are so easily in danger of thinking about prayer like it's dull, taking it for granted?

And so for that reason, this morning, friends, we're going to slow down in our series in 1 Kings.

We've been taking big chunks of this book. We're going to take this small chunk and we're going to

look at the lessons here that are basic but beautiful lessons about prayer.

[5 : 09] And more importantly, this passage also contains basic but beautiful lessons about the Lord our God, the God who is living and the God who hears and answers prayer.

Last Sunday morning, we looked at one of the great fight scenes of the Bible on Mount Carmel where the Lord showed himself to be the living God. And at the same time, the Lord utterly wipes the floor with Baal, the pagan God of the Canaanites, who was shown to be an utterly dead idol. Remember that the Lord had set up this contest, the Lord set up this fight, this public sparring match between this God. And it was because back in those days, King Ahab was king in Israel and along with his wife Jezebel, he had pumped foul, raw paganism into the land of Israel.

That is, he established Baal worship in the land. And as a result of this, the people of God, we're told, ended up limping between Baal worship on one hand and at the same time, carrying out what they thought was still worship of the Lord, their God.

But in reality, friends, you cannot serve God and another master. To do that is really another way of rejecting the Lord completely. And remember that in response to this evil, the Lord had announced back in chapter 17, verse 1, that he was going to turn off the taps.

[6 : 37] He was going to turn off the rain, shut the rain off and bring drought upon the land. Not even a drop of dew would be found anywhere. And in doing this, the Lord was showing himself to be the God of the climate, not Baal.

Because remember, that's what the pagans believed about Baal. Rain was his thing. Well, the Lord says, no, no, no, no. I am the God of the rain. And it all panned out as the Lord had promised. For over three years, there was no rain in Israel and devastating famine ravaged the place. Until 18, verse 1, when the Lord came and finally promised to send rain.

But remember, before the Lord turned the rain back on at that moment, he said to Elijah, go and set up this contest on Mount Carmel because the Lord had to make it clear that it was him who was behind the turning back on of the rain.

You know, if the Lord had simply let rain fall at the beginning of chapter 18, all of the people of Israel may have been tempted to think, oh, rain, how wonderful. That's Baal that's done that.

[7 : 47] And so that's why the Lord makes it so crystal clear on Mount Carmel that Baal is just a figment of the imagination of man. Do you remember? All the prophets of Baal, they pray to him for hours and hours asking him to send down fire upon his altar, but no one answered.

There was no one there because Baal doesn't exist. But Elijah prayed and like that, the Lord answered by fire and it licked up the altar, the sacrifice, the stones, the water, everything.

And just look back to verse 39, please, of chapter 18. What was the result of this God contest? 39, when all the people saw it, saw the fire, the way the Lord answered prayer, they fell on their faces and said, the Lord, he is God, the Lord, he is God.

And with the prophets of Baal now out of the picture in verse 40, Elijah knows that it is finally time for the Lord to send rain.

And we're going to look at this little chunk here at the end of the chapter in two points this morning, two main points. Here's the first main section. Verses 41 to 43, we see a praying prophet, a praying prophet.

[9 : 07] We will look at verse 41 in a minute, but just jump ahead to verse 42, please, and look at what Elijah does. Elijah climbs up higher, up Mount Carmel. Verse 43 says he's not alone, he's with his servant.

And they stop somewhere just below the summit where his servant can easily climb up to the peak and look out over the sea and the horizon. And Elijah, when they reach this point below the summit, he bows down to the ground and he puts his face between his knees.

And some commentators read that and think, oh, Elijah's just having a rest. He's just having a nap. He's very much what I do on a Sunday afternoon these days. But he's not. Friends, that is not convincing.

Although the text doesn't use the word praying anywhere, surely that is what Elijah's doing here. His body language says it all. And anyway, James chapter 5 seems to confirm that that's what the prophet is doing here.

James 5 says this, 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.

[10:18] Then he prayed again and heaven gave rain and the earth bore its fruit. So friends, Elijah is not a resting prophet here.

He is a praying prophet. And I want us in these verses just to notice three beautiful but basic lessons about prayer from them. Firstly, notice the humility of prayer.

The humility of prayer. One of the themes of 1 Kings 18 is the total dominance of Elijah. Throughout everything that happens there is no one who can stand against the Lord's prophet.

Not even Ahab. One writer describes Elijah as being a brash Baal buster throughout verses 21 to 40 and yet here we see the real source of Elijah's strength and power.

It's the Lord. The one to whom Elijah turns to in prayer. He is the one who is really at work and works so powerfully through this man.

[11:24] And by bowing down face to the ground Elijah is expressing that that is the case. On his own he is powerless. He is hopeless. On his own without the Lord he can do nothing.

He can't control the weather. No man can control the weather. He can't bring the rain. Only the Lord can. Which is why he humbly asks the Lord to do it.

But friends the fact that Elijah does this it shouldn't surprise us because humble prayer is something that we've seen over the last bunch of weeks when we've been in this section of the book.

It's something that Elijah does all the time in his ministry. For example just look back to chapter 17 verse 20 and 21. He asks the Lord to raise the widow's son who is dead to life again.

And then in chapter 18 verse 36 and 37 he asks the Lord to send down the fire and to turn the hearts of the people back to himself away from Baal.

[12:26] And then again here in verse 42 he is again praying humbly before the Lord admitting that he is powerless and that the Lord is the only one who can help.

Friends you and I we might think if we know our Bibles we might think that Elijah is some sort of a super prophet but really he's just a man like you and I.

And although his ministry sorry all through his ministry he has needed to turn to the Lord humbly for prayer. And friends so it is with you and I. Prayer requires great humility.

It's a humbling thing. One writer puts it like this for all his seemingly dynamism and charisma his assertiveness and control his gumption and his boldness.

Elijah has no magic. He's got no ace up his sleeve which he brings out to slither out of tight spots and dead end dilemmas. Elijah can only confess his helplessness.

[13:28] That is he can only pray. And friends I think actually whilst this does humble us it should also thrill us. Thrill us as the church of the Lord Jesus Christ today because we want to be a fruitful people do we not?

We want to have a fruitful ministry do we not? We want to see the gospel of the Lord Jesus advance in this city and beyond and we want to see people being raised to life in Christ.

We want to see hearts turning away from idols to worship the true and living God through Jesus Christ alone. Well here Elijah reminds us that alone you and I are utterly powerless to bring about any of that.

We really are. But that really doesn't matter. Why? Because like Elijah we have been given the great gift of prayer and like Elijah we too can humbly turn to the Lord our God who is the same today all powerful all knowing all sovereign we can confess openly how helpless we are and we can ask him to work powerfully to do that which we cannot and indeed we must we must do that friends if we were to be an effective church what a great gift prayer is it is humbling but it's also glorious secondly in this section we see the dignity of prayer the dignity of prayer please look back to verse 41 and Elijah said to Ahab go up eat and drink for there is a sound of the rushing of rain now this is before

Elijah went off to pray up with his servant what he does is he tells King Ahab to go and feast go go stuff your face go and eat and drink which is something that you didn't do during a time of famine and drought that was a time for rationing food being careful but here Elijah tells the king to go and feast now because he knows that the time of drought and famine are almost over for rain is coming in fact Elijah is so certain about this so confident that he says he can actually hear a downpour even though there wasn't a cloud in the sky at that very moment how can Elijah be so confident how can he be so confident well his confidence may have been partly based upon something that King Solomon had prayed back in 1 Kings chapter 8 at the dedication of the temple we looked at it some time ago let me read to you what Solomon prayed at the dedication of the temple he said these

words he prayed to the Lord when heaven is shut up and there is no rain because Israel have sinned against you if they pray towards this place and acknowledge your name and turn from their sin when you afflict them then hear in heaven and forgive the sin of your servants your people when you teach them the good way in which they should walk and grant rain upon your land which you have given to your people as an inheritance

[16 : 42] Solomon prayed those words to the Lord remember and the Lord accepted Solomon's request he said yeah I'll do that if the people sin I shut off the rain and if they turn I will send rain so it could be that Elijah's confidence is based upon that promise of the Lord but really I think Elijah's confidence is based on the particular promise he received in 18 verse 1 back in 18 verse 1 the Lord as I said came to him and said I will send rain upon the earth I will send rain upon the earth after you've shown yourself to Ahab and knowing this promise of the Lord it not only fills Elijah with great confidence but friends it also stirs him up to pray this gets him praying promises produce prayer you see Elijah knows that the Lord wills to send the rain but Elijah doesn't sit back and say oh you know the Lord has promised this he is sovereign his will is certain and set so do you know what

I'm just going to rest up now I'm just going to sit back and wait for the Lord to take action Elijah doesn't do that no Elijah gets on his knees bows his head and prays because clearly he knows that whilst God's will is certain he knows that also God delights to do his will in answer to the prayers of his people let me say that again Elijah knows that whilst God's will is certain and set Elijah also knows that God delights to do his will in answer to our prayers or as one theologian puts it the prayers of the people of God constitute the appointed channel by which God works his eternal will now friends of course God is never limited to this channel God is never limited to our prayers the Bible never says that God will only ever act in response to his people's prayers there are some professing

Christians out there who think that that's the case they think that God won't or even worse God can't act unless we move him to act by our prayers but friends that is not biblical Christianity that is paganism and there's no place in the church no God is the sovereign creator of all things he is not limited by any of his creatures he doesn't need us or our prayers in order to work out his eternal plans and decrees but he loves to that's what the Bible says again and again that whilst God's will is certain the Lord actually delights in working out his will through our prayers in answer to our prayers let me just give you another example from later in the Bible we'll get to this I'm sure eventually here on a Sunday when we look at Ezekiel 36 but no need to turn to it but listen to what the Lord says in this little bit of Ezekiel 36 thus says the Lord God this also

I will let the house of Israel ask me to do for them to increase their people like a flock like the flock for sacrifices the flock of Jerusalem during her appointed feasts so shall the cities be filled with flocks of people did you hear what the Lord says there he says that I have promised and it is my will that one day the people of God the population of the people of God it will explode it will grow and grow and grow and grow but what does the Lord also say there in Ezekiel 36 he says I am going to let my people ask me to do that for them because the Lord loves to work out his will in answer to the prayers of his people because this is the dignity that God has bestowed upon our prayers here's another example from scripture you get this all the way through the prophets again and again and again the prophets promise that one day the Lord will establish his kingdom on earth in all its fullness in all its glory and on that day the glory of the

Lord will cover the earth as the waters cover the seas that's promised that is the Lord's eternal will that is coming unstoppable unshakable it will happen and yet what does the Lord Jesus command us to do in Matthew 6 verse 10 we are to pray your kingdom come because the Lord loves to work out his certain and sure will in answer to our prayers friends that is mind blowing that is mind blowing is it not the dignity that the Lord has given our prayers when we pray to the Lord and when we ask him to keep his promises when we pray like Elijah and think God's thoughts after him calling out on him to do what he says he will do the Lord delights to answer yes yes and when we see the great dignity that our prayers have in God's economy in God's plans and purposes surely that should excite us surely that should stir us up to pray that's what it does to Elijah here as one writer says we are called to take the promises of the

[22 : 12] Lord and turn them into prayers in order that the promises may come to pass what honor what honor God confers on us his servants who should have no higher ambition than to pray down his will well thirdly in this section we are also reminded of the mystery of prayer the mystery of prayer so in verse 42 Elijah is praying the promises of the Lord back to him he is thinking God's

thoughts after him he is asking for rain and having seen the way that the Lord answered the prophet's prayer back when he prayed for fire earlier in the chapter what would we expect to happen here in verse 42 well we would expect the Lord to immediately send in the clouds and for rain to start lashing down from heaven but that's not what happens is it that is not what happens in verse 43 whilst the prophet is crouched down in prayer

Elijah calls on his servant to go up the little journey to the summit and to look out over the sea to the line of the horizon to see if there was any sign of rain and so the servant goes up he looks out and he sees nothing absolutely nothing not one cloud in the sky something that we would love to see in Glasgow at some point soon but he sees not one cloud in the sky just as it's been for the past three years at that time nothing and so the servant goes back down and he says to Elijah there's nothing in the sky there's no sign of rain boss and so Elijah sends him back up again and he carries on praying this happens seven times nothing what is what is the lord doing why doesn't he just answer like he did before when he sent the fire what is the lord doing why does he seem to be taking his time with this rain well friends ultimately none of us can know why because we're not told why it is a mystery it's not been revealed to us if you think you know why well then you're just guessing one thing we can know for certain from this episode is that the lord our god he is not predictable the lord our god is not predictable as one writer puts it there is nothing monolithic about the lord's ways sometimes the way he answers his people's prayers it is mystifying it is mystifying my friends it may well be that when we as a church pray for the lord to act upon his promises it may well be that the lord answers us quickly and obviously and if you've come to our prayer meeting for some time you'll know that's so you'll know that there's things that we pray for one prayer meeting and then the next prayer meeting we turn up and the lord has answered the prayer quickly and obviously for one of our gospel partners he'd be carried out a great act of provision for one of our gospel partners who served the lord elsewhere the lord has answered quickly and obviously however we must never expect the lord to answer us in that way all the time it may well be that the lord responds to our prayers in a way that totally mystifies us could be we pray for a ministry that we support and nothing happens could be that we pray for a ministry that we support and actually situation the situation of that ministry gets worse and we think to ourselves what's going on lord what are you doing and the answer is we don't know and that's okay we've got to trust him we've got to live with mystery i was talking to a friend about this a long time recently about this in the church today we seem to have lost the beauty of living with mystery of remembering that we are creatures and that god is god we're not going to know everything we're not going to know why everything happens we're not going to know why sometimes it seems that the lord answers prayer like that but at other times we are left totally mystified as to what the lord is doing isn't how ralph davis puts it he says this we must learn to live with such mystery and allow it to teach us caution i think especially of those saints who are so keen to write god's script for him and seem to assume that he provides a one size fits all conversion experience or that he has a uniform way of answering prayer if only we have enough faith but friends the lord is not so dull sometimes prayer is relatively effortless and sometimes it is extremely agonizing

and who really knows why so friends let's look at the praying prophet here and i hope these lessons will really have encouraged us to get praying as a church one of the glorious things about going to the prayer meeting on a wednesday with the rest of the brothers and sisters even on zoom when we join in is to see the people of god praying like this we are a praying church but let's do it all the more let's do it all the more let's not give up but do what we're doing more and more and be encouraged well secondly the second big main section of the sermon is a bit briefer we're going to look at verses 44 to 46 and in this section we see a gracious god a gracious god 44 to 46 a gracious god and in these verses we see that the lord is gracious not only to his people he is so gracious to his people we also see in these verses the lord is gracious to an enemy to an enemy let's look firstly at the lord's grace to his people please look at verse 44 at the seventh time elijah's servant said behold a little cloud like a man's hand is rising from the sea so the seventh time the servant has gone up and finally at last the lord has given this sign that has appeared that shows that he has heard his prophet who was praying and in verse 45 a little later after this it says that the sky grew black and the clouds and the wind set in and finally there was heavy rain the lord graciously provides for israel giving the land the water it so desperately needed after over three years of drought friends rain meant life water for soil people and livestock it also meant that people could start growing grain for food and grass for the animals and for their farmlands remember

because the people turned away from the lord to baal they gave up these blessings but now now that they've turned back to the lord the lord graciously restores them showing himself to be their daily provider as one old scottish minister puts it like this israel is to learn again this day that the god who sends fire to convert their hearts will also send rain to refresh and feed their bodies in other words the people of israel would learn that the lord is the god of psalm 65 which we sang earlier in the service which declares that the lord god is not only the god of salvation he is that yes but he is also the god who visits the earth to water it and to enrich it greatly and friends maybe just maybe we today as god's people need to be reminded of this truth as well the lord our god is not only our savior he's not only the god who hears our prayers he is also our daily provider friends the running water that we have in our taps to drink the food that is so available in our supermarkets and in our kitchen cupboards where does the unbelieving world around us think that these things have come from the answer is not from the lord the unbelieving world around us does not think for even a second that the things that we have which are so common are actually gracious gifts from the lord and tokens of his kindness i have an atheist friend and one time at dinner we sat down and i just give him thanks for dinner

quietly and privately he clocked me doing this and my friend did not hesitate to tell me that he just thought i was nuts and he said pretty much he said that he has got this food in front of him because he alone has worked for it he is responsible solely for having this food in front of him and he was spurned on to do this by his need to survive that's actually what people believe about the food that they eat friends that is actually very easing as well as professing christians for us to start thinking in that same way too as one writer says whenever we fail to acknowledge the down to earth gifts of the lord such as food and drink we will slip away into what is known as naturalism which is a more contemporary and sophisticated form of Baal worship we've become blind to our father's gracious hand how crucial it is to understand that both holiness and harvest are gifts of god's grace so friend maybe that's a challenge for you today maybe that's a challenge for you today well the people of israel aren't the only ones on the receiving end of the lord's kindness they are they receive these great gifts of god and the rain and the life that follows but the lord is also kind to an enemy here king ahab back in verse 40 after elijah has dealt justly with the prophets of Baal remember he has them slaughtered by the people and that was in line with god's law that was in line with the lord's commandments that's what you did when people tried to seduce the lord's people away from loving the lord to follow false gods it was just and it was fair now at that moment elijah could have very well turned around looked at king ahab and said now it's time for him because ahab was the one remember responsible for bringing in this poison into the land of israel but he doesn't does he instead the lord's prophet he goes to ahab and he doesn't announce condemnation on him he says go have a meal go eat and drink because drought is about to end because rain is coming go eat and drink ahab you will see in other words the lord's prophet gives this rebellious king another chance to turn and repent and then in verse 44 before the rain starts elijah comes to ahab and says well sends message to ahab technically through his servant and says to ahab get your chariot ready ahab rain is coming it's on its way quick get in your chariot and go home before your chariot gets stuck in the soon to be wet and muddy ground and in verse 45 ahab does just that and he's traveling along in his chariot just imagine what the king's going through his mind he's sitting in his chariot and he looks out in front and he sees a man sprinting in front of his horses in verse 46 the king was riding in his chariot and through the rain that's just started to fall he could see this man with his robes hoisted up and he's running along sprinting absolutely bombing in front of the chariot and the king notices that's elijah that's elijah running in front of my horses and the journey from mount carmel to jezeel we know was about 17 miles and elijah bombs it in front of his chariot sprinting away for those 17 miles did he do that in his own strength not a chance verse 46 the hand of the lord was on elijah and he gathered up his garment and ran before

ahab to the entrance of jezeel and you look at that and you think what is going on here what is the lord why has the lord enabled his prophet to do this well again it seems that the lord is giving ahab another chance to turn this is another chance to repent this is the chance for him to be the king and the man that he really should be the lord enables elijah to run before ahab and that means that the prophet is running in front of the king the king is following the one who brings the word of the lord and that is how things were supposed to be in israel that's how things were supposed to be with the king that's how ahab was supposed to live his life not going on his own not going after other gods but being a humble servant and follower of the lord and his word you see by enabling elijah to run in front of that chariot as though the lord is saying to ahab look ahab look at how things should be you

the king humbly listening to me humbly following my word oh ahab if you did that your kingdom would be full of life your kingdom would be secure if you did that ahab if only you did that will you turn you see all this leaves ahab with a decision will he turn or not and we'll find out next week when we look at chapter 19 but for now let's just know that friends this is what the lord our god is like maybe you're here and you're new to the christian faith maybe you're here and you're just investigating what the god of the bible is like friends this is what he's like he's so kind even to people who hate him so kind that he delays bringing condemnation upon them for their sin so that they might see his goodness and turn and come and be forgiven and friends just think about all the evil ahab has done in chapter 16 we're told that he married jezebel totally rejecting the law of the lord not to marry people outside of the covenant people he also permitted baal worship he constructed a baal temple and a baal altar in the capital city of the nation he also personally practiced baal worship he was invested in this deeply himself in 18 verse 4 we're told that he allowed his wife to butcher the lord's prophets to go and kill servants of the word in verse 10 of chapter 18 he tried to hunt down

[38 : 07] Elijah whilst Elijah was in hiding he seems to think nothing more of Elijah than he is a mad dog who needs to be hunted down and put to death in verse 17 of chapter 18 he spoke out murderous hatred when he saw Elijah remember he said is that you you troubler of Israel Ahab has done all this evil he is an evil man and yet the lord our god gives him yet another gospel opportunity showing him the road to repentance and offering him the help of the servant of the word his prophet this is how kind the lord our god is this is how gracious the lord our god is as ezekiel 18 says he is the god who takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked rather he is the god who wants to see the wicked turn from his evil way to live and you know friends still today the lord is patient he is so patient with this evil and wicked world that we live in this world that is so turned his back against him in his kindness the lord has actually delayed the final day of judgment the final day of reckoning when he will put an end to all evil so that all those who are lost just now might hear the beauty of his gospel of his son and repent turn away from living life for themselves to trust in him alone today his mercy calls us to wash away our sin however great our trespass whatever we have been however long from mercy we have turned away the blood of christ can cleanse us and set us free today that is the kindness of our lord well amen friends let's bow our heads and we'll pray to him our gracious god and heavenly father we praise you for your goodness and your kindness to us we praise you that you hear our prayers what a gift what a privilege we praise you for your providence and the way that you provide for us you are the god who gives the rain we praise you for your grace you are the god who is so patient with us the god who has delayed judgment so that we might hear and turn and go on turning away from sin every day to trust in you alone father your mercy calls to us today help us to respond to that call by the obedience of faith and we pray this in jesus name and for his sake amen