



BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: 5 Prayers That Rocked the World

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For those of you that perhaps struggle with insomnia, there is help coming. I'm thinking about writing my autobiography. (Laughter) It's guaranteed to put anybody to sleep. Now of course I'm joking. I've often said to Patti, "Who gets up one morning and thinks, 'I'll write a whole book about myself?'" But if I did, this is what it would be like:

Chapter One: I got up. I ate a bagel, had a cup of coffee, drove to town, worked at my job, went home, made some supper, piddled around the acreage, went to bed.

Chapter Two: I went to Cherry on Top. Like always, I had vanilla (laughter). I went to the coffee shop, had a plain cup of coffee, went home, went to bed.

Chapter Three: I got up, had a bagel, a cup of coffee, drove to town, did my job, drove home, piddled a little on the acreage, went to bed.

You kind of get the idea. Have you ever thought about how much of your life is invested in the very ordinary—the mundane, the routine, the everyday stuff of life? Actually, it's the overwhelming majority of your life. So, if you're going to be a faithful Christian, that means you must learn to be faithful in the midst of the ordinary, the everyday, the mundane, the routine stuff of life.

No Christian that's ever lived goes from mountaintop to mountaintop to mountaintop. You say, "Well, wait a minute! What about some of those great men of faith from the Bible, like the Apostle Paul?" Actually, if you really do a study on his life, there were a handful of mountain moments. The overwhelming majority of his life was spent going from Point A to Point B, to being on a ship, to making tents, to teaching in the synagogue, to sitting in a prison. You say, "Well, what about Moses?" Well, what about Moses? He lived 120 years—just go back and reread the story—there's a handful of moments out of 120 years. The overwhelming majority of his life was the everyday stuff of life. I've often wondered if maybe God limits our mountaintop moments because of what those moments do to us, how they mess up our heads and cause us to lose perspective.

In our story, Elijah experiences one of the greatest mountaintop moments in all of the Old Testament, yet what follows immediately might shock you. If you have a Bible, turn with us to 1 Kings, Chapter 18. Just to give you a little background, this story would have occurred long

before King Manasseh. Ahab is a wicked king and he's king in the North, in Israel. He marries a queen by the name of Jezebel, who is also wicked, but very powerful. There's been three years of drought in the land and the land is experiencing a famine. There's tension between King Ahab and Elijah, because Ahab thinks it's Elijah's fault. So, the prophet Obadiah arranges a rendezvous between King Ahab and Elijah.

That's where we pick up the story in verse 17:

When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, "Is this you, your troubler of Israel?" He said, "I have not troubled Israel, but you and your father's house have, because you have forsaken the commandments of the LORD and you have followed the Baals. Now then send and gather to me all Israel at Mount Carmel, together with 450 prophets of Baal, and 400 prophets of the Asherah who eat at Jezebel's table."

(*NASB, 1 Kings 18: 17-19)

So, they have their little meeting and Ahab says to Elijah, "So you're the troublemaker!" And Elijah says, "Listen, fella, I'm not the problem here. You're the troublemaker, because you have led the people far from God." And he says, "How about we have a little contest and we'll settle this once and for all?" The idea of the prophets of Baal that sat at the table of Jezebel is a way of saying this was an All-Star team of prophets—the best of the best sat at her table. So, what he's saying is, "You pick 450 of your All-Star prophets and let's have it out once and for all."

So, Ahab sent a message among the sons of Israel and brought the prophets together at Mount Carmel. Elijah came near to all the people and said, "How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; if Baal, follow him." But the people did not answer him a word. Then Elijah said to the people, "I alone am left a prophet of the LORD, but Baal's prophets are 450 men. Now let them give us two oxen; and let them choose one ox for themselves and cut it up, and place it on the wood, but put no fire under it; and I will prepare the other ox, and lay it on the wood, and I will not put a fire under it. Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD, and the God who answers by fire, He is God." And all the people said, "This is a good idea." (Vs. 20-24)

In very Joshua-like language Elijah says, "How long are you going to be torn between the pagans and Yahweh God?" and suggests a contest. The idea of Mount Carmel: that is home-field advantage for the pagans. That's where a lot of their activity took place. So what Elijah is saying is, "Pick 450 of your best prophets. We'll give you the home-field advantage and we'll see what happens. We'll both set up an altar; we'll both call to our gods for fire. Whichever god shows up, that god is God. And the people say, "We like that. Let's do it."

So, Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose one ox for yourselves, and prepare it first for you are many, and call on the name of your god, and put no fire under it." Then they

took the ox which was given them, and they prepared it and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, “Oh Baal, answer us!” But there was no voice, and no one answered. And they leaped about the altar which they had made. It came about at noon, that Elijah mocked them and said, “Call out with a loud voice, for he is a god; either he is occupied or he has gone aside, or is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and needs to be awakened.” So, they cried with a loud voice and cut themselves according to their custom with swords and lances until blood gushed out on them. When midday was past, they raved until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice; but there was no voice, no one answered, and no one paid attention.

(Vs. 25-

29)

Imagine how frantic this scene must have been. From morning until noon, they leap; they dance; they cry out—nothing! Elijah decides to mock them. He tells them, “Maybe you need to yell a bit louder. Maybe he went for a little walk.” Literally the Hebrew is: “Maybe he went to relieve himself; maybe he’s in the bathroom. Maybe he’s sleeping. Wherever he’s at, he is not hearing you. You need to crank it up a little bit.” So, they cut themselves to where the blood is gushing out of them, and the scene gets more and more frantic. But by evening time, they have done everything possible. It must have been a horrendous scene—but nothing!

Then Elijah... [Don’t you love those words? You see what’s coming?] Then Elijah said to all the people, “Come near to me.” So, all the people came near to him, and he repaired the altar of the LORD which had been torn down. Elijah took twelve stones according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD had come, saying, “Israel shall be your name.” So, with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD, and he made a trench around the altar, large enough to hold two measures of seed. Then he arranged the wood and cut the ox in pieces and laid it on the wood. And he said, “Fill four pitchers with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood.” He said, “Do it a second time,” and they did it a second time. He said, “Do it a third time,” and they did it a third time. The water flowed around the altar, and he also filled the trench with water. (Vs. 30-35)

So, it’s already 450 to 1, with the pagans having a home-field advantage. But Elijah says, “Let’s up the ante a little bit.” So, he repairs the altar, gets twelve stones, representing the twelve tribes of Israel—again the reminder that Yahweh is the God of the Hebrews. He takes the water, four pitchers, three times—that equals twelve pitchers of water—again symbolic that Yahweh is the God of the Hebrew people. He pours it on everything on the altar, just to increase the tension.

At the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, Elijah the prophet came near and said, “O LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, today let it be known that You are God in Israel, and that I am Your servant, and I have done all these things at Your word. Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that You, O LORD, are God, and that You have turned their heart back again.” 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. When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and said, “The LORD Yahweh, He is God; Yahweh, He is God.” Then Elijah said to them, “Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape.” So, they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon and slew them there. (Vs. 36-40)

Imagine the scene: Elijah takes the water, soaks the sacrifice—it must have seemed impossible. Then he offers this magnificent prayer of courage and faith, and God sends fire out of heaven! It consumes the ox; it consumes the altar; it consumes the water, the dust—everything gone! And the people hit the dirt and say, “No question about it. Yahweh is God!” And Elijah says, “Take the prophets, haul them down to the river, and wipe them out!”

Now Elijah said to Ahab, “Go up, eat and drink; for there is the sound of the roar of a heavy shower.” So, Ahab went up to eat and drink. But Elijah went up to the top of Carmel; and he crouched down on the earth and put his face between his knees. He said to his servant, “Go up now, look toward the sea.” So, he went up and looked and said, “There’s nothing.” He said, “Go back,” seven times. It came about on the seventh time that he said, “Behold, a cloud as small as a man’s hand is coming up from the sea.” He said, “Go up, say to Ahab, ‘Prepare your chariot and go down, so that the heavy shower does not stop you.’” In a little while, the sky grew black with clouds and wind, and there was a heavy shower. And Ahab rode and went to Jezreel. And the hand of the Lord was on Elijah, and he girded up his loins and outran Ahab to Jezreel. (Vs. 41-46)

So, God provides this magnificent victory and so Elijah says to Ahab, “Hey listen fella, it’s party time.” That’s what he means by, “Go eat and drink.” There’s been three years of drought, three years of famine, but what Elijah is saying is, “The people have turned back to Yahweh—drought over, it’s party time!” So, he goes up on the mountain and he begins to fervently pray. He says to the servant, “Hey, go check the horizon and see if there are any clouds.” The servant comes back and says, “I’ve got to tell you this, boss, no clouds.” So, Elijah prays harder. Seven times back and forth—no clouds, until the seventh time, “Hey, I see a cloud on the horizon!” And Elijah sends word to Ahab and says, “Hey, listen, fella, if I was you, I’d get in my chariot and get off the mountain before you get stuck in the mud, because it’s about to rain!” It begins to rain and Elijah, twenty miles from where he was, he ran to Jezreel and actually beat the chariot.

This is a magnificent story. There’s a challenge, a contest, between the pagan god and Yahweh God. And God shows up in a big way, demonstrates that He’s real, sends fire, consumes the altar. The people turn back to God; the king is convinced; the drought is over; the famine is over. Everything is wonderful. Amen! Praise the Lord! Let’s go home...except the story goes on.

Now Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done...

Now I would have loved to have been a fly on the wall for this conversation, when Ahab comes home and says, “Honey, I don’t know quite how to tell you this, but 450 of your best prophets—they’re gone. They’re not coming home for supper.”

...and how they had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a message to Elijah, saying, “So may the gods do to me and even more, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time.” (1 Kings 19:1-2)

Jezebel is furious! Elijah has killed 450 of her best prophets. So, she sends word to Elijah and says, “Listen, fella, you’ve got twenty-four hours. If you aren’t out of town, we’re going to kill you.” Now I’m thinking, “This is no problem!” Elijah just went up against 450 prophets: 450 to 1, giving them the home-field advantage. This is no problem! He should just pray pray for God to send fire down on Jezebel’s head and burn her hair off! You know, that’ll show her.

Verse 3:

And he was afraid and arose and ran for his life...

I mean, what is up with that? A lot of questions around, “Why didn’t Jezebel just kill him? Why did she give him the chance to flee? Most believe if she’d have just killed Elijah, she’d have made him a martyr but, by causing him to run in fear, she not only discredits him, but she discredits his God. Whatever happened on Carmel, that was some sort of a parlor trick. But the reality is: when the pressure’s on, this guy put his tail between his legs, and he fled.

And he was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree; and requested for himself that he might die, and said, “It is enough now, O LORD, take my life, for I am not better than my fathers.” (Vs. 3-4)

So, what’s going on there? What happened to our courageous prophet that stood on the mountain and trusted God to give him a great victory? Now the queen is upset, and he takes off running and, in a short amount of time—hours, maybe a couple of days—he is seated under the juniper tree and he’s crying out to God. The last time he prayed it was for a miracle, and God did something awesome. This time it’s, “Woe is me! I’m the last one left. Nobody loves me! Just kill me now.” Perhaps what happened is reflected in his words that now he knows he’s not better than his fathers before him.

Cara: I love your message today, Bryan, because I think most believers have those Elijah days when we go from this mountain top to the valley in a really dramatic fashion. What took Elijah there? Was he just tired?

Bryan: I don't know that we know for sure. I think that is part of it. That was a pretty emotional, had to have been very stress filled event, and you just can't live on the mountain top. So, on the way down you're often vulnerable to the enemy's attack. So, I think he was probably emotionally tired, is physically tired. I think in those moments you just aren't really expecting the attack, and I think it's helpful for all of us to remember on the way down the mountain, we're pretty vulnerable.

Cara: Does that compare to your past message with Noah, when he comes out of the ship and then he's just like, "What"?

Bryan: Yeah, careless. I think, very similar.

Cara: Kind of the same thing. Okay. So, do we need to look for similar patterns in our lives and prepare, so we don't despair?

Bryan: Yeah, so, for sure. I think all of us are different, but we need to be aware of moments when we're especially vulnerable. So, just my personality, I don't have big highs, so I don't have big lows, but I do know moments when I'm more vulnerable, and have to be more aware of that. And the more awareness, the better we can prepare.

Cara: So, some personalities may be more prone.

Bryan: Yeah, yeah, I think for sure.

Arnie: So, Elijah starts out very boldly. I mean, can you imagine having a contest and initiate that contest? And this is tricky because it seems like it would have an easy answer, but it really doesn't, does it? What can we learn from this? I mean, would you do this today?

Bryan: I would not. So, it is a very unique story. [Yes.] I don't think the intent of the passage is that it's some sort of a model to follow, that we should go out and do the same thing. But I think what we do see, and what we've talked about so much, is he did believe, he did believe what he said he believed, and that led to this really unimaginable challenge, with the belief that God would come through. And I think figuring out what that looks like for us, but you believe it enough to take the necessary steps of faith.

Arnie: But Bryan, I doubt if I'll ever be prompted by the Holy Spirit to start a contest on God's behalf.

Bryan: No, probably not. I think the relevant question is, what would obedience look like for us? What is God asking of me and do I trust him? Do I believe enough to take whatever that step is?

Cara: God worked in this extraordinary way through Elijah's prayer. I mean, people were falling down on their faces and worshipping God. God's action on behalf of our prayers can bring the same reaction from people, but we have to remember, I think, to give God the glory and not take it for ourselves.

Bryan: Yeah. So, I think it's a reminder that real steps of faith can create opportunities for God to reveal himself. If His children just always play it safe, then what's the God factor, and how do people see that? So, when I step out by faith and the only hope is God, then it's an

opportunity for God to put His glory, His power on display. The problem I think is in our culture, we so often celebrate the leaders, rather than God. And we need to make sure God's the one that's celebrated.

Arnie: So, what's so crazy to me is, after God answers Elijah's prayers, Jezebel just like blows up. She takes exception to God's authority. And what was it about Jezebel that seemed to take Elijah down?

Bryan: She's such an interesting character. [She must've been scary.] Yeah, she was genuinely evil. I mean, Elijah had reason to fear her. It's amazing to me. She's unfazed by Elijah's God. I mean, just think about that. You'd have thought she'd have repented; [Right.] instead she wants a fight. So, I think part of it was Elijah knew she was evil and he'd every reason to be afraid. I also think he just wasn't expecting it. He probably was expecting, we won, and she's going to go along with it, and everything's going to be fine. And the last thing he thought is, she's going to come after him, but now he's public enemy number one. And he's afraid and fleeing.

Arnie: Can something like this happen to us today?

Bryan: Sure. I think the more God uses you, the more you become a target. And that's not pleasant. Elijah was out of the shadows and now in the cross hairs. And if you're going to trust God and God's going to use you, you kind of do the same thing. You step out of anonymity into the crosshairs. And that's a part of what happens when God uses you to do something special.

Cara: Today's message ended with Elijah's statement, about not being better than his fathers before him. What's he talking about there?

Bryan: Yeah. So, my best guess on that is this had been a problem for some time. Elijah steps up, challenges the prophets, wins this great battle. And in that moment, is thinking, he's like kind of a superstar prophet that has put an end to all this. And all he had to do was trust God and God came through. And so, he's thinking of himself in those terms and then, all of a sudden, here comes trouble. And he's humbled. And maybe in that moment, he's realizing I'm no better than any of those that have gone before me. And that's a part of what I think probably contributes to his depression there. I think that journey from the mountaintop to the valley is pretty common, and I think it has the potential to really mess us up. [It's amazing.] Yeah.