



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

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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. (*NASB, 1 Kings 18:36-40)

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)

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 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.” 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." (1 Kings 19:1-4)

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? He had just been a part of something spectacular and, obviously in the midst of that, he started thinking he's better than his forefathers—that he's the prophet of all prophets! They've struggled with pagan gods for generations, and Elijah is thinking, "This isn't so hard! You just set up a contest; you pray; God shows up; the people worship; the king is convinced—everything's fine! You know, I don't know what those guys before me were thinking, but this isn't so hard." But maybe he was also thinking, "You know, this was pretty good. I must be like Super-Prophet. It was probably 50% God and 50% me! So, he's quite shocked when Jezebel suddenly threatens his life, and he's in the wrong frame of mind and he runs for his life.

I think it's quite possible that one of the reasons God doesn't give us more mountaintop experiences is because of what it does to us. It starts to mess with our head. We start to think, "Look at what we did! I must be like Super-Christian! I must have Super-Faith! I must have the right formula. I've got to write a book about this, so other people will know the formula and do the same thing!" And we start thinking that life should be made up of these mountaintop experiences that are absolutely magnificent.

I've found it to be a very consistent story that oftentimes, when we have a mountaintop moment, almost immediately we find ourselves in the valley—in the pit of despair—because something happens to our perspective. We lose sight of what life is really about and we want another experience and we're seeking more and we're wondering, "What happened? How come God didn't show up on the mountain again and again and again?"—which is, I think, what's happening to Elijah. And so, he says, "I guess I'm not greater than all of the fathers that have come before. Just kill me now." I love the compassion that God shows him when He shows up.

He lay down and slept under a juniper tree; and behold, there was an angel touching him, and he said to him, "Arise, eat." Then he looked and behold, there was at his head a bread cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. So, he ate and drank and lay down again. The angel of the LORD came upon him a second time and touched him and said, "Arise, eat, because the journey is too great for you." So, he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mountain of God. (Vs. 5-8)

So, an angel of the LORD shows up. The first time it's angel; the second time, angel of the LORD—capital L-O-R-D. Whenever you see that in the Old Testament, it's typically a reference to the pre-incarnate Christ. In other words, Jesus didn't start at Christmas. Jesus is eternal. He actually shows up a lot in the Old Testament, typically under angel of the LORD, in all caps. So, He shows up to Elijah; He wakes him up and He actually has a fresh meal—warm bread and water. He says, "You better eat this. You're going to need it." So, Elijah eats a little bit, goes to sleep for a while. He wakes him up again, gives him more bread and water for his forty-day journey.

Now from where Elijah is to Mount Horeb—which is Mount Sinai; it's just another name for the same mountain—it's about a fourteen-day journey. So, Elijah is going to stretch a fourteen-day journey into a forty-day journey. It's not hard to imagine that, in the frame of mind that he's in.

He's going to mope his way to Sinai: "Woe is me! The whole world hates me! That's as far as I can go today." Day after day, after day, and he finally makes it to Sinai.

Then he came there to a cave, and lodged there; and behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (Vs. 9)

That's a very important question. Clearly this was not where God was leading Elijah. This was Elijah's idea and God's calling him on it: "Elijah, what are you doing here? What do you think is going to happen here?" This is Mount Sinai. This mountain was legendary as the place where Moses had an experience with God, such a great experience that he actually glowed when he came down off the mountain—maybe the ultimate mountaintop experience. This is where Moses hid in the cleft of the rock as God passed by, so that he could get a glimpse of His glory. And so, Elijah is thinking, "Man, that experience on Mount Carmel was so good; I need another experience. I need another mountaintop moment. Certainly, Sinai is the place where I'm going to get that."

So, God says, "Elijah, what are you doing here?" You know, "What do you think is going to happen here?"

He said, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword. I and I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away." (Vs. 10)

A total loss of perspective: "I'm the only one left! I'm the only one that loves You; I'm the only one that's been serving You, and now everybody hates me and wants to kill me. I just want to die." If you read between the lines, he's saying, "I'm the only one left—this has been really hard. I really need a mountaintop experience here." That's what he's asking for.

So, God said, "Go forth, and stand on the mountain before the LORD." (Oh, boy, here we go!) And behold the LORD was passing by! (That's very Moses-like language; don't miss that) And a great and strong wind was rending the mountains and breaking in pieces the rocks before the LORD; (Here we go!) but the LORD was not in the wind (Hmmm). And after the wind, an earthquake... (Here we go; it's going to be an earthquake!) ...but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake was a fire... (Oh boy, another fire story!) ...but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire, the sound of a gentle blowing. (Who cares about that?) When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave.

(Vs. 11-13a)

The idea of taking his cloak and wrapping his head—maybe thinking he's going to have a Moses moment, and he'll have to hide himself like Moses did in the cleft of the rock.

And behold a voice came to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (Vs. 13b)

This is such an interesting text. Elijah shows up on Sinai because he alone is left and, "I need another mountain moment, or I won't make it." So, God teases him a little bit, sends the wind—here it comes—whoa, not there. Now it's an earthquake, here it comes—it's not there. Now it's

a fire story—nope, not there. It's just a still, small voice! And God asks him again, "Elijah, what are you doing here? What do you think is going to happen here?"

Then he said, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life to take it away."

(Vs. 14)

Almost verbatim what he said before, as if this hasn't sunk in, where God says, "What are you doing here?" "I'm the only one left. I've been the faithful prophet; I've done everything You've asked. The whole world hates me; just kill me now." You can kind of picture God just shaking His head, like, "What is with this guy?" The rest of the chapter is just very ordinary. God very gently gets Elijah back to the business of being a prophet—go here, talk to this person, talk to that person, do this, do that—nothing out of the ordinary.

It's really quieted a story—Elijah goes from the mountain to the valley, just like that. There's no question that's one of the great mountaintop stories in all of the Bible, absolutely spectacular! But it messed with Elijah's head; he completely lost perspective. He would learn in a few verses there are still seven thousand Hebrews that love God and are seeking after Him. He's not alone; he's not the only one out there. But he went from the mountain to the valley, and God had to gently bring him back to fulfill his calling with the routine, ordinary, everyday stuff of a prophet.

There is no Christian that has ever existed, that goes from mountaintop to mountaintop to mountaintop to mountaintop. It just doesn't work that way. We have a mountaintop experience and we think, "I want one of those every day!" It becomes like an addiction—I keep looking for my next experience. But you can't live on the mountaintop. It doesn't work that way. The overwhelming majority of your life as a Christian will be lived in the midst of the most ordinary, everyday, mundane, routine things of life, and if you don't learn to be faithful in the midst of the ordinary, you will not be a faithful Christian. You can't have a few mountaintop experiences and call it good.

So, what does this have to do with prayer? It has everything to do with prayer! We've been trying to re-ignite our belief that prayer really does move the hand of a sovereign God. I don't know how this works, but I believe it's true. But if you think if you're really a good Christian and if you're really full of faith, and if you really pray fervently, and if you really do everything right, it's just going to be mountaintop after mountaintop after mountaintop; that there's so much power in prayer that, "Today I'm going to have a mountaintop experience—send the fire! Tomorrow, I'm going to walk on water, then the next day I'm going to part the sea, and the day after that I'm going to feed five thousand people with a Happy Meal, because that's the power of prayer!" If you start thinking that's the way it works, you're going to be sadly disappointed and you're going to finally conclude it just doesn't work, and you'll quit believing.

There's nowhere where God promises that the Christian life is mountaintop after mountaintop after mountaintop. To be faithful as a Christian is to learn to listen to the still, small voice of God, in the most ordinary, everyday circumstances of life, because that's where the majority of your life will be lived. And when you hear the still, small voice of God, everyday moments can become eternal moments.

Our Father, we're thankful that You love us and that You're patient with us. Lord, You give us a mountaintop experience, and we want one every day, and then we go into the valley of despair

when it doesn't happen. Lord, help us to understand what it means to be faithful in the midst of the most ordinary, everyday circumstances of life. Lord, give us ears to hear the still, small voice in the most ordinary moments of life, that our everyday moments might become eternal moments. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Cara: Bryan, in almost all of your teaching series, you remind us just how important those everyday happenings are in our lives. The key is to pay attention, otherwise we can miss that still, small voice.

Bryan: Yeah. Most of life happens in the ordinary, the everyday. Typically, people don't miss the big moments. What we miss is in the little everyday moments that ultimately will define our story.

Arnie: So, Bryan, you came down pretty hard on Elijah today. Was he really that arrogant or was he just tired? Would you say we need to be aware of when we're coming off of a spiritual high?

Bryan: I think that's really important actually, to know when you're vulnerable and usually after a mountain top experience, you can't stay on the mountain, so you have to come down and that can be pretty vulnerable. So, you know, it's trying to figure out what keeps you grounded, to not neglect your disciplines. You know, figure out those moments for you and what you do in those moments. But they are going to happen.

Cara: So, taking it back to prayer, today we saw God answering Elijah's prayer. Not only when he was spiritually bold, but also when he was feeling pretty faint hearted. That should give us some pretty good hope.

Bryan: Right. So, God hears our prayers because we're His children, not because we've earned the right to be heard. So, He even hears a whisper, He hears a groan. [Yeah.] Yeah, God wants to hear what we have to say.

Arnie: There are those times when we do feel very alone in our faith and that's when we need to gather with other believers and be strengthened. But I know, at least for me, when I'm feeling that way, the last thing I want to do is to be hanging out with other people.

Bryan: Yeah. So, I think that's exactly right. And that's what makes it so dangerous. You know, we go back to Genesis Three and the first thing Adam and Eve did when they sinned is, they hid. And there's just something in us that when life is hard, we want to hide. We want to isolate. What I sometimes tell people is the times when I least feel like gathering to worship are probably the times when I most need to be there. And that's why I would call it a discipline. It isn't always easy, and you have to discipline yourself to do that.

Cara: It's like sometimes you get that feeling like it's a job, but you just have to push through. [Yeah.] That's really good advice. It's so interesting how God asks Elijah what he's doing in the cave. You go back to Genesis Three and God asks the same question of Adam. It's almost comical, because God knows where these guys are and why they're there.

Bryan: Yeah. So, some of that is just the text's way of putting forth the information. Because obviously God already knows. But I do think it's like God's a good counselor and He's wanting them to wrestle with their beliefs and actions, and simple questions often expose a lot. So, it's a good question for Elijah and he needs to answer the question.

Cara: Actually, I said it's comical, but it's actually not that funny: those times when I feel like God's calling me out on something.

Bryan: Yeah, I agree. But don't you think it's true? Sometimes we chuckle because in these stories we see ourselves, and sometimes if you can see your own ridiculous behavior in somebody else, it helps me address it in my own life. So sometimes I do see myself in these stories and it is, I do kind of chuckle because it's so ridiculous.

Cara: I always think the best pastors are the ones that you can hear the reprimanding in the sermon, because then I'm getting something from it. Like I know I'm close to God, because I can still hear that still, small voice thing. But you're that guy. [Yeah.] You're that.

Bryan: Yeah. Yeah, once that voice stops, that's not good. [Right.]

Arnie: No, no. Is there ever a time that we should call on God to prove himself like he did for Elijah? I mean, I can't imagine demanding, "Answer me, answer me." That's totally out of my prayer vocabulary. I pray for answers, but to demand an answer from the Creator of the Universe, is this something we should do?

Bryan: A really good question. I think sometimes people get confused with these great Old Testament stories and trying to figure what's the relevance to us. I don't think the point of the story is that's a formula to replicate. I can't imagine just setting up something like Elijah did and demanding God to just show up and meet my demand. But if we're going to talk about like God proving himself, maybe the better way to think about it is just rightly standing on the promises of God and expecting Him to be true to what He's promised. But typically, it's not going to be nearly as dramatic as what happened in this story. I mean it's one of the great stories in the Old Testament.

Cara: So, at the end of the day, our perspective should be that our prayers definitely have a pull-on God's heart. We should be praying day and night, night and day, regardless of the situation, and regardless of how we feel.

Bryan: Right. So, at the end of the day - that's a very good phrase. [Yeah, thank you.] [I've heard it before.] Right? I think how much we pray; I don't like saying this because it's very convicting. How much we pray is indicative of what we actually believe about prayer. If we really believe prayer moved the hand of God, we would pray more. So little prayer, I think means little belief, and lots of prayer means lots of belief. I don't know how else to explain that.