

SINNERS & SAINTS

Elijah

1 Kings 18–19

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Today we wrap up our Sinners & Saints sermon series that began back at the beginning of June. While we tend to put people God uses on pedestals, the reality is that the people God used in the Old Testament and continues to use today are flawed. They mess up and sin, missing the mark, just like you and I do. I hope the message has come through loud and clear in this series that saints aren't defined by their own goodness or holiness. As Tyler Staton says, "Saints are people through whom God demonstrates his goodness." The great news about the imperfection of the people God uses is that none of us are beyond being used by God. We all qualify. Those of us who invite Jesus into our lives are identified by the Bible as saints.

The character we're focusing on today is Elijah—a prophet to the nation of Israel in the 9th Century B.C. Elijah served Israel during a time when God's people were unfaithful. They had consistently ignored and disobeyed God, and they were experiencing the consequences of their sin. As we pick up Elijah's story, Israel was in year three of a crippling drought. The drought began when Elijah announced to Israel's king, Ahab, that there would be no dew or rain on the land for the next few years until Elijah declared it would rain. Finally, the word of the Lord came to Elijah, and God told him to go to King Ahab to tell him God was going to lift the drought and rain would come at last. Elijah, who had been in hiding because King Ahab wanted to kill him, found King Ahab's palace administrator, Obadiah, who was a devout follower of God and told him that he was ready to meet the king to tell him the drought would soon end. I'll begin reading at 1 Kings 18:16.

So Obadiah went to meet Ahab and told him, and Ahab went to meet Elijah. ¹⁷ When he saw Elijah, he said to him, "Is that you, you troubler of Israel?"

¹⁸ "I have not made trouble for Israel," Elijah replied. "But you and your father's family have. You have abandoned the LORD's commands and have followed the Baals.

¹⁹ Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring

the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table."

²⁰So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. ²¹Elijah went before the people and said, "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him."

But the people said nothing.

²²Then Elijah said to them, "I am the only one of the LORD's prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets. ²³Get two bulls for us. Let Baal's prophets choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. ²⁴Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD. The god who answers by fire—he is God."

Then all the people said, "What you say is good." – 1 Kings 18:16-24

In this account, we see the spiritual complacency of God's people. In verse 21, when Elijah challenges them about their doublemindedness in wavering between the one true God and Baal and tells them to choose today whom they will serve, they all said nothing. And then when Elijah establishes the rules of the challenge, the crowd says, "What you say is good." God has worked in remarkable ways in the lives of their ancestors—delivering them from Egypt, leading them across the Red Sea and miraculously sustaining them through their 40-year trek in the desert to the Promised Land—but they're uncertain whether they want to continue serving God. These verses set the stage for one of the most dramatic scenes in all the Old Testament, ranking right up there with David's killing of Goliath, and Daniel making it out of the lions' den unscathed.

Elijah told the 450 prophets of Baal to go first in asking their god to send fire from heaven, so they prepared their sacrifice and began to cry out to their gods. The prophets of Baal started in the morning, and by noon, still nothing had happened even though they cried out fervently. They yelled and danced and even cut themselves, but Baal remained silent. After a while, Elijah began to taunt them: "Shout louder! He said. Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened" (1 Kings 18:27).

Verse 29 sums up the prophets of Baal's efforts with these words: "But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention."

Finally, it was Elijah's turn. Elijah repaired the Lord's altar, which was broken down after disuse. He then dug a trench around the altar. I can picture Elijah doing all this with dramatic flair and having a good time. After arranging the wood on the altar and placing the pieces of the bull on the altar, he instructed servants to dump four large jars of water on the sacrifice, and they did this three times until the sacrifice and altar were thoroughly soaked. Then Elijah prayed.

LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again. – I Kings 18:36–37

As soon as Elijah finished praying, BOOM! Fire fell from heaven. The flames not only lit the sacrifice, but the meat, wood, stones, and soil were consumed, and the water in the trench was completely dried up. At Elijah's command, the Israelites herded together the prophets of Baal, and they were killed. Then Elijah climbed to the top of Mount Carmel and waited for the rain to come. After some time, a small cloud the size of a man's hand rose from the sea, and Elijah knew that the rain was about to come. He instructed King Ahab to hitch up his chariot and go down the mountain before the rain arrived. As the sky grew black and the wind picked up, heavy rain began to fall. God's Spirit came on Elijah, and he raced down the mountain to the city of Jezreel, passing Ahab's chariot.

What an amazing story! God dramatically displayed his power over Baal to his people in a showdown between his prophet Elijah and 450 prophets of the pagan god. Then as rain began to fall for the first time in three years, Elijah outraced King Ahab's horse-driven chariot down the mountain. I love this story, and if it were a fairy tale, the people of Israel would have lived happily ever after faithfully serving God, and Elijah would be revered as a mighty man of God who enjoyed the sunset years of his life. But this is the Bible, not a fairy tale, and these are real people, not Hollywood actors. Following his dramatic victory over the prophets of Baal and over

wicked King Ahab and his equally evil wife, Queen Jezebel, Elijah was overcome by human emotions every one of us is all too familiar with. Listen to 1 Kings 19:1-5.

Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, “May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them.”

Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. “I have had enough, LORD,” he said. “Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.” Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep. – 1 Kings 19:1-5

After Elijah woke up, God provided food and drink for him, and then God asked Elijah what was going on. Elijah replied, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

Before we look at God’s response to his prophet, I want to make sure we consider what’s taking place. God has just worked incredibly through Elijah. He responded to Elijah’s prayer by sending fire and validating him as the victor in a contest with 450 prophets of Baal. Then God sent rain on a drought-plagued land where there had been no moisture for three years. Finally, God empowered Elijah to race down the mountain, outrunning the king who was riding in his horse-driven chariot. Elijah should be flying high, right? Instead, he’s overwhelmed by fatigue—he fell asleep, was awakened by an angel to take some nourishment and then collapsed again. He was lonely—“I am the only [follower of Yahweh] left and now they are trying to kill me too.” He was filled with anxiety and worry—Jezebel said she was going to make his life like other prophets she’d murdered by killing Elijah too. And he was consumed with self-pity—“Take my life, Lord; I am no better than my ancestors.”

We’re going to look and see how God ministered to his prophet and delivered him from the dark space he was in, but first I want us to reflect on Elijah’s experience. To my knowledge,

none of us have had as dramatic of a victory as Elijah had over the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, but I'm guessing that if we pause and consider what happened to Elijah, we can relate to his experience. Have you ever seen God work in your life in a significant way (perhaps answering a prayer you've been praying) or pouring his blessing on you in a special way only to quickly forget about what happened and doubt Him only days or weeks or months later? Have you read an inspiring story in Scripture of God's miraculous power being unleashed in someone's life only later in the day to doubt whether God can move in your life in a tough circumstance you're facing? Have you ever heard a friend or a family member share a testimony of how God worked in their life, and a short time later find yourself questioning whether God is really able to meet your need?

Elijah's emotional response in this story, while dramatic, is not uncommon. It's often after we experience a great high from seeing God move in our lives or in the life of someone we know that we're most vulnerable to doubt, fear, anxiety, and even self-pity. Let's look now at God's remedy for Elijah. Follow along as I read starting at verse 11 of 1 Kings chapter 19:

The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by."

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. ¹² After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. ¹³ When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" – 1 Kings 19:11-13

After everything that had happened, Elijah needed rest, food, and water, and he desperately needed perspective, but what Elijah needed most was an encounter with God. God instructed Elijah to leave the cave and to go out and await the Lord passing by. As Elijah stood there waiting, a mighty wind ripped into the mountain and dislodged the rocks, but God wasn't in the wind. Then an earthquake came and shook the mountain, but God wasn't in the quake.

Then fire came—reminiscent of what had happened on Mount Carmel—but God wasn't in the fire. And then Elijah heard a gentle whisper, and when he heard it, he knew it was God. He pulled his cloak over his face. Once again, God asked his prophet, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah repeated what he had said earlier: "I've done all you asked me to do, but your people don't listen to me. They continue to disobey you. They have killed all the rest of your prophets and now they're going to kill me too." And then God gave Elijah a series of instructions, including the call to anoint Elisha as his successor.

Elijah's experience reminds us that our ultimate need isn't for God to answer our prayers or to do amazing work through us. What we most need is God's ongoing presence in our lives. We need to hear his voice and receive his leading and direction. We need to walk in relationship with Him. When God does work in and through us in significant ways, it's easy for us to get caught up in everything that's going on and neglect our relationship with God. I suspect that's what happened to Elijah. It's when God works through us that you and I are most vulnerable to attacks of our enemy, Satan, who always seeks to oppose whatever God is doing. We're vulnerable to physical depletion from lack of rest and nourishment, and vulnerable to emotional and spiritual fatigue that shows itself in doubt, fear, loneliness, anxiety and self-pity.

As part of our response this morning, we're going to receive the Lord's Communion. Respective to our message this morning, as you take this time to remember Jesus' sacrifice for you on the cross, I encourage you to reaffirm your commitment to pursue Jesus, understanding that apart from Him, every one of us is lost. As Jesus reminded his disciples in John's Gospel chapter 15:

"Remain in me, as I remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in my and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." – John 15:4–5

And in response to our "Saints & Sinners" summer series, I invite you to embrace the truth that in spite of your sins, shortcomings, and failures—your humanity—Jesus calls those of us who have given ourselves to Him, saints. And his desire for each of us is that we would make

ourselves available to Him for Him to accomplish his purposes through us. As the Apostle Paul tells us in Ephesians 2:10, “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”