

The Race For Grace

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[0 : 00] So if we can turn to the First Book of Kings and chapter 18, as I say, we're picking up from where we left off this morning. There, verse 41, First Kings 18 and verse 41.

Now there's something about the presence of certain people. When these people are there, you have thoughts that sort of seem to come from nowhere.

There's no explanation for these thoughts. For example, when a policeman or a policewoman passes you in the street, what do you think? What do you feel?

What runs through your head? And why do you perhaps begin to feel a little bit of guilt? And of course there could be a reason for that.

But how often does it happen? And you don't know why. There's no real reason to feel like this. It just happens, they're there and the thoughts are in your head.

[1 : 02] Some people say that ministers can have that similar effect on people. Although I must admit, as a minister, I find that quite funny.

Because it probably means that that person certainly knows nothing whatsoever about me. I wonder what King Ahab was thinking after the contest that showed out on Mount Carmel. Clear evidence had been given there on the mountain that Yahweh, the Lord, the God of Israel was God.

And that the worship of Baal, the Canaanite God, was little more than a sham. When Elijah tells Ahab in verse 41 to go, eat and drink, I wonder what the King, what King Ahab was thinking. Did he have any feelings of regret? Did he have any feelings of guilt for his life, for his policies, for his activities?

[2 : 11] The Prophet and the King are set side by side in these verses from 41 to 46. And in looking at the Prophet and the King, we have a number of interesting lessons.

So I want to look at them in two headings this evening. The first is the prayer of the Prophet. That really takes us through into the middle of verse 45.

And then secondly, the race, the race you might call it, between the Prophet and the King. But it is really the race of grace through to verse 46.

So in verse 41, we're not told that Elijah prays when he climbed back up again to the top of Mount Carmel. But when it says there, verse 42, when it says in verse 42, that Elijah bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees, we understand that he is praying.

Of course, Elijah had just completed one of the most confrontational episodes found in the whole Bible.

[3 : 26] The events of Mount Carmel against the prophets of Baal. But now this fearless prophet must fall on the ground and on his knees, at least his head between his knees, and pray.

The real issue is not so much to do with the show of power on Mount Carmel. There was clearly a display of power, the power of the living God.

But the issue actually within this whole part of the story of the life of Elijah was to do with rain. It was to do with when the rain would come.

You remember that Israel and the surrounding region had had no rain for over three years, three and a half years. You go back to the beginning of chapter 17 to find that the Lord had said that there would not be rain for this period of time.

James in his letter in the fifth chapter there, as we read, he reminds his readers of that occasion in the life of Elijah, that he says Elijah earnestly prayed that it would not rain.

[4 : 37] I mean, it's in itself is an interesting comment because, you know, if we ever pray about rain, I suppose maybe I'm just starting to think that maybe in this country we might pray it might not rain.

But generally you pray for rain. Most of the world people will pray for rain. But he prayed earnestly that it would not rain and it did not rain for three and a half years.

But again, at the start of chapter 18, God says to Elijah that he was now going to send rain. Elijah himself did not have the power to produce rain.

Even his earnest prayer, which quite clearly in James's term was the prayer of a righteous and a faithful man in itself did not have the power to produce rain.

God has. And Elijah must turn to that God in prayer. Sometimes I think Bible characters and especially someone like Elijah must seem something of a superman to us.

[5 : 46] But that's to misunderstand the life of these Bible characters, to misunderstand the life of the prophets. Elijah, other prophets in the Bible, does not have some trick up their sleeve to get out of any and every difficult situation.

The frequent battles against the odds had exhausted Elijah. That's why I wanted to read on into chapter 19. After the events that have taken place in chapter 18, the confrontation on Mount Carmel, where both the power of God and the reality of the existence of God and that there is no other God in Israel but God, the Lord had been showing.

And then as we're looking and I'm not giving anything away, we've already read it, how Elijah, the prophet, outruns the chariot of Aham. The prophet at the start of chapter 19 is exhausted.

As we would expect of any ordinary human being who goes through such events, such trials, such things which demand your energy, your courage, your persistence, you cannot go on forever.

You must rest. And Elijah is seems in chapter 19 to be beyond the point of being able to even rest.

[7 : 27] He wants to die. That's why James says, Elijah, a man of like nature, a man, a human being like you and me is all that James is telling us there.

His faith was tested. But, but he does meet the test with prayer. We would do well to learn that lesson in regard to prayer.

Not again that we should be like Elijah, we should be warriors, we should be prayer warriors, which again feeds the idea that we should be Superman.

Look at the real Elijah. He prayed because there was nothing else for him to do. There was nothing else left in him but to pray.

And that doesn't mean the lesson is once you get really desperate, well, you can start praying. It's good to pray regularly. It's good to pray in the good times.

[8 : 36] It's good to pray in the bad times. But prayer, you see, teaches us this. It teaches us to be humble because prayer itself is a reminder that we are not superhuman, but instead are wholly completely dependent on God.

In recent years, there's been a number of academic researchers into prayer, which you may or may not be aware of. And the interest of the research would seem to be whether or not prayer works.

Of course, what do we mean by prayer working? But I think you know what I mean. Now, some of these researchers, we would say, you know, sitting here in a church, we would say have been positive.

For example, they suggest that patients in hospital who are prayed for do better than those who are not prayed for. And people like things that work.

And so maybe these research results will make people more interested in prayer. I don't know. Maybe they will. Maybe they won't.

[9 : 48] If they think that, oh, so you're saying that prayer works. But what does Elijah's prayer, what does Elijah's persistent prayer teach us?

You know, notice he sends his servant back to the mountain to look out over the sea, sends him back seven times. The most important thing Elijah's prayer teaches us is that connection between the promises of God and the prayers of his people.

Elijah was confident enough, for example, to tell Ahab in verse 41, to go and eat since the sound of heavy rain was in the air.

I remember this is in a place where it had not rained for three and a half years. But he has confidence to say to the king, go and eat the sound of heavy rain is in the air.

On the other hand, he still continues to pray to God. Probably for that very same thing that God had promised to do at the start of chapter 18.

[10 : 57] After three and a half years, I will send rain. And it's not, in fact, unusual to find this pattern in the Bible.

God promises and delights to fulfill his promises in answer to the prayers of his people. Perhaps just to give you one example, it's a bit easy as a preacher to say, in the Bible it says, and then just assume they'll all believe me.

But let me give you one example, perhaps the greatest example. Revelation chapter 2, verse 20, as we come right to the end of Scripture, Jesus promises there that he is coming soon. And what does John, the writer of the book of Revelation, say? He says, amen, come, Lord Jesus. We would think that it was enough to be sure that there was a promise of God.

[12:03] And so no need to pray for it. God has promised, God fulfills his promises. It's not like you and me who might make promises, might even be well-meaning.

But inevitably there are those we don't fulfill. God does not like that. He fulfills his promise enough to know that he has promised. So no need to pray for it.

But that's not how prayer works. You see, when there is prayerlessness, a lack of prayer, what is that?

Because someone is just so confident in the promise of God. Let's be honest, it's something different, isn't it? When there is a lack of prayer, it is in fact a terrible sign. It is a sign that either we do not know God's promises. So these things are of no real interest to us, and we've never explored them or looked into them.

[13:05] So we don't know God's promises, and so no surprise, we're not bound to be praying. Or that we maybe do know them. But we could not care less whether or not the promises of God are fulfilled.

Now there in verse 43, what we can say is that it seems that on six occasions the prayers of Elijah go unanswered. The words of his servant, their arms a bit depressing after he sends him off to look out to the sea and he comes back and just tells us the once, but remember this happens six times, there's nothing there.

Now we are probably dishonest if we say that we have never felt that after some of our own prayers. Yes, I've prayed, I've been praying about this.

And, and there is nothing there. What about Elijah? Had not God earlier that same day answered his prayer in an immediate and stunning way there on Mount Carmel?

So why not now? Do you know the answer to that? If you do, please come and tell me. I don't. I don't know the answer to that. Why such an immediate and stunning and powerful answer to prayer there on Mount Carmel when God sends down the fire, it burns up the bull, the wood, the altar and the water in the trench around the altar.

[14:41] And now he's praying for rain and he's got a promise that there will be rain. And on six occasions his servant says, there's nothing there. I don't know why.

As we read on into chapter 19, as we did there in verse four. Fortunately, God refuses the prayer request of Elijah completely.

We just read to verse four, but I think I think you know, don't you? God completely refuses his prayer request. Now let me die.

Why? I don't know again or not precisely. What I do know is that there is a variety in answers to prayer that yes, can be hard for us to understand.

But the prayers are being answered. They are being heard. They are being answered. Back in the day in school, I had a maths teacher who in teaching would explain the day's lesson, what we were trying to work out how to do in maths by putting it all up on the blackboard.

[16:01] And although it must have barely passed 21, it's true that when I was in school we still had blackboards. And then she would ask if there are any questions.

And I often had a lot of questions in maths and quite a few others in the class did as well. So we would ask the teacher, could you work through that again?

Could you explain things again? And sadly the usual reply from this teacher was, what is there to understand? And for us it was like everything.

It made no sense. But the teacher did not seem to have another way of explaining the lesson. I've done it. You don't get it. What is there to do?

But thankfully our God is not like that. Our God is far more imaginative than that. Our God responds in a variety of ways to our prayers.

[17:02] So then back in 1 Kings 18, when the rain comes, it's going to end the drought, of course, a lack of water. And in time that will also end the famine, the lack of food.

God is showing His mercy to the land. He is showing His mercy to His people, the people of the land. So there will be food and drink on the tables of Israel once more.

In some ways, however, this just doesn't seem so spectacular, does it? It's certainly not as spectacular an answer to prayer as the all-consuming fire on Mount Carmel was.

But God answers prayer with what we might call ordinary things, ordinary answers to what we may even deem ordinary prayers, just as He does on occasion in spectacular things.

But we should never despise the ordinary as if perhaps the ordinary was something that we have an absolute right to anyway.

[18:17] Some may be old enough to know times of praying for food. But so many up and down our country, that is barely a thing that would ever enter your head.

You may be brought up to give thanks for your food before you eat it. But how many, again, will be honest enough to admit, it becomes something of a routine thing to do.

I do not expect to find my cupboard bare when I get up in the morning to have breakfast. I expect to find my cereals in the cupboard, my bacon in the fridge, and so on and so forth.

It happens every day. And so we end up feeling that we almost have an absolute right to it. Food on the table have a right to that.

But the reality is, no, the provision of each day is God's special answer to prayers for the ordinary.

[19:25] You think in our world today, how many would love to have the clean water that we, again, take for granted? You do not expect to turn on the tap and it pours out poison.

It brings water, clean water. So you see, these ordinary, everyday things we can take for granted.

And yet, the fact that we have access to clean water prevents killer diseases that in some parts of our world are wiping out thousands of people every year.

So that's the prayer of Elijah the prophet. And so we come to the last short bit from verse 45 and to the end of chapter in verse 46, the race of grace.

Now by now, we should know that Elijah by himself could not possibly hope to outrun the chariot of King Ahab. Elijah is not Superman. He doesn't just sort of, as it were, rip off his cloak.

[20:34] And he says, right, stack up your chariot, but I'll beat you. With God's help, with God's help, he will outrun the chariot of the king.

Now there was a reason for this journey to be fast. There was a reason for the race. You see, the road would make the road from Mount Carmel southwards to Jezreel, where Ahab had his summer palace.

The rain would make that road impassable. So move quick, because the clouds are coming behind us. We might ask, what is this part of the story?

Why is it included? Is it just to show again what God can do with merely human servants, the powerful running of Elijah? The idea that the servant of God can run faster than a horse with God's help.

Again, I don't think so. I think we must understand that Elijah, the prophet of the Lord, is sprinting in front of Ahab the king of Israel, the king of the Lord's people.

[21:48] So what is important when we're looking at this race of grace is the roles of Elijah on the one hand and Ahab on the other. The role of Elijah in relation to the Lord and the role of Ahab in relation to the Lord and his people.

I think that is what is helpful for making sense of verse 45 and 46. Now in that time, in that day, in that part of the world, it was normal for a herald to go in front of the chariot of the king.

And the herald's task was to announce that the king was arriving. Make way. Here comes the king.

So what we have here is a kind of picture of Elijah as the herald going in front of the chariot of the king.

Here we see then Elijah is a servant of the king. So put aside all your thoughts and your ideas about Ahab, the bad king.

They're quite right. Your thoughts are quite right. But put them aside. Elijah is heralding the arrival of the king. In this sense, he is a servant of the king. Despite the confrontation, despite the king's attitude to Elijah, despite the apostasy of the nation, the apostasy of Israel, the picture is one that suggests that a proper harmony between king and prophet can be restored.

[23:17] There could be better days for the future of king, prophet and the lord's people.

Perhaps there is also something in the fact that the king is following the prophet. The king's position is at a vital one.

And if he follows the direction that the lord gives him, then that is a benefit to the whole people, the whole nation.

The lord's direction in these days has been given through his prophet Elijah. Ahab would do well to follow him and to follow him in more ways than just in his chariot.

Now of course, in the Old Testament, we often find that the prophets of the lord are in conflict with the kings of the lord's people, the kings of Israel.

[24 : 14] Isaiah has his confrontations, Jeremiah has his confrontations, the successor Elijah, Elisha will have his confrontations with the kings of the lord's people.

Now you could say a lot on that, but it's enough tonight to remember that this is part of God's plan of amazing grace in sending his son, King Jesus, Jesus the Christ, the Messiah.

In the New Testament, of course, we discover how Jesus is both the prophet and the king. In him, there is this proper harmony between prophet and king.

In him, the harmony between prophet and king is fully. And finally restored.

What this scene Elijah running in front of the kings chariot, what this scene tells us then is the amazing offer of grace by the lord to yes, even King Ahab.

[25 : 26] Forget everything that has happened before. You, Ahab, can be a servant of the lord. The lord who graciously offers to restore righteousness to him and to the kingdom.

It is the race of grace is the scene that we see. That's beautiful, isn't it? It's beautiful.

But then ask ourselves, are we so forgiving and gracious towards those tyrants and beasts and depraved people who are still in our world today?

God in his offer of good news in Jesus Christ is. Ask ourselves, what do we say?

John Brown of Harrington in East Lothian, quite here Edinburgh, and here's the interesting aside.

There's a free church of Scotland congregation in Harrington for the first time in over 120 years, and I was glad to be able to worship there last summer.

[26 : 42] But John Brown of Harrington, he won't be preaching there now because he was an 18th century Scottish minister and theologian. And John Brown was a remarkable character.

He was an orphan at a young age. He was orphan. He worked as a shepherd and as a young man, but still a very young age.

Through largely self education, he would go on to become known as one of the most intelligent and godly ministers that Scotland has ever seen.

He, for example, spoke 12 languages. And I love this quote from John Brown, when we think about God's amazing grace, his offer to King Hayab, and that he is the same God who reaches out in amazing grace today.

John Brown said this, Oh, to have my heart stirred and set in an eternal flame of love to that dear son of God, of whom I think I can say he loved me and gave himself for me.

[28 : 04] And I am sure in point of worthlessness, he might as well have loved Beelzebub Satan himself.

For Ahab, you see, there was a huge decision. He turns his chariot towards the summer palace at Jezreel. And soon as he arrives at that palace, as he gets down out of the chariot, he will be with his wife, Queen Jezebel.

What will he choose? Which way will he turn? And God still calls today to King Hayab's.

And he says, What way will you turn? Amen.