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Elemental: Holy Fire | 1 Kings 18**

Fire. What is it about fire that fascinates us? That mesmerizes us and frankly, makes us a little bit crazy? We're terrified by it; we're drawn to it, and sometimes we're repelled by it. We want to control it, and yet, no matter what we do, we know at the end of the day that we cannot control it. We come up with all kinds of sophisticated schemes to manipulate fire so that it becomes our servant, but then there are those reminders, those occasions that give us pause and remind us that no matter what we do, we cannot control fire, and in fact, fire must be respected. We tell our kids not to play with matches; don't go too close to the fire—watch out! And what do they do? They wait until we are out of view, and they go to find that box of matches so that at the first opportunity they have, they can discover what that amazing secret is that we are trying to keep from them. Fire. We go to 4th of July pyrotechnic displays and we are wowed and amazed by the beauty that comes from igniting something combustible.

Some of you know that I am originally from the Democratic Republic of Congo, a huge country right smack in the middle of Africa. It's a big country—about the size of the United States, east of the Mississippi River. To put that in practical terms, it's from here to New York and everything in-between. It's so large that most of the people who live there, in their lifetime, will never see most of the country that they call home. I'm one of the lucky ones. I've been able to travel to parts of that country that most of my relatives will never see. And on the top of my bucket list, I hope one day to be able to climb Mt. Nyiragongo, which is an active volcano on the outskirts of the city of Goma. Sitting

at almost 12,000 feet elevation, its crater forms one of the deepest lava lakes in the world, forming a literal lake of fire. The beauty of this crater is unparalleled. My friends that have done this trek tell me that they come back appreciating even more the amazing raw power and energy that's generated from this volcano that's been cooking for millennia; this amazing natural light show. And yet, there is also a dark side to a volcano. In January of 2002, this sleeping giant near Nyiragongo decided it was time to wake up, and within a matter of hours, three rivers of flowing lava descended towards the city of Goma and neighboring villages, wreaking havoc—devastation the likes of which no one had ever seen, at least in their lifetime. The sheer power of liquid fire continues to be seen and to be felt, even to this day in the aftermath of it.

Well, today we continue in our series called “Elemental” and we are exploring the idea of God’s presence throughout the narrative of the scriptures through the elements that occur in nature. Today our topic is, of course, fire. There are tons of references in the Bible to fire. Most of them refer literally, of course, to fire, but usually when fire is talked about in metaphorical terms, in figurative ways, in theological terms, generally it is relating to some manifestation of God’s being, some manifestation of God’s action or God’s presence. We have Moses at the burning bush, face to face with God. On the mountain we are told that he turned away from God because he was afraid to look at God. On another occasion we are told that Yahweh descended on Mount Sinai in fire, terrifying the people to the extent that they told Moses, “Please, just tell God to go away. We can’t handle him.”

In the New Testament, Paul describes Christ coming again in a blazing fire. In Revelation, we have John’s vision of Jesus with eyes like blazing fire. Fire represents God’s presence. It represents His care. It also represents His judgment, God’s wrath. And we’re going to look at all of this through a particular lens; the lens of 1 Kings Chapter 18.

But before we jump into the text, I just want to give a little bit of background. This was a time in history, the history of God's people, where they had been split into two—there was a northern kingdom and a southern kingdom. They will never again be one people, one nation, at least never again in the narrative of the Old Testament. The first king in the northern kingdom, his name was Jeroboam, and the Bible describes him as not such a great king. He is afraid that if his people go down to Jerusalem to worship, he may lose control of them, and so he cooks up a scheme. He decides to set up idols in the northern kingdom, in Dan and Bethel, and he tells the people *it's too much for you to go down to Jerusalem. It's too much work, too inconvenient. Why don't we just have worship here? Here are your gods; these are the gods that led you out of Egypt.* So he presents these images, these molten calves, and he leads his people into idolatry. He's a corrupt king. He's the first king of the northern kingdom.

After he dies, his son takes the throne and he's just like his father. This same narrative, this story, goes on over and over and over again, generation after generation. By the time we get to King Ahab in 1 Kings Chapter 16 and then later, he's described like this:

³⁰ Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the LORD than any of those before him.

In a sense, we have reached a new low.

³¹ He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, but he also married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal ...

Notice that name; keep track of that name. We'll talk about that later.

...king of the Sidonians, and began to serve Baal and

worship him.³² He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria.³³ Ahab also made an Asherah pole and did more to arouse the anger of the LORD, the God of Israel, than did all the kings of Israel before him.

Now, let's just pause for a minute here. Ahab marries Jezebel, a pagan wife. The Sidonians lived on the north Mediterranean coast also known as Phoenicia. His wife's name, again, is Jezebel. He, more or less, puts Jezebel in charge of religious affairs in the kingdom.

Jezebel, who is a Baal worshipper, adopts it as her agenda to destroy the worship of God, Yahweh, in Israel and to replace it with her god, Baal. Now, we're told in 1 Kings 18 that she tries to carry this out, among other ways, by systematically killing all the prophets—the prophets of the Lord—which is pretty unprecedented. Prophets in Israel had kind of a diplomatic immunity. You may have noticed in the stories involving prophets that the kings often hated the prophets, but they would never go to the extent of actually doing harm to them. Not Jezebel; she's having none of this. She's having them murdered in cold blood. This is the situation that the northern kingdom is in, and you have to wonder, is God going to do anything about this? Is God even going to let this go on?

Now, there's a lot more to the back story of Elijah; a lot more than we can cram into a 25 minute sermon, so we're not going to go into all of that, but suffice it to say that this is an important story in the narrative of God's people. And what's crucial in this era of Elijah is that worship of God is being threatened by worship of Baal.

The issue is idolatry, which has always troubled the people of Israel from the very beginning of their founding. It's going to tip one way or the other, and Elijah is going to have to force the people of Israel to decide...who is your God going to be? Interesting point: his name, Elijah, actually consists of a confession. "Jah" or "Ya" is Yahweh,

meaning “the Lord”, and “El” from Elohim, meaning God. So, “the Lord is God.” That’s his name; that’s his mission.

Now the main battle in 1 Kings 18 is right here, so let’s begin.

After a long time, in the third year, the word of the LORD came to Elijah: “Go and present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the land.” [1 Kings 18:1]

There was a drought in the land that was plaguing the country, and so this was something that was very relevant to the moment. So, *go and I will send rain on the land. Go and present yourself to Ahab.* Now, this was not an assignment that he was probably looking for or hoping for. You know, thinking *could I just do something else? Something more fun? You know, maybe go back to the ravens, or something like that?* God says, “Go.” And then in verse two, it says,

² So Elijah went to present himself to Ahab. [1 Kings 18:2]

And notice this:

³ and Ahab had summoned Obadiah, his palace administrator. (Obadiah was a devout believer in the LORD. ⁴ While Jezebel was killing off the LORD’s prophets, Obadiah had taken a hundred prophets and hidden them in two caves, fifty in each, and had supplied them with food and water.) [1 Kings 18:3-4]

Obadiah was a righteous person. He was an ally in this. Then it goes on and says,

⁵ Ahab had said to Obadiah, “Go through the land to all the springs and valleys. Maybe we can find some grass to keep the horses and mules alive so we will not have to kill any of our animals.” [1 Kings 18:5]

You know something interesting here? In a severe drought, Ahab’s concern is not for his people, it’s for his horses, for his military strength. Well, this servant Obadiah finds Elijah and arranges a meeting. Then, in verse 16, Elijah confronts Ahab.

¹⁶ So Obadiah went to meet Ahab and told him, and Ahab went to meet Elijah.

Now, think about the drama of this meeting here.

¹⁷ When he saw Elijah, he said to him, “Is that you, you troubler of Israel?” [1 Kings 18:16-17]

Not any pleasantries like *Hi, how are you doing? My name is Ahab*. Not anything like that. Just: *Is that you, the troubler of Israel?* And I love his response: *I’ve not made trouble for Israel. Don’t blame me for this. But you, and your father, and your fathers before you...your family...you’re the ones. You know, you kind of brought this on yourself. You’ve abandoned the Lord’s command and have followed the Baals. Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel and bring the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah who eat at Jezebel’s table.*

So Ahab sent word throughout Israel, all of Israel, and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. I love this. I want you to notice this—something really striking. Here’s Elijah, this run away preacher...Jezebel is trying to kill him...here’s Ahab, the king of Israel, the one who is in charge, but who’s giving the orders? It’s Elijah. He has no office. He has no crown. He has no throne. Yet, he commands and the king does what he says. Where did he get this kind of authority? It’s the authority of one man, one human being, who is utterly yielded to God. It’s an amazing thing. Ahab wears the crown, but he’s a man without a single, serious conviction in his body. There’s not a thing that he believes, deep down in his core, and so he becomes a real passive person, really, in the face of anybody who has a strong character—Jezebel his wife, who’s quite evil, and Elijah, the prophet who stands for God.

Now, imagine this scene. Ahab sends word throughout Israel. The whole country is gathered. On the one side, you have 450 prophets of Baal, you have 400 prophets of Asherah—850 prophets in all. On this one side also stands the king and all of his power, his government, his armies. On this side you have all the freedom to do whatever you want to do, whatever pleases you...no commandments, no ten commandments on this side, there’s no law on this side that you have to care for the orphan or the widow or the alien. There’s no call for devotion to God, no call for commitment to your neighbor. It’s just

idolatry that promises sexual pleasure as part of the cult and material abundance. And then you have on this other side, one guy, one man, one solitary prophet who emerges from years of hiding to confront a king and confront a country singlehandedly. But with that one man, is their God. The God who made them a country, the God who made them a nation, the God of Abraham, the God of Sarah, the God of Isaac, the God of Rebekah. And Elijah, in an act of unbelievable courage, takes on the whole nation. Look at verse 21:

²¹ Elijah 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.” [1 Kings 18:21]

And here’s what’s striking. The people really didn’t think that they were rejecting Yahwah, the God of Israel. They still pray to Him when nothing else works; they still pray to God, but they pray to God as a convenient God. They think they have just added Baal to their menu of Gods. That’s the way that idolatry works. That’s why it posed such a threat to Israel. They decided they were going to worship *both* Gods. The word translated “waiver” here literally means to hobble or to limp. Hebrews often would use walk as a metaphor for life, and Elijah is saying they have chosen a miserable way to live, a miserable way to walk; it’s just limping when you could be running.

And I want to pause for a minute at this point and just ask ourselves, do any of us have Baals in our lives that we are wrestling with? See, Baal is anything that tempts me away from my full devotion to God. It could be a relationship; it could be a lifestyle that keeps me from reckless generosity to the poor. For some of us in this room it’s maybe a habit or an addiction that keeps you shrouded in secrecy, and that’s the idol that we won’t let go, even when we know that God wants us to. Your Baal could be a grudge that you refuse to let go of. You’re not going to let go of that and maybe it’s pride or power, or sometimes Baal is just the insistence that *I have to be in control of my own life. I’ve got to reserve for myself the right to have my own way.* Maybe you’re telling yourself that you can hang on to your little Baal and hang on to God too, but you can’t. Elijah says no. The human heart is capable of giving ultimate allegiance. Your heart, my heart, is

capable of giving our ultimate devotion to only one master. Only one. Jesus says one cannot serve two masters, and Elijah is saying that as well. He says, *if it's going to be Baal, then just be honest about it. Don't add hypocrisy to disobedience. If it's going to be Baal, then that's the way your life drifts and carries you, then just be honest about that. But if it's going to be God, then fall on your knees, he says. And confess and repent and start walking with Him. But you have to choose. He says it's decision time.* One man, one prophet, standing before a whole nation in defiance of a king and 850 prophets. One guy who says, *you gotta choose.*

And we wait for the people's response. This is an awesome moment here. Look at the end of verse 21. Elijah says,

“...How long will you waiver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.”
[1Kings 18:21]

Now look at this. The people said nothing; dead silence. For who knows how long, the nation just stands there, and they won't respond. Some of them are sullen perhaps. Some of them are defiant. Some of them are confused. Some of them are thinking, *choose, why do I need to choose? Stuff is working well for me right now, why do I need to choose? It's working for me. I can call on Yahwah's power when I want to, but Baal lets me follow my own agenda. Why should I choose? I'm going to keep driving; I'm going to stay in control, thank you very much.* No one says a word, and I thought this week, as I was thinking about this passage, how sad that silence must have been to God. After all the centuries of His care, the nation to whom He has poured out His heart just stands there in silence. No party will stand for Him. But still He doesn't give up on His people. Look at verse 22:

²² Then Elijah said to them, “I am the only one of the LORD's prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets.

²³ Get 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. ²⁴ Then 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 18:22-24]

Good idea. What you say is good. And so Elijah further gives instructions. Now here I think Elijah is making things hard for God. Baal is a god of nature. You know, he’s depicted on the cave carvings, on the wall, as a god with a lightning bolt in his hands, so fire should have been a piece of cake for Baal. He’s in control of fire. That’s what the people thought, and it should be a piece of cake, easy, for Baal. Look at verse 26:

²⁶ So they took the bull given them and prepared it. Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. “Baal, answer us!” they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made. [1 Kings 18:26]

Baal’s not doing so well. And Elijah wants to make sure that everybody understands the utter insanity, the utter absurdity of putting your trust in Baal. So he engages in a little prophetic trash talk, ok? Look at verse 27:

²⁷ At noon 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.”

Now this passage is a little hard to translate, but the intent really is to use mockery and humor and sarcasm to try to show people how ridiculous it is to pray to a god who doesn’t hear, a god who really is powerless. And so, the Living Bible—which I love in terms of this translation. At least, I think they have it right and there is some basis for that in the Hebrew—the Living Bible translates Elijah’s word like this:

²⁷ “You’ll have to shout louder than that,” he scoffed, “to catch the attention of your god! Perhaps he is talking to someone, or is out sitting on the toilet, or maybe he is away on a trip, or is asleep and needs to be wakened!” [1 Kings 18:27]

Elijah is going full throttle...I mean, he's just pouring it on. He's showing the people just how crazy this is. He's saying *maybe your god suffers from irregularity; maybe he needs some Metamucil; maybe he's a little constipated.*

Whew! Well, the prophets of Baal, they don't have much sense of humor, and they take Elijah quite seriously, so they decide to try harder and get Baal's attention, and in verse 28 they shout louder. They say *yeah, maybe Elijah is right. Maybe Baal is hard of hearing!*

²⁸ So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed.

²⁹ Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.

[1 Kings 18 28-29]

This goes on for hours—morning until night—until it was time for the evening sacrifice (that's the sacrifice for God). Elijah decides to put an end to it. He calls the people over to him, and very carefully he prepares the altar. He takes twelve stones...twelve is the significant number. He takes twelve stones for each of the twelve tribes—reminding the people who it is that made them a nation. With stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord and he dug a trench around it. He arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces and laid it on the wood, and said to the people, "Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood." Then he ordered them to do it again. Then, he ordered them to do it a third time. The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench.

³¹ He took twelve stones, one to represent each of the tribes of Israel, ³² and used the stones to rebuild the Lord's altar. Then he dug a trench about three feet wide around the altar. ³³ He piled wood upon the altar and cut the young bull into pieces and laid the pieces on the wood.

"Fill four barrels with water," he said, "and pour the water over the carcass and the wood."

After they had done this he said, ³⁴ "Do it again." And they did.

“Now, do it once more!” And they did; ³⁵ and the water ran off the altar and filled the trench. [1 Kings 18:31-35]

And then he prays, and what a contrast. I want to point out the nature of Elijah’s prayer, because sometimes we as Christians pray more like the prophets of Baal than like Elijah. Sometimes we think that if we want to get God’s attention, somehow we have to pray loud enough or long enough or with the right kind of formula or with enough boldness or making some kind of bargain with God. But God is not that kind of a God. God is not a bargaining God. God is not more convinced the louder we get. Elijah just calmly talks to God. It’s a beautiful story. In verse 36:

³⁶ At the customary time for offering the evening sacrifice, Elijah walked up to the altar and prayed, “O Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, prove today that you are the God of Israel and that I am your servant; prove that I have done all this at your command. ³⁷ O Lord, answer me! Answer me so these people will know that you are God and that you have brought them back to yourself.” [1 Kings 18:36-37]

And God sees, and God cares, and God answers prayer, and He sends fire down from heaven. It burns up the sacrifice, and not just that, but it burns up the wood and the stones and the soil, and it even licks up the water in the trench. And now the people cry out,

³⁹ ... “The LORD—he is God! The LORD—he is God!”
[1 Kings 18:39]

Does that phrase ring any bells? That’s Elijah’s name—The Lord, he is God.

The Biblical narrative, friends, is a story of God’s deep, abiding love for His creation and His holiness. When I hear things like “the wrath of God” my tendency is to want to immediately change the subject, or to change the channel. To run for the exits. My first impulse is to think of the indiscriminate, uncaring lashing out of an alcoholic parent, or a religiously inspired terrorist. One of the reasons why we often cling to a picture of a “Mr. Rogers” God is we can’t stand the picture of a “Marquis de Sade” type God who delights in crushing his people like

bugs. But this is not what the Bible means by “the wrath of God” or “the love of God.” James Bryant Smith writes,

“In the same way that God’s love is not a silly, sappy feeling, but rather a consistent desire for the good of His people, so also the wrath of God is not a crazed rage, but rather a consistent opposition to sin and evil. It is a mindful, objective, rational response. God is not indecisive when it comes to evil; He is fiercely and forcefully opposed to the things that destroy His precious people.”

God is against my sin because He is for me. N.T Wright puts it this way,

“The biblical doctrine of God’s wrath is rooted in the doctrine of God as the good, wise, and loving creator who hates implacably anything that spoils, defaces, distorts, or damages His beautiful creation, and in particular, anything that does that to His image-bearing creatures. If God does not hate racial prejudice, He is neither good nor loving. If God is not wrathful at child abuse, He is neither good nor loving. If God is not utterly determined to root out from His creation in an act of proper wrath and judgment, the arrogance that allows people to exploit, bomb, bully, and enslave one another, He is neither loving nor good nor wise. But God is all of those things. He is holy, He longs for the healing of His creatures and His creation.”

And so friends, we have hope. The Bible says that our God is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12). No mistake about it. His holiness will consume sin in the end, but in the meantime, God’s holiness also purifies. It purifies anyone who turns to Him. The prophet Isaiah said,

⁶ Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. ⁷ With it he touched my mouth and said, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”
[Isaiah6:6-7]

Have you let God touch you in that way? Do you need His purifying power? Do you need to be touched by God's holy fire? Please pray with me.

God, we want to open up our hearts to You. We want to make known to You our desires to stop hiding from You. Touch us with that redeeming fire which burned so brightly on the cross. Cleanse us, heal us we pray, that we may love You and worship You. In Jesus' name. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.