

Text: I Kings 18:20-39

Title: “Broken Altars”

INTRODUCTION

We are just one week away from the time we’ve set aside to gather as a people before our great God. For nine weeks we’ll be together in one worship service on Sundays. But also for nine weeks we will also be together in our hearts throughout the week as we seek God with intensity. Remember our schedule changes for those nine weeks, starting next Sunday, September 11. One worship service at 10:30am. Sunday School will start at 9:00.

Joshua 3:5 - Joshua told the people, “Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do amazing things among you.”

One of the ways that we consecrate ourselves is to spend concerted time in prayer. I remind you that our prayer guides are available, but also we have prayer gatherings three times on Tuesdays here in the Sanctuary. Also starting next week our A2C groups will be very important during these weeks. In those intimate gatherings you’ll have an opportunity to open your hearts to one another as you share and pray.

Now times of revival can take different shapes for us. Sometimes they are times of *discovery*. We saw that last week as we talked about the experience of the disciples at Pentecost. Their lives changed dramatically because they had discovered a new relationship with the Lord based upon the filling of the Holy Spirit.

ILLUSTRATION - It was a similar experience for me as a young college student. I had been saved for about 4 years but I had not grown very much. I had not really been taught about the lordship of Christ. I seldom attended church. I never witnessed to anyone. I rarely read my Bible or prayed. I certainly wasn’t involved in service. Now this was towards the end of what some call the last real spiritual awakening to touch America – the Jesus Movement in 1960s and 1970s. God was doing some amazing things on college campuses, and some of my friends were dramatically affected by that. They invited me to a student conference where God spoke so clearly to me. I discovered a life I had never known before. And I am here today because of what God did that weekend in 1972. It was a time of discovery for me.

At other times revival is a time of *recovery*. People recover something that they have lost in the way of their commitment to and relationship with the Lord. By the wonderful grace of God He comes to us in times like this to show us that we have strayed from our initial commitment to the Lord. It may have happened ever so slowly so we hardly realized it was happening to us.

ILLUSTRATION – It’s sort of like when I was a young teenager my family went to visit my grandparents in the piney woods of East Texas. My dad gave me permission to take my grandfather’s shotgun and his little dog to go off into the woods to hunt. My dad instructed me to walk along the fence row for a while, then turn around and come straight back. That way I wouldn’t get lost. Well the little dog took out after a rabbit, and I took out after the dog. I was getting farther and farther from the fence that was to be my guide back home. When we

lost the trail of the rabbit I turned back to go home and realized I was lost ... seriously lost. I won't go into the long story of how I finally made it back home. But that reminds me of how easy it is to get off track spiritually. It often just starts with a seemingly minor step off of God's path, but one step in the wrong direction leads to another and another. And we wake up one day and realize we are far from God. Something needs to be recovered.

It was just such a revival that we have recorded in I Kings 18.

Turn there with me. This gathering will be a turning point for the people of God, but it started out with just one man being obedient. He was the great prophet Elijah. And I Kings 18 begins ...

1 Kings 18:1 - 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."

Now we are given the information that rain has not fallen for three years. Now we've been in a draught, but can you imagine no rain for that long? And this draught will set the stage for an important gathering in which God Himself will display His power and His glory among His people.

1 Kings 18:2 - So Elijah went to present himself to Ahab. Now the famine was severe in Samaria,

Now Elijah was a "wanted" man in Israel. Ahab had been searching everywhere for Elijah. He's one of the few faithful men of God in the land, and as such he has become the enemy of the evil King Ahab. But Elijah is a man of faith, and therefore he's a man of courage. God told Elijah what to do, and he obeyed without questioning or hesitation.

The text here says, "The famine was severe in Samaria." Well of course it was. There's been no rain for years. Crops have failed, so there's been no harvest. Carcasses of dead animals are seen everywhere. Any animals that are still alive are just skin and bones. Streams and rivers have dried up. And it had a devastating effect on people because of the shortage of food and water. Death was always at the doorstep.

Suffering is not always the result of sin, but it is clear that the physical famine in Israel was due to the spiritual famine in the hearts of the people of God. Revival was needed.

So we come down to vv.16-17 and we see that...

1 Kings 18:16b-17 - Ahab went to meet Elijah. When he saw Elijah, he said to him, "Is that you, you troubler of Israel?"

The fact is that Israel was in trouble, but Elijah was not the cause of that trouble. Why was there so much trouble for Israel? Why the severe famine? There are four factors that are given to us here:

1. FORSAKEN DEVOTION (vv.18-24)

Look at how Elijah replies to Ahab:

1 Kings 18:18 - “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.

It starts with the king. Earlier in I Kings we are told about King Ahab becoming king of the northern kingdom of Israel (or Samaria).

1 Kings 16:32-33 - He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. 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.

And Ahab is not willing to admit that he is the main problem. He had abandoned the Lord’s commands in His Law and had instead followed the Baals. The fact that the plural is used here shows that there were different local varieties of this false god.

Baal was known as fertility god and much sexual perversion resulted from that. He was the god of agriculture and thus the one responsible for sending rain for the crops. But the famine has revealed that Baal doesn’t have control of the rains ... the one true God controls the elements of the earth.

So Elijah challenges the king to call the people together.

1 Kings 18:19 - 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.”

Now the apostasy and wickedness of Ahab is seen in the fact that he married a wicked woman named Jezebel. She was an enemy to the friends of God, she was also a friend to the enemies of God. It says that she took care of the 850 pagan priests of Baal and his female counterpart Asherah.

1 Kings 18:20 - So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel.

So the stage is set for this important gathering of God’s people. God is about to get in the face of His wayward people. And He does it because He loves them. He sees what their sin has done to their lives. And here’s the challenge that is given to them:

1 Kings 18:21 - 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.” But the people said nothing.

Here is the root of the problem for the people of God ... they were not fully devoted to God. They have a half-way commitment to God.

The picture is painted by the unusual wording, “How long will you waver between two opinions?” It literally means, “How long will you hobble along on two crutches?” It’s like they were clinging to Baal and to God to see which one would best serve them. Choose one or the other, Elijah said.

Another way of saying it is, “How long will you straddle the line between devotion to God and devotion to the world?” Another translator has it, “How long will you hop along on one leg then the other?” It was a picture of birds jumping from one branch to another in a tree.

And the Israelites were doing just ... that running to Baal, then running to God. Running to Baal, then running to God. If God isn't enough, we'll try some of Baal.

If God is not Lord *of* all in your life, He is not Lord *at* all in your life, no matter what you say. In times of revival like this one before us here in Scripture, and like the one we need today in our lives, in our church, in our homes, in our nation, God is getting at the issue ... are we fully devoted to Him.

Israel abandoned their devotion to God thinking they would be sustained by Baal or Asherah. And today we have our own idols that we have gone after. We bow down to the things of this world ... possessions, pleasures, popularity ... thinking those will sustain us. We're no different than the Israelites who were hopping from the false gods to the true God and back again.

And in times of revival this is what God is getting at in our lives.

So Elijah sets up the challenge. In vv.23-24 he challenges Baal's guys to choose a bull and prepare to make a sacrificial offering to their god. Elijah would do the same to His God. Then Elijah said, “You call on your god, and I'll call on mine, and we'll see which one sends down fire to consume the sacrifice. Then we'll know who is truly God.” The people said, “Fine.”

The key element here is fire. Remember, Baal was supposedly a fertility god, the one who sent rain that caused the crops to grow and a harvest to come. And this rain often came out of thunderstorms where lightning struck ... fire coming from heaven. Well, let's just see how powerful he is.

So the battle is for the hearts of the people of God. There's another factor you need to see. Not just forsaken devotion but also...

2. WORTHLESS IDOLATRY (vv.25-29)

Once again Elijah sets forth the challenge to the pagan priests:

1 Kings 18:25 - Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, “Choose one of the bulls and prepare it first, since there are so many of you. Call on the name of your god, but do not light the fire.”

And what you see next is a very clear picture of empty idolatry:

1 Kings 18:26 - 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.

Their dancing was a kind of cultic dance performed as part of the sacrifice and its purpose was to try to get their god's attention.

Well, Elijah stirs them up with a taunt:

1 Kings 18:27 - 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.”

Elijah teases them. He’s obviously not the kind of god who can handle too much at any one time. Well this really agitates the pagan priests. They shout louder. They even begin to cut themselves, but nothing happened. On and on they went with their frantic antics.

1 Kings 18:29 - But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.

Of course there was no response. False gods and idols are lifeless. They cannot rescue, they cannot sustain us. So there’s forsaken devotion and worthless idolatry, but here’s another factor:

3. BROKEN ALTARS (vv.30-35)

1 Kings 18:30 - Then Elijah said to all the people, “Come here to me.” They came to him, and he repaired the altar of the LORD, which had been torn down.

Here is what appears to be a minute detail, but it may be the most tragic and telling detail of all in the story.

The altar of the Lord had been desecrated and destroyed in their worship of Baal. In the past, it had been a place where the people had worshipped the true God; but they had abandoned it for the gods of this world. The broken altar was a testimony that the people had forsaken God. Elijah knows this:

1 Kings 19:10b - The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword.

BROKEN ALTAR – It must have looked something like this. Is that the condition of your relationship with God?

It is at the altar where the people of God offer their worship; it is where the people of God dedicate themselves to the purposes of God; it’s where the people of God offer themselves as living sacrifices holy and acceptable to God which our reasonable act of worship.

I will just remind you that the altar of sacrifice for us as believers is the Cross where the precious Lamb of God, our Savior Jesus, was sacrificed for our sins. And in times of revival we return to the Cross.

So Elijah starts rebuilding the altar.

1 Kings 18:31-32a - Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD had come, saying, “Your name shall be Israel.” With the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD...

Now this is another important detail. To reconstruct the altar Elijah used twelve stones. Why twelve stones? It symbolized the unity of the people of God. At this point they are divided into two kingdoms, north and south. But that's not the way God sees His people. They are one, and they are to be united in turning back to God.

So Elijah repairs and prepares the altar. The details are there in vv.32-35. He dug a deep trench around the altar. Then he gathered and arranged the wood on the altar. Then he cut the animal sacrifice into pieces placed them on the altar. Then Elijah did something bizarre. He called for the people to bring jars of water and literally soak the whole altar, the wood, the sacrifice, everything to where the water ran down the altar and filled up the trench.

Now why would Elijah do this? He was setting the stage for something to happen, the explanation of which could only be that God did it. If the altar was soaked with water, when the fire from heaven fell no one could say it was an accident, like a spark flying from rocks being piled up. And that's what we're trusting God for in revival ... not something we *work up*, but something we *pray down*.

So there's forsaken devotion, worthless idolatry, and broken altars. But there's one more factor...

4. AUTHENTIC WORSHIP (vv.36-39)

Now Elijah prays.

1 Kings 18:36 - "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."

1 Kings 18:37 - Answer me, LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again."

Notice the difference in the prayer of Elijah and the prayer of the pagan priests. His prayer is focused on the Lord and the glory of His Name. "Let it be known today that you are God in Israel ... so these people will know that you, Lord, are God."

His prayer is fervent and earnest, but not frantic. Sometimes God would have us to pray for extended periods of time, but in this case, Elijah's prayer is less than 60 words in the version I'm reading from.

And here is what God is up to in this whole encounter (v.37) ... "You are turning their hearts back again." That's what we're looking for ... the turning of our hearts back to God.

And God answers in a way that everyone knew it was the Lord God.

1 Kings 18:38 - Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench.

The fire fell. Roy Hession in his great book *The Calvary Road* said, "The world has lost its faith, because the Church has lost its fire." The fire of our devotion needs to be rekindled, and we need God to do it.

1 Kings 18:39 - When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, "The LORD—he is God! The LORD—he is God!"

And this is exactly what God was after ... the hearts of His people turned back to Himself. That's revival ... when forsaken devotion and worthless idolatry and the broken altar gives way to true worship.

And what we are doing in preparing our hearts for revival is exactly what Elijah did in rebuilding the altar. In times of revival we repair and prepare the altar of our heart. We put on it the wood and the sacrifice of our life, but what we need, only God can do ... send the fire that will consume all that we are for His glory.

Next Sunday when you arrive for the first day of Greater Things, this altar will be repaired, symbolizing our desire to meet God. Over the next several weeks, as God moves in your heart, you're going to be encouraged to take a piece of wood and put it on the altar, and in doing so, you'll say, "God I have prepared the altar and offered the living sacrifice of my life ... now God send the fire.