

Lessons from the Roller Coaster

Part 1

I Kings 18-19

Robert Morris ---- July 21, 2024

Well, good morning, Grace. My name is Robert. I'm one of the pastors here and I'm looking forward to being in God's Word with you this morning. Hey, before we get started, for you who were in the first service, I want to remind you that our pastors are leading a course on Proverbs during the second service each Sunday, and we've got two weeks left. And they're going to be tackling the ideas of money and work and what the Proverbs say about that. So those are things we could use wisdom on. So, I just want to encourage you, especially if you're new here or newer to Grace. This is a great way this summer to maybe get to know some people, maybe get to know us a little more as a church, and maybe connect with others. No registration or anything like that is required. Just show up, whether you're new to Grace or not new to Grace. We'd love to have you over there.

Let's shift gears and get into our time in the Word today. A few summers ago, my family went on a fun summer adventure. You see, both of our kids got to the age and the height that we felt like we were going to get our money's worth if we went to a theme park. And so, we packed up and we went to Dallas for a couple of days. We went up to Six Flags. And we picked a hotel to stay at that was right across the interstate from Six Flags.

And so, if you're a kid, the very first thing you do when you go into a hotel room is you jump on the bed. Everybody knows that. But the second thing you do is you open the curtains, and you check out the view. And so, my kids open the curtains, and the view was there.



They looked at this double-loop roller coaster right across in Six Flags. And this is one of the oldest, but still, I think, one of the coolest rides at this Six Flags. It's called the Shock Wave, if you've never been there. This is a beautiful piece of 1970s' engineering.



Now my daughter was almost eight at the time. She was about to turn eight, and she was mesmerized by this, and she said these words: “Dad, I want to do that tomorrow. Can we do that first thing in the morning?” And I’m welling up with pride, because I loved roller coasters as a kid and I’m seeing it in her, and I’m thinking, “Oh, yeah, this is going to pass from one generation to the other.”

But I’m also a little skeptical because of her age. But I’m the dad who says, “Yeah, let’s do it. Let’s have some fun. Let’s go on an adventure.” And I say, “First thing tomorrow we’ll go ride the Shock Wave together.”

If you wind the tape back thirty-something years, I too went on the Shock Wave for the first time as a little child. And if you’ve never ridden this ride—if you’ve never ridden it as a small person, you don’t know that the forces and the G’s of this ride, especially through those loops, are really strong. And if you don’t keep your head back against the headrest, you will end up in those double loops with your head between your knees without the ability to raise your head up.

I’ll bet you’re wondering how I know that. My first ride on the Shock Wave did not go well. And so, I’m thinking, “It’s going to be different for my kids. I’m going to train them. I’m going to say, ‘Hey, there’s some science behind this, sweetie. You’re going to have to understand that when you go on this ride you have to keep your arms on that bar, you’ve got to keep your head pushed up against the headrest. Otherwise, it’s going to go bad for you.’” You see, I wasn’t ready. I was ill-prepared.

And she said, “Okay, Dad, I’ve got it.”

The next morning, we get to the Shock Wave, we go directly there, and we hop on board.



And it is all smiles. Before we take off, we're sitting in the cart, and I remind her once again about the head thing. And here's the thing. We rode on the ride. The good news is that she did not end up with her head between her legs. But her exact words when we got off this ride were, "I don't want to do that again." You see, she liked the idea of the double-loop roller coaster, just not really in action. It looked fun, maybe magical, from a distance. But she wasn't quite ready for it. She bit off more than she could chew.

Here's the big idea for the day. She was not ready for that level of roller coaster. My premise for the next couple of weeks with us is that life with Christ—if you're going to follow Him, if you're going to become like Him in all of life—if you do that long enough, it may feel a little bit like a roller coaster. *I thought I was ready for this, but I don't know if I want to do this again.*

And so, friends, I want to spend some time with us for the next two weeks, getting us ready as best I can for the spiritual roller coaster that awaits all of us. Because I don't want you to resign yourself to different rides. Part of that story is that we spent the rest of the day riding much tamer rides, things like the like the Mine Train or the Little Sombrero spinning thing. And they're all great. I love those rides too. But I don't want you to settle for or resign yourself to the spiritual Mine Train of life if the Lord may have for you the thrilling ride of the Shock Wave in His plan.

So, what I want to do is prepare us, as best I can, for the natural ups and downs and highs and lows that come with life with God. Here's what I've learned. I can't point to any saints in the Bible, and I can't point to any saints that I admire in real life who have not had this kind of experience—experiences where they have walked around and seen God move in miraculous ways. They walk around with their heads held high, just spiritually supercharged. And at the same time, they've had moments when they could not pick up their head at all. They're wondering why God is doing what He is doing and whether they should just give up and say, "I don't want to do this anymore." And it's exhilarating, and sometimes the road is rough, but I don't want to miss the ride.

And so, for the next two Sundays, here's what we're going to do. We're going to take a look at two chapters in your older Testament out of the prophet Elijah's life. And we're going to see him go through an extreme roller coaster. I mean, he has some of the highest of highs and the lowest of lows. And it happens in a very short period of time. And we're going to see and we're going to ask, *Hey, what are the lessons I need to learn from the roller coaster?*

And so, we're going to be in the Book of 1 Kings, if you have your Bibles and want to follow along today. We're going to be in chapters 18 and 19 of 1 Kings. And in these two chapters there are a lot of angles we could take. These two chapters are dense and rich. But what you're going to see is how Elijah had one of the most on-top-of-the-world spiritual moments a person could ever experience. That's what he gets in chapter 18. And then in chapter 19 he's going to have, I think, one of the lowest spiritual moments you could ever have. And he experiences that too. There are lessons for us in both places, because we're going to be in both places over the course of our lives. Because if it happened to Elijah, it can certainly happen to us.

Historical Context of Elijah's Story

And so, as we dig into chapter 18, before we dive in today, I think it would be beneficial to do just a small recap of where we find ourselves in the larger story of God's people. Let me set the scene for you a little bit. We are about a hundred or so years past the reigns of David and Solomon as kings of Israel—about a hundred or so years from the period about which people might have said, "Those were the glory days, the good old days, of Israel." But they're long gone now. And within a short time, the kingdom of Israel has split into two separate kingdoms. There

are ten tribes that go their own way in the north and two to the south. And if you remember, if you were around Grace back in 2020 as we did our walk through the Bible, this is the section that is about the “Mostly Bad Kings.” And by “bad”—what they mean by that is that the leaders of Israel continued to lead the people further and further away from God. They don’t lead by example, they kind of go their own way. And every now and then there’s a good king that remembers the law of the Lord and leads the people well.

But Elijah does not get one of those kings. Instead, he gets the ones who you remember their names because of how bad they were. He gets King Ahab, and you know his wife’s name: Jezebel. They are an extraordinarily evil couple who are hell bent and purposefully moving Israel away from worship of Yahweh to false gods. And the main one is this idol of Baal. And there’s a double mindedness that is enveloping the people. There’s this idea that *I can acknowledge Yahweh, but I can have my side gods on the side as well*. And they’re serving this god of open options, and they’re living this spiritually disjointed and conflicted existence. One of the best ways I know how to describe it is that they are spiritually hedging their bets. They are saying, *Hey, I’m afraid to go all in with Yahweh*. And so, they’re going to try a little bit of everything here and there. *I’ll try a little bit of this, a little bit of that. That seemed to work for a little bit. Let’s do some more of that*.

And the entire country is in this moral and spiritual tailspin. And so, the big theme of the whole book of 1 Kings is whether each king, along with the nation, will continue to worship Yahweh, or whether they’re going to serve idols and continue the slow decline. And their rebellion reaches such a level that God says, *I need to get these people’s attention*.

And so, for three years prior to chapter 18, in an attempt to get the attention of these leaders, He sends a drought on the land. For three years there is no rain. The Bible says that there’s not even dew on the ground in the morning. And if you know the history of Baal, you know this is a clear embarrassment to those who serve Baal. There’s egg on their face. This is bad press for Baal, because he is supposed to be the God of rain and storms and fertility of the land. This is literally his thing, and he can’t do it for three years. And Elijah gets blamed. He’s a wanted man. And Ahab and Jezebel blame his for this drought. And it’s not logical. It’s completely illogical if you think about it. If Baal is God, Elijah would have no power over Israel. If Elijah did have the power to bring on a drought, then Baal is not god. But it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t need to make sense. They just need someone to blame.

And so, we get to this climatic moment in chapter 18 in this standoff between Elijah and the royal family. And so, what I'm going to do is give us a brief recounting of this narrative. It's a really dense chapter. I'd encourage you to read it if you haven't read it in a while. It's a great passage if you're unfamiliar with it. But we're going to go through it really quickly, and we're going to come back and pick up on a couple of lessons I think we can learn from this text.

Here's what happens in chapter 18, if you're following along. Chapter 18 begins with hope. The very first words of chapter 18, after three years of no rain: "[After many days the word of the Lord came to Elijah.](#)" And God says, *Elijah, it's time to go. Go show yourself to Ahab the king.* And I'm sure Elijah was thinking, *Do you know what they want to do with me?*

He says, *Go*, so Elijah goes, and he meets with one of Ahab's servants in his court, a guy named Obadiah who has secretly been serving Yahweh in the king's court. And he says, "I want you to tell Ahab that I'm showing up tomorrow." And sure enough, the meeting occurs the next day. And Ahab is again attempting to blame this drought on Elijah. This is "election-cycle-level" spin here, people. They are trying to put the blame on the other party. Ahab sees Elijah and says, "[Is it you, you troubler of Israel?](#)" *You're the cause of all of this.*

So, ultimately, Elijah says, *Let's settle this once for all. You gather up your people, gather up all your prophets, and we'll go to Baal and we'll settle the score once and for all.* And he issues a challenge, and he says, *Look, this is what we're going to do. We're going to pray to our own gods, and then whichever god sends fire, we'll know that's the true god.*

And so, everyone agrees. And hundreds of false prophets begin to pray and dance and do all kinds of things to get the attention of their god. And we get to one of my favorite parts of the Bible, as a very competitive person who played a lot of team sports growing up. We have a little God-ordained trash talk—it's in there. You should look it up—it's great. Elijah gets a little sarcastic with them and says, *Hey, maybe you should yell louder. Maybe he's asleep, maybe he's on vacation, maybe he's in the bathroom.* And these people begin doing everything they possibly can, these prophets of Baal—cutting themselves, dancing around, working themselves into a frenzy, trying to get the attention of this fake god and have him send fire.

And after a few more hours, the Scripture says that they kind of give up. And it says this: "[... but there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention.](#)" (1 Kings 18:29)

And then it's Elijah's turn. And he stacks the deck against himself. Three different times he grabs multiple giant jars of water to douse his altar because he wants there to be no doubt that

God did this. There doesn't need to be any kind of physical explanation about how this is about to happen. It needs to be clear that this was divine and supernatural intervention. He wants a God story. He says a simple prayer, and God sends fire in an unmistakable, undoubtable way. He sends it from the sky, and it incinerates the altar and leaves the ground around it completely dry.

And it's at this moment that the people of God repent, and they seize these false prophets that have led them astray and give them the justice that is required by the law of Moses of that day.

And in the final verses of chapter 18, Elijah turns and listens to God again. And He's on the horizon. He sees a small cloud and it keeps coming towards him. It gets bigger and bigger and bigger. And finally, the bottom drops out and the rain comes.

And chapter 18 finished with verse 46: [“And the hand of the Lord was on Elijah ...”](#) The hand of the Lord was on Elijah, and he takes off running ahead of the king's chariot, because he wants to be in the capital city when the word comes that Yahweh has brought rain, and that Yahweh has turned the hearts of His people back. Yahweh has done this in an unmistakable, undoubtable way.

Friends, chapter 18 has got to be one of the mountain top of all mountain top experiences. It must have felt otherworldly to have been there that day. I don't know what kind of God stories you have. I'm sure you have some. Maybe you've seen some of these in your life. Maybe you've been part of a group of people who were praying for someone who had cancer and it just disappeared and there's no medical explanation. Maybe you've prayed for years and decades for a friend or a relative whose heart was hard towards God, and you finally see them soften. Maybe you had a story where you did not know how the bills were going to be paid and somehow it just happened. The cash showed up. I don't know what your stories are, but as good as they are, I think we'd all trade for this one. I think we'd all trade for being a part of a moment where we saw God act in a miraculous way and we got to be a part of it.

Now God did not need Elijah to bring about the repentance of his people. He could have done it any number of ways, but instead he uses this person in this generation to have a significant impact for the Lord.

And as I read this passage and I found myself studying it in preparation for our time together this morning, I said, *You know, what God? I want to have more of these types of experiences with You.* I just do. I think that's my heart's desire. I want Him to show up and I

want to be part of times when it's abundantly clear that He's in charge and His glory is on display.

And in all the ways we could look at this chapter and the Scripture, there are plenty of ways we could do that. The question that I couldn't shake is, what did Elijah do to get to be a part of this, to be a part of this kind of epic and monumental event in the life and history of his people? What part did he play?

Our students have been at youth camp all this week, and they studied the Book of Esther. And the big idea was to play your part. So, what part did Elijah play? Because we cannot predict the movement of God. But we might be able to have ourselves ready for some of these experiences as they come into our lives.

And so, I began wondering, what does it take on my end to put myself in this position? *I want more of these experiences, God.* And let me be very clear—I don't think we can obligate God to do anything. He can do whatever He wants whenever He wants to do it on His time schedule. He can use me, or He cannot use me. He can use you, or He cannot use you. But I want to be ready. I don't want to miss opportunities. I'd love to have a few more experiences like Elijah might have had with whatever days the Lord has left for me.

And so, what I thought we'd do today is take a look at two takeaways—two important lessons from the roller coaster, two things that we can consider this morning, because I see Elijah doing them in this section of Scripture.

Lesson #1: Boldness / Courage

The first of those is I think that God can work in His servants, and significant spiritual moments can happen when His servants are bold and courageous.

The first lesson from the very top of the roller coaster is that you've got to have a little courage to get on the ride. One of the great themes over and over again in chapter 18 is the sheer amount of boldness and courage you see in Elijah. Because nowhere on the surface does this look like a winnable situation. He's got the power structure of this country against him. He's got 450 prophets of Baal vying against him, and he's the only one.

He goes right into the teeth of this. Elijah even gives them all of the home court advantages. One of the things that you may not know is that Mt. Carmel was their home stadium. This is their turf. This is the mountain that the Phoenicians believed was Baal's sacred dwelling

place. And the challenge that Elijah proposes is supposed to be their god’s specialty—rain, storm, thunder, fire from the sky. He gives them all the advantages. In addition, I’ve had the opportunity, by God’s grace, to stand on Mt. Carmel.



And it’s visible for miles and miles and miles. It’s on the edge of the Jezreel Valley. It’s wide open for all to see. There’s no hiding here. If this goes poorly for Elijah, everyone in the country knows. Everyone knows. And so, Elijah chooses this place—he is so confident in God.

This idea of home court advantage reminds me of a story in my own life. I’ll never forget stepping off a bus as a wide-eyed high school sophomore to play a playoff baseball game in Leesville, Louisiana. Now their mascot was the Wampus Cats—I have no idea what that is to this day—don’t ask me. But they called their stadium “the Jungle.” And it kind of resembled that. When we got off the bus (apologies, by the way, to the rational and level-headed people of Leesville, Louisiana in the 1990s)—there was a small contingent of people who were hellbent on trying to intimidate us. And they were saying things to us as we got off the bus and as we were warming up along the fence. They tried to intimidate us and scare us with things that no fifteen- to eighteen-year-old boy should hear, things that would make some of us blush. And they were blasting Guns N’ Roses “Welcome to the Jungle” at a volume that was absurd, people. And it was on repeat. To this day it’s still, I think, one of the most intimidating and best home court advantages I’ve ever seen with my own eyes in a sporting event that I’ve played in. It was a

mental grind to stay focused. I remember having this thought: *What are these people going to do to us if we win?* And it almost worked ... almost.

I didn't pick to play in the jungle. Elijah says, *Let's go to your stadium. Let's go to your turf. I'll show up at the jungle. You've got all the advantages—I don't care. I'll let you go first. I'm so confident that you're not going to be able to do this, that I'll let you have the honors.*

Now before we put Elijah on some kind of spiritual pedestal, we're going to see later on that he is still prone to fear and discouragement just like we are. But in this moment, he is so confident in what God has told him to do, and he's so confident in God's recent provision for him, that he says, *It's time. I'm going to stand up and do this.*

And so, roller coaster lesson number one is that God's servants are going to need boldness and courage. And I think we need to remember that this boldness and courage doesn't just happen because of happy thoughts of God. I think Elijah's boldness and courage is fueled by a couple of things. One, he's had an intimate relationship with God. For the years leading up to this, he has spent time alone with God, going deep with the Lord. And in addition, he's seen how God has provided for him in supernatural and miraculous ways over the course of the last three years. And so, he's so confident in this moment. And he knows his history. When he calls for them to build the altar, he says, *Give me twelve stones. I know the history of my people Israel. Build my altar with twelve stones. I know how God has provided and protected these people for all these many years.*

Application

And so, I began to think about how I might be able to apply this kind of call of boldness and courage, and where I might need to have some more boldness and courage right now. Maybe there's a place that the Lord is asking you to step into, and it looks like enemy territory and all the advantages are on the other side and there's not much hope. Maybe you've clearly heard from the Lord about a step you might need to take, and maybe you could follow Elijah's example and say, *You know what, if He's told me to go there, I'll go. If He's told me to do it, I'll do it.*

Like Matt has mentioned a number of times before with us, often times God comes along side us and says, *Hey, let's go do some scary stuff together.* God says, *I'll do that hard part. You just do the easy part. You show up, you listen to my Spirit, let's see what happens.*

Friends, there's a boldness and a courage that is required of the Lord Jesus' disciples all over the Bible in order to be part of some of these special moments. There's a pattern that we see over and over again in the Bible. Peter had to step out of the boat. Joshua had to put his feet in the water before the waters opened. David had to step down in the Valley of Elah.

God can do whatever He wants, whatever He chooses. But sometimes He chooses to use one of His servants who takes a step of faith, who does a scary thing alongside the Lord.

Now let me be really clear, friends. I'm not telling you to foolishly charge hell with a water pistol or to do whatever you think is right in your own eyes. But after a season of prayer, after consulting with wise followers of Jesus who are in your sphere of influence, if you get to the point where the Lord is telling you to do something or to take a step; in the quiet moments of your one-on-one time with the Lord, if you sense Him calling you to do that; then I'm hoping that you and I would both have the courage to say, *I'm in. Let's go to Mt. Carmel. I'll do scary things with You, Lord.* Boldness and courage ...

Lesson #2: The Right Concern

The next lesson from the roller coaster, how we see Elijah playing his part, is that God can work in His servants, and I think significant spiritual moments can happen when we have the right concern, maybe the right heart and motive.

One of the very first things we see in this chapter is Elijah pleading on behalf of his people. He loves his people so much. It says in verse 21 that he drew near to them. And I think that's significant. He's not the prophet who is on the sidelines over here in the distance casting insults towards them, wondering how they should be more faithful, or berating them about how they should know better or how they are acting foolishly. The scripture says that Elijah draws near to his people and asks them a question: *Hey, how long? How long are you going to waver?* Some of your translations might say, *How long are you going to limp along?* It's this moment where Elijah sees his countrymen, his people, hurting, and he says, *Come on, guys, how long?* He's concerned for their indecision, their lack of trust, their spiritual hedging of their bets that they're continuing to do. They are half-hearted, they are in inner turmoil. And he says, *You can't keep doing this. If Yahweh is who He says He is, then we need to serve Him.*

Here's how I imagine Elijah in my head. Elijah is channeling his inner Dr. Phil, and he's saying, *How's that working for you? Because to me, it looks like you're limping.*

And Elijah loves his people. He's concerned for them. He has the right motive. And we see this clearly when he prays up on the mount. Listen to what he prays for in verse 36, if you're following along. It says, "O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that You are God in Israel."

The thing that Elijah wants is for God to be known. *You don't need to know my name—you need to know His—that Yahweh is God in Israel.* And then he follows that up and says, "Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so that these people may know that you are God, and that You have turned their hearts back." He prays and says, *Answer me, God, please. Would You answer me, would You intervene, would You do something ... whatever it takes for them to know that You are who You say You are?*

Application

As I thought about this and began to wonder and ask myself the question about how to apply this to my life, I asked, *Am I missing some of these opportunities to have significant spiritual moments with the Lord because my heart just wants the wrong thing sometimes?* I have mixed motives. I am more concerned with my own glory or success, or maybe it's just the concern for my name or my credibility or my reputation, or maybe not looking silly in front of others, maybe just to protect myself. Elijah on top of the mountain prays for one thing: *I want you to know that God is who He said He is.*

And so, I asked myself, what would it look like? I spend so much time, just like you, in a community of people who I think are doing the same things that the people of Israel are, spiritually hedging their bets, trying a little bit of this, a little bit of that. *This worked for a while ... I'm trying to plug this deep hole that my heart has with something, and I'm confused and I'm wondering what's right, what's up, and what's down.* Like sheep without a shepherd, maybe they're limping between all the options. And I want to be concerned for them. I want them to know something. As I look out at the men and women of our world, I want them to know. Maybe they haven't experienced the grace of God like I have. Maybe they don't know of what He can do for them.

And I believe that God honors this desire, friends. I really do. When we don't make it about us, when we turn outward and we face others and we're genuinely concerned about His will being done on earth, with people coming to know God as God ... when I'm lining up more with God's will, I think God can use that kind of heart—a heart concerned for the right things.

Now these are just some of the lessons from the top of the roller coaster. And I want to learn them. I want to be bold and courageous when needed. I want to do scary stuff with God. And I'm hoping---maybe you folks who have been following Jesus longer than me—I hope it gets progressively less and less scary as I have a bigger catalog of what God has done in my life and how He's moved and how He's shone in unmistakable ways. I want there to be a growing confidence in God that makes boldness a little bit easier. And I want to have the right concern. I want my heart to be towards people, looking out at others; not trying to win arguments or be the smartest, but drawing near, like Elijah did, to others because I love them, and I want them to know that this God is who He says He is. I want to play my part and be ready if God chooses to act.

So, Grace, do you want to play your part? Want to go for a ride on the roller coaster? I don't know if we'll ever get to see fire fall from a mountain. I don't know if we'll get that story. But we could see lives restored. We could see prayers answered. We could see forgiveness radically alter someone's life. We could see the gospel message go out and not return void. We could see hopeless marriages find hope. We could see addicts who are addicted to substances or just addicted to their own pride find freedom. We could see the nations come to know God as our God. We could see all kinds of things happen, maybe, in our lifetime. And we may get a chance to be part of some of them by God's good grace. I want to put myself in that position, so that if God so chooses, maybe, just maybe, I'll get to be a part of something incredible in my lifetime.

And remember, friends, He may choose to do it with or without me. I'm okay with that. But I want to be ready. I want to be ready. Here's the big idea right here. God chose to use a man of courage and concern for people. He chose to use a man of courage and concern for people, and allowed him to experience a spiritual mountain top, atop of the roller coaster of faith. And it required courage and a heart concerned for the right things. And so, let's keep ourselves ready, that we might be able to have some of these stories in our own life of God showing up in

unmistakable, undisputable, magnificent ways. I don't want to sit on the sidelines. The Mine Train is okay. I want to take a ride in the Shock Wave. I want to be ready.

Now next week we're going to see what happens after Elijah's metaphorical and spiritual and physical and mountain top experience—one that I dare say, if any of us ever experience something like this, surely this is the kind of thing that would fuel our faith for decades and decades to come. Surely this is the kind of thing that could fuel spiritual health for years and years. But it's only going to take one sentence from one person, and the freefall begins, and here's comes the dip.

But that's for next week. Let me pray for us.

Father, we come to You this morning, God, and our desire is for You to use us however You see fit, and to bring knowledge and love for You to the world around us. Father, like Elijah, would You give us the courage that is fueled by the reminders of Your faithfulness and Your provision for us and confidence, God, in Your promises? Would You give us the boldness, God, to hear and then also take steps of faith when You place them in front of us? And God, would You give us the right concern? Would You in Your love and grace towards Your servants shape our hearts to be more and more in line with the things that You care about—about Your will being done? God, we want to be a people who are ready—ready and able to do our part. Would You help us, God? Would You help us enjoy the roller coaster? It's in Your Son's name we pray. Amen.