

**“You Are Not Alone” based on 1 Kings 19:1-18 and Galatians 3:23-29**  
**Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on June 22, 2025, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

The books of 1 and 2 Kings are a history book that describes a world very different from ours. The writers and editors of the books of Kings describe the experience of God’s people in the aftermath of the reign of King David and on to the Babylonian Exile. It is their story with the God of Israel, whom we call “the Lord,” in place of the divine name, YHWH, sometimes said as Yahweh.

As the name of the book suggests, it centers on the political leaders and their struggle to remain faithful to the Lord and not the gods of other nations and their lands, or places. You see, the Lord had promised David that from one of his descendants would come a King, who would rule all the nations, and then the Lord would be recognized as the Most High God.

David dies, and after some political maneuvers and assassinations, his son Solomon becomes the king, and after that initial turmoil, things look really good for a little while. Solomon builds the temple, a permanent place for the Lord to dwell. He prays for wisdom, and he really seems like he has it. Yet, he turns away from the Lord. He builds his nation’s prosperity first and makes a series of deals for political security. He seals them with that ancient custom of marriage – thousands of times over. With them, he worshiped their many gods.

Solomon ruled a unified kingdom, but after his death it divided into Judah and Israel. Judah was the land ruled by Solomon’s descendants, while Israel had its own kings. At the end of the book, it seems as though God’s promise is lost. This is because the north is destroyed and its leaders go in exile in the Assyrian Empire. Later, the south is destroyed, and its leaders and huge numbers of people are taken across the desert into the Babylonian Empire. Despite the covenant made with David, the kings of Israel and Judah led the people away from the Lord. They let the worldly empires take their hearts first and then they were taken away from the temple and their home.

This brief recap is necessary to understand the text about Elijah which we read today. This is because like all the leaders of Israel between David and the Assyrian exile, King Ahab had done evil in the sight of the Lord – He promoted a rival god, called ‘Baal.’ You see, Elijah’s name means, ‘El is the Lord,’ or the ‘High God is Yahweh.’ Ahab had married a Phoenician royal named Jezebel, and the Phoenicians worshiped Baal and Asherah. Baal was the ancestral god over this territory of Canaan, while the Lord was the god of a people, not a land. The Lord led Israel out of slavery in Egypt, and brought them to Canaan, to claim both a people, and the land.

This might be difficult for us to understand because we see God as the sole universal God. But in the ancient Near East, the people believed the gods were tied to their territories. There was this idea of a high god over all things, who was known as El, but there were many children of El, or little Els, territorial gods.

The temples were where these territorial gods met their people and the territorial gods had a symbol from their territory that was fashioned as an idol to embody them, whether it was a bull or something else. But a claim consistently made by the writers of our Hebrew scriptures and their interpreters was that “El” and “the Lord” were one God, and this true God needed no idol because humanity was made in the image of God.

Our story today picks up after Elijah had thought he had proven this all to be true. He challenged the prophets of Baal to make a sacrifice and to ask Baal to light it on fire. Despite all their prayers and even cutting themselves to make themselves bleed, Baal did not show up. There is a hilarious little spot where in the Hebrew Elijah basically asks, “Is he in the bathroom? Where is Baal?”

Then Elijah made his sacrifice. He ups the degree of difficulty. He douses it all in water. He did this during a drought and a famine, using precious water and the Lord set it ablaze. What’s more, Baal was allegedly the storm deity, so where was he if they worshipped him? Why didn’t he bring rain. But after this display, it was the Lord who soon after brought rain and ended the famine.

Now, Elijah was sure that he had now proven that his name is true – The Most High God is the Lord. The people cheered for the Lord and Elijah massacred the prophets of Baal (this is a different time). Surely now, Elijah believes the leaders of Israel would see the error of their ways and repent. But no – Ahab tells Jezebel what happened, and she doubles down. Like Elijah, her whole identity is wrapped up in her worship of Baal. There was likely nothing that would convince her of anything in her strongly held beliefs. She vows to have Elijah killed, just like Baal’s prophets.

Elijah runs away and prays that the Lord would just kill him – “I’m no better than my ancestors.” Despite all that the Lord had done for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who is renamed Israel, and after leading the descendants of Jacob out of slavery in Egypt, after feeding them manna and quail in the wilderness, after leading them into the promised land, after uniting them into a strong and prosperous kingdom, and after so many more things – idolatry remained. The ancestors failed to prove the meaning of Elijah’s name, that the Most High God is the Lord. And so, he felt he failed too.

The truth is that Elijah is like his ancestors, because he thinks it’s all about him. But before we’re too hard on Elijah for this, the truth is we all have this tendency. Have you ever tried to convince someone of some belief? Maybe your faith and an argument about God being real? Have you ever tried to convince someone on a political matter? Anything? How did you feel when you thought you had the perfect argument, and still the person you were arguing with did not believe?

Trust me, no matter what your argument or mine is, it is definitely not more convincing than soaking a bunch of logs on fire and getting God to light them on fire. If that doesn’t convince, why do we think our arguments will?

We live in a time of division and the erosion of trust in our common spaces. It is overwhelming. We are bombarded by people trying to convince us of anything and everything and we put up our defenses as they put up theirs. We may look back at this story of Elijah and think we are good monotheists who reject Baal. The truth is that we may not make idols and put them in temples. But we do make basic needs of safety, belonging, and purpose into objects of worship. We defend at all costs our popularity, prosperity, and power.

We justify going against the words of Jesus, who teaches us to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. We justify actions on the grounds of “do unto others as they have done to you,” or “do unto others as they might do to you at some point,” ignoring Jesus, who said, “do unto others as you would *have them do* unto you.” Pride is a terrible thing. We think we are in the right and the ends justify the means, even if it means doing something a little shady, a little crass, a little violent, or a little dangerous in the name of the right ideal.

We divide ourselves into “us” vs. “them” and draw lines. These lines make us look “good” with our halos and makes them “evil” with their horns.

Beloved, as you hear this you may be thinking – Yes, Pastor Drew that’s exactly what “THEY” do. But, as I have said over and over again, if scripture doesn’t challenge you and your own ways, then you are not reading or hearing the scriptures in the right way. Yes, it applies to “them,” most certainly, but it also applies to “us.” This is what it means that all fall short of the glory of God. You may think that you “do unto others” in the right way because on issue A, B, or C, you may well be right. But how do you handle those who disagree with you?

This is why I focus so much on “why” we believe what we believe and “how” we live out what we believe, rather than “what” is the right belief on a particular issue. I struggle with this constantly because I read a lot of books, and I absolutely love learning. I have my own political, economic and social opinions on many, many topics. If I decide to argue my point, it will be supported by a lot of information, facts, and reason. I will believe my opinion is the right one, and if I engage in the argument, I will expect to convince you. But the truth is, I know that I cannot convince you.

So, I must actively suppress my desire to win any argument. To my wife Claire, I’m sorry I don’t do that enough for you. But with everyone else, I actively suppress that desire to win arguments.

All of us – politically, ideologically, theologically, whatever – have an identity, who we think we are. Elijah’s identity was in his name – He was the prophet who would prove God is the Lord. How does the Lord handle Elijah when Elijah is in his crisis of failure? The angel of the Lord gives him some food and lets him take a nap. Then the angel of the Lord wakes him up and gives him some more food and sends him on a journey in the footsteps of his ancestors.

The angel of the Lord tells Elijah to go to Horeb, the mountain of God, also called Sinai. This is the place where Moses saw the bush that burned, but it was not consumed. This is the place where the Word of the Lord first came to Moses. So, now the Word of the Lord comes to Elijah as well and asks in most translations, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Which when we read it that way, we might think, “Didn’t you tell me to come here?”

But that is not actually the question’s meaning, which is why it was translated today as, “What are you here for, Elijah?” The angel is asking, “Do you know why you’re here?” In his answer, Elijah emphasizes his zeal and passion – his animated work on behalf of the Lord, whom he calls the God of Armies. Elijah is emphasizing the Lord as a god of war because that’s what he wants – victory. He wants safety, security, and belonging, as much as he wants to serve God. He laments that everyone else in Israel has failed, altars are gone, and the prophets are all dead. He is the last one.

Once again, rather than beating up on him, let’s remember that it’s easy for us to feel like Elijah. We have those times when we think we are the only ones – us and our tribe – who truly understand what is right and just. We have the answers. We close ourselves off to others. We close ourselves off to God. We become the arbitrators of right and wrong, making the same choice that Adam and Eve made. Everything becomes too much.

But notice what the Lord does – Elijah is told that the Lord will soon pass by that place. Elijah goes outside and there is a storm of some kind with a mighty and massive wind. The Lord was not in the

wind – the Lord was not in the storm, as Baal claims to be. Yes, the Lord had seemed to be in the wind before, think about the parting the Red Sea. But in this instant, the wind is the wind, and not the Lord. Then there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in it. Yes, the Lord had seemed to be in an earthquake before, perhaps that is what God used to tumble the walls of Jericho. But in this moment, the earthquake was just an earthquake and the Lord was not in it.

Then there was a fire, but the Lord was not in it. Yes, the Lord had seemed to be in fire before – in the burning bush or when the fire came down to consume Elijah's sacrifice. But, in this moment, the fire was just a fire, and the Lord was not in it. After the fire, there was a still small voice, or a calm sheer silence. In what seemed like it might be nothing – nothing at all – there was the Lord, and Elijah covers his eyes with his cloak.

Beloved, we may look for God in the big stuff and we may want God to vindicate us by saying we are right so that what we think, what we believe, will be recognized and accepted by others. We want the show, the big actions that put our enemies in their place. But in truth, God is in the still, small voice, and in the calm sheer silence.

We see this paradox of the Most High God in humble spaces in the incarnation of the Eternal Son of God in Jesus. Jesus is the Lord, and yet he took on our humanity, humbling himself to be born a baby, to live as we live, die for us, and rise again for us. God doesn't fill great temples of stone or need idols to be embodied. No, by the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, we now become temples of God's Holy Spirit.

This means we not only are God's image, but the Holy Spirit is in and among us. When the world overwhelms us, it is easy to feel like Elijah – to feel alone. But we are not alone, the Holy Spirit is in our hearts pouring God's love in us, and we are called to faithfully pour that love out into the world around us. Sure, we can withhold it, or we can do as Christ says, and love others, even our enemies without fear of what we might lose, because we are secure in God's love for us.

At the end of our reading, Elijah complains again, and the Lord appoints a successor for him. This one has a similar name, Elisha, whose name means "the Most High God is Salvation." It's no coincidence, I think, that the name of Jesus plays on these names also, for it means, "The Lord is Salvation." The Lord also points out to Elijah that he is not alone – there are many who remain faithful, even if he doesn't see them.

Sisters and brothers, thanks to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus our world has changed from that very different and dark time. Yet, we still find ourselves overwhelmed by the prevalence of sin and death all around us. But take heart, as the Lord assured Elijah then, many today remain faithful to the Lord. No matter how corrupt the leaders of Israel and Judah were, no matter how idolatrous, no matter if their actions result in exile, the truth is that the Lord would remain with them. The Lord was with them, not to endorse their actions, but to love them and carry them through the suffering and pain.

Then it took the Lord in our flesh to fulfill the promise to David, and now, faithfulness has indeed arrived, as the Apostle Paul said. Beloved, you are not alone – this is the point to Elijah, and the point made by Paul in our first reading. Indeed, many are faithful to the Lord because of the Lord Jesus's faithfulness. Our justification before God is not by anything we accomplish – even great

accomplishments like becoming an Eagle Scout, as Brett has done. It is also not about any excuse we make where we claim the ends justify the means. This is not what justifies us before God.

No, Paul says we are justified regardless of nationality –Jew or Greek – status – enslaved or free – or gender – there is no male and female. We are together through our allegiance to Jesus, the Messiah, the Christ. Let us then recognize that there are false idols and we can set aside. The Baals of this world seek to control us using our desire for popularity, prosperity, and power. We must trust in the love of God, without fear of what we'll lose, because The Lord is God and God is with us. Amen.