

We've come to the end of this Ordinary Phenomenon series, where we've been exploring some of those amazing miracle moments in the Old Testament. Stories of God's work in the world in big, spectacular ways - parting the Red Sea, raining down food from the skies, the walls crumbling at Jericho. And each week, we've seen that what is truly phenomenal is NOT that big event, but the gift God offers us of a daily, constant relationship. Those big events, the so-called Mountain Top moments, are signs that point us to the God who is with us every day.

This is a difficult reality for us to grasp. Whether you were raised in church or not, we all tend to think of Church as that thing that happens here and now - on Sunday mornings, once a week. In fact, for many of us, Sunday becomes that Big Event in our lives. We move from week to week, treating Sunday as that sort of mountain-top. We come in, exhausted from our week, spiritually drained, and ready to be energized, inspired and recharged. We leave ready to run back down into our ordinary lives, hoping we got enough to make the climb again next week. [\[let's do a mountain picture here\]](#)

And this sort of Sunday Spirituality works well enough for us (obviously, because we keep doing it). But the good news we've seen throughout this series and that we'll see again today is that God invites us into something much better than the up-and-down, exhausting climb. When we discover the beauty of daily devotion to God, we find a new energy, a freedom to run every day.

The problem with that idea of daily devotion is that so much competes for our attentions and affections. [\[to the various stacks of idols\]](#) Everyday is an endless press of family obligations and vocational demands and the whispered desires of our own souls that push and pull us in every direction. We run from demand to demand, from obligation to obligation, and we get weary. The idea of adding in one more demand, one more obligation is intimidating, exhausting. This is why we actually sort of *like* God confined to Sundays, so we can limp tiredly over here once a week (or so) and then, hopefully energized and slightly less-exhausted, stagger back over to our other demands of our lives.

There's a word for these various obligations that pull our lives out of shape, that distort our souls with their endless pulling in every direction. The Biblical writers called them *idols*. Now when we hear the word "idol" we think of little statues worshiped in caves by tribal peoples. And while it's certainly true that - particularly in the ancient world - idols were oftentimes represented by statues, that's because those statues actually represented other gods. Idols are essentially false gods. They make claims about the nature of reality and our place in it. One of the best books I've ever read is called *Playing God*, by a tremendous guy named Andy Crouch. In *Playing God*, Andy defines an idol like this:

[\[An idol\] advances a claim about the ultimate nature of reality that is ultimately mistaken. And since the Creator God is the ultimate meaning of the world, an idol is a representation of a false god. Implicitly or explicitly, all idols represent a challenge and counterclaim to the identity and character of the true Creator God. Like the serpent in the Garden, they all raise the question of the Creator God's truthfulness and goodness, subtly or directly suggesting that the Creator God is neither true nor good. -- Andy Crouch, \*Playing God\*](#)

This helps us identify the things that are idols in our lives (verses the things that are good and healthy and life-giving). So for instance: our jobs should be good. To know one's vocation, to put in a hard, honest day's work, to provide for your family, these are good and beautiful things. But we all know how easy it is to get caught up in our jobs, to strive for just a little bit more, just a few more hours. We know the slow creep to the place where our jobs begin to distort our souls, to steal time away from our families and friends, to convince us we can't afford to take a break. [\[this may be worth picturing\]](#)

And all this when God tells us we were created to enjoy Sabbath, a day every week of refreshment and enjoyment with God and the people we love. When our work convinces us we can't afford that, that our lives will be worse off without a Sabbath, our work has become an idol. Its pull on us has distorted our soul.

The good things in our lives are particularly susceptible to becoming idols. And this is why daily devotion to God is so necessary. Why we can't have a faith that limps from big event to big event. From mountain top to mountain top.

The last big event I want to explore with you today shows us exactly why idols are so dangerous. It's found in 1 Kings 18 - go ahead and turn there in your bibles. If you grabbed one of our Bibles off the rack on the way in, or from the rack in front of you, you can find 1 Kings 18 on page XXX. And if you don't own a bible, we'd love for you to take that Bible with you as a gift from us. So, a little bit of background as you're turning to 1 Kings 18:

Israel has had a king for several generations now. And just like God warned them (if you were here last week), since they've abdicated their responsibility for their relationship with God, things have gotten bad. The kings have ruled over them, protecting them, but at the cost of their freedoms. One of the early kings was so bad he caused a civil war, and at this point in Israel's history, God's people are divided into two nations. This particular story occurs in the Northern kingdom, Israel. The ruling king is a man named Ahab.

Ahab was one of the most successful kings Israel ever had in terms of national security and GDP. Israel under his rule was secure and prosperous. Ahab was a brilliant, shrewd leader (think Kevin Spacey in *House of Cards*). But the way Ahab ruled was toxic to his nation. As was the custom in his day, Ahab ratified treaties with his allies through marriage. And his queen - a woman named Jezebel - was from a neighboring country, one that didn't worship God. Instead, Jezebel's people worshiped Ba'al, the chief god of the Canaanite pantheon. Ba'al (and his divine wife) were Jezebel's gods, and when she married Ahab, Ahab brought Ba'al into Israel.

Ahab tore down altars to Yahweh, Israel's god, and replaced them with altars to Ba'al. And - just like God had warned them they would - the people of Israel followed the lead of their king. They worshiped Yahweh, some. But they also worshiped Ba'al. And God would not have the loyalties of his people divided. So Yahweh, the god of Israel, took a dramatic action. Yahweh called his prophet, a man named Elijah, to announce to Ahab that God was going to shut up the skies. No more rain.

Which for an agrarian people was catastrophic. Their livelihood depended wholly on rain for their crops. No rain meant no food. No food meant death for you and your family.

So why would God close the skies?

Because Ba'al was a rain god. Ba'al was the Thor of the Canaanite pantheon. In the Canaanite worldview, Ba'al was responsible for sending rain for the crops. The Canaanites thought Ba'al was their source of life. And because Israel was worshiping Ba'al, they were looking to Ba'al for life. Specifically, for rain. But Ba'al was an idol. Ba'al made false claims about the world - specifically that it's a harsh, cruel place where his followers had to fight and kill for his affections (as we'll see in our story). In other words, if

you wanted rain, if you wanted life from Ba'al, you had to hurt. Hurt yourself. Hurt your family. Hurt your enemies.

Worshipping Ba'al instead of Yahweh meant Israel was looking elsewhere for their life and sustenance. And despite countless warnings from God's messengers, Israel continued to worship Ba'al. So God finally said, Okay. If you want Ba'al to send you rain, I won't send you anymore rain. We'll see how long it takes this false god to fulfill his bargain.

Three years went by. Three years in which rain didn't fall once. Ba'al sent not a drop. By the end of that three-year drought, Israel was in a national crisis. Ahab was furious. And our story today is the culmination of the long drought. The final showdown between Yahweh and Ba'al.

This is a long passage, so I invite you to listen as I read. And to help me tell the story, I'd like you to welcome several of my friends to the stage.

Ahab went out to meet Elijah. When Ahab saw him, he exclaimed, “So, is it really you, you troublemaker of Israel?”

“I have made no trouble for Israel,” Elijah replied. “You and your family are the troublemakers, for you have refused to obey the commands of the Lord and have worshiped the images of Baal instead. Now summon all Israel to join me at Mount Carmel, along with the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah who are supported by Jezebel.”

So Ahab summoned all the people of Israel and the prophets to Mount Carmel. Then Elijah stood in front of them and said, “How much longer will you waver, hobbling between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him! But if Baal is God, then follow him!” But the people were completely silent.

Then Elijah said to them, “I am the only prophet of the Lord who is left, but Baal has 450 prophets. Now bring two bulls. The prophets of Baal may choose whichever one they wish and cut it into pieces and lay it on the wood of their altar, but without setting fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood on the altar, but not set fire to it. Then call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the Lord. The god who answers by setting fire to the wood is the true God!” And all the people agreed.

Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, “You go first, for there are many of you. Choose one of the bulls, and prepare it and call on the name of your god. But do not set fire to the wood.”

So they prepared one of the bulls and placed it on the altar. Then they called on the name of Baal from morning until noontime, shouting, “O Baal, answer us!” But there was no reply of any kind. Then they danced, hobbling around the altar they had made.

About noontime Elijah began mocking them. “You’ll have to shout louder,” he scoffed, “for surely he is a god! Perhaps he is daydreaming, or is relieving himself. Or maybe he is away on a trip, or is asleep and needs to be awakened!”

So they shouted louder, and following their normal custom, they cut themselves with knives and swords until the blood gushed out. They raved all afternoon until the time of the evening sacrifice, but still there was no sound, no reply, no response.

Then Elijah called to the people, “Come over here!” They all crowded around him as he repaired the altar of the Lord that had been torn down. He took twelve stones, one to represent each of the tribes of Israel, and he used the stones to rebuild the altar in the name of the Lord. Then he dug a trench around the altar large enough to hold about three gallons. He piled wood on the altar, cut the bull into pieces, and laid the pieces on the wood.

Then he said, “Fill four large jars with water, and pour the water over the offering and the wood.”

After they had done this, he said, “Do the same thing again!” And when they were finished, he said, “Now do it a third time!” So they did as he said, 35 and the water ran around the altar and even filled the trench.

At the usual time for offering the evening sacrifice, Elijah the prophet walked up to the altar and prayed, “O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, prove today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant. Prove that I have done all this at your command. O Lord, answer me! Answer me so these people will know that you, O Lord, are God and that you have brought them back to yourself.”

Immediately the fire of the Lord flashed down from heaven and burned up the young bull, the wood, the stones, and the dust. It even licked up all the water in the trench! And when all the people saw it, they fell face down on the ground and cried out, “The Lord —he is God! Yes, the Lord is God!”

-- 1 Kings 18:17-39

Thanks for your help, everyone!

What's the point of the story? That idols can't give us what they promise. Ba'al promised rain. And if you worshiped Ba'al, you would do anything to get that rain. Even making a fool out of yourself. Even hurting yourself, hurting your family (the Canaanite gods welcomed child-sacrifice - and by the third year of a drought like this, it's probably that happened). This is how idols work: they convince us they're good, they give us a little, and then they begin to take. Over time, they give us less and take more, until one day, we look up and our lives have become something we never thought we'd see.

This is where Israel has been over the course of this drought: hobbling from altar to altar. Ba'al to Yahweh and back. Dividing their time, their attention, their loyalties. Torn, wondering which god will give them rain. Which god will give them life. And Ba'al has left them limping, staggering, broken and dying.

Because God gave them what they wanted: he let them have their idols, their false gods who couldn't give them life. Yahweh wanted them to see they didn't have to hurt themselves or their loved ones to receive rain. They didn't have to bring death to receive life.

What they needed was constant worship of Yahweh. Daily connections with the God who is the source of life. But they had forgotten that. The idols had blinded them to the love of God.

Our idols today blind us to God's love, too. We're surrounded by potential idols - things that vie for dominance in the center of our lives. We spend all week running from obligation to obligation, getting to the point that we're limping, listless, exhausted. God occupies a corner of our lives, but he's just one potential God among many.

The true danger of idols is how enticing they seem. If Ba'al didn't promise rain, no one would've worshiped him. If our idols today didn't *seem* so effective we wouldn't give our lives to them. One of those idols is work - one I'm particularly susceptible to. And since I work in the Church, all the work I do is for God, so it's all sort of mandatory - or so I thought.

I've shared this story before - the day I realized I had an idolatry problem: when I was 25 or so, I was working as a Youth and College pastor. And it was during that odd week between Christmas and New Year. I was looking at my calendar for the upcoming year and realized that because of the various bible studies and retreats and all the other ministerial stuff I'd committed myself to - *work* stuff, I had three days off from January to May. Three days in 5 months. 3 days in 130. That's 2% of my time that I had free to rest, to not produce.

And I had convinced myself it was all okay, because after all I worked for a Church so clearly this is what God wants.

Except it's not. Because God clearly commands us to take weekly Sabbath rests. To quantify it, God expects 14% of our time to be free. Not 2%. 22 days out of 150. Not 3. And God commands this specifically so our work does *not* become an idol in our lives.

If you think it sounds silly to do the math, think about all the times you just wish God would come right out and tell you do do something, when you wish God's will for your life was plain. 1/7 is pretty clear. 14% is a pretty easy measurement. (15% if you're not good at math and now you're basically doing tips right?)

And I can tell you that by the time May rolled around, I was totally spent. I had no margin left, no energy to give to anyone or anything. I wasn't even doing my job well anymore. Because I believed the lie that more work is always better. That doing more things (especially because they were so *spiritual*!) was good. I learned the hard way that God's way is life, and idols bring death.

Work has been an idol in my life. What about yours? What are your idols? Is it work? Your family? Your religion? A salary or a lifestyle or a look? What are the things you find yourself limping back and forth between? What fights with God for control of your life?

Know those things, whatever they are, offer you the world but will give you nothing. They will leave you broken, empty and limping. Only by walking with God day in and day out, letting God order our lives and all the would-be idols in them will we find the life we are so desperately craving.

### **Calendar**

When you came in, you received a bulletin. Inside is a sheet with a week-at-a-glance calendar on it. Take that calendar out.

I'm not asking you today to quit your life and move to a monastery or convent. I don't expect you to leave your job or abandon your family or quit all the things you're involved in. In fact, quite the opposite. God has called you to that job, that family, those activities, to be a light in darkness. To be a picture of Jesus in those places, among those people. But those can so easily become idols.

I want to challenge you to consider the next week, and imagine what it would look like for you to carve out daily time with God. Many Christian communities set aside three times a day to pray: in the morning, at lunchtime and at night. You can choose all three, or start with one. The point is that every day, you spend a few minutes with God reflecting on your day, and asking God to help you follow him.