

Elijah and the Prophets of Baal

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Salem

1 Kings 18:17-46

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS:

- WELCOME!
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INTRODUCTION:

This morning we will be taking a look at a passage from the Old Testament.

- In **Romans 15:4**, referring to the Old Testament, the Bible says, *“For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”*
- With that in mind, I would like for us to go back and study a rather exciting lesson from **1 Kings 18**.

To review just a little bit of Old Testament history we know that after King David died, his son Solomon became the king and for the most part was a pretty good king.

- However, after Solomon died, things quite literally fell apart, and the kingdom split in two—the Northern Kingdom (known as Israel) and the Southern Kingdom (known as Judah).
- The event we are looking at this morning from **1 Kings 18**, takes place roughly 60 years after that split, in the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

The king of the North at this time was a horrible man by the name of Ahab.

- In **1 Kings 16:30**, the Bible says, that Ahab *“...did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him.”*
- As if that were not bad enough, the Bible says that Ahab married a horribly immoral woman by the name of Jezebel.
- Jezebel was completely pagan (the daughter of a foreign king), and Jezebel convinced Ahab to build altars to the pagan god Baal, and to Baal’s female counterpart, the Asherah.
- Not only was Jezebel responsible for the altars, but she went further and actually sponsored a school to train and produce prophets of Baal.
- She was actively promoting the worship of these pagan idols.

At this point, for the very first time in the Scriptures, a man pops on the scene, whose name is Elijah.

- The name itself means, **“Yahweh is my God,”** and Elijah lived up to his name by speaking on the Lord’s behalf in a very powerful way.
- Elijah was an incredibly tough individual, and is referred to in the New Testament more than any Old Testament prophet.
- In the gospel accounts, we find that John the Baptist (the forerunner of Jesus) was compared to Elijah.
- We also know from **James 5:17**, that *“...Elijah was a man with a nature like ours.”*
- He was a man of courage, but was very down-to-earth at the same time.
- We find later on in the Old Testament, that Elijah was one of a very few people who never had to die, but he was taken directly to heaven in a chariot of fire.
- In the New Testament, he later appeared with Moses and Jesus, on the Mount of Transfiguration—an incredible honor for this man of God.

It is this man who comes on the scene for the first time in **1 Kings 17:1**.

- Elijah approaches King Ahab with a special message, *“As the Lord, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, surely there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.”*
- At that point, Elijah basically becomes **#1** on the list of **“Israel’s Most Wanted.”**
- He is the only one who dared to challenge the idolatry of the Northern Kingdom.

As a wanted man, Elijah then disappears and is protected and cared for by the Lord (as he is hunted down by Jezebel), and there are some very interesting stories that take place during that time.

- After 3½ years, the Lord tells Elijah to go back to King Ahab with another message.
- By this point, Israel had not had even a single drop of dew or rain.
- In fact, when we find Ahab in **1 Kings 18**, he is scouring the countryside, looking for a single patch of grass for his horses and mules.
- The famine was that bad!
- I cannot even imagine what Illinois would be like without a single drop of precipitation for 3½ years, but I know that it would probably destroy our economy, and would make life extremely miserable.

Just for us to try to get a picture of Baal in our minds, I should point out that Baal was the head god and was the god of rainstorms and fertility.

- Baal is often pictured with the horns of a bull (to represent fertility), and he is often pictured with a club in one hand and a lightning bolt in the other (to represent his power over the storms).
- Our Lord is a just God, and yet He also has a wonderful sense of humor!
- The people worship the rain god, and our Lord stops every drop of rain (and even the dew on the grass) for 3½ years!

I would like for us look at **1 Kings 18**, this morning, one section at a time, and consider three lessons from the life of Elijah.

- Elijah's first words to King Ahab (and the results of those words) are found in **1 Kings 18:17-29**.

17 When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, "Is this you, you troubler of Israel?"

18 He said, "I have not troubled Israel, but you and your father's house have, because you have forsaken the commandments of the LORD and you have followed the Baals.

19 "Now then send and gather to me all Israel at Mount Carmel, together with 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of the Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table."

20 So Ahab sent a message among all the sons of Israel and brought the prophets together at Mount Carmel.

21 Elijah came near to all the people and said, "How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him." But the people did not answer him a word.

22 Then Elijah said to the people, "I alone am left a prophet of the LORD, but Baal's prophets are 450 men.

23 "Now let them give us two oxen; and let them choose one ox for themselves and cut it up, and place it on the wood, but put no fire under it; and I will prepare the other ox and lay it on the wood, and I will not put a fire under it.

24 "Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD, and the God who answers by fire, He is God." And all the people said, "That is a good idea."

25 So Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose one ox for yourselves and prepare it first for you are many, and call on the name of your god, but put no fire under it."

26 Then they took the ox which was given them and they prepared it and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon saying, "O Baal, answer us." But there was no voice and no one answered. And they leaped about the altar which they made.

27 It came about at noon, that Elijah mocked them and said, "Call out with a loud voice, for he is a god; either he is occupied or gone aside, or is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and needs to be awakened."

28 So they cried with a loud voice and cut themselves according to their custom with swords and lances until the blood gushed out on them.

29 When midday was past, they raved until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice; but there was no voice, no one answered, and no one paid attention.

I. First of all, we find that **ELIJAH CALLED FOR A DECISION TO BE MADE**.

I find it interesting, that even before he called for a decision, Ahab knew who Elijah was, and Elijah became the target.

- As a man of God, Elijah was falsely accused.
- We notice up in **verse 17**, as soon as Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said, *"Is this you, you troubler of Israel?"*
- Elijah took the blame for all of the horrible things that had happened in Ahab's life.

- It is very easy for any of us to look at our lives and try to turn the blame on others.
- **“If someone had just been nicer to me, if the preacher had done his job a little better, if the worship had just been a little more spiritual, if someone else had not done this, and this, and this...then my life would not be the mess it is today.”**
- Looking back on this, none of this should surprise us, because for thousands of years, even God’s own people have killed the messenger instead of listening to the message. Adam blamed Eve.
- Eve blamed the serpent. Cain blamed Abel. Saul blamed David. The Pharisees blamed Jesus.

The same thing is true in society.

- It is much easier for us to blame the schools, and blame the police, and blame city hall, and blame the Internet, and blame the media, and blame everyone else...and never take responsibility for our own decisions.
- It is possible to blame the entire world, and never even look at the sin in our own homes.

All of us can learn a lesson here, in the fact that Elijah did not take this accusation personally, but he very quickly turned it around and challenged the sin in Ahab’s life.

- Elijah said, ***“I have not troubled Israel, but you and your father’s house have, because you have forsaken the commandments of the Lord and you have followed the Baals.”***

The only way to find the true troublemaker is to compare the situation to the word of God!

- That is exactly what Elijah did, and we see in the following verses that Elijah set up a challenge between God and all of the prophets of Baal—450 prophets of Baal, and 400 prophets of the Asherah.
- Elijah got them all together, at a huge gathering on Mount Carmel, and in **verse 21**, Elijah issued the challenge, ***“How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him.”***
- Elijah called for a decision to be made.

We can look around us, and notice that we live in a world where we need to make decisions all day long.

- I have been to a few ice cream places over the years and I can distinctly recall some of the feelings that come over me when I see all the different flavors when I walk in the front door.
- I am often mesmerized by all of the decisions that had to be made.
- There is usually a giant display on the wall with all of the options, and I am paralyzed for some time.
- I cannot even focus—there are so many choices!

With ice cream, that’s okay...but in matters of faith, God is calling on us to make a decision!

- God does not want us to ***“hesitate between two opinions.”***
- In **Ephesians 4:14**, PL said that ***“...we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine.”***
- Unfortunately, it can be very hard to choose a side in matters of faith.
- No one wants to be stuck with an unpopular position. No one wants a confrontation.
- The people of Israel wanted to stay in the middle. They did not want to totally turn their back on God, because they knew what God had done for them in the past, but neither did they want to let go of the things that Baal had to offer.
- How many of us here this morning have a Baal in our lives?
- We love the Lord, we would like to do the right thing, but the world doesn’t really look that bad!
- Elijah would challenge us to come down on one side or the other!

I am amazed at the courage that Elijah had. Did you notice in **verse 27** how Elijah started talkin’ trash?

- The prophets of Baal had been dancing around all morning, and at noon, Elijah finally broke in and said, ***“You know, maybe you guys aren’t yelling loud enough, maybe Baal is on vacation, maybe you need to go wake him up.”***
- When Elijah suggested that perhaps Baal was ***“occupied,”*** some of the commentaries have pointed out that Elijah was using a figure of speech, and he was suggesting that perhaps Baal was in the bathroom!
- Perhaps Baal’s robe was around his ankles! Maybe Baal was too busy relieving himself!

- Elijah was one tough man, and he presented a very clear choice, but the prophets of Baal continued.
- In **verse 28**, it even got worse.
- They cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out...all through the afternoon.
- In spite of this, at the end of **verse 29**, *“but there was no voice, no one answered, and no one paid attention.”*

These prophets were sincere, but simply believing something is true does not make it true.

- It only makes a person sincerely wrong, and sincerely wrong is still wrong.
- Elijah called for a decision to be made—the same decision that Jesus called on us to make in **Matthew 6:24**, when He said, *“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”*

The reaction to Elijah’s challenge is summarized up at the end of **verse 21**, where the Bible says, *“But the people did not answer him a word.”*

- There are times when we talk with people, when we offer them the same choice, when we might have a door slammed in our faces.
- Others might be more polite and simply change the subject.
- We can take comfort in the fact that we have done our job, that God is merciful and just, and that even Elijah was persecuted for doing the same thing.

II. Not only did Elijah call for a decision to be made, but we also learn a second lesson from this chapter, and that is, **ELIJAH MADE SURE THAT HE OBEYED THE LORD HIMSELF—REGARDLESS OF WHAT THOSE AROUND HIM WERE DOING.** Let’s notice what happens in **verses 30-35.** **(1Kings 18)**

30 Then Elijah said to all the people, “Come near to me.” So all the people came near to him. And he repaired the altar of the LORD which had been torn down.

31 Elijah took twelve stones according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD had come, saying, “Israel shall be your name.”

32 So with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD, and he made a trench around the altar, large enough to hold two measures of seed.

33 Then he arranged the wood and cut the ox in pieces and laid it on the wood. And he said, “Fill four pitchers with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood.”

34 And he said, “Do it a second time,” and they did it a second time. And he said, “Do it a third time,” and they did it a third time.

35 The water flowed around the altar and he also filled the trench with water.

...Even before this day, Elijah had already paid a high personal price.

- In the eyes of the world, Elijah was weird, but Elijah continued doing what was right—even if he was all alone in front of thousands of people.
- One person, though, has a lot of power.
- When one person does the right thing, others can see that good example.
- Through the Lord’s grace, and because of the Lord’s love, Elijah’s job was to bring the people back into a relationship with the Lord.
- At one time, there had apparently been an altar on Mt. Carmel that had given honor to the true God in heaven.
- It was a place where a priest would go to offer sacrifices on behalf of the people.
- It was a place where God would come down and meet whoever it was who made the sacrifice.
- At some point, though, that altar had been neglected—perhaps the people felt that sacrifices were no longer needed, and so the altar had been torn down.
- That altar represented the covenant that Israel had with God.

With that in mind, in **verse 30**, Elijah called the people to come near...and then *“he repaired the altar of the Lord which had been torn down.”*

- In **verse 31**, we find that he used 12 stones—one stone for each of the 12 tribes of Israel—a reminder of the unity that Israel had had at one time—a reminder of God’s love—a reminder that God had brought them out of

Egypt—a reminder of God’s power from the past—a reminder of the battle of Jericho—and certainly a reminder of God’s law.

Even though Elijah was outnumbered, we find that he not only called for a decision to be made, but he also obeyed the Lord himself by building this altar.

- At the end of this section, he orders it to be absolutely soaked with water.
- In the middle of a drought, at the top of a mountain, hauling water and dumping it out was a sacrifice in itself.
- Water was a very precious and rare commodity after going for 3½ years without rain.
- But we learn that Elijah obeyed the Lord.

III. There is a third lesson for us to learn. It comes in **verses 36-46**, and in these verses, we will find that **ELIJAH PRAYED TO GOD AND GOD RESPONDED TO HIS PRAYER**. Let us read... **1 Kings 18:36-46**.

36 At the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, Elijah the prophet came near and said, "O LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, today let it be known that You are God in Israel and that I am Your servant and I have done all these things at Your word.

37 "Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that You, O LORD, are God, and that You have turned their heart back again."

38 Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench.

39 When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, "The LORD, He is God; the LORD, He is God."

40 Then Elijah said to them, "Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape." So they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon, and slew them there.

41 Now Elijah said to Ahab, "Go up, eat and drink; for there is the sound of the roar of a heavy shower."

42 So Ahab went up to eat and drink. But Elijah went up to the top of Carmel; and he crouched down on the earth and put his face between his knees.

43 He said to his servant, "Go up now, look toward the sea." So he went up and looked and said, "There is nothing." And he said, "Go back" seven times.

44 It came about at the seventh time, that he said, "Behold, a cloud as small as a man's hand is coming up from the sea." And he said, "Go up, say to Ahab, 'Prepare your chariot and go down, so that the heavy shower does not stop you.'"

45 In a little while the sky grew black with clouds and wind, and there was a heavy shower. And Ahab rode and went to Jezreel.

46 Then the hand of the LORD was on Elijah, and he girded up his loins and outran Ahab to Jezreel.

Elijah did not need to cut himself, or dance around the altar, or do any of the things the prophets of Baal did, but in **verses 36-37**, he offered a very simple prayer.

- **Verse 38** is absolutely awesome!—Not only was the sacrifice consumed, but the fire from heaven obliterated the water, the wood, the dust, and even the 12 stones of the altar!
- As a result of this, the people repented (at least for the time being) and carried out Elijah’s instructions to kill the prophets of Baal.

This sounds so severe—probably because we are not very familiar with justice in our nation.

- We are familiar with suspended sentences, plea bargaining, and early parole.
- But God is a jealous God, and He deals severely with sin. **Verse 40** is a bloody and gruesome verse.
- It is hard to imagine the immediate execution of 450 men, and yet the punishment had been legislated by God hundreds of years earlier in **Deuteronomy 13**.
- In **Deuteronomy 13** (concerning false prophets), the people were told, *“not to have pity, but you shall not yield to him or listen to him; and your eye shall not pity him, nor shall you spare or conceal him. But you shall surely kill him; your hand shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterwards the hand of all the people. So you shall stone him to death because he has sought to seduce you from the Lord your God who brought you out from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. Then all Israel will hear and be afraid, and will never again do such a wicked thing among you.”*

And so we see that the Lord answered Elijah's prayer. Thankfully, the chapter ends on a note of mercy.

- Elijah basically says, *"I think I hear some rain,"* and then he goes and prays again.
- He keeps telling his servant to go look at the sky, and finally the servant comes back and says, *"I see a cloud as small as a man's hand is coming up from the sea."*
- At that point, Elijah knows that his prayer is being answered, and this is the situation referred to in **James 5**, where JM says that, *"Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit."*

SUMMARY:

- We learned, first of all, that Elijah called for a decision to be made—just as we also need to decide today. We cannot blame others, because the decision is completely ours. But we learn here that God will not share first place in our lives.
- Secondly, we learned that Elijah obeyed God himself. He followed God's instructions to build an altar. Even though he was terribly outnumbered, Elijah did the right thing, just as we should always do what is right.
- And finally, we learned that Elijah prayed to God, and God responded to his prayer. The story ends on a note of mercy as God sends the rain after a drought of 3½ years.

CONCLUSION:

Unfortunately, the people did not remember this day very long, and after a short time they fell right back into the sin of idolatry.

- Knowing that is true, I feel a little better knowing that Elijah was still pleasing in the eyes of God.
- Elijah did not make a very permanent difference, and yet Elijah himself was a good man.

What amazing courage Elijah had, and what a wonderful pattern for us to follow—calling on those around him to take a stand, leading by example, and always remembering to go to God in prayer!

- May God be with us as we follow that example!

INVITATION:

It is so hard to stay focused on God in a society like ours, but the challenge from Elijah is still valid.

- *"How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him...."*
- The Bible tells us that to follow the Lord, we must believe that He is, change our lives, and then allow ourselves to be immersed in water so that our sins can be washed away.
- If you have any questions, we hope you will ask.
- You should know that you can obey the Lord at any time of day or night.
- You do not need to walk down an aisle to be saved.
- On the other hand, if you have made the decision, and if you are ready to do it right now, we invite you to let us know about your decision as we sing the next song. Let's all stand and sing...