

“The God War Begins”
1 Kings 17
April 2, 2017

INTRODUCTION:

Evil is on the increase in Israel. Their latest king, Ahab, is the most evil in a line of evil kings preceding him. Idolatry has grown to the point that King Ahab marries a woman, Jezebel, who is a strong supporter of Baal worship. As a result, Ahab himself becomes a worshiper of Baal. The days of King Ahab are not unlike our own, when I think we can say that evil is on the increase. One indication of that can be seen in what happened recently to Tim Keller, probably the most well-known preacher in our denomination. He had been awarded a significant prize by an old and well-known seminary in our nation, a prize named after Abraham Kuyper, the Prime Minister of the Netherlands at the beginning of the twentieth century and a devout Christian. The prize is “awarded each year to a scholar or community leader whose outstanding contribution to their chosen sphere reflects the ideas and values characteristic of the Neo-Calvinist vision of religious engagement in matters of social, political and cultural significance in one or more of the spheres of society.” But then that same seminary realized something about Keller that caused them to renege on their award and deny him the prize. What did they discover? That he holds the position that sexual activity is to be limited to a covenant marriage between a man and a woman. And this is a seminary that found such a position problematic.

Any student of either the Bible or of history is not surprised by this. We may be living at a time when evil is on the increase, but we are not living in a unique time. 1 Kings 17 describes just such a time, and God’s response is to raise up a mighty prophet, one whose name means “Jehovah is God.” Elijah is God’s instrument in going to war against the false gods who are gaining followers throughout Israel. This is the first appearance of this great prophet in the Bible. One of the striking things about him is the suddenness of his appearance. We read nothing of his origin, his call to the office of prophet, or what he was like as a person. His sudden appearance reminds us that God always has an answer to the rise of evil. We may not, and usually don’t see it. But we do not despair because we know that God will not let evil grow unchecked.

Many are familiar with the great contest of prophets that will occur in the next chapter on Mount Carmel, when Elijah goes to battle against all the prophets of Baal. But that war actually begins in our chapter when the true God decisively defeats two Canaanite gods, Baal and Mot. In these verses, we come to understand what it means to follow Elijah and to have Jehovah as our God.

I. Jehovah Versus Baal

It is helpful, if we are going to understand this passage, to know something of Canaanite religion. It was a polytheistic religion that attempted to explain life by referencing activities of the gods. Baal was one of their gods, and he was the god of fertility, responsible for sending the rain. But remember that the Middle Eastern region has an arid climate, characterized by a rainy season and a dry season. During the rainy season, Baal was active in sending rain. But what about the dry season? How could that be explained? Another god was employed to do so. Mot was the god of death, and every dry season could be explained by the fact that Mot killed Baal. But Baal didn't stay dead, because every return of the rainy season was explained by Baal being resuscitated.

The opening of the chapter, then, is a clear challenge to Baal. Elijah announces a coming drought, one that dries up not just rain, but dew as well. Baal does not control the rain; Jehovah does. God had been faithfully sending rain to those who had been denying his glory by attributing the rain to Baal, but he now reasserts his sovereign rule through this word of judgment. As is often the case, God's prophets take the heat when people get angry at God. King Ahab is completely unwilling to acknowledge his own fault in this judgment, so he blames Elijah. We learn in the next chapter that he puts out an all-points bulletin for the capture of Elijah. So God acts to protect his prophet by sending him to a remote area where Ahab will not think to look for him, reasoning that no one could survive in such an area. But Ahab doesn't reckon with the power of God. God is in control not only of the rain, but of all the animals in the world. They obey his word, and he commands the ravens to do that which is not natural for them, to bring both meat and bread to Elijah twice every day.

Eventually, the brook supplying water to Elijah runs dry, and Elijah has to move from his wilderness retreat. God directs him to go to a town called Zarephath, which was in the heart of Baal worship. It is in Sidon, the region where Jezebel grew up. God hides Elijah under Baal's nose, and Baal can do nothing about it for an obvious reason. He is nothing but a fiction. There is no Baal. Further, Jehovah has power in the land of Baal. The view present at this time was that each god had power only in his own land. But here is Jehovah in the land of Baal with no limits to his power. Just as he told the ravens to feed Elijah, he now tells a Baal worshiper to feed Elijah, and she does so. What's more, Jehovah proceeds to steal a servant of Baal's and make her his own. This widow responds in trust of God when Elijah tells her to feed him first, with the promise that the Lord will cause the jar of flour not to run dry for the duration of the drought. She believes him and trusts him. A Baal worshiper becomes a Jehovah worshiper.

II. Jehovah Versus Mot

God doesn't stop with Baal. The Canaanite god, Mot, supposedly had power over life and death. The God who will brook no rival next turns his attention to the dethroning and exposure of Mot as a false god. The widow who had cared for Elijah had an only son. Just when things seemed to be stabilizing in her life, tragedy struck. Her son became ill and didn't improve. Instead, he continued to worsen until he died. The widow, though she has faith in Jehovah, does not yet have very strong faith. As a result she responds now in resentment and anger, directed at Elijah as God's prophet. She blames his presence as reminding God of her sin, and, in keeping with common pagan belief, says that it is because of her sin that her son has died. Elijah responds to her angry outburst, not with a theological correction, but with action. He takes the body of this boy up to his second floor room and lays him upon his bed. He then stretched himself upon the child and prays three times for God to bring back the life of the widow's son.

I like what one commentator says about this.

Here is the ultimate test of the Lord's authority. It is one thing to rescue people from the jaws of death, but can he do anything when death has clamped tight its jaws and swallowed the victim up? He can act across the border from Israel in Sidon, but is there a 'border' that he ultimately *cannot* cross, a kingdom in which he has no power? When faced by 'Mot,' must the Lord, like Baal, bow the knee? (Iain Provan, p. 134)

This is the first resurrection in the Bible, and probably the first one in the history of the world. But it will not be the last. Jesus will raise the dead during his earthly ministry. In a very similar miracle, he will raise the only son of a widow from the town of Nain. But he does so in a way very different from what Elijah did. Elijah prayed and asked God to restore this boy's life. Jesus simply spoke a word of command, **"Young man, I say to you, arise"** (Luke 7:14). And life was restored by a mere word from Jesus. Even more astounding is something Jesus says in John 5. **"An hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment"** (John 5:28-29).

III. Jehovah Is God

I would imagine that some of you might be thinking to yourself, "Aren't you guilty of preaching to the choir here? It is highly unlikely that any who are present today need convincing that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the true God, not Baal, Mot or any other god. What practical

difference does this make in our everyday lives?” I think that’s a good question. So let’s take another run through this passage with that question in mind.

The first implication is the practical reminder that God answers prayer. James makes this point in his epistle. **“Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit”** (5:17-18). The tendency is to make Elijah out to be some spiritual super-hero, fundamentally different from us. But James says that he is no different from us, having a sinful nature just like us. I think it is important to point out that Elijah’s prayer was prompted by God’s word. God had warned back in Deuteronomy 11:16-17 that if Israel fell into idolatry, that **“the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you, and he will shut up the heavens, so that there will be no rain.”** Elijah is simply praying the word of God, which is a great way to pray. Prayer is energized when the Holy Spirit impresses upon our hearts some part of his word that we then pray back to God. Prayer is not twisting God to bend his will to ours. Rather, it is filling our hearts with his will through his word, and then simply praying it into existence.

A second practical implication of making the true God your God instead of worshiping false gods is his call to us to be in relationship with him through daily trust in him. This is one of the biggest differences between the true God and false gods. Our effort with false gods is to get them to do what we want. Such a god is revealed as reluctantly giving us what we want if we just pull the right strings with him. The true God doesn’t want us to learn to pull the right strings. He wants a relationship with us that is characterized on our part by a daily trust in him. Notice how we see that with the two main characters of this chapter, Elijah and the widow.

Elijah had to trust God by fleeing to the area east of the Jordan, an inhospitable area where there would be no reasonable hope of food. As one commentator said, “This was hardly the pension plan for retired prophets for which Elijah had been hoping!” Every day, he had to wait upon the raven food delivery service. But as the drought worsened, another problem developed. The brook began to dry up. The flow slowly decreased until it was only a trickle, and then it just stopped. What would Elijah do now? God directed him to go to Zarephath, where he would meet a widow whom God had directed to provide for him. In many ways, ravens must have felt more dependable than a widow. To be a widow during this period of history was to be poor. What’s more, it was a time of economic hardship. Who are the first to be affected in such times? It is always the poor. So Elijah once again finds himself depending on God for his very life. That is God’s purpose for us for the simple reason that he wants us to depend on his love for us, knowing that we will find our greatest joy in doing so.

The widow found the same thing to be true. In his great mercy, God put her in a place of dependence upon him. As the drought worsened, food prices began to rise. And then she ran out of money and could no longer buy food for herself and her son. She watched as her supply of flour and oil began to run low. On the day she calculated would be her last to eat a meal, Elijah shows up and asks for some food. After she explains her situation to him, he says something astounding. She is to go ahead and prepare the food as she planned, but instead of doing the normal thing that any parent would do, feeding one's child first, she is to feed Elijah first, and then herself and finally her son. But he brings a word from God as he gives this command. **“For thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, ‘The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the Lord sends rain upon the earth’”** (17:14). And she did what any who follow God must do—she risked everything on his promise. She fed Elijah first, even before she had any reason, other than God's word through Elijah, to believe what he had told her. But she found it just as God had said. Every day she would open her flour jar and find another day's supply, even though she had emptied the jar the previous day. She had an everyday opportunity to experience the presence of God through his provision.

We are no different than this widow. To have the true God of Elijah, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, as our God, requires that we risk everything on his promise. We wager everything on words such as these from those climactic verses of Romans 8. **“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor power, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”**

CONCLUSION:

Several years ago, I read these words.

Rising early one morning, I heard the baying of a score of deer hounds in pursuit of their quarry. Looking away to a broad, open field in front of me, I saw a young fawn making its way across, and giving signs, moreover, that its race was well-nigh run. Reaching the rails of the enclosure, it leaped over and crouched within ten feet from where I stood. A moment later two of the hounds came over, when the fawn ran in my direction and pushed its head between my legs. I lifted the little thing to my breast, and, swinging round and round, fought off the dogs. I felt, just then, that all the dogs in the West could not, and should not capture that fawn after its weakness had appealed to my strength.

That's what we do by faith. In our weakness, like that of Elijah and this widow, we appeal to God's strength, the true and living God. He does not disappoint, nor will he ever do so.