

“The Lord, He Is God”
1 Kings 18
April 9, 2017

INTRODUCTION:

There are several truths in the Bible that terrify me. One of these truths that terrify is that God often gives us what we want. In Romans 1, when Paul is talking about the wrath of God, he says that it is revealed from heaven already in this life. It is not just something that will come on judgment day, but something that is already in place. He says that God’s wrath is being revealed right now by giving people what they want. The problem, of course, is that we are all born with a sinful nature that has a defective “wanter.” We are all the spiritual equivalent of the willful toddler who wants a diet that consists only of French fries and cookies.

In today’s passage, Ahab gets what he wants. Having blamed the long drought on Elijah, he had been diligently searching for him for more than three years. But in another sign that God is in control of all things, even powerful kings, Ahab proves uniquely inept at finding Elijah, and other things too. He can’t even find grass for his horses, much less God’s prophet. He never does find Elijah. But when God decided it was time, Elijah finds him. Ahab gets what he wanted, but it doesn’t turn out so well for him.

This is the most well-known chapter in 1 Kings, featuring the dramatic confrontation between Elijah and the prophets of Baal. The stakes could not have been higher, with life itself on the line depending on which God one chose. Only one prophet walked off this mountain alive. The 450 prophets of Baal attended their last worship service on this mountain, and had their lifeless bodies carried off it. The greatest matters in life hinge upon theological decisions. That was the case on this day and it will always be the case. The most significant issue for you today is the same as it was for Ahab in Elijah’s day. Is Jehovah God or do we look elsewhere for that which is ultimate? Is Jesus who he said he is, the Son of God, or is he just a pretender? What is it that keeps people from choosing the true God? Let’s explore these matters a little further as we look more carefully at this passage.

I. Human Choice Poorly Used

Our passage spends a surprisingly large amount of time talking about King Ahab. We see, for example, his concern for his horses. They are in danger of dying because of the lack of grazing land due to the drought. Why was he concerned about his horses? Horses represented military power in this day, and Ahab was all about power because he really trusted in himself. He is in

contrast to Obadiah, who served as something like a chief of staff to the king. We are told that Obadiah feared the Lord, and as a result he was concerned to save the lives of the Lord's prophets that Queen Jezebel was seeking to eradicate. But we see in Ahab a man who was full of willfulness and determination, willing to walk throughout the land to preserve what was important to him.

The second paragraph of the passage describes an interaction between Elijah and Obadiah. Though Ahab is absent from this interaction, we learn something about him. While Obadiah is on his search for some grazing land for the king's horses, Elijah finds him and tells him to bring a message to Ahab saying that he wants a meeting. Obadiah is frightened by the message because he anticipates Ahab's reaction should the Spirit of the Lord lead Elijah away from Ahab in order to preserve Elijah's life. Obadiah knows that should that happen, Ahab will kill him. What does that tell you? It speaks very clearly about the strength of Ahab's resolve. He would stop at nothing to rid the earth of this prophet, Elijah, whom he holds responsible for the terrible drought on the land.

Ahab's story reveals a misconception most of us have. We often believe that our main problem is that we lack the resolve to do what needs doing. But Ahab did not lack resolve. His problem was that he desired the wrong things. His problem wasn't the inability to carry out his will through a lack of discipline or self-control, but that his will was corrupt. He wanted the wrong things because he was following the wrong god.

I don't think it was an accident that Herman Melville gave the main character of his great novel, *Moby Dick*, the same name as this king. Captain Ahab is the epitome of stubborn willfulness. He is captain of a nineteenth-century whaling vessel named *Pequod*. His crew has a nickname for him, "Old Thunder." Like King Ahab in his determination to hunt down Elijah, Captain Ahab is determined to hunt down and kill Moby Dick, the whale that took his leg. He will allow nothing to deter him from achieving his desire, not even the mutinous intentions of his crew. He even challenges the gods to try to stop him from his purposes.

You've knocked me down, and I'm up again, but ye have run and hidden. Come forth from behind your cotton bags! I have no long gun to reach ye. Come...and see if ye can swerve me. Swerve me? Ye cannot swerve me, else ye swerve yourselves!... The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run.

But his resolve doesn't serve him well, leading ultimately to his death. This is not to say that self-discipline is unimportant, but rather that something else is more important, and that is to desire the right things. Such desires come only as we have the right God. Your biggest need is not more self-discipline, but the

kind of heart that wants the right things. If you have an abundance of self-discipline but direct it toward the wrong goal, you only end up speeding your progress toward a bad outcome.

In his book, *Desiring God's Will*, David Benner describes a counselee he once had named Michael. This man, in his late thirties, had a life motto, "Where there's a will, there's a way." He was highly disciplined in every part of his life. He was a competitive runner who ran at least two hours a day, four days a week, no matter the weather. He maintained the spiritual discipline of prayer and Bible reading, devoting the exact time of 5:10-5:30 every morning to that discipline. He was equally disciplined in all other parts of his life, including his diet, sleep and work. Not surprisingly, he was proud about these things, leading to his contempt for those who lacked his discipline. He even became proud about silly things, such as his ability to go longer than others without needing to go to the bathroom. Like King Ahab, he demonstrates to us that our biggest need isn't resolve and self-discipline, but the more radical transformation of our hearts to desire the right things. Without that, our souls are just as arid and lifeless as the ground in Israel after three years of no rain or dew. There is only one God able to do that, and that God pursues King Ahab through Elijah, inviting him to choose the true God.

II. Human Choice Well-Used

The best use of human will is to choose to worship the true and living God. The enemy of such a good choice is not just choosing the wrong god, but also trying to walk a fence without committing oneself to God. When Elijah confronts the people of Israel on Mt. Carmel, he asks them, "**How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him**" (18:21). The failure to commit is to make oneself a cripple. Ours is an age in which people don't like to make commitments, but the price of that failure is high. A fence can serve a good purpose, but it makes a very poor place to live. Elijah is asking them to get off the fence. Notice the response of the people. "**The people did not answer him a word.**" Their silence was similar to the response I sometimes make to my wife when she asks me to do something that I really don't want to do. It is a non-committal response.

Elijah knows that part of choosing the true God is to expose the true nature of the false god. So he sets about doing that on Mt. Carmel. He begins by giving every advantage to the prophets of Baal. Mt. Carmel was a special place for the worship of Baal, something like Jerusalem was for the worship of Jehovah. To use a sports analogy, Elijah is playing an "away game" here. The test he sets up plays into Baal's supposed strengths. Baal was a storm god, and one of the images of him features him holding a lightning bolt in his hand. To strike this sacrifice with fire would be his supposed specialty. Then Elijah allowed them to

choose the bull they wanted and to go first. To use another sports analogy, this was a sudden death contest, literally. Had Baal been able to bring fire, Elijah would have lost the contest without ever having a chance to ask his God to bring fire. Elijah knows that the human heart will find any way possible to wiggle out of a commitment to the true God, and he is seeking to close every possible door for someone to say that the contest wasn't fair to Baal.

The worship of Baal by his prophets has all the elements the sinful flesh finds impressive. There is shouting, dancing, lengthy praying and even self-injury as a way to persuade Baal to answer their prayers. Phil Ryken describes the prophets of Baal like this:

This was hardly a boring worship service. All the singing, dancing, slashing, and shouting must have been very exciting. 'How was the service at Carmel?' someone might have asked. 'It was awesome. It went on for hours. There was this huge worship team up on the mountain. Blood everywhere. Four hundred and fifty prophet singing "Come on, Baal, Light My Fire!" But God judges by the heart, and what seems impressive from the outside is often empty on the inside.

It was empty, and Baal doesn't respond for the simple reason that there is no Baal. Elijah mocks them, saying they need to cry louder because perhaps Baal is asleep, or on a journey or perhaps even in the bathroom. After the prophets of Baal give up in exasperation, Elijah increases the challenge by having the altar saturated with water. After praying a simple prayer that focuses on God's covenant promises, God sends fire, signifying that he is the true God.

Since he is the true God, he answers prayer. In his book, *Sit, Walk, Stand*, Watchman Nee tells of an evangelistic mission just before World War II in an island south of the Chinese mainland. After much effort by six evangelists, none of the island's residents had shown any interest in Jesus. One of the evangelists finally asked them, "Why is it that none of you will believe?" They replied, "We already have a god, Ta-Wang, and he has never failed us." They went on to say that they had held a festival in January every year for the past 286 years, and their god had always provided a perfect day without rain or clouds. After finding out that the festival was scheduled this particular year for January 11, the young evangelist said, "Then I promise you that it will certainly rain on the eleventh." They said to him, "That is enough! No more preaching! If there is rain on the eleventh, then your God is God." This young evangelist hadn't consulted his evangelism colleagues before saying this, and it made them quite nervous when they found out. But it was too late to back out, because word had gotten out about it and everyone seemed to know about the Elijah-like challenge. So they did the only thing they knew to do—they prayed. Watchman Nee describes the events of that day as follows:

I was awakened by the direct rays of the sun through the single window of our attic. "This isn't rain!" I said. It was already past seven o'clock. I got up, knelt

down and prayed. “Lord,” I said, “please send the rain!”... I walked downstairs before God in silence. We sat down to breakfast—eight of us together, including our host—all very quiet. There was no cloud in the sky, but we knew God was committed. As we bowed to say grace before the food I said, “I think the time is up. Rain must come now. We can bring it to the Lord’s remembrance.” (Ryken, p. 499)

As they concluded their prayer, they could hear a few drops of rain begin to fall. It grew heavier through breakfast until it was a downpour. It kept up until the streets were flooded. Later, the missionaries heard that in the town as it began to rain, some of the young men began saying, “There is a God; there is no more Ta-Wang!” But the older men weren’t so ready to make that confession. They carried their idol outside to begin the procession in his honor. As they did so, the downpour increased, causing those who were carrying him to slip. Ta-Wang fell and broke his jaw and left arm. They quickly repaired him and tried to resume their parade. But then the flooding started and they couldn’t even walk. God answered the prayers of the evangelists just as he had answered Elijah’s prayers. When you are desperate and call out to God for help, you have a God who answers prayer. There is no other god who will answer you—not the American gods of success or money or accomplishment.

CONCLUSION:

This was a life and death situation, both for Elijah and the false prophets. Whether you realize it or not, you are in the exact same position as Elijah. If God doesn’t send fire, you will die. Like King Ahab, our desires are out of whack. It is our nature to take God’s good gifts and the good desires that he gives for those things and corrupt them by wanting things that will bring harm to us. We need fire from heaven in the form of a changed heart by the power of the Holy Spirit. We can be confident that God will send the fire as we come to him through Jesus. Our confidence is based on the fact that he has received the sacrifice of Jesus. Just as Elijah’s sacrifice was received with a clear sign from God in the form of the fire, so the sacrifice of Jesus at the cross was accompanied by signs. The curtain in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The tombs were opened and the dead were raised. Darkness at noon came, prompting the Roman soldiers to declare that surely this was the Son of God. So God is coming to you now with these words, **“The Lord, he is God”** (18:39). It is time to stop limping between options and invite the fire from God.