

1 KINGS 18

SHOWDOWN ON MT. CARMEL

Last week we asked the question, “Who is really in control?” In asking that question, we looked at how the northern kingdom of Israel had gotten to the place of total idolatry and how Ahab had become king. Ahab married a Sidonian woman by the name of Jezebel. She brought the worship of Baal, the storm god to her husband, the king, who then institutionalized Baal worship in Israel, building a temple in Samaria.

God then took up the challenge of proving just who was in control and who the real power broker was. He did this through His prophet, Elijah. God, through Elijah, declared that there would be no rain in the region until God, through Elijah declared the drought to be over. This was a direct challenge to Baal, who as a storm god, was said to have power over the rain, crops and fertility. His weapons were said to be thunder, lightning and fire. His enemies were the sea and death.

After declaring the drought, Elijah was sent by God east of the Jordan, to an arid place where meat and bread were brought to him twice daily. This should remind of us of how God provided meat and bread for Israel during their desert wandering experience. Elijah drank from the brook Cherith until it dried up because of the very drought he had declared. God then moved him to Zarephath, which was near the hometown of Jezebel. God moved His prophet right into the center of Baal worship at that time. As we will see today, God removed him from Israel in order to hide him from Ahab. The irony is that God hid him right under Baal’s nose, so to speak.

By declaring a drought, YHWH ushered a direct challenge to Baal and those who worshipped him. If Baal really controlled the weather, specifically the rain, then he should have had no problem countering the drought declared by Elijah. As we will see, Baal was not up to the challenge. While Ahab was frantically looking for water in Israel, Elijah was witnessing to a widow, her son and those who lived around her. Elijah showed them that despite the drought, from which the Sidonians, as well as the Israelites were suffering, the one true God could provide

sustenance. We pick up the story today as Elijah returns to Samaria in order to confront Ahab and the prophets of Baal. By the end of the chapter everyone will know who is really in charge.

1Kings 18:1 **“After many days the word of the LORD came to Elijah, in the third year, saying, “Go, show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain upon the earth.”² So Elijah went to show himself to Ahab. Now the famine was severe in Samaria.³ And Ahab called Obadiah, who was over the household. (Now Obadiah feared the LORD greatly,⁴ and when Jezebel cut off the prophets of the LORD, Obadiah took a hundred prophets and hid them by fifties in a cave and fed them with bread and water.)⁵ And Ahab said to Obadiah, “Go through the land to all the springs of water and to all the valleys. Perhaps we may find grass and save the horses and mules alive, and not lose some of the animals.”⁶ So they divided the land between them to pass through it. Ahab went in one direction by himself, and Obadiah went in another direction by himself.**

- God tells Elijah to confront Ahab. He returns to Samaria, though we haven’t seen or heard from him, to this point.
- The famine has gotten severe in Samaria, so Ahab needs to find water. It is interesting that his concern is for his animals, not the people of Israel. Horses and mules were likely military concerns.
- Obadiah, who feared the LORD greatly, is over the running of the palace, think back to Joseph in Egypt. Obadiah has hidden 100 prophets in caves, making sure they are fed and watered. He wants to preserve the prophets of God. Remember what a prophet does in the OT.
- Ahab divides the land in two – taking one half himself and assigning the other half to Obadiah, in search of water.

1Kings 18:7 **And as Obadiah was on the way, behold, Elijah met him. And Obadiah recognized him and fell on his face and said, “Is it you,**

my lord Elijah?”⁸ And he answered him, “It is I. Go, tell your lord, ‘Behold, Elijah is here.’”⁹ And he said, “How have I sinned, that you would give your servant into the hand of Ahab, to kill me?¹⁰ “As the LORD your God lives, there is no nation or kingdom where my lord has not sent to seek you. And when they would say, ‘He is not here,’ he would take an oath of the kingdom or nation, that they had not found you.¹¹ And now you say, ‘Go, tell your lord, “Behold, Elijah is here.””¹² And as soon as I have gone from you, “the Spirit of the LORD will carry you I know not where. And so, when I come and tell Ahab and he cannot find you, he will kill me, although I your servant have feared the LORD from my youth.¹³ Has it not been told my lord what I did when Jezebel killed the prophets of the LORD, how I hid a hundred men of the LORD’s prophets by fifties in a cave and fed them with bread and water?¹⁴ And now you say, ‘Go, tell your lord, “Behold, Elijah is here”’; and he will kill me.”¹⁵ And Elijah said, “As the LORD of hosts lives, before whom I stand, I will surely show myself to him today.”¹⁶ So Obadiah went to meet Ahab, and told him. And Ahab went to meet Elijah.

- In his search for water, Obadiah meets Elijah.
- Elijah instructs Obadiah to tell Ahab that he, Elijah is in Samaria.
- Obadiah balks at this, fearing for his life. Ahab has been looking for Elijah since the beginning of the two-year drought. He has gone so far as to make people swear oaths that they have not seen Elijah. If anyone was thought be hiding Elijah, they would be killed. Because Elijah had seemingly disappeared from the planet, Obadiah fears that Elijah would leave and not be found, prompting a deadly response from Ahab towards Obadiah. This would be seen as Obadiah taunting Ahab. As pious as Obadiah is, he has misunderstood the situation. This isn’t merely a personal thing between Elijah and Ahab. This is a personal thing between God, Baal and Ahab.
- Elijah assures Obadiah that he will meet Ahab today. He will not be a “no-show.”

1Kings 18:17 When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, *“Is it you, you troubler of Israel?”* ¹⁸ And he answered, *“I have not troubled Israel, but you have, and your father’s house, because you have abandoned the commandments of the LORD and followed the Baals.”* ¹⁹ Now therefore send and gather all Israel to me at Mount Carmel, and the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel’s table.”

Upon seeing Elijah for the first time in a couple years, Ahab addresses the prophet as, “the troubler of Israel.” This isn’t the first time this phrase has been used. We need to hyperlink back to **1 Samuel 14: 24 – 46**, where it had to be determined who was troubling the camp; Saul or Jonathan.

Elijah quickly responds that it isn’t he that is the troubler of Israel. It is Ahab who has brought trouble into the camp through the worship of Baal. The showdown is not just between Elijah and Ahab, it is between God and Baal, as well as God and Ahab. There will be a manifest winner, and all Israel, as well as the Sidonians and anyone else within earshot will know exactly who the winner will be.

Elijah then throws down the gauntlet, telling Ahab to assemble all the prophets of Baal, as well as the prophets of Asherah at Mt. Carmel – a range of mountains in the Northwest corner of Israel, near the Mediterranean coast, not too far south of Sidon.

1Kings 18:20 So Ahab sent to all the people of Israel and gathered the prophets together at Mount Carmel. ²¹ And Elijah came near to all the people and said, *“How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.”* And the people did not answer him a word. ²² Then Elijah said to the people, *“I, even I only, am left a prophet of the LORD, but Baal’s prophets are 450 men.”* ²³ Let two bulls be given to us, and let them choose one bull for themselves and cut it in pieces

and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. And I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood and put no fire to it. ²⁴ And you call upon the name of your god, and I will call upon the name of the LORD, and the God who answers by fire, he is God.” And all the people answered, “It is well spoken.” ²⁵ Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, “Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many, and call upon the name of your god, but put no fire to it.” ²⁶ And they took the bull that was given them, and they prepared it and called upon the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, “O Baal, answer us!” But there was no voice, and no one answered. And they limped around the altar that they had made. ²⁷ And at noon Elijah mocked them, saying, “Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.” ²⁸ And they cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them. ²⁹ And as midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention.

- Ahab gathers the people and the prophets to Mt. Carmel.
- Elijah addresses everyone by asking: *“How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.”*
- The people, in their shame, did not answer.
- ²⁴ *And you call upon the name of your god, and I will call upon the name of the LORD, and the God who answers by fire, he is God.”*
- The Lord’s association with fire is well attested to in the OT; (Lev. 9:24; 10:2; Num. 16:35)

- The showdown and its terms. The pagans get the first shot. Baal does not answer the call. Self – flagellation. Limping around the altar. Will return to the issue of limping.
- Elijah mocks them. As the day passes noon, Baal is still a no-show.

1Kings 18:30 Then Elijah said to all the people, “Come near to me.” And all the people came near to him. And he repaired the altar of the LORD that had been thrown 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 came, saying, “Israel shall be your name,” ³² and with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD. And he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two seahs of seed. ³³ And he put the wood in order and cut the bull in pieces and laid it on the wood. And he said, “Fill four jars 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 And the water ran around the altar and filled the trench also with water.

1Kings 18:36 And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near and said, “O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that 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 hearts back.” 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 And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, “The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God.” ⁴⁰ And

Elijah said to them, “Seize the prophets of Baal; let not one of them escape.” And they seized them. And Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon and slaughtered them there.

- The altar that had been thrown down was an altar to YHWH, but it wasn't a legitimate one. It was on a high place and not at the temple. Elijah rebuilt it (in order that it will be destroyed).
- *Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD came, saying, “Israel shall be your name,”*
- Preparation of the bull, the trench, firewood and all the water.
- “Israel” = wrestling or contending with God.
- At the time of the offering of the oblation, (preparation at the temple would have started around 2:30 pm, with the oblation commencing at 3:00 pm).
- Elijah prays, *“O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word.*
- *“Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.”* This is God reaching out to Israel, in order that they return to Him.
- Then the fire of God falls, consuming not only the bull and the firewood, but also the dirt, the 12 stones, (is that in some way prophetic?) but also the illegitimate altar to YHWH that Elijah had repaired, pointing the people back to the legitimate worship of YHWH in the temple.
- The pagan prophets are killed. This is gory, but also symbolic.

1Kings 18:41 And Elijah said to Ahab, “Go up, eat and drink, for there is a sound of the rushing of rain.”⁴² So Ahab went up to eat and to drink. And Elijah went up to the top of Mount Carmel. And he

bowed himself down on the earth and put his face between his knees. ⁴³ And he said to his servant, “Go up now, look toward the sea.” And he went up and looked and said, “There is nothing.” And he said, “Go again,” seven times. ⁴⁴ And at the seventh time he said, “Behold, ¹a little cloud like a man’s hand is rising from the sea.” And he said, “Go up, say to Ahab, ‘Prepare your chariot and go down, lest the rain stop you.’” ⁴⁵ And in a little while the heavens grew black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain. And Ahab rode and went to ^mJezreel. ⁴⁶ ⁿAnd the hand of the LORD was on Elijah, ^oand he gathered up his garment and ran before Ahab to the entrance of ^pJezreel.

- After the showdown, Elijah tells Ahab to go home and eat. This sets up the next scene in the story.
- Elijah goes to the top of Mt. Carmel, prays and instructs his servant to look towards the sea.
- He sees nothing. Go back again, seven times. (7 = perfection or completion).
- A storm cloud is brewing, and it soon brings rain. But it isn’t the only storm cloud that is brewing. God and God alone controls the rain. Baal has been shown to Israel, to be powerless.
- Verses 44b – 46 set up the next episode.

APPLICATION:

The cosmic battle is won, but the war continues to rage.

How long will you limp between two opinions? Israel is limping around just as the prophets of Baal are limping around their altar. They have been in a sort of spiritual limbo. This didn’t happen in a vacuum and it didn’t happen overnight. We can easily fall into the same trap. We can slowly be lulled into limping between God’s way and the ways of our culture, the ways of the world. To limp between two things is to be double-minded.

James 1:5 If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. ⁶ But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷ For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸ he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

A double minded person has not really committed to either one. We are going through the motions. And God does not like it when we are going through the motions.

Show them who is God. Turn them back. We see here that God is reaching out to Israel in order to bring them back to Himself. And He is constantly wanting to do the same thing with us. God is always standing there, His hand outstretched, wanting to pull us out of the pit, but many of us are too busy trying to dig ourselves out of the pit, if we even realize we are in the pit.

This didn't happen in a vacuum. It came about over a period of time as Israel became acclimatized to the surrounding cultures. (The proverbial frog in the pot).

Their acclimatizing became the default.

How long will we limp between the truth that we have a God and a King that is to be followed, and the ways of the world that push us ever so slowly into the default positions of the culture around us?

Is Jesus our King, who gives us our marching orders? Is He the one who is to govern our lives, or have we slowly become accustomed to a "Christian life" that is now defined as going to church and being a generally good person?

If we say we believe that God is in control, then we should live that way. If He is in control, then we need to be on the same page with Him in order to walk in His ways. And that will look very strange to the unbeliever as well as to the limping believer. Israel was to be so different from the surrounding nations that people stood up and took notice. But after having taken the land, they quickly settled

into life and business as usual – looking very much like everyone else. Have we fallen into the same trap?

Re-read the Gospels in this light – in light of the coming kingdom Jesus proclaimed and see what jumps off the pages at you.

God is in control of our lives. And if we yield to His will, not our own – and if we yield to His will and not the default of our culture, we will be different, and people will want to know why. And that is when we can share the Gospel of the kingdom. That is when we will see it rain again and this drought, we are all living in now, will come to an end.

God bless and Happy Mother's Day!