

“Choose: God or Baal?”

SCENES FROM THE LIFE OF ELIJAH (PART 4): 1 KINGS 18:17-46

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Over the past several weeks, we have been looking at scenes from the life of the prophet Elijah. Elijah, of course, was one of the most powerful and one of the most unique characters in the Old Testament. Several weeks ago, we learned that Elijah was a man of tremendous courage. He comes on the scene during the reign of King Ahab, a king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel who did more than just about any other to pull the nation away from God and toward the worship of Baal. In that context, Elijah comes basically out of nowhere, he approaches the king, and he says (in 1 Kings 17:1), ***“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.”*** Elijah then leaves and lives by a stream in the wilderness. Over time, though, the stream dries up, and God commands him to go live with a destitute widow who is commanded to give Elijah her very last meal, which she does. The widow, then, serves as a tremendous example – sacrificing what was valuable for the Lord’s work. Then, last week, we continued in 1 Kings 17 by looking at the death of the widow’s son. Life was caving in, so to speak, and in that crisis of faith, the widow turned to Elijah for help, Elijah turned to God, and the young man was raised from the dead, something that had never happened before up to that point in world history.

At the end of our time together last week, we looked at all of these things that happened to Elijah as training. Not that God necessarily caused all of these bad things to happen, but God took those events and used them to transform Elijah from ***“Elijah the Tishbite”*** (at the beginning of 1 Kings 17) to Elijah, the ***“man of God”*** (at the end of that chapter). So with all of this as background, with the idea that God was preparing Elijah for something far greater, we come to 1 Kings 18 (p. 579).

In 1 Kings 18, if we look at verse 1, we find that by this time, the drought was in its third year. Most of us cannot even imagine what life would be like, going for more than 3 years without a source of water. Last week, we had some neighbors go for about 3 days without water when their pipes froze. And even in modern times, when we lose our source of water (even for 3 days), things can very quickly get rather barbaric! But at this time, it had been 3-½ years from the time Elijah had told Ahab that there would be neither rain nor dew except by his word. It is hard for us to imagine what that must have been like.

My understanding is that California is in a fairly serious drought right now. Communities are struggling to get water. But even there, in those communities out in California, they haven’t gone nearly 3-½ years without water. So yes, it might be a little uncomfortable out there, but certainly nothing that could even compare to

the situation in the days of Elijah. If you look at Wisconsin on this map, you will notice that we are still right on the edge of some very moderate drought-like conditions.

And of course, over the past several years, we have also been short of rain here in Wisconsin. I think this picture goes back to the summer of 2012 when we had those record-breaking temperatures. Crops suffered, the state got involved. But even with that, we still had rain from time to time. It is hard for us to imagine, then, what life might have been like to go for 3 ½ years without a single drop of rain.

Several years ago, we studied this passage in another format, and I sent a quick note to a former member of this congregation who was currently working as a television meteorologist. As I remember it, Kevin Usealman worked for the Fox affiliate here in Madison and also did some work with Channel 27. So I sent Kevin a message, and I asked Kevin, "If Wisconsin were to go 3-½ years without any rain whatsoever, what would that look like? In practical terms, how would that affect us?" Well, he responded, but his message came in one day after I preached that message! This message is dated Monday, March 22, 2004. I shared it on the following Wednesday, but I want to share it again this morning. What would this kind of drought look like in Wisconsin? This is his answer, coming from a trained meteorologist:

3.5 years with NO PRECIP would be enough to kill nearly every living thing. ALL plant life would be extinguished (except maybe some Christmas cactuses in windows here and there, and some that lingered near lakebeds). What animal life that did remain would hang out around what lakes remained (smaller and even moderate sized lakes would likely be wiped out completely in three years time). As far as human beings are concerned, we would be completely unusable. Wisconsin would essentially become a desert climate as those topographical changes would most definitely affect the climatology. Winters would be shorter, days would be much warmer and nights would be colder, on the average. In short, darn miserable all around. In Bible times, I imagine people would probably migrate out of the area or mostly die from such a drought (aside from any especially rugged folk who might learn to adapt, but even then it would be a challenge to survive without modern amenities under such conditions).

So, that is the scenario facing Israel in roughly 850 BC. In 1 Kings 18:5, in fact, the king is out looking for water with the hope that he might be able to save some of his horses and cattle. The nation is desperate, and as far as the king was concerned, Elijah was the cause of it. Now, what is interesting to me is that the people were being punished for worshipping Baal. I have put a picture of Baal on the wall back here. This is from a trip I took down to Chicago on the Van Galder bus several years ago. If you have a day, I would highly recommend that you take the 3-hour trip down to the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago. They have a number of significant artifacts from Bible times, including this figure of Baal. It is about 8-9 inches tall, and it actually reminded me of a large rusty nail! But this is Baal. As the caption explains, Baal is pictured here in his typical "striking pose," one hand up in the air as if he is about to smack somebody. A number of ancient artifacts have Baal posing with a lightning bolt in that hand. Baal was the Canaanite god of fertility and storms. Baal was the god of rain, and lightning, and thunder! So, people worship the rain god, and in response, the Lord God of heaven stops every drop of rain (and even the dew on the ground) for 3-½ years!

And remember, the drought started with the word of Elijah. The king, therefore, had been searching for Elijah. In verse 10, in fact, we find that King Ahab had even traveled to the surrounding nations and forced those nations to swear that they did not know where Elijah was staying. Elijah was the equivalent of "Israel's Most Wanted." The king wanted to find Elijah and in some way force him to make it rain. We can only imagine the torture that King Ahab had in mind. At this point, the king was willing to do just about anything to make it rain.

Elijah, though, had been in hiding. Finally, though, in the opening verses of 1 Kings 18, at God's command, Elijah takes the initiative and sets out to find the king. And with that, we pick up with 1 Kings 18:17,

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

So Ahab sent a message among all the sons of Israel and brought the prophets together at Mount Carmel. 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. Then Elijah said to the people, "I alone am left a prophet of the Lord, but Baal's prophets are 450 men. 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. 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."

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." 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. 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." 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. 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.

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

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

God.” 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.

Now Elijah said to Ahab, “Go up, eat and drink; for there is the sound of the roar of a heavy shower.” 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. 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. 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.’” 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. Then the hand of the Lord was on Elijah, and he girded up his loins and outran Ahab to Jezreel.

This is an amazing chapter! I know there is no possible way for us to cover this in any comprehensive way in the time we have left, so I would like for us to look at this chapter with the question: What does this chapter mean for us? Why did God preserve this for us? Why did God tell us about this? What do we need to get out of it? And as we think about what we’ve read with those questions in mind, I want us to go back and notice the emphasis here on **THE CHOICE THAT ELIJAH (AS GOD’S PROPHET) PUT BEFORE THE PEOPLE**. The key statement in this entire chapter is found in Elijah’s challenge in verse 21. If we could imagine the scene here: We have the king of Israel, we have 450 prophets of Baal, we have 400 prophets of the Asherah (Baal’s female counterpart), we have all of the people of Israel assembled here, and then we have the prophet Elijah. And in that very tense and dramatic situation, Elijah speaks up and says, **“How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him.”** And with that, we are back to a one-point lesson this morning, and the one thing we need to focus on in this chapter is **THE CHALLENGE TO CHOOSE GOD**. Elijah was making an appeal to the nation as a whole: All of you need to decide which God to follow.

And with that, I would point out the people’s response. At the end of verse 21, the inspired record says, **“But the people did not answer him a word.”** In other words, the people thought they could stay neutral. They thought they could put off making a decision. Elijah, though, told them to stop straddling the fence, **“How long will you hesitate,” “How long will you limp along [literally] between two opinions?”**

At this point, then, in order to force a decision, Elijah proposes the challenge: Let us set up two altars, let us set up two sacrifices – you call out to your god, I will call out to my God, and let us see which one answers by fire. And, at the end of verse 24, **“all the people said, ‘This is a good idea.’”** Remember: Baal is the god of lightning, lightning can start fires, and so the prophets of Baal jump all over this idea. Elijah, of course, also has some history here. Elijah’s God had also shown himself through fire on a number of occasions. We think of what happened to the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. We think of God appearing to Moses in the burning bush. So, we find that everybody agrees to the challenge of the two altars.

By calling for a decision, Elijah was keeping with a long tradition. Elijah echoes Moses who addressed the people as they stood across the river from the Promised Land in Deuteronomy 30:19. As an old man, Moses begged the next generation, **“I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants.”** Elijah was echoing some of the last words of Joshua from more than 500 years earlier as Joshua also addressed the nation, **“Now, therefore, fear the Lord and serve Him in sincerity and truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. If it is disagreeable in**

your sight to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” Elijah, then, appealed to history and called on the people to make a choice.

This, by the way, is the same choice that God is calling us to make today. We think of what the Lord himself said in Matthew 6:33, where he challenged his disciples to ***“seek first His kingdom and His righteousness.”*** We think of what the Lord said a few verses earlier (in verse 24), ***“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.”*** Some of the harshest words anywhere in the Bible come from the Lord himself in his message to the church in Laodicea in Revelation 3:15-16, ***“I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth.”*** So, the decision Elijah called for on Mt. Carmel is the same decision we are being called on to make today. We have to choose: Will we follow God or not?

And I would point out: There is no middle ground. Like the Laodiceans, the Israelites also thought they could straddle the fence. They thought they could worship Baal a little bit here and there. They thought they could worship God a little bit here and there. They thought they could play both sides. They thought they could hedge their bets, so to speak, worshiping each god a little bit just to be on the safe side. But notice: Elijah forces the choice. They remain silent after the challenge, but Elijah presses forward. To be silent is to make the wrong decision.

And so, as Elijah presses forward, I want us to notice that he lets the prophets of Baal go first. He lets them dance and jump around for a while, and then (after a few hours) he starts mocking these men publicly, ***“Call out with a loud voice,”*** he said, ***“Maybe he is occupied, or gone aside, or maybe he is on a journey, maybe your god is out of town. Maybe he is taking a nap. Maybe you need to wake him up”*** [paraphrased]. Those who have studied the Hebrew language tell us that Elijah is perhaps using a common figure of speech. When he says, maybe your god has ***“gone aside,”*** it would be like saying, ***“Maybe your god is in the outhouse. Maybe your god is using the men’s room. Maybe your god’s robe is around his ankles,”*** so to speak. Elijah has quite a sense of humor. And so at that point, the prophets of Baal try even harder. They gash themselves with knives and swords until the blood flowed freely. The scene was a scene of total chaos. I can tell you: I have been in some denominational worship services that have looked a lot like this. I remember going to observe one service down in Tennessee where nearly the entire church got up on stage and rolled around on the floor in their suits and ties and dresses, screaming, babbling at the top of their lungs, with all kinds of instruments blaring in the background. That is what I see here in 1 Kings 18 – total chaos. So, just a side note here: Sincerity is overrated! Maybe you have heard somebody that it doesn’t matter what you believe, as long as you are sincere. Or, ***“We are all going to heaven, and all of us are just taking different routes to get there.”*** That is not true! Yes, we are to be sincere in our worship, but I would suggest that the prophets of Baal were totally sincere in what they were doing. They were sincere, but they were dead wrong.

In contrast, notice what Elijah does. There is no dancing or cutting, there is no leaping into the air; instead, in verse 30, Elijah invites the nation to come near. And then, with the utmost of respect and dignity, Elijah rebuilds the altar of the Lord that had previously been torn down. It is significant that in verse 31, when Elijah steps up to the challenge, he rebuilds the altar using twelve stones. By using twelve stones, Elijah was telling those who were assembled there on that day, ***“You are God’s people!”*** He digs a trench around the stones, he arranges the wood, he cut the ox in pieces and put it on the altar, he has the entire thing absolutely soaked

with water, and then the prophet offers one of the most simple and heartfelt prayers ever found in the Bible (found in verses 36-37).

At that point, fire comes out of heaven and consumes not only the sacrifice, but the wood, the stones, the dust, and even the water that was in the trench. God's answer, therefore, was decisive. The people turned to God, and the prophets of Baal were killed according to the word of God.

And yes, this must have been a very dramatic scene, and yet we get back to the main point. The main point in this entire chapter was to get the people to choose one way or the other. They could no longer go on trying to stake out a position in the middle. They couldn't just dabble here and there, but they had to be either in or out when it came to their commitment to God.

With all of this in mind, what would Elijah say to us today? If Elijah were to move in with us for a while (as he moved in with the widow of Zerephath), if he were to move in to your house for a year or so, what observations might he make about our lives today? What message might Elijah have for us? I believe his message today would probably be very similar to the message he brought to ancient Israel, and that is: Make a choice! If you are going to follow the world, follow the world, but if you are going to follow God, then follow God! Make a decision and go all in with it. We are not to dabble with the Christian faith, we are not to be permanent visitors to the local congregation, we are not to just be observers, but we are to serve God with our whole hearts. We are not to play around with materialism, and alcohol, and pleasure, or whatever, but we are to jump in and serve God from the heart. We are either in or we are out. We are on one side or the other. There is no middle ground.

And that is what this passage means for us. When it comes to God, all of us have to make a very simple, a very profound, decision. Of course, as Americans, we walk into a Starbucks, and we are faced with literally 87,000 choices. According to Starbucks' website, that is the rough estimate of how many drink options we have before us. Of course, you know me – I am pretty much blown away by the menu down at Laredo's – sometimes I just sit there and stare at it for a while – I can't even focus on it sometimes, and that's just a few pages. But with God, the choice is rather simple: We either trust and obey from the heart, or we do not. God certainly does not want us to ***“hesitate between two opinions.”*** As was mentioned in our scripture reading this morning, we either take the narrow path leading to life, or we take the broad way leading to destruction (Matthew 7:13-14), there is no middle ground.

What does all of this mean for us? How do we know whether we are on the narrow path or the wide path? How do we know whether we are choosing God or choosing this world? How do we know whether we are choosing God or settling for something less? I would make several observations:

- If we find ourselves wavering as to whether we should stay home and do homework or assemble with God's people on a Sunday morning or a Wednesday evening, we are in that dangerous middle ground.
- If we find ourselves making time to watch several hours of TV every night while we struggle to find time to read a passage of God's word every day, then we are hesitating in that dangerous middle ground.
- If we praise God on Sunday and then go out and use profanity during the week, then we are hesitating in that very dangerous middle ground.
- If we cannot decide whether to put God first in everything or to chase the almighty dollar at any cost, then we are hesitating in that dangerous middle ground.

- If we can barely get ourselves out of bed for Bible class, and if we do make it we are half an hour late, but we are somehow able to make it to school or work on time every day, then I would suggest that we are hesitating in that dangerous middle ground.
- If we scrimp and save for that new TV, or gaming system, or car, or whatever – but we have a hard time setting aside funds for the pantry, then we are hovering in that dangerous middle ground.

The question is: Where are our hearts? God wants us to serve him with all that we are. He wants everything. He doesn't want us to be flopping back and forth in the middle, but he wants us to be either in or out. He wants us to be IN, but he wants us to make that decision.

Conclusion:

Thankfully, this chapter ends on a note of grace and great mercy. In verse 41, Elijah basically says, "I think I hear some rain!" [paraphrased]. Elijah then crouched down with his face between his knees and prayed fervently. In faith, he kept sending his servant to go look at the horizon, and finally, after the seventh time, the servant comes back and says that he sees a cloud on the horizon, a cloud the size of a man's fist. At that point, Elijah sends out the equivalent of a Severe Thunderstorm Warning. Ahab starts out in his chariot, the rain pours down, Elijah starts running, and the chapter ends with Elijah on foot, outrunning the king's chariot.

"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" (James 5:17-18).

This morning, God is asking all of us here to make a decision, and God's sincere hope is that all of us will choose to follow him from the heart. For those who are not yet Christians, God teaches us through his word that we must turn away from sin and then allow ourselves to be briefly dipped in water for the forgiveness of our past sins. At that point, the Christian life begins. If you have any questions, we hope you will ask. On the other hand, maybe you have fallen away. Maybe you have drifted over time. Maybe you are struggling with something that we need to pray about as a congregation. If so, we would invite you to write your concerns down, and bring that to the front so that we can pray on your behalf. If there is some way we can help, we would invite you to make your choice for God as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com