

Praying With Fire (1 Kings 18)

On March 23, 1775, a young, redheaded lawyer stood in a church in Richmond, Virginia.

Angry and agitated by what seemed to him to be an endless debate about the next response the colonists should take in their conflict with Great Britain's King George, **Patrick Henry** could contain himself no longer. His impassionate speech ended with these words:

“Is life so dear or peace so sweet as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!”

70 years later, as tensions (that would explode into the Civil War) increased, the poet James Russell Lowell described what he called *The Present Crisis* with these words:

***Once to every man and nation comes
The moment to decide,
In the strife of Truth and Falsehood,
For the good or evil side.***

What were they saying? There comes a time to stop wavering, and decide.

We've been preaching through the Life of Elijah. And if you've been here, you know that our story starts with a king gone wrong by the name of Ahab, a king whom the Bible says, “Does more evil in the eyes of the Lord” than any of the kings before him (1 Kings 16:30).

Ahab was not faithful to the Lord – passive and tolerant of evil.

And to make matters worse, he is married Jezebel – demonic, manipulative and controlling. (Where he tolerated, she

dominated). Remember weak Ahab who doesn't do conflict? And Jezebel steps in and says, “If you won't do conflict, I'll do control.”

So in those days, when you married a foreign wife, her religious leanings were a part of the package. And so she introduced Baal worship to the people of God. Ahab built her an altar– and many of the Israelites were attracted to this pagan religion.

And God was distressed – because pure devotion to God has been combined with pagan religion.

All through the land there were shrines, temples of prostitution, the altars to Baal where children were sacrificed by fire.

And God said, “Enough.” And for 3.5 years, it didn't rain.

But then – what seems to be an act of sheer mercy for the land and the people, we read -

18:1-2 - ***“After a long time, in the third year, the word of the LORD came to Elijah: “Go and present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the land.”² So Elijah went to present himself to Ahab. Now the famine was severe in Samaria . .***

I want you to imagine if you're living in Israel for three years, and every single day the weather report is the same – clear skies. Not 10% chance of rain – not 5% chance of rain – every single day, no clouds.

So when Elijah comes back to Israel, the land of his birth, the land of his love, try to imagine how grieved he must have been to see the place. There were no Kodak moments, because everything was dead.

The land was ravaged, and the stench of death was everywhere.

And yet it seems like these terrible conditions have had no impact on the condition of Ahab's heart.

He's been looking everywhere for Elijah, sending emissaries everywhere to find him –to break the curse that's making the god of his newly adopted religion look so bad.

And so it was COURAGEOUS for Elijah to obey God and go back to Israel. And it was OUTRAGEOUS what Ahab says to him when they finally meet again:

¹⁷When [Ahab] saw Elijah, he said to him, "Is that you, you troubler of Israel?"

¹⁸"I have not made trouble for Israel," Elijah replied. "But you and your father's family have. You have abandoned the LORD's commands and have followed the Baals. ¹⁹Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table."

So – how many false prophets are there in the story? How many real prophets?

There's 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah. They're all employed by Jezebel – the eat at her table. So – 850 total – and one Elijah.

Let me say this – these are always the odds of the truth teller.

For every prophet, there's many false prophets. For everybody who tells the truth, there's hundreds who are going to get paid to lie.

In our day – people talk about "fake news." Guess what – that's nothing new. There's always been fake news.

Because Satan has a way of dominating the messaging.

And these 850 – they all have degrees, and suits, and platform you know, and they speak nice English.

And then here's this one old homeless guy named Elijah who lives in the woods and wears camel's hair.

And here's these 850 prophets who say they know what they're talking about.

I need to say this: don't believe everything you hear. Do your homework, and realize – the number of false prophets always outweighs the real prophet, the real truth.

(So 850 false prophets show up) And verse 20 says . . .

²⁰So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel.

I can almost picture it: the royal trumpets play; Ahab is brought up the mountain of his men's shoulders – as he is surrounded by his entourage. All eyes are on him to see what will happen in this great conflict.

AND THEN – here comes old mangy Elijah (nobody's sure what to say). They haven't seen him for three years – they know of his power – but their allegiance is the King and the prophets of Baal.

Suddenly – the eyes of the two men meet - the crowd grows silent

And Ahab speaks – "Is that you, you troubler of Israel?" (And that word "troubler" is the Hebrew word for "viper.") So Ahab is insulting the prophet – "Is that you, you snake?"

And Elijah shoots back and says, "If there's a snake in the grass, its you Ahab. You think I'm the problem. Brother, you're the problem. THE RAIN HAS CEASED BECAUSE YOU HAVE CEASED TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE REIGN OF THE TRUE GOD OF ISRAEL. So we need to decide once and for all, what the real problem is here."

So he calls for this meeting on Carmel. (And please understand, he is not calling for a summit of understanding, where everybody gets together and they share their points of view followed by a nice Q and A. (And when hearts are right, there's an important place for that. BUT – that's not here).

He's got a clear two-fold agenda – the complete rededication of the people to Jehovah God, and he wants a total eradication of Baalism once and for all from the land. So he says, "Let's have a duel."

And notice – he even proposes they meet on Baal's turf. This Baal is the god of rain, so they would build altars up on the hill closest to the clouds and closer to their God.

So Elijah says, "Let's get the biggest hill. I will put this battle on your gods best field. Let's all meet at the altar, and let's alter the direction of the people once and toward whoever the true God is."

²¹Elijah went before the people and said, "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him." But the people said nothing.

This word "waver" is the same word that the writer is going to use a few verses later when he talks about the prophets of Baal dancing around the altar. So Elijah says, "You've been dancing with whatever god you think is hot at the moment – you need to make up your mind what's worthy of your affection here.

You're like the boy that goes to the party and he wants to flirt with all the girls, but he doesn't want to commit to any of them. And you need to stop it.)

And notice: "The people said nothing."

Now – I've preached long enough to know what that means. If people say something – somebody says "Amen!" – that either

means "I agree with you" or "I think the person sitting next to me needs to pay attention to what you just said."

But if they say nothing – either they're bored, or you've said something that hits right between the eyes.

And the people of Israel have been nailed at this point. They know he's right. They know they have put Baal on the shelf and Jehovah God on the shelf and they worship which ever one seems right at the moment.

And Elijah says, "Stop it! It's time to be a nation under one God." So stop dancing and start choosing – and I'll even let their side go first.

²²Then Elijah said to them, "I am the only one of the LORD's prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets. ²³Get two bulls for us. Let Baal's prophets choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. ²⁴Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD. The god who answers by fire—he is God." Then all the people said, "What you say is good."

Now that's a fair proposal – because after all, Baal is supposed to be the god that controls the rain and the sun. So starting a fire shouldn't be a problem for him, right? So he says, "You go first. You choose the altar you want, you choose the wood you want, you even choose the bull you want. You go first."

Because he doesn't want there to be any question regarding the impotence of Jezebel's imported religion.

Before their very eyes he wants this fake god exposed, and he wants their foolishness for dancing with a fake god exposed.

And he got exactly what he wanted.

²⁵ Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, “Choose one of the bulls and prepare it first, since there are so many of you. Call on the name of your god, but do not light the fire.” ²⁶ So they took the bull given them and prepared it.

Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. “Baal, answer us!” they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made.

²⁷ At noon Elijah began to taunt them. “Shout louder!” he said. “Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.” ²⁸ So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed.

You see what happens when Satan is winning? It’s so destructive. The demonic presence compelled the man to damage his body by cutting themselves.

And you see - the Bible doesn’t just tell us what happened, but what always happens. And even though people come and go, the demons remain the same spirit that are working through different people in every generation.

So if you see something a few thousand years ago, don’t be surprised when the pattern continues in the present day.

Just like you - I meet people regularly, who have almost bled out on the altar of alcohol or prescription pills, and have sacrificed almost everything for it.

But as misguided as these people are, God still loves them and is trying to get their attention through the prophet Elijah. (And he’s trying to get the attention of you and me today). Well . . .

²⁹ Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.

You know why that was? Because there was no one there. (nothing in life that makes you bleed will ever give you what you need).

They were serving a non-entity, a nothing, a circle with the edges rubbed out.

They had put their faith in a nothing. The idols were things they had made with their own hands.

So it doesn’t take much to figure out – the one you worship must be greater than you are. And if you made it, why pray to it?

But - the greater their effort, the greater their failure!

And so he taunts them, and he mocks them – is he asleep? Is he out of town? Did his battery run down? Staring into space, down a scroll hole? (In fact that phrase “is he busy” is the Hebrew idiom for going to the bathroom.)

I mean, he is really letting them have it, because he wants to expose Baalism for what it is and show the absurdity of their religion. (This is not ridicule for ridicule’s sake. This is different. What is he doing? He’s pushing them to the end of their actions – further and further down the path they have chosen, so the people can see for themselves what the end of this madness looks like).

Now – imagine what’s going through the minds of the people as he’s going through all this – they’re dancing, cutting themselves, bleeding, screaming – Elijah is taunting, and they are watching all this, and they have to be thinking, “We’ve been letting these guys be our worship leaders?”

And before we read the next part (which is one of the great stories in the Bible) – I want you to notice two things –

First – Elijah is going to call for 12 stones to rebuild his altar. And that’s significant. Remember Ahab is the king of the northern kingdom (there’s just 10 tribes there) and the other two belong to the Southern Kingdom. What’s Elijah doing? He’s calling them back to their true spiritual heritage.

He’s saying, “Do you remember what God’s original spiritual goal for his people was?”

Not two nations worship many gods, but we’re supposed to be ONE NATION under ONE GOD. One God, one people.

And then – he’s going to say – pour water on it, pour some more, pour some more – he’s deliberately setting a context for his God to show who He is – because nothing is too hard for His God.

After they did it – it was time to pray a fire prayer:

³⁰Then Elijah said to all the people, “Come here to me.” They came to him, and he repaired the altar of the LORD, which had been torn down. ³¹Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD had come, saying, “Your name shall be Israel.” ³²With the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD, and he dug a trench around it large enough to hold two seahs (24 pounds) of seed. ³³He arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces and laid it on the wood. Then he said to them, “Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood.”

³⁴“Do it again,” he said, and they did it again.

“Do it a third time,” he ordered, and they did it the third time. ³⁵The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench.

What is Elijah doing?

If you know the history of that time period, the prophets of Baal were notorious for hiding sparks in the altar and fanning them to flame.

They built chambers under the altar to deceive the people.

Elijah was making certain that if fire consumed the sacrifice, God would get the credit. No tricks, no sparks.

So notice: The prophets of Baal frantically pray for six hours. Now – contrast that with the prayer of Elijah:

³⁶At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: “LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. ³⁷Answer me, LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.”

³⁸Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench.

This is literally an airstrike from heaven. Literally.

Here God reveals himself as a warrior. This is like calling in a military strike and then it immediately hits the target. (In chapter 18-19, three times God is called the Lord of Hosts). That’s the heavenly armies – God, commander of the cosmic forces, head of the Divine Council.

Here’s the thing – God won’t be mocked. We reap what we sow. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

³⁹When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, “The LORD—he is God! The LORD—he is God!”

And suddenly these mouths that would not open, can't stay shut. And Elijah is hearing what he has been waiting over three years to hear: "Yahweh is our God. Yahweh is THE God."

It was a sweeter sound than the sound of the rain falling, and it was sound heaven had to hear before the heavens were ever going to be opened.

And now there was only one thing left to do:

⁴⁰Then Elijah commanded them, "Seize the prophets of Baal. Don't let anyone get away!" They seized them, and Elijah had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and slaughtered there.

You say – this doesn't feel right. But here's what I want you to see – God will not put up with evil forever.

God has waited five generations – and he sent the prophets – and he sent Elijah, and God send the drought, And then God sends fire from heaven. And even with that – Ahab and Jezebel didn't care.

But here's what God knew: Baalism was a cancer on the world, and God had to eradicate it.

⁴¹And Elijah said to Ahab, "Go, eat and drink, for there is the sound of a heavy rain." ⁴²So Ahab went off to eat and drink, but Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees.

The same man that stood tall in the presence of sin, bowed low in the presence of God. Why? Because this whole episode had not been about defending the honor of Elijah, it had been about vindicating the honor and the name of God.

And so he prays – "This is not about me, God, this is about you – about your honor, about your reputation" – and so he submits himself and kneels before his God.

⁴³"Go and look toward the sea," he told his servant. And he went up and looked.

"There is nothing there," he said. Seven times Elijah said, "Go back."

⁴⁴The seventh time the servant reported, "A cloud as small as a man's hand is rising from the sea."

So Elijah said, "Go and tell Ahab, 'Hitch up your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.'"

⁴⁵Meanwhile, the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain started falling and Ahab rode off to Jezreel.

Now – it is one of the great stories of the Bible – a defining moment in the history of Israel. What can we take away?

For many years when I read the Bible I thought of Baal as a particular god, but it's actually a name for any God – it's a word that means "spiritual Lord." This was a "Rain Baal."

There was a beauty Baal, and a military Baal, and a party Baal, and an educational god, and a wisdom god, and there was a scholarship god – for every created thing there was a god.

There was a Baal – they worshipped everything. You say, "Yes, that's those primitive people." Primitive? Let me say something. The pagans do something that you and I don't – they admit things that we don't. They're ahead of us in some ways.

They knew that everybody worships something – that everybody is under the spiritual power of something.

And so all of us are called to choose what will rule our lives, what we will give our affections to.

We all have to make a decisions – what will gain the allegiance of our hearts. Because our actions show it.

I go 3x a week to the gym Talked to another guy there who goes 6x a week. (I get there at 5:30).

But at 5:00 – cars everywhere – another group before me

You do what's important to you.

You do it – because it's your priority.

And so look at the difference – the prophets of Baal – the make decisions from the seat of emotion. Emotion drives them.

And here's Elijah – it was a committed approach. You've got to decide what you value. Choose this day whom you will serve.

Because here's what I know - If you're going to have a marriage, you're going to have to choose righteousness. Or it's not going to work. What will sit on the throne of your marriage? That's what will control your marriage. (You look around this room – solid marriages, not perfect – they've given their life to make it work. What they've decided to build their marriage on, has been much more vital than what they've built up together).

You see – God is not gonna bless what has replaced him.

You're coming up to dead ends – because you've not given your heart, your soul – to seek the Lord.

We're going to pray

Play: Goodness of God . . .