



WILL THE REAL GOD IN HEAVEN PLEASE SEND FIRE?
1 KINGS 18:20–40

Turn to 1 Kings 18. We're in a series called "He Reigns" and we're looking at different picture of God's sovereignty in the Bible. And today we're looking at an absolutely epic showdown in the OT between and guy named Elijah and the prophets of Baal (I know it's Ba'al). They are about to get owned. I heard one pastor say this story has everything a middle-school boy would want, a champion and a villain, in an epic face off with blood, gore and fire! If it was in the movie store—it would be in the action section. This text is entertaining. But it serves a deeper purpose that Paul reminds us about in Rom. 15:4. "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." (Rom. 15:4) This is why we preach from and study the OT here. It was written to encourage us and give us hope. So that's what we're going to do.

A little context to set the stage. This is about 150 years after King David—the kingdom of Israel has been split for over a century into the northern and southern kingdoms and when it comes to devotion to Yahweh—especially in the Northern kingdom Israel—things have really gone downhill. They've had a lot of bad kings leading up to a guy named Ahab. He was so bad to the degree that 16:34 "did more to provoke the God of Israel to anger than all of the kings before him." After you thought it couldn't et worse Ahab said hold my beer and led Israel to worship Baals. Storm God. Rainmaker.

Enter a guy named Elijah a prophet of God who announces to Ahab the consequences of Israel's actions—there is going to be a famine on the land. Vs. "no rain in the land" and thus there was famine. And vs. 1 of ch. 18 God tells Elijah "After many days the word of the Lord came to Elijah in the third year, 'Go show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain, upon the earth.'" Elijah meets up with one of Ahab's god-fearing employees named Obadiah (not the prophet), and tells him to let Ahab know it's time for a meeting and vs "17 When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, "Is it you, you troubler of Israel?" Why this ? Because Elijah announced the famine. He sees Elijah and his God as the reason Baal hasn't given rain. Which has caused them massive trouble. 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."

Now this interaction is crucial because it gives us insight into the fundamental problem God is addressing in the scene we're about to read. For Ahab, the biggest problem in Israel was a lack of food. For Elijah, the biggest problem in Israel was a lack of worship. And we're supposed to ask ourselves the question, is Israel's biggest problem something that's gone wrong in their circumstances, or something that's gone wrong in their hearts?

And after all the people and the pagan prophets have gathered to Mt. Carmel, Elijah gives a clear answer to that question vs 21 says he comes near to the people and says, "How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God follow him; But if Baal, then follow him." As much as famine is a problem, the biggest problem here is a lack of devotion. Rather than getting the benefits of both Gods—which is why Israel worshipped Baal too—ironically, it made them spiritually handicapped; constantly walking with a limp because they have no real devotion to either God—like a dog who goes to whoever's holding the bone. Israel's biggest problem isn't a water shortage but a faith shortage.

Now it's not as if God doesn't care about their circumstances, or ours—after all he has sent Elijah to tell Ahab that rain is coming. But he hasn't done that yet because there's something else that needs to be taken care of first and that is their idolatry problem that is causing them to limp between Baal and Yahweh. And it in our pride, it's easy for us to say how silly of them to be on the fence about God "I wouldn't place my faith and hope in multiple objects." But of course we do. Like Israel, our problem isn't worshipping something besides God but something alongside God that we believe will offer us something God won't. Abundant life now, heaven. Status, forgiveness. Satisfied, saved. And Elijah's exhortation to them is the same for us—pick one. If God is God, follow him. All chips to the center. If something else is God follow him. It doesn't even make sense to sit on the fence. "Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance, the only thing it cannot be is moderately important." (C.S. Lewis).

Especially if you're an unbeliever in the room, notice it's the truth of God's existence that Elijah is appealing to here. We're not Christians because it's helpful or useful. We're Christians because we believe it's true—that Jesus of Nazareth was who he claimed to be. That he did rise from the dead in vindication of his claim to be God, that he is currently ruling in heaven, that we've received the Spirit to participate in Christ's mission to rescue the world, and that he will return one day. If that's not true, follow something else. But if Jesus is Lord, then lose the limp and follow him. The only thing there can't be is a casual Christianity. The only thing their can't be is limping. Which is what Israel is doing. And what follows in the text is designed address any uncertainty around the question—Is Baal withholding rain because of all this Yahweh worship? Or is Yahweh withholding rain, because of all the Baal worship. How will we decide—with a good old fashion contest that will determine who the rain maker really is. **Pray.**

Now vs 19-20 that all of Israel, 450 prophets of Baal, and 400 prophets of Asherah, had all gathered on Mt. Carmel. So we've got 850 pagan prophets, 1 prophet of Yahweh, and all of Israel watching. And Elijah lays out rules says, "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." This should be no problem for the storm-god. IT was belived that lighting bolts were his arrows. So the prophets of Baal take their bull and prepare it and from morning to noon, they cry out asking Baal to answer them, and get nothing. Imagine Elijah watching! Vs. 27, "And at noon Elijah mocked them, saying, "Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself—taking a dump—, 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.

So now it's Elijah's turn and he prepares his bull and he makes a trench around the altar—and he even tries to make things more difficult for Yahweh—vs 33-34, he soaks his wood with 12 buckets of water so that it overflowed and filled up the trench. Piper "God loves to be at a disadvantage just before he wins." And at the time of the evening sacrifice, Elijah comes near to the people "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.

They learned their Baal was not God. And Israel learned that Yahweh was. “The Lord, he is God. X2” These people are worshipping! Don’t miss this: there was a famine in the land—no rain for 3.5 years—have those circumstances changed? No. Their circumstances haven’t changed, their hearts have. Now immediately after this Elijah goes further up the mountain to pray, and vs. 45 tell us that “the heavens grew black with cloud and wind, and there was a great rain.” The famine is over. Yahweh is the rainmaker.

Does God care about our famines, yes! Why didn’t he just end the famine first? Because he knows the people would go after whatever God was sending rain that day. He doesn’t want people who’s devotion to him is only as good as the currently perceived benefits. And so rather than delivering them from the famine first, God changes their hearts so that they’re worshipping him in the famine. Not worshipping him because he gave rain, worshipping him when there is none—worshipping him just for who he is, “The Lord he is God”.

This is our goal every week in worship and God’s work here in 1 King 18 is a model for how he makes that happen. God produces worship by changing peoples hearts as he puts his glory on display. That’s what we’re trying to do. We aren’t a lifehacks church. They have their place. But they don’t change our hearts. We aren’t starved for the glory of techniques and strategies. Like the Israelites, we are starved for the glory of God. And that’s why each week when we sing our songs and open this book, it’s simply a Spirit-fueled effort to exalt that glory of God in Christ. Because God displays his glory, hearts change and people leave saying “The Lord is God.” And he is supreme, and better than, and above all things—especially the Baals here in this text.

And when you compare Yahweh to Baal in this text—as I believe you’re supposed to do—you’re able to see Yahweh’s supremacy in a variety of ways. And I want to help you see it so you can savor it! 4 comparisons between Baal and Yahweh here.

God hears His people, Baal doesn’t. You have to appreciate the numbers advantage the prophets of Baal have here. This is 450 prophets vs. 1 prophet. And they are doing everything they can, to get their Baal’s attention. Even cutting themselves to get him to answer. And Elijah—one prophet—simply steps up, and without dancing, or cutting, or limping says, “Let it be known this day that you are God in Israel.” Fire falls. When he prays for it to rain, it rains. And God wants you to know that you have that kind of access. “Yea but God doesn’t listen like that—that was Elijah he was like a spiritual super hero” but he wasn’t. And God wants you to know that. James 5:17, “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 and heaven gave rain and the earth bore fruit.” Believing that Elijah was above you is the opposite of what James is teaching. And we have access to the same God who is attentive and cares. And you don’t have yell or dance or scream to get him to pay attention to you. And your knowledge that God hears you and knows what you need empowers you to stand before 450 people who are against you and know that God will vindicate his name and your confidence in him. God hears his people Baal doesn’t.

God controls nature, Baal doesn’t. Remember, Baal was the storm god. It should have been nothing for him to send some lightning to hit the altar, but nothing happens. As the storm God, he’s also the rainmaker. But it’s been three years, why isn’t he sending rain? Why isn’t he sending fire? Because he’s not the God of lightning and he’s not the rainmaker—Yahweh is—and every flame the flickers and ever raindrop that falls does so at his command. The people were looking to Baal to give them something he couldn’t. And this is why idols are dangerous—whether they are Baal or your job or your family—they promise to give you something only God can. Idols constantly say, “I can give you the joy and satisfaction you crave. If you would just live for your family, your job, your physique. If you would just live for your reputation or romance—I’ll make sure that when you get them, they’ll fill the void inside.

They will fix your brokenness and make you whole. And it's not true. Eminem—tried everything to be happy and then wrote a song about how it didn't work. Augustine said, "Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee." Don't make the mistake of the prophets of Baal and hope in something that's unable to deliver on its promises. Don't ask the Creation to give you something that only the Creator can. Don't ask Baal for rain. God controls nature, not Baal.

God gives grace, Baal doesn't.

The prophets of Baal are dancing and cutting and limping and pleading why? Because their trying to get their God him to act on their behalf. It's a perfect picture of a works-based religion where Baal's devotion to you depended on what you do for him—to appease him. But this is the exact opposite of what we get in Yahweh. What are the Israelites doing? Nothing. Round 1 of this contest is about people trying to get their God to act for them. Round 2 is about God acting for his people—people who have misplaced their worship. **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.** Look at the language here, God is bending their hearts—toward himself. By redirecting their worship. Why? Did they start reading their Bibles more? Promise to try harder? Sovereign grace. There is a danger here to look at the 850 pagan prophets on one side and Israel on the other side and coming away thinking that the good guys won and the bad guys lost. But that's not true, Israel was just as bad. Both groups of people were idolaters. Both deserved judgment and death. Both groups of people see the fire fall, but only one group worships Yahweh and only one group lives—and it's due to God's electing covenant love to preserve his people and the glory of his name among the nations. And the grace that turned their heart then, is the same grace that turns our hearts now. God shows his grace by NOT giving everything I want, and helping me want the things I should. God gives grace, Baal doesn't.

God rescues His people, Baal doesn't.

Vs. 40 is kind of intense isn't it? **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.** Hacked them up in the creek like Mel Gibson in the Patriot! Now this isn't the most pleasant scene. I don't think we have any songs inspired by this text. We have some songs about falling fire but not like this, "Take the prophets to the creek and hack 'em up—Hallelujah!" But the picture here is clear—Baal is not able to save his people from their sin and the price for idolatry, which is death. Israel knew that. That's what was communicated so clearly in Israel's sacrificial system. Very simply, an animal sacrifice communicated that when you sin either you die, or something dies in your place.

We see it right here in this text, not only is God's consuming of the bull but look at how Elijah builds his altar in vs. 31, **"Elijah took twelve stones according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob..."** Note also that when God sends the fire in vs. 38 says it "consumed the burnt offering, and the wood, and the stones..." What kind of fire consumes stones? A fire that's intentionally consuming the stones, rather than the people they represent. Peter Leithart explains, **"Yahweh's fire falls on the altar, not on the people so that Yahweh's judgment falls on a substitute Israel in order to deliver Israel itself."**

When we read this story, it's easy for us to think of ourselves as Elijah. But we're not, we're faithless Israel, limping between two opinions. Deserving the death the prophets of Baal received and the eternal death that it represents. And we also need a substitute to be consumed by God in our place. And years later another prophet would climb a hill, and he would be placed on the wood and offer himself as a sacrifice for his people. To save them from death, and turn their hearts back to God. The prophets of Baal are a picture of worldly religion. Where some god asks you to work in order to go up to him. In the Gospel Jesus came down to us.

Where the prophets of Baal are bleeding to try and draw their God close, Jesus bleeds in order to draw us close to God. The prophets of Baal called out to fake God who forsakes them leading to their death.

Jesus called out to the true God who forsook him leading to our life. And where God's fire fell on the bull and the stones so that Israel wasn't consumed, the wrath of God fell on the Lamb of God so that we are not consumed. H.B "One animal per person, one lamb per family, one lamb of the nation, one lamb for the world." Who bleeds for us to bring the rescue we couldn't bring ourselves. Not so we'd limp between two opinions, but so we'd say with awestruck wonder and confidence, "The Lord He is God; the Lord He is God."