

Sermon outline and notes:

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## I Kings 18:17-39 (read vv.17-24) “Showdown at Mt. Carmel”

Intro. Many of you recall the story of the time the prophet Elijah announced to King Ahab that there would be a drought upon the land of Israel. It would come as a chastisement from the Lord for turning away from Him to other gods. Elijah made it clear that only by his word and prayer to God would it rain again. Sure enough, the drought came. After the first year of drought, the King, Queen, and the people were still worshipping the false god Baal. The drought continued for another year. There was still no repentance. Even after 3 years of drought, the people had not repented. They refused to stop worshipping false gods and turned back to the true God of Israel.

So now it was time to bring the whole matter to a head. Ahab sees Elijah one day and accuses him of bringing trouble in Israel. That led to one of the most interesting stories in the Old Testament. We will read about Elijah’s challenge on Mt. Carmel that would just about force the people to make a decision. But first, let’s read about:

### I. ELIJAH’S REBUKE

In v.17 we read what led to his rebuke, “Then it happened, when Ahab saw Elijah, that Ahab said to him, ‘Is that you, O troubler of Israel?’” He accused Elijah of causing the drought, and bringing trouble to Israel. Then in v.18 Elijah answered, “I have not troubled Israel, but you and your father’s house have....” Elijah boldly rebukes Ahab, though he was a king. Elijah said to Ahab, “I am not the one troubling Israel, YOU are!” The alarm bell does not set the house on fire. Sin & unbelief was the cause of the calamity, and the only way to escape the calamity was to put away the sin.

Our country is in trouble today. The Democrats blame the Republicans, especially George Bush. And the Republicans blame the Democrats. And I dare say that most of the politicians of both parties are to blame, along with the majority of Americans who vote what they think is good for themselves, rather than what God wants, or what is good for the country. Likewise, through the years there have been denominational and church conflicts. Often, the very people who seek to uphold biblical principles are the ones who are called the troublemakers. We also see from v.17 the fact that before you blame someone else for the trouble you are in you should first look at yourself in the mirror! [Hold one up]

Ahab and Queen Jezebel were certainly to blame for almost total apostasy in Israel. So Elijah did not hesitate to rebuke the king, though he felt like he was standing alone. He rebukes the king and his people for two particular sins. We need to make sure that we are not guilty of the same sins. First of all:

A. He Rebukes Baal Worship – Notice in v.18 that Ahab & the people had “forsaken the commandments of the LORD and have followed the Baals.” They had forsaken the first two of the 10 Commandments, which are to have no other gods besides the Lord, and to make no graven images of the Lord, or any other god. Under Jeroboam they had only violated the second commandment. They worshiped the God of Israel by means of an idol. But Ahab led them to worship another god, Baal, an ancient Canaanite and Mesopotamian deity associated with agriculture. Baal means Lord. He was believed to be the “giver of life” and mankind was

dependant upon him for providing what was necessary to sustain the farms, flocks and herds. Baal was the principal deity of the land. It was he who was in charge of the rain and the weather. He was represented by a male idol, or by a bull. The worship of Baal involved drunken sexual orgies, religious prostitution, and even human sacrifice.<sup>1</sup> The child sacrifice took care of all those unwanted pregnancies! So they also violated the commandments against adultery & murder.

People are doing the same thing in America. They are just not doing it under the cover of religion. It's called drunkenness, immorality, and abortion. The apostle Paul warned in 2 Timothy 3:4 that in the last days people would be "lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God." Sinful pleasure is the God of many today.

Elijah rebukes the King and his wife for leading the people to commit the sin of Baal worship. Now Elijah turns to the people to rebuke them. Notice that:

B. He Rebukes the People for their Indecision – Let me give a little background here. In v.19 Elijah says, "Now therefore, send and gather all Israel to me on Mount Carmel, the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal, and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table." Ahab meekly did the prophet's bidding in summoning "all Israel". Three long years of drought made him willing. Amazingly, Elijah had authority over the king! The prophets of Baal came on the orders of the king, but nothing else is said about the 400 prophets of the goddess Asherah (unless implied in v.20b). Perhaps Queen Jezebel did not honor Elijah's request, so they didn't come. As a result of the king's invitation, the people of Israel gathered on Mt. Carmel, which was a 1600 feet high mountain next to the Mediterranean Sea in NW Israel. I have been there. Perhaps the people gathered with great interest, hoping that Elijah would pray for rain & the drought would soon be over. But before he could do that, he had other work to do first. The people must be brought to repentance and turn back to the Lord. Then they may look for the removal of the judgment, but not until then.

So here in this setting, Elijah also rebuked the people. He was no politician. He was more concerned about pleasing God than courting the popularity of the crowd. He sought divine approval rather than public applause. So Elijah says in v.21, "How long will you falter between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him." They were taught by the prophets of Baal that Baal was in charge of the rain, and they should pray to him and sacrifice to him to end the drought. But they had also been talk that the Lord God was the only true God. Many believed in both God and Baal. And they couldn't decide between the two. So Elijah rebukes their indecision. The word translated "falter" means to limp,<sup>2</sup> and thus in this case means "to hesitate." So Elijah calls upon them to make up their mind which God they worship. Elijah knew what was in the hearts of the people. Many were pretending to worship the living and true God, but they were also worshipping Baal. Elijah reproved the people for mixing the worship of God and the worship of Baal together. There can be but one God.

[Use marriage illus. If a man loves two women, both women will require that he make a choice. He can't have both!]

I wonder how many of us have not truly decided to follow Jesus. Instead, we halfway follow Jesus occasionally on Sunday, but the rest of the time we follow the world and the false beliefs of the world. Jesus said in Matthew 12:30, "He who is not with Me is against Me..."

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<sup>1</sup> Howard E. Vos, *An Introduction To Bible Archaeology*, Revised ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1953), 17-19. It was a frequent practice to kill young children and bury them in the foundations of a house or public building at the time of construction: Joshua 6:26, "In his days did Hiel the Bethelite build Jericho: he laid the foundation thereof in Abiram his firstborn..."

<sup>2</sup> The same word is translated "leap" in v.26.

(Luke 11:23). There are too many churchgoing people who haven't made a true commitment to Jesus Christ. Are you one of them? That you been putting it off? If not today, when? There is more double-talk and beating around the bush in the church than any other place.

In spite of the rebuke of Elijah, notice and the last of v.21 that "the people answered him not a word." Though conscious of their guilt, they made no response. Not one person responded to the invitation & stepped forward to say, "I will follow the Lord, & turn from Baal." As a result Elijah said in v.22, "I alone am left a prophet of the LORD..." How sad! Yet because of their indecision we see next of all:

## II. ELIJAH'S CHALLENGE

Look at Elijah's challenge in vv.22-24, "I alone am left a prophet of the LORD; but Baal's prophets are four hundred and fifty men. Therefore let them give us two bulls; and let them choose one bull for themselves, cut it in pieces, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire under it; and I will prepare the other bull, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire under it. Then you call on the name of your gods, and I will call on the name of the LORD; and the God who answers by fire, He is God."

In the last of v.24 the people said, "It is well spoken." It seemed appropriate. Sacrifice was common to all religions. Of course, if both answered with fire, then they could continue to worship both. If either answered alone, then they would worship that God alone! If neither God nor Baal answered, then the people could turn into Atheists! Notice that the *people* said, "It is well spoken." I don't think that Ahab and the prophets of Baal were enthusiastic about this challenge, but they dare not oppose it for fear of the people. Besides, they were drawn into Elijah's trap by 2 considerations. First, the test seemed to favor Baal with all the external advantages on his side. In v.22 Elijah said, "I alone am left a prophet of the LORD; but Baal's prophets are four hundred and fifty men." Secondly, they probably figured that the worst outcome possible would be a draw. So get the picture here. On one side is the prophet Elijah, dressed in simple clothing with his rough sheepskin mantle over his shoulders. On the other side were the 450 prophets of Baal, probably dressed in white robes and peaked turbans, sustained by the power of government. They must have been an impressive sight. It seems like a repeat of David versus Goliath, with a large crowd looking on, undecided who to root for. Yet Elijah was not afraid, for he had great faith in God, who is greater than 10,000 priests of Baal. It is Martin Luther, who is credited with the statement, "One with God is a majority."

Now let's follow the story and see how the challenge unfolds.

A. The Prophets of Baal Go First – Notice what we read in v.25, "Now Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, 'Choose one bull for yourselves and prepare it first, for you are many;<sup>3</sup> and call on the name of your god, but put no fire under it.'" Once again, they meekly did what Elijah had requested. Now notice:

1. Their Initial Efforts to Get Baal to Respond - In the last of v.26 we read that they "called on the name of Baal from morning even till noon, saying, 'O Baal, hear us!' But there was no voice; no one answered..." On the one hand, we hear the wild chorus echoing among the rocks; on the other, we feel dead silence in the heavens. We are not surprised, for the gods of the heathen do not even exist. Their idols have mouths, but they do not speak. They have ears, but they do not hear.

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<sup>3</sup> Since they had many, it would not take long to prepare the sacrifice. That was one reason to go first.

As a result, we read in the last of v.26, “Then they leaped about the altar which they had made.” As the day wore on, and the voices grew hoarse, and hope declined, more violent bodily exercise was resorted to, and the shouting crowd of Baal worshippers limped or danced about the altar, hoping that would bring some response from Baal. But once again Baal was silent. All that they did was in vain.

Next we see:

2. The Mocking of Elijah – In v.27 we read, “And so it was, at noon, that Elijah mocked them and said, ‘Cry aloud, for he is a god; either he is meditating, or he is busy, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is sleeping and must be awakened.’” How sharp Elijah was Elijah’s sarcasm upon them, exposing the absurdity of idolatry. I’m sure it had little effect upon the prophets of Baal, but it must have caused the people to think.

Stung by Elijah’s mockery, the priest were stirred to fiercer excitement, and more extravagant acts, as ridicule is likely to do. So next we read of:

3. Their More Intense Efforts – V.28 says, “So they cried aloud, and cut themselves, as was their custom, with knives and lances, until the blood gushed out on them.” Like fools they had leaped upon the altar, and now, like madmen, they cut themselves, hoping to obtain the favor or attention of their god by offering to him their own blood. This is not uncommon in pagan religion, and even professing Christians in other nations are known to beat and lash themselves on the back until they draw blood on Good Friday. Such is an example of how pagan practices have crept into the church over the centuries.

Then in v.29 we read, “And when midday was past, they prophesied until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice.” That was probably 3:00 in the afternoon. Notice that they prophesied. That means that they preached what was alleged to be the word of Baal for hours and hours. You may think that I preach long, but I can assure you that I have never preached that long!

4. Their Failure/Baal’s Failure – Yet in spite of all of their efforts, the last of v.29 says, “But there was no voice; no one answered, no one paid attention.” Satan & his demons are behind false religion. Yet God refused them any opportunity to respond.

There are times when, even as a Christian, you are going to feel that God is silent, and that God is not hearing your prayers. But don’t think for a minute that you can do anything to force God to respond to you. No amount of religious ritual, or sacrifice, or good works will force God to show up on your behalf. We need to remember that God works by His grace and according to his sovereign will.

So the prophets of Baal had failed miserably. As we follow the story we see that:

B. Elijah Goes Next – In v.30 we read, “Then Elijah said to all the people, ‘Come near to me.’ So all the people came near to him.” He wanted their attention, and he wanted them to come close. By the way, I like for people to sit close to the front. I believe you will pay better attention, and give God greater opportunity to do a work in your heart.

Notice the steps taken that led to a great revival in Israel:

1. He Repairs the Altar of the Lord – In vv.30-32 we read, “And he repaired the altar of the LORD that was broken down. And 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.’ Then with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD....” Elijah with his own hands, as would appear, repairs a ruined altar that had been destroyed by Ahab and Jezebel in their crusade against Jehovah worshipers (see 1 Kings 19:10). He probably did that while the priests of Baal were offering their sacrifice. That altar probably had been erected for the secret

worship of Jehovah by some faithful amid the apostasy. He chose to repair the altar of the Lord, to intimate to them that he was not about to introduce any new religion, but to revive the faith and worship of their fathers' God.

Our responsibility is not to introduce a new religion that will be more appealing to the new generation. Our responsibility is to go back to the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3). While we must change with the times in some respects, we must never abandon the fundamentals and core values of our faith. And notice that Elijah repaired the altar of sacrifice. Even so, there is no salvation apart from the shed blood of Jesus Christ. That message can never change. Yet there are plenty of churches that do not preach the cross anymore. We need to restore gospel preaching in our churches. We need to get back to the Bible in our churches. We need to restore the foundations of our faith. We also need to repair the altars of the Lord in our lives. Does your prayer altar need to be restored? [Give other examples].

Notice also that he repaired this altar with twelve stones. Why not 10 stones? Though ten of the tribes had revolted to Baal, he would look upon them as belonging to God still, by virtue of the ancient covenant with their fathers. The selection of the twelve stones was symbolic of the unbroken unity of the nation, and Elijah's protest against the very existence of the Northern Kingdom, and its assumption of the name of "Israel". This action could have angered the people, but he did not fear them, because he feared God!

2. He Rules Out Natural Causes for the Fire that Would Consume the Sacrifice – In vv.32-35 we read, "and he made a trench around the altar large enough to hold two seahs of seed. And he put the wood in order, cut the bull in pieces, and laid it on the wood, and said, 'Fill four waterpots with water, and pour it on the burnt sacrifice and on the wood.' Then 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. So the water ran all around the altar; and he also filled the trench with water." He poured a total of twelve barrels of water (probably sea-water, or water from a spring of the mountainside) upon this sacrifice, one for each tribe.

Why did he pour water on that altar? He poured water to prevent the suspicion of fraud, or any natural causes for the fire. Have you ever tried to burn wet wood? No spark or small amount of fire would set that would ablaze! So it was clear to all that there was no human explanation if fire consumed the sacrifice. But no amount of water would pose a problem for God. My friend, God can do the impossible. So Elijah did not mind pouring the water over everything. He had learned to depend on God. During the famine he had looked down in an empty flour barrel and sung the doxology. God fed Elijah, the widow, and her son out of that empty flour barrel for the period of the drought.

We must not rely on human gimmicks to get the work of God done. I want to have the kind of revival that will have no human explanation. May everyone talk about what *God* did!

3. He Offers a Simply Prayer of Faith – The prophets of Baal had wailed and prayed out loud for hours. But notice the contrast in Elijah's prayer. In vv.36-37 we read, "And it came to pass, at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that Elijah the prophet came near and said, 'LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that You are God in Israel and I am Your servant, and that I have done all these things at Your word. Hear me, O LORD, hear me, that this people may know that You are the LORD God, and that You have turned their hearts back to You again.'"

This brief prayer is a pattern of prayer for all of us. His prayer was not long, but it was very calm though earnest, and far from the frenzied cries of Baal's prophets. His prayer exhibited superb trust in God. Prayer also included petition. Note the substance of the petitions. He pleads three things here:

(a) He seeks the glory of God. Likewise, Jesus taught us in the model prayer to pray, “Hollowed by thy name.” The deepest desire of a truly devout soul is that God would make His name known. It is God, not his own credit, about which Elijah thinks first. That is what moves the arm of God.

(b) He prays that God would affirm him as servant. He also wants such confirmation that the people would henceforth listen to him, not the prophets of Baal. Also, as a servant, he wants the people to know that he was not doing anything by his own will, but in accordance with the voice of God. Likewise, you and I need to be sure that what we are doing is according to the will of God. Don’t do something that you want to do and then ask God to bless it. God doesn’t move that way. We are to pray according to His will. Don’t run down to the meeting of the atheist society and propose a contest unless He has told you to propose such a test. Otherwise, you are not acting in faith, but rash presumption. Faith must be based on the Word and will of God or it is not faith.

(c) He prays for the repentance & restoration of the people back to God. I especially like the request in the last of v.37, “that this people may know ... that You have turned their hearts back to You again.”

Listen, if we are going to have revival this month, God must turn the hearts of people back to him. No evangelists can do that. So I call upon you to pray the prayer of Elijah concerning the people of our church, our community, our state, and our nation.

4. God Responds – Elijah soon obtains from his God an answer by fire. In v.38 we read, “Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood and the stones and the dust, and it licked up the water that was in the trench.” A great fire from heaven not only consumed the sacrifice, but even the stone altar,<sup>4</sup> in every drop of water. The short prayer of faith does in a minute what hours of crying & preaching could not do. God immediately answered him by fire. We may imagine what a terror the fire struck on guilty Ahab and all the worshipers of Baal.

Not only did the fire fall to glorify God’s name, and affirm Elijah as His prophet, but also to demonstrate acceptance of the sacrifice, as had happened at least 3 times before (Leviticus 9:24; 1 Chron. 21:26; 2 Chron. 7:1). Elijah was no priest, nor were there any attending Levites. Carmel had neither tabernacle nor temple, yet never before was a sacrifice more acceptable to God than this. By the way, how did God show that He accepted the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross? It was by raising Him from the dead the third day, and by sending the fire of the Holy Spirit on His disciples on the day of Pentecost. Furthermore, just as God proved His existence on Mount Carmel, even so He gave proof that Jesus is the Son of God by hundreds of miracles. And the greatest miracle of all took place after Jesus died on the cross. When all seemed lost, he was gloriously raised from the dead the third day. These miracles were done before many eyewitnesses, and the record of their witness has been faithfully preserved in the Bible.

We need to pray that the fire of the Holy Spirit will come down during our upcoming revival. We need to pray that God will burn off the dross of our sin, and set us on fire for Him.

How are you going to respond to such clear demonstrations from God? I hope you will do what the people of Israel did on Mount Carmel. For notice last of all:

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<sup>4</sup> The burning of the altar, as well as of the sacrifice, expressed the acceptance of the people whom it, by its twelve stones, symbolized.

### III. THE DECISION OF THE PEOPLE

In v.39 we read, “Now when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, ‘The LORD, He is God! The LORD, He is God!’” Elijah had by the most convincing and undeniable evidence, proved his claims on behalf of the God of Israel. And now, the people, as the jury, gave in their verdict. They could procrastinate no longer. They all fell on their faces in agreement, and all as one man said, “The LORD, He is God! The LORD, He is God!” After Elijah rebuked the people for their indecision there was no response. But when God answered Elijah’s prayer, there was a great response in affirming the Lord God of their fathers. However, the faith that is founded on miracle may be deepened into something better; but unless it is, it speedily dies away.

Now notice in v.45 what happened when the people turned to God: the rain came and the blessings came. So that the people might realize that the drought was not just an accident of nature but was a disciplinary measure, it ended the same way that it had begun—by the command of God’s man, Elijah.

Our nation is in trouble today. If we will repent of our sins and turn back to God we will experience the blessing of God once again upon our nation.

Conclusion: God has demonstrated that there is only one true God. He has demonstrated that Jesus is His only begotten Son. The apostle Peter saw His miracles, and later said, “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12, KJV). Are you following Jesus, or are you still undecided about following Jesus? What other proof do you need? Now is decision time. “How long will you falter between two opinions?” Repent of your sins and trust in Jesus. When I give the invitation in just a moment, don’t hesitate. Take a stand for Jesus Christ and give glory to Him.

Sources: Ronald A. Beers, ed., *Life Application Study Bible* (Tyndale House & Zondervan, 1991); Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961); R. G. Lee (printed sermon or commentary on 1 Kings 16:33-18:44, source unknown); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 2 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1982); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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