

TRIAL BY FIRE

Choosing to Live with No More Bull | Book of Kings (Part 4) | 1 Kings 18

Good morning. Whether you are back from last week or just joining us today, I'm so glad you're here. We've been exploring together the BOOK OF KINGS – an amazing history with so many parallels and lessons that apply to life in our times. Let me quickly catch you up on past episodes.

A royal power couple named Ahab and Jezebel have progressively led the citizens of Israel away from worshipping and serving the God who'd blessed their nation with uncommon grace. The King and Queen have led Israel into worshipping the pagan gods, Baal and Asherah, whose cult involved the sacrifice of children, an obsession with celebrity and sex, and an outsized focus on the sun and storms. God has sent the prophet, Elijah, to shake the heads of state to their senses. He tells them that God is sending a drought on them to wake them up to their need to turn back to HIM who is the giver of the graces of life.

It's a terrible time in Israel. The sin of Ahab and Jezebel has brought drought, and drought has brought famine, and famine has brought illness and death. As Tara Beth so helpfully described last week in the story of the Widow of Zarephath, it's a time when a lot of people's Plan A's are being utterly disrupted. And there's a lesson here: When sin and selfishness infect a powerful person's life, the damage flows down. It affects relatively innocent people. Think of the damage happening in Ukraine and now in Russia because of the distorted heart of one powerful man. Think of what happens to kids in the home of an alcoholic parent. Think of the damage done by a bad boss or a messed-up pastor.

If you are in a position of leadership anywhere, let this be your Proverb: **Guard your heart for it is the wellspring of life (Proverbs 4:23).** Make sure you are studying the leadership style of Jesus. Make sure you are in a small group where others have permission to challenge you and hold you accountable to the highest values. Get help if you are in trouble, because it's not only your life at stake. Other people depend on the quality of what flows from your heart. It's also why the Apostle Paul urges us to: **Pray for kings and all those in high positions, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives (1 Tim 2:1-2).**

First Kings chapter 18 continues the story: **¹After 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."** I love this verse because it tells us something so important about GOD'S heart. God's given Ahab and Jezebel three years to turn from their sin. There is no evidence at this point in the story that have changed THEIR heart toward him at all. But God sends his prophet, Elijah, to say to them anyway, "I'm ending the drought. **I will send rain on the land** again."

In couple's therapy, this is called "a repair attempt." Imagine there's been this terrible fight between two people and an awful drought of affection and communication ensues. I know, it's never happened for you; but, remember, God's Word is mainly for your neighbors! But then imagine, in the midst of the mess, one of the parties renders to the other a quiet act of service, or puts their hand on the other's shoulder, or says something kind. Even though it can be emotionally costly to them to do this, they extend an olive branch – an expression of grace – hoping that the other will move toward them. Top therapists say that the willingness to accept a repair attempt is the number one predictor of long-term hope and health for a relationship. Reaching out with, recognizing and receiving GRACE is the key to hope in life.

I get choked up when I think of all the times we see God making repair attempts in his relationship with people. He's the one party that has actually done nothing wrong. He's not responsible for the fight or the breach. But as Adam and Eve stalk out of the Garden of Eden, God clothes them. As the Israelites wander and complain in the wilderness, God sends manna and quail to them. When his people forget him, he sends prophets to them to blaze the way back to him. When the rebellious prodigal son, now starving because of his stupidity, heads home hoping (irrationally) for a handout from the dad he has so wounded, the father, says Jesus, comes running out to meet him. When the self-righteous older son is sitting pouting on the patio that the dad has shown grace to that worthless younger brother, the father also goes out to find him.

Reaching out with, recognizing and receiving GRACE is the key to hope in life –because our ultimate hope does not lie so much in possessions or policies or protections, as it does in finding our true home in God's heart, and developing a heart like His for others, and helping others find their home in God too. Who in your life might you make a repair attempt with, not because they deserve it, but simply because of the grace God has shown you?

The Bible says: **²So Elijah went to present himself to Ahab... ¹⁷When he saw Elijah, [Ahab] said to him, "Is that you, you troubler of Israel?"** In the Hebrew language a "troubler" was someone whose actions or presence is destructive of others. It is ironic that Ahab views Elijah as such a person, because it is actually the king himself who is destroying the people of his land.

For three years now, the land of Israel has been enduring a terrible drought – a judgment from God designed to turn the royal family and the nation back to him. But have Ahab and Jezebel examined their hearts and detached from their idolatries? Nope. They're pouring more and more of themselves into serving the false gods and enticing others to do the same. In the midst of this massive drought and famine, are Ahab and Jezebel moving resources to help their people? Nope. Earlier verses in chapter 18 tell us that Ahab's preoccupation is making sure that his horses and mules have enough provision (1 Kings 18:5).

Here's another great LESSON FROM THE BOOK OF KINGS: When you are spiritually lost... when selfishness or pride has distorted your bearings ... when your priorities are way out of whack... the people God sends to help set you right, often look like enemies. Elijah comes to offer Ahab grace in the form of rain; but Ahab responds to Elijah the way the powerful Pharisees, Caiaphas the high priest, and King Herod (the king of the Jews) all responded to Jesus. Their ultimate hope and help stood right there with his arms outstretched, but they treated him as an enemy.

My question is: Who in your life (or mine) might be OUR Elijah? Who might God have sent to disturb us in the way we need to be disturbed? I've been deeply disturbed over the years by certain things my family members or church members have said to me that I eventually came to see was the truth that could set me free. It's an unfashionable idea, but God is far more interested in the development of our character than in the preservation of our comfort. Have you seriously considered the possibility that that person who is criticizing or challenging you... or that person of a different race or political party urging you to see or do something different... might actually be the voice of God's grace, seeking to help you to set something right? And, conversely, to whom might God be calling you and me to muster the courage to BE an Elijah? Do you suppose God has stopped using prophets, because all is going so well?

¹⁸"I have not made trouble for Israel," Elijah replied [to Ahab]. "But you and your father's family have. You have abandoned the Lord's commands and have followed the Baals. ¹⁹ Now 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. ²⁰ So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel.

I have stood atop the heights of Mount Carmel in Israel and observed its commanding view of all of the northwest Holy Land. Its western slopes cascade down to the Mediterranean Sea. Its forested eastern slope descends to the Jezreel valley, where the Book of Revelation suggests the final battle of human history will be waged. To this day, Arabs refer to this place as Mount Mar Elias -- the Mount of Saint Elijah. What happens here may be -- save for one other mount -- the most famous encounter between the real God and the false gods ever recorded. I encourage you to read 1 Kings 18 in its entirety for yourself. In the interest of time today, let me just give you the video highlights.

We witness a contest between Elijah, the one prophet of God, and 850 prophets of the Canaanite gods, Baal and Asherah. It's a David and Goliath moment scaled up -- only the real contest is not between human beings but between the two powers in which they have put their hope. Elijah proposes a simple test. Each side will sacrifice a bull on an altar laid with wood, but not light the wood. Then each will call upon their divine

power to light the wood. It is from this narrative that we get our familiar phrase, “trial by fire.” Elijah says: **24You 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.”**

So Elijah lets the prophets of Baal and Asherah go first. They start praying and then dancing, but the skies are silent. After several hours: **27Elijah began to taunt them. “Turn up the volume. Maybe Baal is meditating or answering email or on vacation. Perhaps he’s napping.”** Read the text for yourself. Elijah actually says this sort of stuff. Eventually the prophets start cutting themselves as an act of sacrifice to compel their gods to answer. It goes on and on like this till nighttime. **29But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.**

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.” I love this part of the story because it, too, is such a lesson for us. If you want to restore your relationship with God (or with someone else important to you) repair an altar. Renew some practice or place where God or that person used to be honored, but has become neglected. Maybe it’s in the way you spend your time or your money or employ your talents. Rebuild some practice or place where once you said and it was felt by the other: YOU are FIRST for me.

Then Elijah had people pour water on the wood, so that it would be almost impossible to light, save for an unimaginably hot heat. **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. 35 The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench.** I’ve been on more than a few Scout campouts. There’s no way on earth that barbecue’s going to light.

Then, **36 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... 37 So these people will know that you, Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.” 38 Then 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. Mic drop. 39 When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, “The Lord—he is God! The Lord—he is God!”**

40 Then 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. 41 And Elijah said to Ahab, “Go, eat and drink, for there is the sound of a heavy rain.” 42 So 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.

I've left out the most famous verse in this narrative. At one point in the story, ²¹ **Elijah 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."** Peter Marshall, the great chaplain of the U.S. Senate once finished a famous sermon on this text by saying: *"If God be God, then follow him; but if Baal be God then follow him and go to hell!"*

Marshall preached that message at a time when to use the "H-word" in church would have caused dentures to drop. But this brilliant, faithful man was convinced that his audience needed to be grabbed by the lapels and shaken. America and the Church had become accustomed to God's grace and comfortable with spiritual compromise. They felt they could worship GOD partly and worship other things mostly. Yahweh and Baal could both be put FIRST, depending on the situation. But Peter Marshall understood – as Elijah did – that God will not accept this.

I've asked myself over the years, what makes people put GOD truly first? What makes them view every place in their life as an ALTAR for honoring him? Old Testament texts like First Kings, suggest that one reason would be out of a healthy FEAR that if we don't honor God first, we're going to wind up like the prophets of Baal – cut down at the Final Judgment. But as I close today, I want to offer an additional way home – a pathway which I wonder was not intentionally foreshadowed by the Mount Carmel story.

WORLD COMMUNION SUNDAY is a day when people all over the planet come together at various altars to remember that, once upon a time, on another mountain top outside Jerusalem, it was God who submitted HIMSELF to the ultimate Trial-by-Fire. JESUS voluntarily laid himself down as a sacrifice upon the wood, right next to criminals dying for their murderous devotion to the sort of idols Baal and Asherah represent. JESUS was drenched and soaking with the living water of the Holy Spirit. The full fiery fury of judgment upon idolatry and sin fell upon Him. But Christ's sacrifice on the Cross was God's "repair attempt" – a blazing act of amazing grace designed to call us back into relationship with him. It unleashed a RAIN and REIGN of grace that continues to wash all who want to be bathed in it.

The question remains: Do YOU want it? In a world still blazing with idols and altars of so many kinds: Who is your GOD? Who or what sits on the THRONE of your life? Who will you choose to FOLLOW from here as your source of identity, significance and hope? ***If Baal is God, follow him and live with the consequences; but if JESUS is God, follow him for LIFE.***

I urge you to answer that question for yourself, as we come now to the Table of our Lord.