

“The God Who Answers By Fire” (pt. 2)

1 Kings 18:30-40

In the fourth century, there was a church leader named Athanasius who stood against a false teaching in his day known as Arianism. The controversy centered on whether Jesus Christ is truly God or a created being. Athanasius defended the truth that the Son shares the Father’s divine nature. As powerful people pressured him to make some sort of compromise, Athanasius refused to abandon that confession. He was expelled from his church five times and spent roughly 17 years in exile. His persistence in the face of powerful opposition came to be summed up in the phrase *Athanasius contra mundum*—“Athanasius against the world.” He stood firm because he believed the gospel depended on telling the truth about Jesus. And his story reminds us that truth isn’t decided by consensus, or by the size of the crowd, but is determined by God alone.

With that in mind, let’s turn in our Bibles once more to the eighteenth chapter of 1 Kings. If you have ever felt that you’re standing alone against the majority, then you will appreciate this text. It is very much *Elijah contra mundum*, Elijah against the world. The prophet Elijah stands against the 450 prophets of Baal, the 400 prophets of Asherah, and a nation that is riding the fence over who to worship.

See the question that Elijah confronts the people of Israel with in verse 21, “How long will you go limping between two different opinions?” How long are you going to straddle the fence of indecision? Make up your mind about who you’re going to worship, and devote yourself entirely to it. Israel had been limping as a nation in attempting to worship both Baal and the Lord. So this text is a warning for us against divided allegiance. We can confess Christ with our mouth, while at the same time look elsewhere for security, identity, and pleasure that we long to have. We come up with idols that we functionally serve all while we continue to

give 'lip service' to God. In other words, we say one thing while our practical allegiances say something else. And it is this very same thing that God explains later to Isaiah:

Isaiah 29:13—“These people draw near to Me with their mouth and honor Me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me.”

So Elijah throws down the gauntlet and says, “If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, then follow him.” Come down from the fence of divided allegiance, make up your mind as to who it is that you’re going to serve. And so it is one man standing against the majority. God’s prophet representing God’s truth on one side, and the prophets of Baal and the majority of the people on the other. Who is right?

Truth is not determined by the majority. Popularity is never a criterion for whether or not a thing is true. You will often find out in the Bible how most of the time the crowd gets it wrong. The crowd moves in a direction that is going away from God, not to Him. And it is into that setting that God will raise up a prophetic voice like Elijah, whom He will use to call wayward people back to God. The prophet is like a fish swimming upstream against a current of unbelief.

In verses 20-29, we’ve already looked at the confrontation of the people and the refutation of the idol. And so the third heading that I want to point out involves the demonstration of the Lord. The prophets of Baal have had their turn, and it has been an epic failure. They’ve cried out to Baal until they no longer have a voice. They’ve cut themselves until their blood was gushing. But verse 29 says, “But there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention.” Now it is Elijah’s turn. Let’s see what happens. (Read)

There are three things in particular that God does here on Mount Carmel, from which we're able to see three things that He will do in the life of any person who comes to trust in Him. Number one:

1—He EXPOSES our sin and need (18:30-32a)

“Then Elijah said to all the people, ‘Come near to me.’ And all the people came near to him. And he repaired the altar of the Lord that had been thrown down. Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord came, saying, ‘Israel shall be your name,’ and with the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord.”

The Lord has already shown the people the absolute failure of their idol. No matter how loudly they've cried out or how much of their own blood they've shed, Baal has remained silent. The last statement of verse 29 has made that clear, “But there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention.” That's the futility of idols. Why give your life to the pursuit of something that will not and cannot save you? And yet that is exactly what we do when we make a part of creation ultimate in our life. That's what Israel had done in this chapter. They had become enticed by Baal worship all because it promised material prosperity. If they wanted an abundant harvest, they needed to serve Baal just like their pagan neighbors. The desire for prosperity and success is what stands behind Baal worship. That's what became the ultimate, driving factor in their lives. It is not a question of 'if' a person worships something. It is always a question of 'what' that person worships. Because we will always serve something, either Christ or the idols we make for ourselves.

And so in contrast to the failure of the idol, Elijah steps up to the plate calls for the people's attention. He says to all the people, “Come near to me.” You've

been standing at a distance. You've been limping between two opinions. Now is the time to come back to God. Years before, when King Solomon had prayed at the dedication of the temple, listen to what he had acknowledged:

1 Kings 8:35-36—“When heaven is shut up and there is no rain because they have sinned against You, if they pray toward this place and acknowledge Your name and turn from their sin, when You afflict them, then hear in heaven and forgive the sin of Your sin servants, Your people Israel, when You teach them the good way in which they should walk, and grant rain upon Your land, which You have given to Your people as an inheritance.”

Verse 30 says that Elijah repaired the altar of the Lord that had been thrown down. To understand the significance of that, you need to keep in mind the significance of the altar in God's covenant with Israel. It was there that a sacrifice was made for sin, and only on the basis of sacrifice could a holy God have fellowship with a sinful people. So the 'altar' has a prominent place in the Old Testament scriptures. All throughout Israel, before the temple in Jerusalem was built, there were altars built for offering sacrifices. Genesis 4, for instance, where Abel brought the firstborn of his flock as an offering to the Lord. Or in Genesis 8 where Noah builds an altar and offers sacrifices in worship. Genesis 12, the Bible says that Abraham built an altar to the Lord, from which he offered sacrifice and called upon the name of the Lord. On and on it goes until the time of the Exodus and God's Law as given to the people through Moses. God specified that sacrifice had to be offered by the priest, upon an altar that the Lord Himself would sanction for that purpose. And so that is what they would have in the tabernacle, and later on in the temple. But one of the things that you frequently will see in 1-2 Kings is worship that is being offered by Israel at unsanctioned

altars referred to as the 'high places.' There on hills and mountain tops, altars would be built for worship that kept the people from making the trip to the Jerusalem temple. And in the days of the divided kingdom, the kings in the north had reason to promote these high places due to the fact that it kept their subjects from returning to south to Judah. Eventually, worshiping God from the high places gave way to worshiping Baal from those same places, just like what happened at Mount Carmel. It was a slow fade into complete spiritual compromise. Ignore the place of worship, and sooner or later you're confused over who to worship.

Now, I fully realize that through the finished work of Jesus, the church is now the temple of the living God. There is a sense in which our worship is centered, not in a place, but in the person of Jesus Christ. And through what Christ has done for me on the cross, I now can worship no matter the time or the place. But in no way does that make the local church optional for the Christian. Our faith is personal, but it is not meant to be private. And when you let the things of the world pull you away from consistent participation in the local church, it won't be long before you'll be confused over who to worship. We're one generation away from unbelief.

So Elijah repairs the altar of the Lord that had been thrown down, the place where they had made sacrifice to the Lord because of being kept from Jerusalem. But the point that I am trying to make is that God is working through all of this to expose their sin and how far they had drifted from Him. Before we will ever come to faith in Christ, the Spirit of God works in us to expose our sin and need for a true sacrifice. I think the failure of the things in which we try to find refuge drives us to our knees, back to the only One who can save us. That's

what Elijah is counting on. He is looking to God, whom he knows to be at work, bringing a wayward people back to Himself.

Friends, aren't you grateful for a God who welcomes the sinner with open arms? You are never too far gone. You have never made such a mess of your life that He can't redeem it and transform it. The devil would have a person believe that they are beyond hope, too entrenched in their idols, beyond the scope of God's redemptive love. But he is a liar! God welcomes the sinner with open arms.

Think about how Jesus explained this through the parable of the prodigal son.

He had made an idol out of the far country, he had wasted all that his father had given him, yet he finds out that there is a father who is waiting with open arms to welcome him back and seat him at the table of grace. And that leads to a second thing that God does here is this:

2—He BRINGS us to trust in His grace (18:32b-35)

“And he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two seahs of seed. And he put the wood in order and cut the bull in pieces and laid it on the wood. And he said, ‘Fill four jars 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. And the water ran around the altar and filled the trench also with water.”

Not only does God work in such a way to expose our sin and need, but He brings us to trust exclusively in grace so that our only hope of salvation is in Him. In verse 32, Elijah does something very strange. He digs a trench around the altar and prepares the sacrifice. And then he tells them to fill up four jars with water and pour it on the offering. And he tells them to do this three times. So that by the time it is said and done, the altar is drenched, the wood is soaked, and the

trench is full of water. I don't know if you have ever tried to start a fire when conditions are wet, but it is pretty much impossible. I mean that's the reason we stack up our firewood in a wood shed, so that it can stay dry. There's no fire when your wood is waterlogged. And so this really is a strange thing for Elijah to do.

But the impossibility is the whole point. Twelve stones for the altar, and twelve barrels of water on the sacrifice. The number twelve is yet another reminder of God's will for the divided nation. A soaked sacrifice would eliminate all other explanations for what was about to happen. In that way, there would be no question about it when the fire fell upon the altar. It was something that could not be explained in human terms. There would be no way to suggest that he had somehow sneaked a burning coal under the sacrifice, or used some other form of trickery. When they saw the water being poured on the altar until it filled up the trench, the people would realize that it was humanly impossible for the sacrifice to burn. Only God could light the sacrifice and consume it on the altar. That is what happens in verse 38.

And it is an illustration of our need for divine grace and the important truth that God alone is the hope and confidence of His people. The hymn we sing expresses it this way:

*My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness;
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
But wholly lean on Jesus' name!*

There is a sense in which you need to 'pour water' on your efforts at salvation. Abandon all reliance upon your own good works. Salvation does not come by

relying upon self-effort. It is not a thing to be achieved. Instead, it is a gift of God's grace to be received through faith in Christ. Jesus is the sacrifice, and His sinless life offered up in the place of the guilty sinner is the only way that our sin can be atoned.

There is a sense in which you need to 'pour water' on your efforts at service. There's a lot that happens at Hopewell in any given week. I thought about what goes into planning a worship service on a Sunday. We need to plan, we need to prepare everything that needs to be prepared. But let me tell you that we need to pour water on all of our efforts by realizing that if anything is to be said or done that makes an eternal impact, it will be by the grace and power of God. Only God, by means of His Spirit, He is the One who sends the holy fire we need! There was no amount of pyrotechnic ability that Elijah could turn to in order to ignite fire upon the altar. There's no ace up his sleeve which he relied upon. He simply casts himself entirely upon the mercy and grace of God, fully recognizing that what the people needed was a demonstration of power from on high!

There is a sense in which you need to 'pour water' on your efforts at speaking, at witnessing, at proclaiming the gospel to people. That's what Paul did when he went to Corinth. I love what he writes in 1 Corinthians about the focus of his preaching ministry among them. He says:

1 Corinthians 2:1-5—"When I came to you, brethren, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God."

When God does a thing, it will be obvious that He alone is the One who has done it. That's what grace is all about. If there is anything that will happen today in your life that will be eternal value, God is the One who will do it. There is a third thing that the Lord does here:

3—He RESPONDS to the prayer of faith (18:36-40)

“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. 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.’ 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. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, ‘The Lord, He is God; the Lord, He is God.’ 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.”

You will find in these verses a sacrifice, a prayer, and an answer. Elijah repairs the altar of the Lord that had been torn down, upon which he prepares a sacrifice, offers a simple prayer, and notice how God sends fire to consume the sacrifice. Look at what Elijah prays in verses 36-37. His words take about 30 seconds to speak, and that's 30 seconds seen in contrast to the many hours of incessant babble that the prophets of Baal had used. Unlike them, Elijah didn't have to work himself into a frenzied state. He didn't have to act out and dance around the altar and cut himself. He offers to God in faith a simple, rational prayer, in full control of his faculties.

The timing of his prayer

Verse 36 says that it was at the time of the offering of the oblation, or other translations say the ‘evening sacrifice.’ That’s significant because it was at the same time that the sanctioned sacrifice was being offered by the priests in the temple in Jerusalem. Numbers 28 specified that sacrifice of a lamb was to be made in the morning, and a lamb was to be offered in the evening, which was around 3pm. So the timing here is important. Elijah deliberately timed his sacrifice to coincide with the 3pm sacrifice as a reminder to the people of what God’s Word said to the nation and how far they had strayed from it.

The basis of his prayer

Notice how Elijah begins his prayer in verse 36, “O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel.” While all of the false prophets had been calling upon the name of Baal, Elijah calls upon the name of the One who had revealed Himself to the patriarchs and had proven His power to them again and again. He isn’t an invention of their own imagination, but is the one true God. For those who say that it doesn’t matter who or what a person worships, just so long as they are sincere, this is a sobering reminder that a person’s faith is no better than the object of their faith.

The motive of his prayer

Elijah’s motive in prayer is seen in verse 36 as he asks the Lord, “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.” There’s no self-glory here. There’s no selfish or self-centered agenda. It is first and foremost a prayer for God to bring glory to Himself by confirming to the people that He is God. Motive is important in prayer. You and I are to pray, “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name,

Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Prayer is not about accomplishing my will in heaven, but about accomplishing God’s will on earth.

The tone of his prayer

Elijah’s prayer is fervent, not a bunch of empty phrases and unnecessary words. It isn’t some religious formula that just goes through the motions. Nor is it mindless drivel. We’re able to sense his passion in verse 37 as he fervently prays, “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.” His petition isn’t vague. He is asking for the Lord to respond in such a way that it will be obvious to all that He alone is God and that He has turned the hearts of His people back to Himself. Isn’t that a revival prayer? God, hear our prayer and move in response so that these people will know that You have captured their hearts once more! What might it look like in our own time and place if God captures the hearts of His people once again? So that we are no longer satisfied with business as usual religion. We are no longer entertained by our lifeless idols. We are no longer satisfied to hide behind our empty excuses. We are no longer content to squander our lives away while the world around us is sinking into hell. We ought to pray like the psalmist who said:

Psalm 85:6—“Will You not revive us again, that Your people may rejoice in You?”

And so Elijah prays, and then watch what happens in verse 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.” Notice how the fire was all-consuming, and all the people could clearly see how it was not normal, neither

could it be explained away through human rationale. Verse 38 says it consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench! Who's ever heard of a fire that consumes even the stones? This was a fire that could not have been kindled by any human hand. And it was sufficient evidence for the most avowed skeptic. So that the people cry out, "The Lord, He is God!" It was real worship, not like all the shouting and slashing of Baal's prophets, but the worship of total submission before the awesome majesty of God. It was worship in spirit and truth as they were totally absorbed in the goodness of God.

Philip Graham Ryken — *"It must have been wonderful to be on Mount Carmel, to lie in the dust shouting, 'The Lord, He is God' over and over again. 'The Lord, He is God; the Lord, He is God.' We should have such worship. We can have such worship. We do not need to see the fire on the mountain to experience the goodness of God in our worship. If there is little passion in our worship, it is not because we do not have enough dancing and shouting and frenzy. If there is little awe in our worship, it is not because we do not have swords, spears, and blood. It is because we do not have a due sense of the weightiness, holiness, and the majesty of Almighty God."*

There's a sacrifice, a prayer, and fire from heaven. I mean the whole reason there is a sacrifice is to keep the fire from falling on the people. Hebrews 13:3 says that our God is a consuming fire. Their sins deserve it, right? They've been guilty of idolatry and everything else. However, God is full of mercy, and His judgment is poured on a substitute who dies in the sinner's place. And so there's a sacrifice.

But there is also a prayer. Elijah offers a simple prayer of faith, the effective prayer of a righteous man that avails for much. Not a long prayer, not a drawn

out prayer meant to bring attention to himself, but a simple prayer that gets to the point. And God hears. And answers with His fire that consumes the sacrifice and not the sinner! Let me tell you, Jesus is not only our Lamb who is consumed in our place. He is the prophet and priest who offers the sacrifice, who prayed, “Father, forgive them...”

Matthew 27:45-46—“Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?’”

He cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up His spirit. It was just as He had said in John 10:17, “I lay down My life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have the power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again.” And the proof of our salvation, evidence that His sacrifice is effective, is the empty tomb. Christ is raised to endless life, and gives that endless life to the one who trusts in Him. He gives the gift of His Spirit to every believer. And that’s what John meant when he said that Christ will ‘baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.’ Friend, it is one or the other for you.

Man’s world will one day be destroyed by fire. The fire of God’s judgment will consume this sinful and unbelieving world at the last day. The Bible says in 2 Thessalonians that the Lord Jesus will one day be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. And they will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His might, when He comes on that day to be glorified in His saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed. That’s the destiny of those who reject Christ. But for those of us who receive Him in faith, the fire of judgment that you and I deserve has already fell upon Jesus at the cross. He became my sin, and wrath

was poured out upon Him in my place, so that by faith I could receive His righteousness. It is in this sense that 1 Kings 18 points us to Christ and to His gospel. Think about it. He's the altar and the sacrifice. He's the gift sent from heaven! The greatest of all miracles is not fire from heaven on a mountain, but the resurrection of the Son of God from a grave. The most important thing in your life is whether or not you're trusting in Him. I'm not talking about making decisions as much as I am about you being His disciple. Elijah is calling the people to the point of decision here, but it is about who they're going to serve.

I would ask you the same thing. How long are you going to limp around? You say, "I've decided to follow Jesus!" Well, is there any proof? Let me put it this way—three frogs are sitting on a log. Two decide to jump off. So how many are left? The answer is three. You haven't jumped off the log because you decided to jump off. To simply 'decide' counts for nothing. You're still on the log until you jump off the log. You can decide all you want to, but as long as you're sitting on the log, you're still sitting on the log. You can sing, "I have decided to follow Jesus." But until you're following Him, you're not following Him. The Great Commission is not a call for decisions, but a command for disciples. Yes, it begins with a decision, but it doesn't end there. It leads to a life of following Jesus. So in response to God's Word this morning, perhaps you need to:

- Stop trusting in your own self-efforts at salvation and start trusting in God's Son.
- Renounce your hidden idols and declare, "The Lord, He is God!"
- Obey Christ by going public with believer's baptism.
- Pour water on the altar of your obedience to God and fully rely upon His grace and power.