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1 Kings 18

Third Message

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TO TELL THE TRUTH

SERIES: A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

Some of you might be old enough to remember the TV game show “To Tell the Truth.” The show features a panel of four celebrities attempting to correctly identify a described contestant who has an unusual occupation or experience. The central character is accompanied by two impostors pretending to be the central character. The celebrity panelists question the three contestants; the impostors are allowed to lie but the central character is sworn, “to tell the truth.” After questioning is complete, each member of the panel votes on which of the challengers they believe to be the central character. Once the votes are cast, the host asks, “Will the real [person’s name] please stand up?” The central character then stands, often after some brief playful feinting and false starts among all three challengers.

Our story today is an ancient Israelite version of “To Tell the Truth.” In the days when Ahab reigned over the ten tribes in the northern kingdom, Israel became very confused as to the identity of the true God. Ahab married the daughter of the king of Sidon and Jezebel brought with her to Samaria the prophets of Baal and Asherah. Ahab built a house to Baal and made an altar to this Canaanite god. There were two gods claiming to be God—Yahweh, the God of Israel who had freed his people from bondage in Israel and brought them to the Promised Land, and Baal, the Canaanite god of rain and fertility. Either Yahweh or Baal was an imposter. It was time to tell the truth and for the real God to stand up. And stand up he did in the well-known shoot out that took place between Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel.

Our study this morning is found in 1 Kings 18, one of the most entertaining stories in all of Scripture.

Now it happened after many days that the word of the LORD came to Elijah in the third year, saying, “Go, show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the face of the earth.” So Elijah went to show himself to Ahab. Now the famine was severe in Samaria. (1 Kgs 18:1-2 NASB)

This is now the third time that Elijah has received the word of the Lord. The first instance sent him to the brook Cherith and the second to a widow in Zarephath. Now God wants Elijah to show himself to king Ahab. The drought that Elijah promised has lasted three years. The drought was severe and has taken a huge toll on the Israelites. But it is about to end. Again, for the third time, we see Elijah’s ready obedience. The story takes place in five scenes.

Ahab called Obadiah who was over the household. (Now Obadiah feared the LORD greatly; for when Jezebel destroyed the prophets of the LORD, Obadiah took a hundred prophets and hid them by fifties in a cave, and provided them with bread and water.) Then Ahab said to Obadiah, “Go through the land to all the springs of water and to all the valleys; perhaps we will find grass and keep the horses and mules alive, and not have to kill some of the cattle.” So they divided the land between them to survey it; Ahab went one way by himself and Obadiah went another way by himself. (1 Kgs 18:3-6)

In the first scene we are introduced to Obadiah, Ahab’s major-domo, who was over the king’s household. The famine is so severe that there is no water for the animals. Ahab calls Obadiah to help search the land for water. We learn a couple of things. First, Jezebel has been on a witch-hunt for the prophets of Yahweh. Second, Elijah is not the only faithful one in Israel. There is Obadiah, who fears the Lord greatly, and at least a hundred prophets of the Lord, whom Obadiah had hid in a cave and provided for in the way that ravens and a widow provided for Elijah. Ahab has more concern for his animals than he does for the Lord’s prophets. He will kill the prophets, but doesn’t want to kill the cattle.

Third, Obadiah serves the Lord inside the palace while Elijah serves outside. They have different but equally important roles. This is a significant point. We are not all called into full-time ministry. Working at a company is just as important as being a missionary. It is all a matter of what God has called us to.

In the second scene, Elijah finds Obadiah and tells him to go to Ahab and tell him “Behold, Elijah is here.” Ahab has searched high and low for Elijah for three years in order to kill him. Obadiah is greatly afraid that if he tells Ahab that Elijah is here and Elijah leaves then Ahab will kill him. Obadiah’s speech is surprisingly lengthy for a minor character (1 Kgs 18:9-14). Elijah is calling him to a higher level of commitment. Obadiah labors over his choice to obey Elijah. He foreshadows the choice that Israel will be forced to make.

Elijah said, “As the LORD of hosts lives, before whom I stand, I will surely show myself to him today.” So Obadiah went to meet Ahab and told him; and Ahab went to meet Elijah. (1 Kgs 18:15-16)

Elijah gives Obadiah assurance that today is the day. Elijah will show himself to Ahab, exactly what God commanded in verse 1. Obadiah makes the choice to obey. Scene 3 brings Ahab and Elijah face to face.

When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, “Is this you, you troubler of Israel?” He said, “I have not troubled Israel, but you and your father’s house have, because you have forsaken the commandments of the LORD and you have followed the Baals. (1 Kgs 18:17-18)

When Ahab sees Elijah he lashes out and calls him the “troubler of Israel.” The word “troubler” means to bring ruin or destruction. The enemies of Abraham and Moses label them in the same way. In Joshua 7 the word is used to describe Achan, who brought defeat on Israel at Ai because he stole a robe, silver, and gold from Jericho. Ahab believes that Elijah has brought the famine on Israel in the way Achan brought trouble.

But Elijah turns the table and tells Ahab that it is he and his father’s house that have brought the trouble because he has forsaken the Lord and followed the Baals.

Both Obadiah and Elijah had to face the hatred and animosity of Ahab and Jezebel as they sought to serve God. And we should expect nothing less. God's own son Jesus was hated and is still hated by the world. Jesus told the disciples, "if the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you" (John 15:18-20).

When I was a freshman in college my roommate and another student on my dorm floor hated me because I was a diligent and successful student. They conspired against me and pulled pranks. If getting good grades can cause hatred, how much more can we expect if we follow Jesus? We will be mistreated, misunderstood, misrepresented, maligned, and challenged. Our characters will be assassinated. If you want the world to love you, if you want to play it safe, you will have a hard time committing your life completely and publicly to Christ.

"It's a simple fact that if you want to live a significant life you will be hated and opposed. Every step of the journey will be contested, every decision tested and challenged. Our Lord was despised and rejected. So you will be. 'To be significant,' said Emerson, 'is to be misunderstood.'"¹

"Now then send and gather to me all Israel at Mount Carmel, together with 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of the Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table." So Ahab sent a message among all the sons of Israel and brought the prophets together at Mount Carmel. (1 Kgs 18:19-20)

Elijah commands Ahab to gather all of Israel, the 450 prophets of Baal, and the 400 prophets Asherah on Mount Carmel. Elijah has inside information on who eats with Jezebel. Ahab, showing his true passive character, complies and then disappears from the action until the last scene.

Mount Carmel is actually a range of mountains that extends from the Mediterranean Sea southeast for several miles. The northern promontory is near the modern city of Haifa. It is a lovely forested area that reflects the meaning of the word "Carmel" as a garden or vineyard.

Elijah came near to all the people and said, "How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him." But the people did not answer him a word. Then Elijah said to the people, "I alone am left a prophet of the LORD, but Baal's prophets are 450 men. Now let them give us two oxen; and let them choose one ox for themselves and cut it up, and place it on the wood, but put no fire under it; and I will prepare the other ox and lay it on the wood, and I will not put a fire under it. Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD, and the God who answers by fire, He is God." And all the people said, "That is a good idea." (1 Kgs 18:21-24)

Now in the fourth scene things are really heating up. Elijah gathers with all Israel and presents them with a decision—how long will you hesitate (literally limp) between two opinions? The idea here is that Israel was not sold out either to God or Baal. They vacillated between the two; they straddled the fence with one foot in each camp. Their motto was "the more gods, the better." Like Ahab they were unwilling to make a choice. They do not answer; they do not speak a word. Like Adam in the garden they are silent.

The people of Israel are like the politician who, when asked, "Are you for or against this issue?" replied, "Well, some of my friends are for it. Some of my friends are against it. And I'm for my friends."

So Elijah proposes a test to determine the truth about who is God. The prophets of Baal and Elijah will each prepare a sacrifice with no fire. Each will call upon the name of their God. The God who answers with fire is the true God. The odds are in favor of the prophets of Baal - 450 to 1. We don't know what happened to the 400 prophets of Asherah. Apparently, they didn't show up; they knew better. All the people think this is a great idea, literally a "good word." The stage is set for an epic battle. Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday are walking down the streets of Tombstone to meet the Clanton's and McLaury's at the O.K. Corral.

So Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose one ox for yourselves and prepare it first for you are many, and call on the name of your god, but put no fire under it." Then they took the ox which was given them and they prepared it and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon saying, "O Baal, answer us." But there was no voice and no one answered. And they leaped about the altar which they made. (1 Kgs 18:25-26)

The prophets of Baal are given first crack. Since Carmel was a high place, most likely there already existed an altar to Baal or another god. They set up their sacrifice and called upon Baal for several hours. The prophets leapt around the altar and worked themselves into frenzy. The word "leaped" is the same word as "hesitate" or "limp" in verse 21. But there was no voice, no answer.

It came about at noon, that Elijah mocked them and said, "Call out with a loud voice, for he is a god; either he is occupied or gone aside, or is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and needs to be awakened." So they cried with a loud voice and cut themselves according to their custom with swords and lances until the blood gushed out on them. When midday was past, they raved until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice; but there was no voice, no one answered, and no one paid attention. (1 Kgs 18:27-29)

Around noon Elijah begins to taunt the prophets of Baal, telling them they aren't yelling loud enough. Maybe Baal is busy, away on other business, or just asleep. So the prophets call out louder, they cut themselves, and they raved or prophesied until the evening. But there was no voice, no answer, and no one paid attention. The scene strikes us as comical and absurd.

The worship of Baal is chaotic, disorderly, frenetic and lengthy. It is sexual, sensual, and sensory. All the attention is focused on the actions of the worshiper. Baal worship is "worship that seeks fulfillment through self-expression, worship that accepts the needs and desires and passions of the worshiper as its baseline."²

Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come near to me." So all the people came near to him. And he repaired the altar of the LORD which had been torn down. 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." So with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD, and he made a trench around the altar, large enough to hold two measures of seed. Then he arranged the wood and cut the ox in pieces and laid it on the wood. And he said, "Fill four pitchers 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. The water flowed around the altar and he also filled the trench with water. (1 Kgs 18:30-35)

Elijah draws the people near as he did in verse 21, an invitation to worship. He repairs or heals the altar of the Lord that had fallen into disrepair and disarray. He gathers twelve stones, a reminder of Israel's heritage in Jacob. He makes a trench and prepares the sacrifice. He instructs the people to pour four pitchers of water over the sacrifice and the wood. He has them do this three times, resulting in a total of twelve pitchers, again a reminder of the twelve tribes of Israel. The sacrifice is soaked and the trench is filled with water as well. Elijah's liberal use of water during a drought appears ironic. In any case, he is really stacking the deck against himself.

At the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, Elijah the prophet came near and said, "O LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, today let it be known that You are God in Israel and that I am Your servant and 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 heart back again." 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. (1 Kgs 18:36-38)

Elijah comes near (same word as verse 21 and 30) and prays. His prayer is simple and direct. He calls on the name of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel (i.e. Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes). He requests an answer so that the people of Israel might know that Yahweh is God. "Will the real God please stand up?" And Yahweh stood up. Fire, a symbol of both God's judgment and presence, ignites the water like it is gasoline and consumes the offering. Like something from Star Wars, everything is vaporized.

Elijah's worship is methodical, orderly, rooted in history, practiced in community. The contrast to the prophets of Baal is very helpful. In our western church culture the tendency is to seek a fulfilling, exciting, and relevant worship experience. The focus is on self and not God. This does not mean that the senses are not involved. There is music, dance, art, silence, and liturgy, but it is ordered by the word of God so that we do not become victims of emotional manipulation.

We gather as God's people to simply call upon the name of the Lord. We don't rely on frenetic worship but an orderly gathering around the sacrifice of God. Worship "is not something a person experiences, it is something we do, regardless of how we feel about it, or whether we feel anything about it at all. The experience develops out of the worship, not the other way around."³

When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, "The LORD, He is God; the LORD, He is God." Then Elijah said to them, "Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape." So they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon, and slew them there. (1 Kgs 18:39-40)

The people see the truth, the reality of the real God and the impostor, and they give their allegiance to Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The prophets of Baal are taken down to the brook Kishon and slain. The Kishon is the site where Sisera and Jabin met their demise when Deborah and Barak led Israel to victory (Judges 4). The victory on Carmel is total. The Baal stranglehold on the people of God is broken, even though it will take another twenty years or so to clean up the mess. The connections between Elijah and

Moses in Exodus 24 and 32 are numerous—altars built, sacrifices offered, a meal celebrated, idolaters executed.

In scene five, Elijah instructs Ahab to eat and drink while Elijah goes to the top of Carmel and prays for rain. When he finally sees that his prayer is about to be answered, Elijah outruns Ahab to Jezreel, a distance of 25 miles. The drought was finally over. Rain speaks of the renewal and refreshment we receive when we turn to the Lord. It was a really good day for Elijah. But as we will see next week, Jezebel is not a good loser.

What a great story. But besides being entertained, what should we take away? I want to mention three things.

First, the worship of idols and false gods is absolutely without merit or reward. The story points out the absurdity, the ridiculousness, and the foolishness of giving our hearts to counterfeit gods, trinket gods who are absolutely impotent to act no matter how much we implore them. Our idols might have mouths, eyes, ears, noses, hands, and feet but they cannot speak, see, hear, smell, feel, or walk. We can yell at the things we give our heart to all day long, we can go into frenzy and convulsions, but it will not have any result. Sounds kind of like me watching football, imploring the team I want to win.

And yet we so often are tempted to hesitate between two opinions, serving God and Mammon. We are seduced by lust, greed, and selfishness to seek life, worth, value, significance and meaning for ourselves in places and ways other than God. We are tempted to give ourselves to idols because we don't think God cares or hasn't given us what we think we deserve. As I said a couple of weeks ago, we can make an idol out of anything in our life if we place its importance and status above that of God. I don't have to tell you what your idols are—you know. These are the things that get us up in the morning and keep us going through the day. They are things we think about when we lie on our bed at night.

The story forces us to make a choice between our idols and God. If we limp between two opinions we become crippled, or worse yet, dead like the prophets of Baal. What we love, adore and focus on forms us into the people we become. And what we value we worship. Baal worship might seem exciting, but it is empty. "True worship happens when we put God first in our lives ... when we intentionally cherish God and value him above all else in life. Worship reveals what is important to us."⁴

Worship is not equal to going to church, serving in a soup kitchen, or giving money to missions. They are all good things, but worship is a matter of the heart. The message of Mount Carmel is: "I am the LORD, and there is no other; Besides Me there is no God" (Is 45:5). The encouragement is to give God your whole heart. Don't be seduced. Don't turn to the right or the left. Keep your eyes on the God of the Bible. Don't limp between two loves. And in order to be single-minded we have to be ruthless to destroy the idols that vie for our devotion.

Second, most of the time we give witness to God through the natural relationships we have everyday. However, there are those rare occasions when we face a direct confrontation with the forces of evil and darkness. There can be those times when God calls us to war against the Ahabs and Jezebels of this world or to stand firm against the opposition.

Years ago when I was working as an engineer, our software team was working at a site in Omaha Nebraska. I had worked with the three other team members for several years and we were good friends.

One night we came back from work late in the evening. As we sat around talking, the conversation turned to God. All of a sudden I found myself in a war. My friends fired question after question at me and our discussion went into the early hours of the morning. The next day when I woke up I felt like I had just gone fifteen rounds with Mohammed Ali. But a couple of weeks later, one of the guys referred to our discussion and said, "You won that battle." Well, I didn't win, God did.

We are in a war whether we realize it or not. It doesn't matter what we can do. What matters is what God can do. We might seem outnumbered, but one plus God equals a distinct majority.

Finally, Mount Carmel foreshadows another mountain outside Jerusalem where "the" epic battle took place between God and the great imposter. I am speaking of Calvary. On Calvary, the fire of judgment came down on another sacrifice, God's own son. Instead of the prophets of Baal being slaughtered, Jesus was slain. At first it didn't appear like a victory but a defeat. Like Elijah stretching himself out on the widow's son **three** times, like Israel pouring water on the offering **three** times, like the drought that had lasted **three** years, so Jesus lay in the tomb for **three** days. But on the **third** day he rose from the dead to declare a greater victory than the one on Carmel.

He claimed a victory over sin and death and all evil and Satan himself. God vindicated his son and made all his enemies a footstool for his feet. At Carmel, after the fire consumed the sacrifice, God sent rain to renew the land; and in the same way, after the resurrection and ascension God poured forth his Spirit. Calvary stands as God's statement to the world that Jesus is Lord and there is no other.

People of God

Place your hope in the Lord

Trust in the Lord

Call upon the name of the Lord and

He will answer you.

1. David Roper, *Elijah: A Man like Us*, (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1997), 143.

2. Eugene H. Peterson, *The Jesus Way*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 110.

3. Peterson, *The Jesus Way*, 111.

4. Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 44-45.

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