



Catalog No. 759

1 Kings 18

First Message

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July 30, 1989

THE MOUNTAIN OF VICTORY

This is the summer of the movie blockbusters. There are more box-office spectaculars this season than any year I can remember. The most popular theme seems to be that of a hero, a champion who stands against overwhelming odds, a conqueror who is bold and strong—Indiana Jones, Batman, even James Bond.

The pages of the Bible are alive with heroes and champions: Moses took on the Pharaoh of ancient Egypt; David went out to battle Goliath; Daniel in the lion's den in foreign Babylon; Noah standing tall and building an ark in the face of public ridicule. In our study for the next couple of weeks we will encounter another champion, Elijah, a servant of God. We will look at two mountaintop experiences in Elijah's life. We will see him on the mountain of victory, and on the mountain of defeat. If Hollywood ever gets hold of this script, we could have another blockbuster for our summer viewing!

Rudyard Kipling wrote that one of the qualifying characteristics that makes a boy a man is if he can meet with triumph and disaster and "treat those two imposters just the same." All of us have been acquainted with both ends of the spectrum through the sporting contests we have followed. One television sports show describes this as the "thrill of victory and the agony of defeat." Life is a contest in which we all participate. Although some might be reluctant, unwilling participants in this contest, each of us must deal with the "thrill of victory and the agony of defeat." We all must meet with triumph and disaster.

The questions we want to ask of ourselves today are: Have we engaged ourselves in the contest? In what contest are we engaged? Which team have we chosen to represent? What sort of victory are we seeking, and what will it mean to us?

The first two verses of our text, from 1 Kings 18, introduce us to the plot, and to the main characters in our story.

Now it came about 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)

Elijah is a Tishbite, a prophet of God, one of the settlers of Gilead. Outwardly he is a rugged man, like many of the characters portrayed in adventure movies today, but inwardly, as we will see, he operates on a totally different basis. The name Elijah means "my God is Yahweh," or, "Yahweh is God." Yahweh is the personal name for God in the Old Testament. It characterizes what God has called Elijah to do in terms of the nation Israel.

Our other main character is Ahab, king of Israel. This account occurs at a time when the nation of Israel is divided. After the reign of Solomon, the nation was torn asunder by civil war and divided into a northern and a southern kingdom, Israel in the north, Judah in the south. Jeroboam, the first king of the northern kingdom, installed a rival system of worship in order to keep the people at home instead of going to Jerusalem to worship. Jeroboam initiated high places of worship, and anointed priests. As a result, the people began to worship

the gods of the nations around them. Ahab, the son of Omri, was the eighth king in the history of Israel, and he did evil in the sight of the Lord, as we see in 1 Kings 16:30-33:

And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD more than all who were before him. And it came about, as though it had been a trivial thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he married Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and went to serve Baal and worshiped him. So he erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he built in Samaria. And Ahab also made the Asherah. Thus Ahab did more to provoke the LORD God of Israel than all the kings of Israel who were before him.

If Ahab was evil, Jezebel was totally wicked. She supervised the cultic prostitution in the temple of Baal at Tyre, and brought all the Canaanite gods into Israel when she married Ahab. Baal was a Canaanite deity, the god of rain and fire. He was the one who supposedly controlled rainfall, and fertility in agriculture, beasts, and mankind. Asherah was the female deity, the goddess of the sea, an ancestor of Baal. Her image carved in wood was planted on the high places and worshiped there.

But God brings judgment on the people of Israel and announces through Elijah that there would be no rain or dew on the land, "except by my word" (17:1). When we come to the first verse of chapter 18, it is three and half years later. The cloudless skies and barren land represent Israel's relationship with God. It was dry, barren, void and unfruitful. Elijah has been in the wilderness and Ahab has been seeking to kill him, but now God tells Elijah to show himself to Ahab. And he also tells Elijah that he will now send rain on the face of the earth.

We read of their meeting in verse 17 of chapter 18:

And it came about, when Ahab saw Elijah that Ahab said to him, "Is this you, you troubler of Israel?" And 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. 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. (18:17-20)

Ahab accuses Elijah of being the troubler of Israel, but Elijah quickly turns the tables and puts the blame in the right corner. It is Ahab and his fathers who have led Israel into trouble with God. They had forsaken the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals instead. Elijah asks Ahab to meet him at Mt. Carmel with the false prophets who eat at Jezebel's table. The name Carmel means "the park-like," and such it is. Mt. Carmel rises sharply from the Mediterranean in northwest Israel, where the current port city of Haifa is located. There are three peaks with stretch about 12 miles from the sea. Along the base of the mountain flows the river Kishon. This moun-

tain was a high place, where the altars of Baal stood in the shadows of the decayed altars to Yahweh.

Next, Elijah issues a challenge at Carmel. Verse 21:

And 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.” (18:21-22)

Here Elijah asks a very penetrating question of the people. He asks literally, “How long will you limp between divided opinions?” In other words, “How long will you attempt to follow God and Baal both, limping after one or the other like a man with legs of unequal length?” Practically speaking, Elijah is asking how long do they hope to straddle the fence, keeping one foot in two different worlds, leading a double life. The people of Israel were like the politician who was asked, “Are you for or against this issue?” He replied, “Well, some of my friends are for it, and some of my friends are against it. And I’m for my friends.”

We can all ask ourselves this question. The nation of Israel was divided between serving Yahweh and serving the Baals, but as believers in Jesus Christ we still wrestle with the same problem, diluting our service of God by worshipping idols. Our idols may not be named Baal, and they might not be carved from wood, yet we still have plenty of them around. An idol is anything that takes the place of God in our life; anything that replaces God as the primary relationship we have, that substitutes for God as the source of joy, fulfillment and satisfaction.

These idols are easy to spot. They are what we think about constantly; things we dwell on, and worry over; things we cannot live without. Obvious examples are money, possessions, or career. Others are, sports (either as a participant or a spectator), pleasure, vacation, cars, achievements, retirement; a spouse, or the pursuit of a spouse. We can make an idol of our own children if we look to them as the source of our joy and fulfillment. An idol is anything which can take all of our time, energy, and money.

As I thought about this passage, I remembered that the first thing I like to do in the morning as I open my eyes and catch the first glint of sunlight. I think of the morning newspaper lying on the front porch, and in particular the sports section. I like to read the sports page with my coffee in the morning. I become almost irrational when the newspaper boy fails to deliver it. Now I have a new problem: my son has begun reading the sports page, and he gets it first at times.

If you think that our idols are more refined and sophisticated, just think about the New Age phenomenon of worshiping crystals. That isn’t too far removed from the Baals. And neither is all things we wrap with such beautiful wrapping paper. You can make an idol out of anything or anyone in life. There isn’t anything wrong with these things in and of themselves. What is wrong is when they take over the center of our life. What is wrong is when we become obsessed with them and serve them and worship them. It isn’t a sin to possess them, it is a sin when they possess us. Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon” (Matt 6:24). You cannot limp along on divided opinions.

Why do we have idols? I think there are two reasons. As human beings we must worship something. We were created with the capacity and necessity to worship, to serve, to be controlled by things outside of us, even if we worship ourselves. This is simply the way we were created. Secondly, we have such deep-seated desires that we will

do anything, we will serve anything to get what we think we want, whether it is rain or productive crops, or whether it is happiness, peace, joy, acceptance, love. We long for fruitful lives and will serve anything which promises to produce them. Therefore, we have many things competing for our worship.

Next, Elijah issues a challenge to the prophets of Baal. Verse 23:

“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 answered, “That is a good idea.” (18:23-24)

Here it looks like Elijah is playing into the hands of the prophets of Baal. They have the home field advantage. They drastically outnumber Elijah—by 850 to 1. (The 400 prophets of Asherah are not mentioned.) The clincher is that Baal is the fire god. This is why the people answer, “That is a good idea.” The prize in this contest is that the prophets of Baal will be able to say once and for all that Baal is god, the all-powerful god of the universe; or Elijah will be able to declare that Yahweh, the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is God. So begins the World Series of the gods, the battle of the titans: Baal vs. Yahweh.

Elijah even gives the prophets of Baal the first at-bat:

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. And 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 [literally, gone to the bathroom], 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 of them. And it came about when midday was past, that 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. (18:25-29)

The prophets of Baal sought to solicit Baal’s favor by working themselves into a frenzy, going from morning to noon, trying to excite and motivate the gods by their actions. Elijah responds by mocking them. With cutting taunts and bitter irony he now reminds them that, since Baal was god, the fault must lie with them. He might be otherwise engaged, and they must cry louder. Stung to madness, they became more frantic than before, cutting themselves with knives and beating themselves with scourges until the blood gushed out. They continued on until the time of the evening sacrifice, about 3 p.m.

These prophets were very religious people. Their worship was exciting, emotional, and had much appeal, but in the end it profited nothing: “There was no voice, no one answered, and no one paid attention.” They were religious and they were sincere. It just so happens that they were sincerely wrong. When the prophets came to bat, it was no runs, no hits, no errors, no one left on base.

The spiritual principal is this: False gods and idols do not deliver when the pressure is on. You can yell and scream all you want, but they will not deliver what you hoped they would. First Samuel 12:21 says, “And you must not turn aside, for then you would go after futile

things which can not profit or deliver, because they are futile." An idol has no capacity or capability deliver life.

Psalm 115:4 says, "our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases. Their idols are silver and gold, the work of man's hands. They have mouths, but they cannot speak; they have eyes, but they cannot see; they have ears, but they cannot hear; they have noses, but they cannot smell; they have hands, but they cannot feel; they have feet, but they cannot walk; they cannot make a sound with their throat." They look like they have life: they have ears, noses, mouths. But they cannot do anything. You might think that idols hold the key to life, that they can offer grand and glorious results; that the payoff will be tantalizing; but when you scratch off the lottery ticket, there's nothing. When you ask for the next card you go over 21 and you go bust. When you open up door number 2, you wish that you had taken door number 3.

We see this truth in the phenomenon known as "destination sickness." You work so hard to gain a goal or achievement; but if it is an idol, when you finally arrive you are left with an empty feeling in the pit of your stomach because your idol didn't pay off like you thought it would. Following idols is stupid. Worshiping idols is stupid. They just cannot deliver on anything.

Now it's Elijah's turn at the plate.

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. 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." 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. And the water flowed around the altar, and he also filled the trench with water. (18:30-35)

What a contrast with the actions of the prophets of Baal! Elijah goes about his work calmly and prayerfully. Twice he makes reference to the twelve tribes of Israel, once with the stones, and then with the four pitchers of water being poured on three times. By his actions he points the people back to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of their history. Then he pours on the water until the trench is filled, making clear that there will be no trickery involved.

Next, Elijah prays to his God. Verse 36:

Then it came about at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that Elijah the prophet came near and said, "O LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, today let it be known that Thou art God in Israel, and that I am Thy servant, and that I have done all these things at Thy word. Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that Thou, O LORD, are God, and that Thou hast turned their heart back again." (18:36-37)

Notice again the contrast here. Elijah's prayer is a calm, and direct. He is simply talking to God. He knows that nothing he does will manipulate the action of God; that God will act on the basis of grace and not merit.

And Goes does answer his prophet. Verse 38:

Then 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. (18:38)

The lightning bolt flashed and ignited the sacrifice, consuming everything, as if the water poured over the altar were kerosene. Elijah must have heard the voice in *Field of Dreams*: "If you build it, he will come," for that is certainly what happened. It's interesting that God started the temple fire for burnt offering, as is the case here. Fire is a symbol of God's presence and also a symbol of his judgment on sin.

What happens as a result of this confrontation on the top of Mt. Carmel? Verse 39 gives the people's response to this demonstration by the God of Israel:

And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, "The LORD, He is God; the LORD, He is God." (18:39)

The people turn back to God. David Roper has written, "It doesn't matter how many steps you take away from God, it is only one step back." They declare with boldness, "The Lord, He is God; Yahweh, not Baal is Elohim, the One who controls the universe."

Next, we see in verse 40 that the false prophets are dealt with:

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. (18:40)

There was no joy in Baalville that day! The mighty prophets of Baal had struck out. The people here are fulfilling the Old Testament command to destroy false prophets. Now we are not called to do this today, but the reality for us is to be ruthless and cut out the cancer of idolatry which has infected our life. God's call is to purity and to holiness, and this cannot coexist with idolatry.

Finally, once the idols have been dealt with, God sends the rain. Verse 41:

Now Elijah said to Ahab, "Go up, eat and drink; for there is the sound of the roar of a heavy shower." So Ahab went up to eat and drink. But Elijah went up to the top of Carmel; and he crouched down on the earth, and put his face between his knees. And he said to his servant, "Go up now, look toward the sea." So he went up and looked and said, "There is nothing." And he said, "Go back" seven times. And it came about at the seventh time, that he said, "Behold, a cloud as small as a man's hand is coming up from the sea." And he said, "Go up, say to Ahab, 'Prepare your chariot and go down, so that the heavy shower does not stop you.' So it came about in a little while, that the sky grew black with clouds and wind, and there was a heavy shower. And Ahab rode and went to Jezreel. (18:41-45)

Jeremiah 14:22 says, "Are there any among the idols of the nations who give rain? or can the heavens grant showers? Therefore we hope in Thee, for Thou art the one who hast done all these things." The rain represents what happens when our relationship with the Lord is restored and reestablished: We experience renewal and refreshment. In the Scriptures, the Spirit and his provision are often characterized by rain. When the people worshiped Baal, there was no life; their hearts were barren and dry. But when they turned to Yahweh, to worship him as their God, the one and only God, then life came as a gift, and their life could be fruitful and productive once again.

The spiritual principle here is this: It is the God of Israel alone who can give us fruitful lives and no one else. Why waste our time with idols which cannot satisfy?

There are many things to consider in this passage, but I would like us to ask ourselves two questions. First, are we willing to take on the idols in our own lives and tear down the altars on the high place? How long are going to limp around, trying to follow God and serving idols at the same time? A week? A month? A year? Five years? When we retire? When we have made our first million? Have you have said to yourself, as I have, "When I get what I want for myself, then I

will follow God with both feet and with a whole heart? When I get comfortable, then I will turn over control to God in every area of my life. Are we willing, like Elijah, to be ruthless and to destroy the idols in our life? This is a very difficult question. We can all sit here, myself included, and very easily assent to the fact that the Lord is God. But it is something else entirely for him to be the only God we trust.

In order to do that, we may have to take some drastic measures. We may have to take the idol down to the river Kishon and slay it. It may mean changing jobs. We might have to stop shopping at certain stores. We may have to give up reading certain magazines or books. Certain television programs may have to go. Television is a physical idol that is too dominant in many of our thoughts and use of time. It might mean that instead of taking a vacation strictly for pleasure we embark on a ministry experience, a service trip where we are forced to give up thinking about ourselves.

Chad Walsh writes in *Early Christians of the 21st Century*:

Millions of Christians live in a sentimental haze of vague piety, with soft organ music trembling in the lovely light from stained-glass windows. Their religion is a pleasant thing of emotional quivers, divorced from the will, divorced from the intellect and demanding little except lip service to a few harmless platitudes. I suspect that Satan has called off his attempt to convert people to agnosticism. After all, if a man travels far enough away from Christianity, he is liable to see it in perspective and decide that it is true. It is much safer, from Satan's point of view, to vaccinate a man with a mild case of Christianity so as to protect him from the real disease.

At the end of his letter, the apostle John warns, "Little children, guard yourselves from idols." Matthew writes, "You can't serve two masters...for this reason do not be anxious for your life, as to what you shall eat, or what you shall drink; nor for your body, as to what you shall put on...Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you." If we have divided hearts, we cannot be godly people. The Lord is God and he wants to be the only God in our life. The promise is that if we do turn to him, the one and only God, if we trust in him only rather than limping between different idols, then our lives will become fertile and productive again. The rain will come once more to soak our barren lives.

Here is my second question: Are we willing to engage in the contest and make known through our lives that Yahweh is God? Elijah was commissioned by God to bring people back to their devotion to God; to instill in them once again the fear of the Lord; to direct their attention and their worship back to him. As believers, we need to enter into this same ministry—to engage our lives into this contest, to go after this kind of victory. It is very easy for us to be engaged in the wrong battles, and to represent the wrong team. As a result of our involvement in people's lives, they should say, "Yahweh is God; Jesus is Lord." We live in a society where it is easy to get distracted, where we get so busy worrying about other things that we lose sight of a ministry which proclaims the primacy of God.

Now it is easy for us at this point to get all fired and think about what we can do for the cause of Christ and what kind of a stand we can make. We think about joining an organization or contributing to a ministry, and then quickly our excitement fades and we fall back into a passive involvement, into mediocrity. We simply alleviate our guilt until time allows the scabs to heal over or until we become distracted by some other issue in our life.

I don't want us to think of passage in terms of organizations and programs. Rather, I want us to think in terms of personal involvement. Elijah is one person who is trained by God, instructed by God, and obedient to God. He is one person who stands in the breach and dramatically affects the lives of others. He is a man who is willing to swim upstream against the tides of popular opinion, to risk in order that people might proclaim Yahweh as God. Many of you are thinking, "I'm not Elijah. I couldn't do anything like that." But James says that Elijah was a man just like us; his nature was just like ours. In other words, we can do what he did. Elijah was an ordinary man who lived an extraordinary life.

God is still looking for one man, one woman, who will become a personal representative for him. It isn't convenient or comfortable, but then it wasn't for Elijah either in ancient Israel ruled by Ahab and Jezebel. The issue is not what can we do, it is what God can do. Howard Hendricks said, "One plus God constitutes a distinct majority."

This is our ministry as well, to be men and women who have a "Yahweh is God" ministry. The place where this ministry can take effect is in our neighborhoods, at our jobs, on the PTA committees, at the baseball games. We can be involved with people wherever we go. This account of Elijah and the prophets of Baal calls us to be engaged in this contest rather than sitting on the bench or playing the wrong game. It calls us to make sure people understand that we represent the living God who loves and redeems and saves us, rather than idols which can never offer life.

A few years ago when I was working as an engineer, a project I was involved in was enmeshed with a lot of problems. There were bad attitudes, negative comments, and much finger pointing. One evening I sat down and wrote a memo setting out what I would say to the project team if I had the opportunity. I titled the memo "Encouragement." I wrote about attitudes, and about work and its place in God's plan. A fellow worker who was also a Christian read what I had written and said, "This is great. I'll type it up and pass it around." "You will not!" I said.

Next morning she passed around the memo to everyone involved in the project. I was shaking in my boots, waiting for the repercussions. But the response was very different than I had imagined. People who were Christians came to me and shared about our common faith in Jesus Christ. Others wrote me notes saying, "This is a good word. We needed this." Even the project manager thanked me. I was astonished at the response. From that day forward I was never the same at work. I had a "Yahweh is God" ministry. When I arrived at work each day, there was no way I could limp between two divided opinions because everybody knew that I stood for Jesus Christ. I no longer could bring my idols with me; here was too much at stake. From that time on every day at work was exciting. Every day was an adventure. Every day seemed like that day when Elijah confronted the false prophets on Mt. Carmel.

When we are willing to be Elijahs, then we can stand on this victory stand, this mountain of victory. We know that we have decided to trust only in the Lord. We know that we have engaged ourselves in the right contest. We know that we have represented the right team. We know that we have not sought glory for ourselves, but for the Lord, the one who is God.

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