

Heroes of the Faith

Elijah and the Prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:1-2, 17-40)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on August 23, 2015

Introduction

- ❖ This month we began a new sermon series. A brief one called “Heroes of the Faith”. We’ve been looking at OT heroes and their stories. We’ve considered Joseph and Daniel; today we’re covering Elijah; and next week is Elisha. They’re all well known heroes in the Bible.
 - ▶ A number of you have mentioned how excited you are that we’re doing a series on OT heroes. I’m excited too. But I’m also weary. Because any time you teach on a biblical hero you always run the risk of moralizing the Scriptures.
 - **There are many sermons and Sunday School lessons on OT characters that end up promoting nothing more than good behavior.** That’s moralism. They focus on *what we have to do* as Christians and ignore (or just assume we all know) *what Christ has already done* for us in his life, death, and resurrection.
- ❖ They’re what Bryan Chapell, in his book *Christ-Centered Preaching*, calls one of the deadly Be’s in preaching and teaching¹. In our case, we’re talking about a **“Be Like” message** where listeners are exhorted to “be like” a hero in Scripture. Be like David and confidently face your personal Goliaths! Be like Moses and wait on God in the wilderness because he’s preparing you for a mighty deed!
 - ▶ You could argue that there’s nothing wrong with that since they’re biblical messages. They’re biblically based. They promote godly behavior. And they might even point to Jesus as the best Example of this behavior.
 - **But they’re not biblically completely messages until they point to Jesus as – not just our Example – but our Savior and Sanctifier.** Who atoned for our disobedience and who, by his Spirit, enables and empowers our obedience. That’s what has to be emphasized in every sermon.
- ❖ We’re legalists by nature. So we’ll easily take a “Be Like” message and try to conform our outward behavior to match that OT hero while our hearts remain untouched. But if we want real life transformation, then we must go further and study this OT hero and his/her story in the context of the Bible’s grand story and its greatest Hero.
 - ▶ That means more than seeing Jesus as another example, even the best of examples, to imitate. **It means seeing Jesus as the point of the whole story of Scripture, as the Hero of the Bible to which all these OT heroes simply point and foreshadow.**
 - Jesus expects more than our imitation. He requires our trust and obedience, our love and gratitude. He must be exalted as more than our Example but as our God who is worthy to be praised.
- ❖ I think about it this way: ***If I’m to preach on a hero from the Old Testament, then have I prepared my sermon in such a way that it would be considered blasphemous if preached in a Jewish synagogue?*** If I can preach my message on Elijah to orthodox Jews who revere the same OT and same biblical hero, and if they walk out of the room shaking my hand thanking me for the powerful message, then I have utterly failed as a Christian preacher. I would have dishonored my Lord.

¹ Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching, 2nd ed*, 289-295. The other deadly Be’s include “be good” and “be disciplined” messages.

- ❖ My job as a Christian preacher is to preach Christian sermons where, in the end, the Christ of Scripture is exalted. Where he gets the spotlight and takes center place. God help me to do that for you this morning!
- ❖ So here's my plan. Today we're going to be looking at **Elijah** and the best known event in his life – **his confrontation with the prophets of Baal**. This happens 800-900 years before Christ, in the north when the kingdom was split in two. The king of Israel was Ahab (a wicked king) and his queen was Jezebel (even more wicked). **Together the king and queen were on a campaign to make Israel religiously pluralistic**. To maintain the worship of Yahweh but also to spread and establish Canaanite religion and the worship of Baal, the Canaanite storm god, the god of thunder and rain.
 - ▶ In response, Yahweh (the LORD God) sends his prophet Elijah to Ahab to say, "The Lord is shutting up the sky. He's sending a drought. There won't be a drop of dew or rain until I say so." (17:1) **Do you see what God is doing? He's humiliating this so-called storm god, this great god of rain that you call Baal**. The LORD God is exposing the falseness of these false gods, these idols. Everything comes to a head in chapter 18.
 - After three years of drought, Elijah is instructed to contact Ahab and set up a final confrontation. They're to meet on top of Mt. Carmel. Ahab is to bring the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah, the consort of Baal. And with all of Israel as witnesses, there's going to be a showdown. A winner-take-all final battle.
- ❖ It's definitely an exciting and memorable story in Scripture. But more so, it's a relevant and applicable story for us today. We live in a society that has witnessed radical changes over the last half century where before you only had the option of one or two religions, but now in cities we're surrounded by a plurality of faiths, a plurality of gods, a plurality of options.
 - ▶ When you talk with non-believers, you're not just dealing with the issue of whether or not you should believe in God. **The question people are asking now is, "Which god?" Which god are you saying I should believe in? And why limit myself to just one when there are so many options out there?"**
 - Do you see how our passage is addressing the very questions people are asking today? I've divided it up into three points based on three things I see Elijah doing in our passage. I see him 1) Challenging syncretism, 2) Confronting idolatry, and 3) Calling on the One True God.

Challenging Syncretism

- ❖ The first thing we see Elijah doing is challenging syncretism. **What's syncretism?** It's the picking and choosing of different beliefs and practices from different religions and incorporating them into your own religious beliefs and practices.
 - ▶ It's a very open stance towards other religions that follows on the heels of **pluralism**. If you live in a society that breathes the air of pluralism – the idea that all religions essentially teach the same thing and offer the same societal good – then you're free to borrow from any religion any belief or practice that inspires you. That's syncretism.

- ❖ That's what the Israelites were doing in Elijah's day. They weren't rejecting their Judaism. They didn't abandon the worship of Yahweh. They just incorporated the worship of Baal. **They didn't want to limit themselves to just one god, one belief system.** As members of an agrarian society, you can see the strong appeal of currying the favor of a storm god. If you want fertile land and good crops in season, then it's extremely helpful to be on the good side of a rain god.
 - ▶ But the first thing Elijah does is challenge this syncretic approach to religion. Look at v21, *“And Elijah came near to all the people and said, “How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.” And the people did not answer him a word.”*

- ❖ Now what's Elijah saying? He's saying: You think you have a solid system down where you sacrifice to Yahweh every Sabbath, and then you start off your work week with a sacrifice to Baal praying for rain. You think you've got firm solution, but really you're limp. You're limping. You're hobbling.
 - ▶ **You don't have a solid foot in either religion.** You're hobbling back and forth between two different systems of belief. Choose one. Either follow Yahweh or Baal.

- ❖ But we read that the people respond with silence. Some of them were probably thinking what some of you are thinking. ***Why do I have to choose? Why can't I believe a bit of both?*** I think that's what the average person in Elijah's day would've said. I appreciate *this* about Yahweh worship and I appreciate *that* about Baal worship. Why are you making me choose?
 - ▶ That's just like how we think. **In our day, the average person doesn't want to have to choose between religions.** They'll say I'm open to all of them. I'm not so close-minded as to claim to have a monopoly on the truth. They're all good. They all have something to offer. Why do we have to choose?
 - But Elijah says: That's actually the worst position to be in. You're not neutral. You don't have a solid footing. You're limping. You're about to fall, and it's not going to be pretty. This is not a stable position to be in.

- ❖ Let me explain why. **First off, it's logically incoherent.** It sounds charitable to say that all religions are valid because they're essentially teaching the same thing. That they all boil down to loving others and being true to one's self. **But you can only hold this claim if you flat-out ignore what these religions actually teach.** The doctrinal differences between the major world religions are not superficial. They differ at the fundamentals.
 - ▶ Buddhism does not believe in a personal God. Hinduism believes in many gods. But Christianity, Judaism, and Islam believe in only one personal God. How can they all be correct? The math doesn't work.
 - How can the road that says there is no after life, and the road that says you are reincarnated, and the road that says you die once and face judgment all lead to the same place? They logically cannot.

- ❖ **Second, this position is not only logically incoherent but it's not even consistent with your own belief system.** What I mean is that even if you want to say that all faith are valid, you don't really mean that. Think about it: *Would you call a religion that demands the sacrifice of young virgins a valid way to God?* What about a religion that requires its followers to sell all their possessions and move out to a desert compound stockpiling guns and ammunition?
 - ▶ **So when you say that all ways are equally valid, what you really mean is that all ways (that you consider reasonable and respectable) are equally valid.** You're not referring to all the kooky cults that have strange beliefs and promote practices you find reprehensible. So no one is as tolerant as they claim to be. The truth is that all of us discriminate between religions and everyone excludes to some degree.

- ❖ **And lastly, the reason why a pluralistic, syncretic position towards religion is inherently unstable is because it's self-defeating.** Just think about the popular claim that all religions are just different paths up the same mountain. The reason why we disagree and dispute over which is the right path is because we're still near the bottom of the mountain. By the time you get up to the top you'll discover that all the various paths ultimately lead to the same place.
 - ▶ But think about it: **The only way you can make this assertion about all religions is if you think you're above everyone else – only if you've made it to the top of the mountain.** So here you are on top of the mountain looking down on all these religious people bickering about whose god is the true god, and only you can see that they're being so close-minded to think they have a monopoly on the truth. But isn't that what you're claiming to possess?
 - Not only are you holding to a self-defeating position, it's actually a pretty arrogant position. It's a claim to have already made it to the top where you realize that all paths lead to one.

- ❖ Do you see how unstable of a position this is? You can't go on for long limping between two opinions, between two religions. You'll eventually have to choose. There's no position of neutrality. **If you're a syncretist who mishmashes two or more religions together, you're really just forming your own religion where you're the Creator.** You're the Judge over good and evil. You're the Final Authority and Arbiter of truth. See, in actuality, you've already made a choice.
 - ▶ Friends, you can't go on limping between two opinions. You have to choose this day whom you will serve (cf. Josh. 24:15).

Confronting Idolatry

- ❖ I know what some of you are thinking. You're thinking, "*Fine, then I choose no religion. I choose not to believe in God. I'll take secularism. After all, I'm just not a religious person.*"
 - ▶ Oh but here is where our passage is going to confront you. You claim no religious beliefs, but according to this passage, that's not really true. **You may not worship the LORD God but you certainly worship something.** The biblical term for that is idolatry. That's what Elijah is confronting. He's confronting our idolatry.

- ❖ Let me show you what I mean by continuing with our story. Starting in v22, Elijah lays out the rules of this contest, and he purposely stacks the odds against himself. He gives the prophets of Baal every advantage. He says let's take two bulls, and you get to choose which one is yours. Then I'll let you go first to build an altar, sacrifice the bull, lay it on the wood, but then don't set it on fire. Then call on the name of your god to bring the fire. I'll do the exact same with the bull you leave me. *"And the God who answers by fire, he is God."* (v24). He probably was referring to a lightning bolt. Let's see who's the real God of the storm.
 - ▶ In v26, the prophets of Baal take the bull, lay it out on the altar, and wait. It says they *"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 limped around the altar that they had made."

- ❖ At noon we're told that Elijah begins mocking them. Speak up! Cry out louder! Maybe Baal is deep in thought. Maybe he's relieving himself (yes, that's ancient potty humor). Maybe he's on a journey. Maybe he's asleep and needs to be awoken.
 - ▶ That mention of Baal on a journey or asleep is actually significant. According to Canaanite mythology, once a year (during dry season) Baal would succumb to Death (Mot, that is, the god of death) and travel to the underworld before reappearing again at the start of the rainy season. **Elijah is not just teasing them but demonstrating the impotence of their rain god if even he has to succumb to the god of death every year.**
 - So what do the prophets of Baal do? It says in v28, *"They cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them."* Wow that's intense. That's a strange ancient custom. Or is it?

- ❖ **What's interesting to note is that the term *baal* is actually a generic name for any god** (cf. Judg. 2:11). In the OT, you'll come across Baal-peor, a Moabite god (cf. Num. 25:3) or Baal-zebub, a Philistine god (cf. 2 Kg. 2:2). Depending on the context, it could also be translated as husband (Exod. 14:22) or master (Exod. 14:28).
 - ▶ So a *baal* is a spiritual master. Something or someone that has power or control over you. And since it's a generic term, that means anything that has power or control over you is a *baal*. Do you see what this means?

- ❖ **You might claim to be non-religious, but the Bible is saying you have a *baal* in your life.** There's something you're making sacrifices to. There's something in your life that you'll shed blood to obtain or retain. You may call it career or academic excellence. The ancients called it *baal*. You call it romance, marriage, or kids. But they can all be *baals*. Maybe it's money or power or beauty or youth. **If it has a power or control over you – a spiritual authority that you look to for meaning or significance in life – then it's turned into a *baal*.**
 - ▶ Thoroughly modern people don't like to be told they're actually religious. That they're actually into *baal* worship. But that's what the Bible teaches. Everybody worships something. So the question is not: Do you worship a *baal*, a master? The question is: **What kind of *baal*, what kind of master, are you worshipping?**
 - And the point is if your *baal* is not the One True God – if it's of this world, if it's an idol – then you've got yourself a master that's impossible to please.

- ❖ Just look back at the text. Remember how the prophets of Baal are limping around the altar and slashing themselves with their swords? It sounds like some ritualistic dance. But don't you see? **These are not worshippers dancing around the altar out of ecstatic joy. These are worshippers performing for their baal.** If they want their *baal* to pay attention and answer their prayers, then they'll have to perform. They'll have to hit all the right steps. So they start dancing for their *baal*. But no answer. So they start cutting. The worshipper has to bleed if he wants his *baal's* attention.
 - ▶ But v29 says there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention. But that's what you can expect from *baal* worship. Idols are cruel masters. They're never satisfied. They demand you to sacrifice more. Perform better. They're impossible to please.
- ❖ If getting into **med school** is your *baal* or if it's being accepted into that **prestigious program** or getting that **promotion**, that coveted position – if that's your *baal*, if you're hoping it will answer your prayers and give you the **significance, status, or security** that you've been craving, then you'll be perpetually dancing and performing, trying to hit the right steps. You'll resort to sacrificing friends and family and even hurting yourself, slashing yourself, working yourself to the bone.
 - ▶ All for what? Just like those prophets of Baal, you won't hear a voice. No one will answer. No one will pay attention. **Idols can't give you what you're seeking. They can't please you because they themselves are impossible to please.** They're never satisfied so there is no way they can satisfy you. So give up your idols. They are cruel masters.
- ❖ I realize most of you here are Christians. I hope you haven't been sitting here thinking that so far I've only been addressing the non-Christians in the room. You do realize I'm talking to you as well, right?
 - ▶ Let's get over this idea that some of us are neutral. That some of us don't identify with the characters in this story. No, we're all here. Either we acknowledge we're full on into *baal* worship like these 450 prophets. Or we recognize that we're like the people of Israel limping between our devotion to the LORD God and our personals *baals*.

Calling on the One True God

- ❖ Until we recognize and repent of our idolatry, our *baal* worship, we're not ready to call upon and receive the One True God. That's why Elijah let's them go first, so everyone can see for themselves how futile and foolish it is to trust in any *baal* to answer our prayers.
 - ▶ Turn back to our story, and let's see what happens when Elijah steps to the plate. He tells all the people to come near, and he rebuilds the altar of Yahweh. He sets up the twelve stones representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Then he digs a trench around the altar and lays out the wood and the bull. Then he asks for four large jars full of water to be poured over everything. And to do it three times, twelve jars full of water drenching it all. It says the water ran around the altar and filled the trench also with water (v35).
- ❖ Now read what happens starting in v37. Elijah prays, *“³⁷Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.”* 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.* ³⁹*And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, “The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God.”*

- ❖ This was huge. **This was one of those special moments in redemptive history where God rolls up his sleeves, outstretches his arm, and demonstrates his sovereign power.** He vindicates his Godness over all the false gods of the nations. It's up there with the Exodus. The Israelites never forgot this moment. They passed this story down from generation to generation.
 - ▶ In fact, there's this place in Luke's Gospel where Jesus and his disciples entered a Samaritan village but the townsfolk were inhospitable. This is found in **Luke 9:51-56**. The disciples are pretty upset, so they turn to Jesus and ask, "*Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?*" (some manuscripts add "*as Elijah did*") They had 1 Kings 18 in mind. Let's ask God to send down fire, to strike them.
 - But Jesus rebukes them because they don't get the point of Elijah's story. The point is not: God is going to send fire down upon his enemies. No, the fire fell on the altar, on the sacrifice. **And as we said in the beginning, the main point of Elijah's story, as with any OT story, is to ultimately point to Jesus.**
- ❖ A few chapters after the disciples ask to call down fire on their enemies, Jesus says in **Luke 12:49** that he did come to earth to send down fire. But he's going to surprise us. He says, "*⁴⁹I came to cast fire on earth, and would that it were already kindled! ⁵⁰I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!*"
 - ▶ Do you see what Jesus is saying? He's talking about his impending death. He describes it as a baptism by fire. Do you get what he's saying? **Fire will come down from heaven – but not on my enemies – on me.** "I'm that sacrifice laid out on the altar of God. When I go to the cross, I'll carry your sins with me so that the fire of God's holy wrath aimed at your sins will come down on me and consume me." **What happens on Mt. Calvary will be *the* moment in redemptive history that surpasses all events, even what happened on Mt. Carmel.**
- ❖ Unlike Baal who was forced to succumb to Death once a year, Jesus willingly gave up his life to death once and for all (cf. Heb. 9:26). No *baal* is going to willingly do that for you. Instead they'll demand for you to perform, to dance, to slash yourself. But Jesus is so much better. **Jesus is the one and only master who sheds his blood for the sake of his followers. The one and only God who gets slashed for the sake of his worshippers.**
- ❖ If you're searching for the One True God or if you're trying to put off the idols in your life and wholly devote yourself to the LORD God – then you have to look to Jesus who freely gives himself to you, who actually pays attention when you cry out to him, who answers your prayers.
 - ▶ **Every other so-called god, every other *baal* will demand you to perform, you to sacrifice, you to shed your blood. But not Jesus.** Jesus says, "I perform for your sake. My blood is shed for your sake." Jesus is different. Jesus stands alone. Because he alone is God.
- ❖ When the Israelites saw the fire come down on Carmel, they fell on their faces and worshipped. "Yahweh, he is God. Yahweh, he is God." Church, let's turn our eyes to the fire that came down on Calvary, and let's fall on our faces to worship Jesus – because he is God.