

Heroes of the Faith

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

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on August 8, 2021

Introduction

- ❖ **I think it's fair to say that many of us deal with indecisiveness.** Every day we're faced with a bevy of choices. What to wear; what to eat; what to watch; who to spend time with and what to do together. Many of us have much trouble deciding. Wavering back and forth. Sometimes paralyzed by indecision. And those are the easy choices with little consequence.
 - We're not even talking about the big decisions in life. About what school to apply to; or degree to pursue; or job to take; or who to date or whether you two should get married. Then there are those difficult decisions you make on behalf of others – what school you should send your kids to or should you homeschool; or what should you do with aging parents who need more care than you or your siblings can provide. I'm not surprised if you're dealing with indecisiveness. There are many competing choices, many different opinions pulling you one way or another.

- ❖ It benefits to ask why we have a hard time deciding. **What's behind our indecisiveness?** It's probably multifaceted. There are many reasons why we hesitate to decide. **But probably chief among them is fear.** Fear of making a decision that we'll regret. Fear of choosing the lesser option. Fear of missing out on the benefits of the option we didn't choose. So we rationalize our tendency to push off a decision, to delay.
 - **And, of course, this indecisiveness creeps into our spiritual lives and the choices we make about spiritual realities that carry with them eternal consequences.** Some of you are still seeking, still asking the big questions, still not ready to decide whether you're going to trust God. You see good reasons to believe, which is why you're even here in church. But you don't feel ready, so you're pushing off a decision.
 - There are also those of you here who have grown up in church (or you're a kid currently growing up in church). You believe in God. That's not the issue. But if you're honest, you'd admit that God is not the priority in life. Your attention and allegiance are drawn away by lesser gods. By your academics or your work; by a relationship or your family; by entertainment or games. You're wavering in your commitment to the LORD.

- ❖ The same question that Elijah posed to the Israelites could we asked of us today: *How long will you go limping between two different opinions?* (18:21) How much longer will you continue hesitating, pushing off a decision? When will you decide if you're going to believe in God or not? How long will you waver your attention and allegiance between God and lesser gods? **When will you decide if you're going to give your life wholly over to the Lord?** I hope that the answer is today. That today will be the day you choose to follow the Lord God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

- ❖ This is why we're looking at 1 Kings 18 and the best known event in the life of Elijah – his confrontation with the prophets of Baal. We're in a series called Heroes of the Faith where we're trying to learn from the high point of their stories. **I think Elijah has a lot to teach those of us today who are vacillating between different loves and allegiances – limping between two different opinions.** My prayer is that today will be the day you decide.

- ❖ I've divided this message into three sections based on three things I see Elijah doing in our passage. I see him 1) Challenging our indecisiveness, 2) Confronting our idols, and 3) Calling on the incomparable God.

Challenging our Indecisiveness

- ❖ **Let's begin with Elijah challenging our indecisiveness.** Our limping between two different opinions. But before we dive into the story, let's consider the context of this confrontation between the prophet of Yahweh and the prophets of Baal.
 - The events of our story happened 800-900 years before Christ, in the northern kingdom during the time when the nation of Israel was split in two. The king of the north was Ahab (a wicked king) and his queen was Jezebel (even more wicked). **Together, they 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 sends 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 the LORD is doing? He's humiliating this so-called storm god – this great god of rain known as Baal.** The LORD God is exposing the frailty and futility of these false gods, these idols. And 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 Mount 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.
 - Listen to vv20-21, "²⁰So Ahab sent to all the people of Israel and gathered the prophets together at Mount Carmel. ²¹And 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."
- ❖ **Elijah is challenging Israel's indecisiveness.** When it came to religion, they were trying to play both sides, to hedge their bets. They weren't outright 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 those who lived in an ancient, agrarian society, there was a strong appeal to any religious practice that curries 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.
- ❖ **So they refused to make a decision between Yahweh or Baal.** They feared making a decision they would regret. That they'd miss out on the benefits of a storm god on their side (if they chose Yahweh) or they'd miss out of the covenant promises made to their forefathers (if they chose Baal). So they pushed off a decision and kept trying to follow both.

- ❖ Elijah considers that a weak excuse. 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 a firm, solid 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 the people responded with silence. Look at the end of v21, "*And the people did not answer him a word.*"
 - They were thinking what some of you are probably 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 to think that one religion is better than the rest. 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 don't have a solid footing on either side. 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.

- ❖ For those of you who have yet to make a decision about the God of the Bible, I hope you see how precarious of a position you're in. I know you prefer *not* to take sides. You want to remain neutral. But there is no position of neutrality when it comes to God.
 - **If you're dabbling here and there with religion – not identifying with one or the other – you've actually rejected them all and formed 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. In actuality, you've already made a choice. **You've already taken a side. You're on your own side – in opposition to the God of the Bible.**

- ❖ **Friend, if you don't come to a decision now, then one day a decision will be made for you.** There will come a day when a decision will be made at the judgment seat of God. And you won't like the outcome. Don't assume that judgment will only befall those who are stridently anti-God – the aggressive atheist or the brazen blasphemer.
 - **There will be many pleasant, open-minded, tolerant individuals who will face judgment because they refused to choose.** They limped all their life between two opinions. It's a tragedy. Look, for me, as a person of faith, I would definitely prefer you over the aggressive atheist. Given a choice, I would pick you for your open-minded, tolerant stance and attitude. But I'm not the Judge. It's not my choice that should concern you.
 - **It's the Judge of all the earth that you need to worry about.** And your vacillation, your limping between opinions, won't earn you any credit or excuses on the day of judgment. Choose this day whom you will serve.

Confronting our Idolatry

- ❖ So the first thing we see Elijah do in this story is that he challenges our indecisiveness. **Next, we see him confronting our idolatry.** I was just speaking to those who wouldn't consider themselves Christians or an adherent to any other faith. Those who are still on the fence.
 - **But now I want to speak to those of you who are comfortable calling yourselves Christians.** You might feel relieved and excused from the bite of this text because you already decided. Whether recently or years (maybe decades) ago, you already chose the LORD God. So you don't see yourself as limping between opinions.

- ❖ But don't brush aside this passage. **You may have chosen the LORD and are perfectly comfortable on his side – but is your heart wholly dedicated to him?** Granted, you're not drawn to worship any other god or follow any other religion. You're a Christian, and you're unashamed about that. Your lips only confess Jesus as God. **But is it possible that your heart is still vacillating and limping between Jesus and lesser gods?** The Bible would call them idols. And 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 don't set it on fire yet. Instead, call on the name of your god to bring the fire. And I'll do the exact same with the other bull. *“And the God who answers by fire, he is God.”* (v24). He might have been referring to a lightning bolt. Let's see who's the real God of the storm.
 - So in v26, the prophets of Baal take their bull, lay it out on the altar, and they 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 (that's ancient potty humor). Maybe he's on a journey. Maybe he's asleep and needs to be awoken.
 - Now that mention of Baal on a journey is significant. Because according to Canaanite mythology, once a year (during dry season) Baal would succumb to Death (Mot the god of death) and travel to the underworld before reappearing again at the start of the rainy season. So Elijah is not just teasing them. **He's exposing the impotence of their rain god.** He's reminding them that even Baal 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. **No one today would hurt themselves in a futile attempt to satisfy unappeasable idols, right?** Well, I don't know.

- ❖ **What's interesting to note is that the term *baal* is actually a generic name for any god** (Judg 2:11). Depending on the context, *baal* could also be translated as master (Ex 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?
- ❖ **It means everyone has a *baal* in their life.** There's something in your life that you're making sacrifices to. There's something that you'll shed blood to obtain or retain – to get or keep. You might call it a successful career or academic excellence. The ancients called it *baal*. You call it romance, marriage, or kids. But they would've been called *baals*.
 - Maybe your *baal* is money or power or beauty or youth. **If it has a power or control over you – a spiritual authority that you look to and depend on for meaning or significance in life – then whatever it is, it's turned into a *baal*.**
- ❖ I realize, that for modern people like us, it sounds strange to be told you're involved in something so primitive sounding as *baal* worship. But that's what the Bible is saying. 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 a lesser god 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 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. **Apparently, 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.*” It's tragic. But that's what you can expect when you serve an idol. **Idols make cruel masters. They're never satisfied.** They demand you to sacrifice more. Perform better. Work harder. They're impossible to please.
- ❖ Friends, think about yourself and who or what you're serving. If getting into **med school or law school** is your *baal* or if it's being accepted into that **prestigious program**, if that's your *baal*, if you're hoping it will 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 eventually resort to sacrificing friends and family and even hurting yourself (slashing yourself) working yourself to the bone. But just like those prophets of Baal, you won't hear a voice of affirmation. No one will answer. No one will pay attention.

- ❖ If chasing that **dream job** has become your *baal* – if career advancement or recognition has become your obsession – **if you were expecting your job to give you a reason to get out of bed every morning, to provide meaning and purpose in life, then you're asking your job to play god.** You're expecting your career to define you.
 - But your job is a cruel master. It'll call you to sacrifice your health, your marriage, your family to meet its insatiable demands. No matter how many goals you achieve, you'll keep asking, "What next?" There's always another promotion to receive, another rung of the ladder to climb. You'll never finally "make it" because every time you get to the top, you realize there's another ladder – a taller one – to climb. **Your career makes for a pitiful god because it'll always leave you dissatisfied.**

- ❖ Now maybe your career hasn't risen to a god-like status for you, but maybe **relationships** have. Your life is centered around human relationships – the **person you're dating**, your **spouse**, or your **children**. You don't just care for them. You don't just love them. You need them. You need their approval, their affirmation, their love or otherwise you feel angry, jealous, empty, or worthless. That's how you know your loved one has become a *baal*.
 - Not only are you setting yourself up for disappointment and frustration in that relationship – you're being unfair and cruel. **You're forcing that person to carry the weight of godhood.** You're expecting them to give you what only God can provide. Doing that is going to crush them. You could very well lose that relationship. Fellow human beings were never meant to be your *baal*.

- ❖ Last week, when we looked at David and Goliath, we talked about how it's easy to misidentify yourself in the story and assume you're David courageously facing down the giants in your life. When really you're one of the scared Israelites whose only hope is in a champion who is willing to fight for you.
 - **Well, in the same way, let's be careful not to quickly assume we're Elijah in this story.** That we're the ones God is relying on to confront all those idolators in the world. No, my friends, we're either one of the 450 prophets of Baal who outright reject the God of the Bible. Or we're one of the Israelites weakly limping between our devotion to the LORD God and our personals *baals*.

Calling on the Incomparable God

- ❖ Friends, it's not until we recognize and repent of our idolatry, will we ever be ready to call upon the One True God. That's the last thing we see Elijah doing – **he calls on the incomparable God.** I think Elijah lets the prophets go first because he wants everyone to see for themselves how futile and foolish it is to trust in any earthly *baal* to answer our prayers. He's hoping that will lead them to repentance and prompt them to call on the LORD.

- ❖ 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 look with me at v37. Elijah prays, “³⁷*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.*” 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 is 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 God-ness over all the false gods of the nations. It’s up there with the Exodus. The Israelites never forgot this moment. The memory of it was passed 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*”) That means they had 1 Kings 18 in mind. They were thinking, “Let’s ask God to send down some fire like Elijah did on Mount Carmel.”
 - **But Jesus rebukes them because they don’t get the point of Elijah’s story.** The point is *not*: Rest assured, God will send down fire upon your enemies. No, the fire fell on the altar and the sacrifice. Not the prophets of Baal.

- ❖ You see, like us, the disciples misidentified themselves with Elijah in the story. **Because the one more comparable to Elijah is Christ.** In fact, a few chapter later in the Gospel of Luke, 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 not in the way you think.
 - He says, “⁴⁹*I came to cast fire on earth, and would that it were already kindled!* ⁵⁰*I 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, and he’s describing it as a baptism by fire. Listen to what he’s saying. **Fire will come down from heaven – but not on my enemies – on me.**
 - “I’m Elijah calling on the incomparable God to send down fire. And I’m also the sacrifice laid out on the altar of God. When I go to the cross, I’m going to 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.”

- ❖ Friends, do you see? **What happened on Mount Calvary was *the* moment in redemptive history that surpassed all events, even what happened on Mount 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 (Heb 9:26).
 - No earthly *baal* is going to willingly do that for you. Instead, they going to 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 own 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 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.

- ❖ Friends, if any of you have been vacillating and limping back and forth between two opinions – between believing in Jesus or not Or between giving your whole heart to him or not – this is the time to decide. Choose this day whom you will serve.
 - When the Israelites saw the fire come down on Carmel, they fell on their faces and worshipped. “*The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God.*” (v39) **Remember, we are the Israelites in this story, so let's imitate them and turn our eyes to the fire that came down on Calvary, and let's fall on our faces to worship our Lord Christ – because he is God.**