

Limping Between Two Opinions  
1 Kings 18:20-40  
September 27, 2020  
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CenterPoint Church

Read 1 Kings 18:20-40

*"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever."* (Isaiah 40:8)

### **Introduction: Lopsided Contests**

Everybody likes to see a fair fight or a fair contest right? "Pick on someone your own size" and all that. In sports we don't love it when a team is so stacked that the other team has no chance (unless, of course, we root for the stacked team). It's why there's been backlash for the super-teams that the NBA superstars put together, like the Miami Heat with LeBron, Wade, and Bosh, or the Warriors that went to the Finals four times in a row with all the sharpshooters. But we see it every year in college sports, as the big state schools like Alabama and Ohio State destroy teams like Western Kentucky and Kent State with scores of 70-0. But occasionally the underdog rises up and beats the stronger opponent: I think of the greatest upset in college basketball tournament history when #16 University of Maryland, Baltimore County beat #1 seeded University of Virginia, or when my Baylor Bears were humiliated by Liberty University in the first game of the 2017 season. In the history of warfare, there have been great upsets, where greatly overmatched combatants beat a greater fighting force. David and Goliath comes to mind, but so does the Battle of Fei River in China in 383 BC where the Eastern Jin army of 80,000 defeated the Qin Empire's army that was ten times bigger, numbering 850,000. And the Battle of Alesia in 52 BC where Julius Caesar's Roman army was outnumbered by united Gaul tribes by close to 4 to 1, but Caesar's brilliant tactics resulted in a great win for the Roman Empire. And the Battle of Solway Moss in 1542, where over 15,000 Scottish soldiers were defeated by 3,000 English troops.

Today's Scripture passage sees a contest of sorts where one side is outnumbered 450-1, great odds stacked against the one. And he's the one who initiated the contest! If you haven't been with us for the previous sermons on Elijah's life, the background leading up to today's text is that Elijah had announced a drought in the land that was a punishment from God for Ahab's wickedness in turning to Baal worship. The drought had stretched out to three and a half years, and Elijah had some adventures in those years where God provided for him, but now the drought was coming to end. But before any rain came, Elijah challenged Ahab to bring all of the prophets of Baal and Asherah to Mt. Carmel, but didn't exactly say why. This passage will describe exactly what he had in mind.

I talked a little bit about why Baal worship was such a problem back in our first sermon on Elijah, but I wanted to paint more of a picture. One commentator said that "when the Romans – hardly paragons of virtue themselves – encountered Baalism at Carthage, they were utterly grossed out by it... Baal worshipers engaged in a catalog of... deviancy... in some instances, the priests of Baal performed the rituals... as representatives of the people, but at other times the people themselves shared in the ritual... Jezebel led Israel into the most... corrupt idolatry and sexual immorality."<sup>1</sup> I certainly don't want to go into more graphic descriptions, but I want us to understand how depraved and ungodly Baal worship was. It was not simply that they put up statues of false gods and prayed to them instead of the true God, although that was truly offensive to God (and we'll talk more about that); it's that the worship led to degrading sexual acts and violence that took people

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<sup>1</sup> David Roper, *Elijah: A Man Like Us* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1997) p. 17.

about as far from the righteous life of following Yahweh as you could imagine. And hey, your average Israelite farmer or townsman was drawn to worship Baal in three ways: 1) there was great pressure since the royal couple were pushing it as the new national religion; it was what all the influential people believed, just get in line and believe too; 2) keeping Baal happy would bring rain and ensure good crops and prosperity, so it was attractive for personal gain; and 3) they could join the temple prostitutes and depraved practices and call it worship, maybe even feel virtuous about it.<sup>2</sup> Clearly Israel had wandered far from the heart of Yahweh.

As we start looking at the text, the first two verses show that

### **I. The People Were Given A Choice (vv. 20-21)**

*<sup>20</sup> So Ahab sent to all the people of Israel and gathered the prophets together at Mount Carmel. <sup>21</sup> 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.*

Elijah preached a two sentence sermon as a prologue to the day's festivities at Mt. Carmel: "*How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.*" I like that limping imagery: you can't run or walk fast if you haven't decided where you're going or why, you just end up limping if you can't make up your mind. There are echoes of Joshua's challenge to Israel: "*Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve... but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord*" (Joshua 24:14b-15). It is what Jesus said in Matthew 6:24: "*No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.*" That's still a very necessary message that we need today. We'd substitute a lot of different things for Baal: health and wealth prosperity, postmodern relativistic philosophy, universalism, Buddhist tenets of peace... there are a lot of things that people want to add to their Christianity. There is always a temptation to hold onto faith in God, but then mix in faith in some other belief system. Israel hadn't left their faith in Yahweh completely, though Jezebel was doing her best to stamp it out by killing off Yahweh's pastors. It's just that they regarded Him as that God who got them out of Israel, but they needed Baal and Asherah to get them favorable weather and crops, even fertility in childbearing, some of these other areas of life. It came down to hearts of unbelief: Yahweh can't accomplish all of those things in all of those areas, right? He is not a God who addresses everything in life and is sovereign over all that affects us, right? So we need to hedge our bets by pleasing all the gods, by taking the best of the other beliefs systems. The technical term for that is syncretism, the less technical term is that we have divided hearts. God is enough in every area of life, we need no other.

And I believe that God's call to be wholly devoted to Him includes our commitment to His word, the Scriptures. To say something along the lines of "I believe the Bible, lots of great stories in there, lots of inspirational sayings ('Be still and know that He is God,' 'I will give you perfect peace'), but as soon as the Bible speaks against something that I think is true or that all of my friends believe or that the culture has declared to be truth, well, I don't believe that part about the Bible" – that fits Elijah's definition of limping between two opinions. Belief and allegiance to God is an all-or-nothing proposition, as is belief in the Scriptures. Now, obviously, we can have different views of things when they are supported by different Scriptures and that doesn't mean we've abandoned our allegiance to the Bible. We can have different views on baptism and creation days and the end times, and if we can support our views with Scripture, great. But I'm talking about denying things in

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<sup>2</sup> Dale Ralph Davis, *The Wisdom and the Folly* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2003), p. 437

the Bible because modern, enlightened views are more sophisticated and you can't trust everything in the Bible: "Jonah was swallowed by a fish and lived, a virgin gave birth, a man not only spoke healings and miracles but rose from the dead? Well, we know better now that those things couldn't happen, so I'm going to leave that out of my belief system. Jesus says He's the only way to God the Father? That's a little too harsh for my friends of other faiths, so I'll believe in Jesus, but not exclusively." And Elijah says, "You're limping between two opinions. Either follow God or cast your lot in with one of the belief systems of this world." The Bible is God's definitive word to us, if you pick and choose what you want out of it, you're essentially taking beliefs from other belief systems and mixing them with the worship of the true God.

For those of you who are married, try this tonight: turn to your spouse and say, "I love you with part of my heart. Not my whole heart, just part. I hope that's enough. And I've got my eye on some other people who I think will help satisfy the other parts of my heart, so that I'm completely fulfilled and satisfied in my life." How do you think that will turn out? You'll probably need some recommendations for marriage counselors or lawyers to call tomorrow. Because that's not how marriage is designed, I don't care how much our culture would love to push "open marriages." Marriage is a covenant between a man and a woman that is exclusive and lifelong. And so is our covenant relationship with God. He is a jealous husband for His bride, the Church, you and I; He will not share her with another. You're either all in or all out. Hot or cold, Jesus told the church of Laodicea in Revelation 3: don't be lukewarm or I'll spit you out of my mouth.

I knew a student who had grown up in the church and professed faith in Christ, but he went off to college he came back a completely different person. He had decided that there was no God, no afterlife, that the Bible was just written by ignorant shepherds, a bunch of things along those lines. We talked for a long time over lunch, I pushed back on some areas, tried to figure out how he got there, but he was pretty resolute. But at one point I told him, "I actually really appreciate that you aren't pretending that there's a middle ground here." If the Scriptures are true, obey them and follow Jesus as God. But if they're not and you're utterly convinced it's all wrong, then don't give lip service and pretend that you believe some of it but you've actually moved on. That's what some of the other kids who had gone through my youth ministry were doing. We can work with honesty.

Now, there's a time to weigh Christianity's merit. I'm not saying that if this is all new to you and if you're not ready to become a born-again, every-day praying, rock solid Christian, then go away. No, on the contrary: stay a while, study, get answers to your questions, taste and see that the Lord is good. We'll take honest seekers who have honest questions and young Christians who need to grow in their faith and sort it all out. But ultimately, God says come all the way and give your absolute loyalty to me, or don't come at all. For those of us who have grown up in the church or been part of the faith for many years, Elijah has a strong message of not compromising: "Make a choice and go all in."

Let's see how God treats other religions and other false gods that capture our hearts, as the next 8 verses start the prophetic contest. Elijah was a gentleman and a good sportsman, so

## **II. The Prophets Of Baal Were Given A Turn (vv. 22-29)**

*<sup>22</sup> Then Elijah said to the people, "I, even I only, am left a prophet of the Lord, but Baal's prophets are 450 men. <sup>23</sup> Let two bulls be given to us, and let them choose one bull for themselves and cut it in pieces and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. And I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood and put no fire to it. <sup>24</sup> And you call upon the name of your god, and I will call upon the name of the Lord, and the God who answers by fire, he is God." And all the people answered, "It is well spoken." <sup>25</sup> Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first,*

*for you are many, and call upon the name of your god, but put no fire to it.”<sup>26</sup> And they took the bull that was given them, and they prepared it and called upon 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.<sup>27</sup> And at noon Elijah mocked them, saying, “Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.”<sup>28</sup> And they cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them.<sup>29</sup> And as midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention.*

Elijah set the rules up for the contest: each side gets a bull (you guys pick) and a pile of wood, and whoever can get their god to light it on fire wins. In verse 24, the people watching the contest agreed that this was well-spoken, a fair fight, good rules. No, it wasn't! Not only were they on Baal's home turf and his prophets outnumbered Elijah 450 to 1, but controlling the weather and bringing rain and lightning was Baal's specialty. The odds were totally stacked against Elijah. But you know what? God likes those kinds of odds. Ask Gideon.

Anyways, the Baal prophets went first and took all morning and half of the afternoon imploring Baal to send down fire. Apparently, they were used to having to get Baal's attention and the gods had physical needs and activities that were similar to humans. At noon, halfway through their big show, Elijah took the time to mock them. If you watched the recent Michael Jordan and Chicago Bulls 10-part documentary “The Last Dance,” you know how much trash talk he engaged in on the court. But actually, his teammate, Scottie Pippen, got in one of the all-time great lines when Karl Malone, nicknamed “The Mailman” because he always delivered for his team, was at the free throw line to help his team go ahead in one of the Finals games in 1997. Pippen walked past him and whispered to him, “The Mailman doesn't deliver on Sundays.” Malone proceeded to miss both free throws and the series swung to the Bulls. Elijah's mocking was nowhere near as subtle as Pippen's. It was brutal, essentially, “Maybe Baal is out for a walk, or going to the bathroom, or asleep. You need to yell a lot louder, maybe wake him up.” And they whipped themselves into an even bigger frenzy. But, of course, Elijah knew something these prophets didn't know, or couldn't admit: there is no Baal. There never has been, there never will be, a false god. So, of course, no one answers because there is no one to answer. I don't care how much you cut yourselves and bleed over these altars, I don't care how intense your dancing is, no one's going to answer.

So now it was Elijah's turn and the next section shows that

### **III. Elijah Was Given A Decisive Victory (vv. 30-40)**

*<sup>30</sup> Then Elijah said to all the people, “Come near to me.” And all the people came near to him. And he repaired the altar of the Lord that had been thrown down.<sup>31</sup> Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord came, saying, “Israel shall be your name,”<sup>32</sup> and with the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord. And he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two seahs of seed.<sup>33</sup> And he put the wood in order and cut the bull in pieces and laid it on the wood. And he said, “Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood.”<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup> And the water ran around the altar and filled the trench also with water.<sup>36</sup> And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near and said, “O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word.<sup>37</sup> 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.”<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup> And when all the people saw*

*it, they fell on their faces and said, "The Lord, he is God; the Lord, he is God." <sup>40</sup> And Elijah said to them, "Seize the prophets of Baal; let not one of them escape." And they seized them. And Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon and slaughtered them there.*

So not only has Elijah humiliated the false prophets so far, but then he made it even harder and less likely that his altar was going to catch fire by having twelve jars of water poured on his offering. When you think of jars, don't think of pitchers, think of barrels; there was so much water that the trench was filled as well. (Where did Elijah get water during a drought? They're close to the Mediterranean Sea, so it wouldn't have been drinkable water, but able to be used here.) You know, Elijah could have covered the altar with modern day flame-retardant coating and buried it in an underground fireproof bunker, but the God who is a consuming fire would still have burned it.

And then Elijah prayed calmly. There is no frenzy of dancing and yelling and cutting like the other side had used. Why would Elijah need to do that when a simple prayer will do? He knows God hears Him. And He knows that God has sent fire from heaven to consume offerings before: for Aaron at the first tabernacle service in Leviticus 9, for David in 1 Chronicles 21, and for Solomon in 2 Chronicles 7 at the temple dedication (you can look those up later). Elijah's prayer unleashed fire from heaven that consumed everything – the bull, the wood, the twelve stones, even the water in the trenches. This was not normal fire, right? Fire doesn't consume water or stone usually. But the fire of God consumed everything. And the people fell on their faces, acknowledging the winner: "Yahweh, He is God." There's still no rain, God hasn't solved their physical problem, but He's solved their spiritual loyalty problem. Though with Israel, that rarely ever lasts.

Now, I'm not sure that Elijah had made it clear that this was a "winner take all" fight to the death. Maybe that was implied, but it certainly wasn't stated in the rules. But in an action that was taken as God's judgment on false worship and false religion, Elijah ordered the people to help him put these false prophets to death. The verb used for "slaughtered" is singular, so it seems that Elijah himself performed the executions. We modern-day readers do not like this ending; we would have much preferred for the Baal prophets to have repented and turned to Yahweh. But clearly that's not how history happened, and the reality is that these prophets probably would not truly repent and had earned God's wrath. They were actually under a legal sentence of death: Deuteronomy 13:5 says, "*But that prophet... shall be put to death because he has taught rebellion against the Lord your God... So you shall purge the evil from your midst.*" Now, of course, as we look for ways to apply this passage to our lives, this is not something that we are commanded today: to take on people of other religions and then kill them when we win the argument. Israel was such a unique chosen nation ruled by God for a set period of time. No other nation in history has been under those rules in the way that Israel was. We are never commanded to hurt anyone in the name of loyalty to God today. What we kill is internal – the desire to be double-minded and half-hearted, to compromise, to worship idols and false gods, to abandon our loyalty and obedience to God alone. Colossians 3:5 says, "*Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.*" We win over followers of other religions with winsome conversation, prayer, and love, never violence.

### **Conclusion: Bleeding to Express Devotion**

Let's get back to this picture of the Baal prophets dancing around, acting like madmen to get their god's attention, cutting themselves and bleeding all over the place. Some commentators have pointed out the fact that this should remind us that worship does not need to be emotional and demonstrative because we have a God who hears us even when we whisper and pray in our heads and are quietly reverent. I'm sure if I was still doing youth ministry, I could segue to a discussion of

how kids cut themselves to get emotional relief and control when they are hurting; if you are cutting or know someone who is, you should get help. But I see something much deeper here: The prophets thought that maybe they needed to show the ultimate act of devotion by bleeding, shedding their own blood. And that has been true of many false religions all through history: if we give our lifeblood for our god, surely he will recognize how devoted we are to him. But the true God of Christianity does things in a way that no other religion would ever come up with, they can't even understand this because it's so counterintuitive to the nature of religion: He bleeds for us. He expressed His commitment to us by sending His Son, Jesus, (fully God and fully man) to bleed and die for us. And in fact, He was the sacrifice on the altar who took on the sins of the people in death. He was the great substitute, dying so that we could live.

->(walk over to the communion table)

Hebrews 9:11-12 – *“But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come... He entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of His own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.”*

Ephesians 1:7 – *“In Him (Jesus) we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace...”*

Revelation 1:5 – *“Jesus Christ... loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood.”*

On our own, we would be limping between all the opinions and ideas and philosophies of this world. But God reveals Himself, His will, His character, and His plan of salvation in the Bible. And the high point, the climax of history that all of the Scriptures point to is Jesus hanging on the cross taking on the sins of His people. And God accepted His sacrifice, and He declared victory over Satan and His evil forces, and He declares that it is time to believe Him and follow Him or turn aside and be lost. So now we can sing the words to the songs earlier and mean them: *“Your blood has washed away my sin / The Father's wrath completely satisfied / Once you're enemy, now seated at your table / Jesus, thank You.”* *“What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.”* *“The Lord, He is God!”*

-> Transition to communion

### Benediction

1 Chronicles 29:11-13

*“Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is Yours. Yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and You are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from You, and You rule over all. In Your hand are power and might, and in Your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. And now we thank You, our God, and praise Your glorious name.”*

Choose this day whom you will serve, but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. Amen.