

## OLD TESTAMENT LESSONS FOR NEW TESTAMENT RENEWAL

Sunday, July 4<sup>th</sup> & July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2010, 10:00 a.m. - Teaching #'s 1384 & 1386

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### FIRST PRAY FOR FIRE - THEN PRAY FOR RAIN

**1 Kings 18:16-39** - "So Obadiah went to meet Ahab, and told him. And Ahab went to meet Elijah. [17] When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, "Is it you, you troubler of Israel?" [18] And he answered, "I have not troubled Israel, but you have, and your father's house, because you have abandoned the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals. [19] Now therefore send and gather all Israel to me at Mount Carmel, and the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table." [20] So Ahab sent to all the people of Israel and gathered the prophets together at Mount Carmel. [21] 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. [22] Then Elijah said to the people, "I, even I only, am left a prophet of the Lord, but Baal's prophets are 450 men. [23] 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. [24] 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." [25] 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." [26] 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. [27] 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. [28] And they cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them. [29] 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. [30] 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. [31] 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," [32] 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. [33] 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." [34] 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. [35] And the water ran around the altar and filled the trench also with water. [36] 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. [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.""

There's a marvellous **black and whiteness** to this account that sounds hopelessly out of date to our contemporary mind set. This passage screams out the blunt truth that all religions are not equal in truth or power. And that, in and of itself, simply doesn't fit a pluralistic age.

This is not a battle between religion and non-religion. Elijah isn't battling the forces of atheism. This is a showdown between two conflicting worship systems. It's a battle royal between God and Baal. And the reason it makes us a little uncomfortable is most of our society doesn't even see that as a battle that should be fought. This account is stark in its pronouncement that all religions are not to be embraced with equal passion. Some ideas are true and some are not. There is a God who is real and there are many that are not. And what's more, this difference **matters**. The God who is real takes a very dim view of people worshipping gods who are idols.

You see, for about the last two centuries the church has fought the battle against **atheism** and the notion that **all religions are false**. But many have missed the fact that a new enemy has snuck up on the hearts and minds of the church. The battle today isn't fiercest when waged against the few who still think all religion is **false**. The real war is against the masses who are shouting all religions are **true**. And both those viewpoints destroy the Christian faith with equal effectiveness.

That's why this is such an important account in the Old Testament. Anyone can claim anything. Anyone can pray. And

anyone can offer sacrifices to their God. All of that can be done by countless people all around the world. This proves nothing whatsoever.

This great passage strips the issues down to the core. Either your God is real or He isn't. Either He lives or He doesn't. Your sincerity isn't the issue. "What works for you," isn't the issue. What everyone else believes isn't the issue. **Who's right? What's actually true?** Those are the issues. And this account teaches so clearly that everyone can't be right. If we both hold to conflicting religions we may both be **wrong**, but we can't both be **right**.

So in the face of conflicting truth claims, Elijah stands out because he voices the unthinkable. He utters the words that make all the prophets gasp: **"Let's find out! Let's call upon our respective Gods. The one who answers is the living and true God and we will worship Him!"**

This is what makes Elijah shine. Out of all God's people in Israel, only Elijah seems so confident. Nobody else voices the same words. Nobody else stands up against the false prophets of Baal.

And I'll tell you why. The worship of Baal had been adopted by Ahab and Jezebel. And when the King and Queen adopt a religion it isn't healthy to oppose it. It's hard to fight the dominant religious world view. The **dominant ideology** of our land and its leaders is **tolerance**. It's not just the idea that everyone should be able to freely choose his or her religion. Of course, that should be the case. I'm talking about the unspoken assumption - the **agenda** - that insists all religions are equally **true**.

This is where the example of Elijah stands out. He's all alone. The religious leaders have all gone home or turned traitor to Jehovah God. The people are backslidden and will worship whomever they're told to worship. There is a great deal of pressure to turn people from the Lord.

Elijah looks magnificent. Elijah doesn't bow to that pressure. And God uses Elijah to confront the false claim of Baal - to demonstrate God's power in answer to prayer - to (at least temporarily) cause the people to bow before Jehovah God - and to rid the land of 450 false, idolatrous leaders. That's what can happen when ordinary people decide to take a strong, crisp stand for the true God.

So here's what we want to look at today: What did Elijah do so right? What are the steps that bring this demonstration of God's presence and power, even in the middle of the bleakest of odds and the blackest of times?

## 1) THERE WAS AN HONEST FACING OF THE TRUE SOURCE OF ISRAEL'S TROUBLE

**1 Kings 18:16-18** - "So Obadiah went to meet Ahab, and told him. And Ahab went to meet Elijah. [17] When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, "Is it you, you troubler of Israel?" [18] And he answered, "I have not troubled Israel, but you have [gutsy words!], and your father's house, because you have abandoned the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals."

We know from the early part of this chapter that this was no easy meeting between Ahab and Elijah. Obadiah didn't even want the job of reporting to Ahab that he had **seen** Elijah - **1 Kings 18:7-12** - "And as Obadiah was on the way, behold, Elijah met him. And Obadiah recognized him and fell on his face and said, "Is it you, my lord Elijah?" [8] And he answered him, "It is I. Go, tell your lord, 'Behold, Elijah is here.' " [9] And he said, "How have I sinned, that you would give your servant into the hand of Ahab, to kill me? [10] As the Lord your God lives, there is no nation or kingdom where my lord has not sent to seek you. And when they would say, 'He is not here,' he would take an oath of the kingdom or nation, that they had not found you. [11] And now you say, 'Go, tell your lord, "Behold, Elijah is here." ' [12] And as soon as I have gone from you, the Spirit of the Lord will carry you I know not where. And so, when I come and tell Ahab and he cannot find you, he will kill me, although I your servant have feared the Lord from my youth."

When King Ahab and Elijah finally meet, Ahab's opening words are so instructive - "Is it you - you **troubler of Israel?**"(17). That's the king's view. "Elijah **you're** the problem! You got us into this mess. You pronounced that there would be no rain for three and a half years. You're the reason our herds are dying. You're the **troubler of Israel!**"

As long as that view is allowed to stand, God won't be able to do a thing to turn the hearts of the people around. If people get the idea that **Elijah** is the problem - as long as they think the hard hand of God in closing the sky of rain is the problem - they will never take a hard look at their own sin. There will be no chance of repentance. And it's

right at this point that Elijah starts everything off on the right foot:

**1 Kings 18:18** - “And he [Elijah] answered, “I have not troubled Israel, but you have, and your father's house, because you have abandoned the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals.”

“Ahab, the problem isn't what you think it is. The problem is your wicked leadership over these people. It goes right back to your father Omri. You didn't learn from his mistakes. **King Ahab, your sins are the problem here!**”

Yikes! But this unpopular, dangerous truth must be stated. I'm not sensing that the contemporary church is as interested in talking about **sin** or **sinner**s anymore. We don't like to appear to be **against** anything anymore. That seems to be negative and counter-cultural.

This is such an important point. Before you can fix anything you have to know what's broken. And if you spend all your time treating **symptoms** instead of the **disease**, you're not going to get anywhere with God.

Just on the side, I think there is both **encouragement** and **warning** in these words.

- a) First, for the **encouragement**, if you are in a situation where you truly are trying to serve God with honesty and holiness in a corrupt environment, you need to know that you will be constantly under fire for your stand for Christ. You will be the problem.

I think we need to tell new Christians this truth. This is so universally taught in both the Old and New Testaments that it's amazing the church is so silent about it:

- \* **Faithful Amos** was called a conspirator for giving the Lord's words to Jeroboam the Second. The King told Amos that the nation would not be able to bear his “**wicked words**” (**Amos 7:10**).
- \* Jesus was accused of stirring up the people against their leaders in **Luke 23:5**
- \* **Acts 16:20** tells how Paul and Silas were imprisoned for “**troubling the city**” where they ministered.
- \* Here's what Jesus said in some of His most scathing remarks to His own unbelieving brothers in **John 7:7** - “**The world cannot hate you, but it hates Me because I testify of it, that its deeds are evil.**” The world only hates those who are faithful to Jesus and Jesus' assessment of the unbelieving world.

What I'm trying to say with these verses is simply this. As a Christian you won't have to dig too deep to find trouble in this world. While you should never go looking for it, while you should conduct yourself with meekness and humility, **you should expect that you will experience some kind of persecution for following Jesus Christ as your Lord.**

**Matthew 5:11-12** - “**Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. [12] Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.**”

“**For so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.**” Jesus commands us to study the kind of accounts we're studying today. Elijah was one of those prophets who was “**before us.**” We're to **examine and remember and emulate** these faithful, persecuted Old Testament prophets. We're specifically told not to look for a **fresh** approach. We are commanded by our Lord to copy an **old** approach.

I am amazed that Christians constantly come to me totally stunned that they receive less than ideal treatment from their unsaved fellow workers. Or a spouse of an unsaved partner who feels singled out as the cause of all the problems in the home because of her or his relationship to Jesus Christ.

While we should never go looking for that kind of trouble or bring it upon ourselves with foolish words or attitudes, **we should take comfort in the fact that this is the way Jesus said it would be.** Your pain doesn't mean you're out of God's will or that He is not in control of your situation.

- b) For the **example** we looked at Elijah. For the **warning** we'll consider King Ahab. On the **warning** side, this

passage reminds all of us of the fallen tendency to shift the blame when God wants to deal with issues of stubbornness or idolatry in our lives.

Nothing made less sense than for Ahab to blame Elijah for Israel's troubles. The people **knew** they had turned from the ways of God. Ahab and Jezebel certainly knew they had been slowly killing off all the prophets of Jehovah.

On top of that, Ahab knew the reason for this drought. Elijah had **told** Ahab that there would be three and a half years of drought because of the idolatry of the people. Ahab knew that, even though the herds were dying in the dust, he and the people were still committed to following Baal.

How could anybody blame Elijah for Israel's trouble? Easy really. We all do it. More often than we think. When people are in poor shape spiritually they usually find something wrong with the church they attend (that's usually when we're told it's full of hypocrites). They find all sorts of areas where people have mistreated them. They spot all the flaws in those who are professing to follow Jesus. They find other people who aren't living any better than they. Almost anyone or anything will do. The darkness and bondage both grow until I come to the place of humbly recognizing my sin.

That's the role of Elijah here. He's saying, "Listen Ahab, the problem isn't God and the problem isn't me. The problem is your own sin and rebellion against the Lord!" - **1 Kings 18:18** - **"And he answered, 'I have not troubled Israel, but you have, and your father's house, because you have abandoned the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals.'"**

I wonder how many people would never have spotted what Elijah diagnosed as the true source of their trouble. I wonder how many people thought the real trouble was the lack of rain and the infertility of the soil - **"You know, I can remember when the soil used to bring so much more yield. It just seems that a farmer can't get ahead anymore."**

I wonder how many people thought the trouble was that God had deserted them and forsaken them as His people. And even that wasn't the truth. Elijah's point wasn't that God had deserted them. It was **they who had deserted God**.

The proof that God hadn't changed or deserted them is seen in the fact that when Elijah prayed he called on the **"God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob"**(36). That's Elijah's way of proclaiming that God was the God of the **covenant**. He was the God who kept His word. He was the faithful God of promise.

But I'll lay odds that there were sincere but deluded people who just kind of sat back and whined about the good old days when God had blessed His people and **where in the world did He go anyway?**

There were people who blamed Elijah. **"Everything was fine until that goofy prophet started putting his spells on everything. Why couldn't he just leave well enough alone?"**

My ingenuity for blaming others for my sin is limitless. And to the extent to which I'm successful in passing the buck, I will never experience God's forgiveness and renewing grace.

"Pastor Don, so and so said this so I quit teaching." Really? Other people didn't quit. They stayed with it. Which probably means the problem is I'm too thin skinned and petty and unforgiving. But until I face that truth, I'll just go on quitting on life and nurse my ego until I convince myself I'm right.

So the rule here is simply this. No spiritual problem can be properly solved in my life until it's accurately diagnosed. And once I think I've found the source of all my trouble - I should look again and make sure I haven't gone too quickly.

Jesus said I have this tendency to want to go pulling things out of other people's eyes rather than my own. The real problem was clearly Israel's sin. First they needed cleansing fire. Then they could receive refreshing rain. So I guess we need more than just **"showers of blessing"** after all.

**1 Kings 18:20-21** - "So Ahab sent to all the people of Israel and gathered the prophets together at Mount Carmel. [21] 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."

Notice how Elijah talks about "limping between two different opinions"(21). That's a fascinating phrase. Some translations say "halting between two opinions." Some say "faltering between two opinions." But the idea is basically the same.

The problem wasn't a lack of opportunity or knowledge. And their problem wasn't that they were making a flat out **refusal** to follow the Lord. The truth is, we rarely do that. And that's the important point. I don't usually voice any actual **refusal** to do anything the Lord tells me. That's because I know I'm not supposed to do that. And so do you. I'm pretty sure I respect the Lord too much to say, "**No way, God,**" when He speaks. I mean, that would be sinful.

But the principle behind Elijah's words is key to spiritual power and life. You don't choose to **dishonor** God in the same way you must choose to **honor** Him. Or, to say it a bit differently, choosing to **disohonr** God doesn't involve quite the same exercise of the will that choosing to **honor** Him does. By that I mean **dishonoring** God is simply a matter of mental and moral drifting. It's rarely an **intentional** or even **conscious** action. But **honoring** God is very different. Honoring Him is more mentally active and costly because, in this fallen world, it is usually **socially unacceptable** to choose to honor God. So **dishonoring** God is mentally careless and socially popular. **Honoring** Him is always disciplined and socially costly.

That means honoring God requires a solid **decision**. That's Elijah's whole point. You can **limp** into dishonoring God. But you can't limp along into honoring Him. To honor God is to plant the flag of choice. You have to choose the high ground to honor God. And, in this fallen world, you usually have to choose to do it **alone**.

This is so down to earth. We all know what Elijah's saying. In a nutshell, this is specifically how spiritual failure occurs. We want to pray more - but we don't. We want to spend more time with our family - but we don't. We want to get involved in the church - but we don't. We want to tithe - but we don't. We plan on serving the Lord with our time in some area but we don't.

That's the meaning of that little word in **verse 18**. "**Limping**" along through Christian commitment. "**How long will you limp between two different opinions?**" Elijah's calling on the people to face something. Actually, he's calling on them to put a time limit on their lazy indecision. "**How long**" are you going to do this? Those are **time framed words**. The problem of the people is one that grows through **delay**. It's not the result of a flat-out chosen refusal. It's just lame, lazy, mindless, worldly **delay**.

Look at these people as Elijah points out their sin. "**And the people did not answer him a word**"(21). How could they? I mean, there they were up on Mount Carmel with 450 false prophets. How could they deny their divided hearts? There was nothing to do but hide in silence.

And so God speaks to me and God speaks to you. He does it through His holy Word. He does it through teachers and preachers. He does it a dozen times a day with the faithful inner voice of the Holy Spirit. Your conscience annoys you when you drift morally off course. At least for a while.

And whenever that happens **it's the hesitating that seals your fate**. "I should go to the altar and lay this all out before the Lord." "I should get some Christian friends, open up my soul, and have them pray for me." "I should make things right with that brother in Christ." "I should, I should, I should..."

Whenever God speaks, the next few moments are crucial. That's because - never forget this - **the decision to obey is part of the victory itself**. God works **graciously** in bringing the conviction of sin, but what sets His Hand to work **redemptively** in your situation is your commitment to obey His voice.

**Psalm 37:5** - "**Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act.**" There's hesitating and there's committing. One leads to ruin, the other to spiritual life. All of this leads to the third point:

### 3) **FAILURE TO COMMIT TO GOD'S RULE AT ANY POINT IN MY LIFE LEADS TO IDOLATRY**

**1 Kings 18:24-29** - "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." [25] 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." [26] 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. [27] 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." [28] And they cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them. [29] 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."

Let me tell you why I think the Holy Spirit includes so many descriptive passages about the baseness of idolatry in the Scriptures. I think we all understand that when I fail to choose to obey God at any point where He speaks into my life, ***I leave a hole where He wanted to build His kingdom in my heart.***

I've lived the Christian life long enough and know enough of God's Word to understand that something will remain ***undone in my heart*** if I don't follow the Lord in every choice I make. But what isn't always equally clear is this - ***the hole in my life won't stay a hole. What I don't choose of God's will ["Choose you this day...."] goes automatically to another god by default.***

Now, get a picture of these savage looking creatures in our account today. See them dancing around this bloody altar. Listen to them as they work themselves into a lather. Hear their cries and shrieks fill the sky as it gets dark. Look at them as they start to cut their wrists and arms to make the blood flow.

Why do we need all of those gruesome details recorded in the Scriptures? I believe the reason is this. God wants all of us to see ***visibly*** what will always happen ***invisibly*** when I let my life get careless about choosing His will over my own.

This relates to the last point - ***"How long will you go on limping between two opinions?"*** The problem is indecision doesn't ***feel*** like spiritual rebellion. In fact, it doesn't ***feel*** like much of anything at all. Indecision doesn't ***feel*** like a dark dominating spiritual power. But it ***is***.

O, I will probably never see the smoke and hear the shrieks. But inwardly, while I think I'm choosing my own freedom, the bondage starts to dance and rage. And bit by bit, without a shot being heard, I lose what I love most - the freedom and peace of the Holy Spirit - the joy of serving the Lord with a whole, pure heart - and the certainty of heaven and eternal life.

Remember, Bob Dylan said it years ago - ***"You gotta serve somebody. It might be the devil and it might be the Lord. But you gotta serve somebody."*** The God who created you in His image invites you with a heart of love to follow Him. He provides redeeming grace through Jesus Christ to make us heirs of eternal life. He invites you to freely choose His grace, life and purpose.

So in freedom and joy I choose God's rule and way daily. That's what Jesus meant when He said we must ***"take up our cross daily and follow Him."*** I don't just ***choose*** this. I ***re-choose God everyday***. If I don't choose the costly following of the true God I need not make any other choice. A host or replacement gods will sneak up on me when I'm not looking and gradually carve up and claim the remaining territory of my life.

In an absolutely brilliant little book called ***"The Good News We Almost Forgot"*** author ***Kevin DeYoung*** caught my attention with these words: ***"The only thing more difficult than finding spiritual truth is not losing it. What starts out as new and precious becomes plain and old. What begins a thrilling discovery becomes a rote exercise. What provokes one generation to sacrifice and passion becomes in the next generation a cause for apathy."*** Then he perceptively adds that, ***"....for the most part, everything we need to learn is what we've already forgotten."***

That's why we're spending time with this simple, direct account from the life of Elijah. I love that ***"How long?"*** question. It puts the ball in my court. I want to let it press me for a while. I don't need one more "spiritual lesson" to admire. I don't need another false start. And this story seems to remind me God is waiting for people to make up their minds - with all their might.