

Triumph Against All Odds – Part 2

Series: Days of Elijah

1 Kings 18:20-39

June 12, 2016

Good morning again. It's great to be here together.

Well, we are back from Annual Conference, and I am extremely happy to announce that I am still appointed to Germantown United Methodist Church. Myra and I are so pleased to be able to share in ministry with you. We are finishing our 5th year. 5 years! Wow, I can't believe that. It has been a wonderful 5 years, and we hope to be here another 5 years, then another 5 years after that. And then we will see if Myra will let me retire.

Next week, I want to encourage you to be here in worship. We are beginning a series that will help us focus on our partnership ministry with St. Paul's United Methodist Church. Pastor Steve Gill from that church will be our preacher of the morning, and I hope you will join Myra and myself as we hear Steve preach and talk to us about St. Paul's.

As we begin the message today, I would like for us to consider how we act or might act if we knew there was no way we could lose.

PLAYING BASKETBALL WITH YOUR 10 YEAR OLD.

What dream might you go after, pursue, if you knew that you could do so and you would not fail? If you knew there was no way you could lose, what would you do? (BECOME A PROFESSIONAL ATHLETE, GO ON BROADWAY, AUTHOR THE NEXT HARRY POTTER TYPE BOOK, GET THAT DEGREE YOU ALWAYS WANTED, PLAY AND SING IN A CLASSIC ROCK-N-ROLL COVER BAND)

Last week, we began looking at the pressure points we face today as believers as we face the realization that our values and faith as Christians are questioned and discounted more and more each day, that the truths and standards of our faith are being abandoned by society, abandoned by leaders, abandoned in the pews and abandoned in the pulpit. Lies have become truth; immorality has become accepted.

My friends, you need to face the truth: you, me, Christianity, we are all under pressure right now.

That's why we are studying the life of the Old Testament prophet Elijah in our series "Days of Elijah." Elijah was a powerful prophet, calling the people and the nation to repentance. Yet Elijah had his struggles, his doubts. He was just like us... except for his faith in God. Even in the godless times during his life, Elijah declared the word of the Lord. So we are looking at Elijah's ministry and learn how we can be voices in the desert crying, "Prepare the way of the Lord!"

I'm going to invite you to turn once again to 1 Kings 18. As you do that, let me remind you of what we've learned so far.

Ahab is the king of Israel. He led the people of the God of Israel to worship pagan idols, especially the male god Baal and the female fertility goddess Asherah. As a result, God judges Ahab and the people by giving Elijah a message: there will be no rain, not even any dew, for about 3 years.

Now, at the end of the three years, Elijah proposes an epic cage match, a duel to the death, to prove once and for all which God we should serve: the god of Baal or the God of Israel.

Let's pick up the story in 1 Kings 18. I will be using the New Living Translation today.

Elijah says in VERSES 19-20

Now summon all Israel to join me at Mount Carmel, along with the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah who are supported by Jezebel." So Ahab summoned all the people of Israel and the prophets to Mount Carmel.¹

Ahab brought 850 pagan prophets to Mount Carmel to match wits and power against one guy: Elijah. Talk about a mismatch. 850 to 1. Ahab probably thought there was no way he would lose, so he called everyone in the nation to come out and watch the troublemaker Elijah get blown away and crushed by his competition.

VERSE 21

Then Elijah stood in front of them and said, "How much longer will you waver, hobbling between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him! But if Baal is God, then follow him!" But the people were completely silent.²

The Israelites had not totally turned from Yahweh, the God who brought them out of Egypt. They believed in Him, but they tried to combine their worship of the God of Israel with Baal, local Canaanite idols of the people that lived around them. Elijah says to the people, "Make up your minds. If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him."

Elijah challenged the people to take a stand – to follow whoever was the true God. You can almost hear the words Joshua spoke generations: "Choose this day whom you will serve... but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."³ Or Jesus of Nazareth: "No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other."⁴

COMMENT

If we just drift along with whatever is pleasant and easy, we will someday discover that we have been worshiping a false god – and it just might be ourselves.

VERSE 22

Then Elijah said to them, "I am the only prophet of the LORD who is left, but Baal has 450 prophets."⁵

This is not entirely true. 1 Kings 18:4 indicates there were at least 100 prophets of the Lord in hiding. What is true is that Elijah is the only one who is bold enough to confront the king and these 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah. And Elijah knows this: those are 100 prophets of the Lord are most certainly praying for him.

Back in the late 1800's, an American minister visited Charles Spurgeon's church in London. When the visitor noted there was little heat in the sanctuary, he asked Spurgeon if he had a heating plant, a furnace. Spurgeon led his guest to a large basement room. He explained that before every service, 400 members met there to

¹ 1 Kings 18:19-20 (NLT)

² 1 Kings 18:21 (NLT)

³ Joshua 24:15

⁴ Matthew 6:24 (New Living Translation, Second Edition)

⁵ 1 Kings 18:22 (NLT)

pray for their pastor and the salvation of the lost. Spurgeon concluded, "This is the church's real heating plant."

My friends: **Prayer should always be our first response, not our last resort.**

COMMENT

Well, the lines are drawn: Elijah verses the 450 prophets of Baal, 400 prophets of Asherah, the King, and a nation that wavers. So Elijah sets the ground rules for this epic contest.

VERSES 23-25

Now bring two bulls. The prophets of Baal may choose whichever one they wish and cut it into pieces and lay it on the wood of their altar, but without setting fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood on the altar, but not set fire to it. Then call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD. The god who answers by setting fire to the wood is the true God!" And all the people agreed. Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "You go first, for there are many of you. Choose one of the bulls, and prepare it and call on the name of your god. But do not set fire to the wood."⁶

Elijah gives the pagan prophets first choice. Normally, the best animal was chosen for the sacrifice, the one without blemish; this animal would be acceptable to be received as a sacrifice. So, Elijah gives these prophets first choice; they looked over the two bulls, and they picked the better animal, leaving the other, lesser one for Elijah.

Now, both the God of Israel and Baal were said to ride the thunderstorm as their divine chariot, that thunder was their voice, and that lightning was their weapon. The image of the fire of God consuming offerings was not new.

In Leviticus 9:24, we read,

Fire blazed forth from the Lord's presence and consumed the burnt offering and the fat on the altar. When the people saw this, they shouted with joy and fell face down on the ground.⁷

Elijah is drawing up precedence. God has done this before, and Elijah believes He will do it again.

When you face opposition in life, when you are up against the wall, do you look back and see what God has done for you before, or do you think, "That won't happen again."?

The strength of our faith is in knowing **God has done it before; He'll do it again!**

READ VERSE 26

So they prepared one of the bulls and placed it on the altar. Then they called on the name of Baal from morning until noontime, shouting, "O Baal, answer us!" But there was no reply of any kind. Then they danced, hobbling around the altar they had made.⁸

The prophets ecstatic cultic dance was intended to arouse the deity to perform some action. Its erotic motion was meant to stir the passion and the lust of these fertility gods.

They began in the morning, and as the time past, the prophets howl became louder and louder, and the dance more frantic. They whirled round and round, ran wildly

⁶ 1 Kings 18:23-25 (NLT)

⁷ Leviticus 9:24 (New Living Translation, Second Edition)

⁸ 1 Kings 18:26 (NLT)

through each other's ranks, always keeping up a circular motion, the head bent low, so that their long disheveled hair swept the ground. Ordinarily the madness would become infectious, and the onlookers joined in the frenzied dance.

But Elijah knew how to prevent this. It was noon, and for hours they had kept up their wild rites. Now Elijah gets snarky towards them, with cutting taunts and bitter irony.

Would somebody using the red Bible from the seat rack read verse 27 out loud for us? (At noon Elijah mocked them, saying, "Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened."⁹)

Here's what is says in the New Living Translation:

*About noontime Elijah began mocking them. "You'll have to shout louder," he scoffed, "for surely he is a god! Perhaps he is daydreaming, or is relieving himself. Or maybe he is away on a trip, or is asleep and needs to be wakened!"*¹⁰

Elijah suggests that the Baal must be otherwise engaged, and so the prophets must cry louder. Stung to madness, they became more frantic than before.

READ VERSE 28

*So they shouted louder, and following their normal custom, they cut themselves with knives and swords until the blood gushed out.*¹¹

Their wild howl morphed into piercing demonic yells. In their madness, the priests bit their arms and cut themselves with the two-edged swords which they carried and with lances.

As blood began to flow, the frenzy reached its highest pitch, when first one, then others, commenced to "prophesy," moaned and groaned, then burst into rhapsodic cries, uttering incoherent broken sentences. All the while they beat themselves with heavy scourges, loaded or armed with sharp points, and cut themselves with swords and lances – sometimes even mutilated themselves – since the blood of the priests was supposed to be specially propitiatory with Baal.

READ VERSE 29

*They raved all afternoon until the time of the evening sacrifice, but still there was no sound, no reply, no response.*¹²

After all that, no sound, no reply, no response. All that self-mutilation, common among pagan worship, forbidden in Hebrew worship, resulted in nothing.

Serving the wrong god always leads to self-mutilation and destruction.

READ VERSES 30-35

Then Elijah called to the people, "Come over here!" They all crowded around him as he repaired the altar of the LORD that had been torn down. He took twelve stones, one to represent each of the tribes of Israel, and he used the stones to rebuild the altar in the name of the LORD. Then he dug a trench around the altar large enough to hold about three gallons. He piled wood on the altar, cut the bull into pieces, and laid the pieces on the wood. Then he said, "Fill four large jars with water, and pour the water over the offering and the wood." After they had done this, he said, "Do the same thing

⁹ 1 Kings 18:27 (NRSV)

¹⁰ 1 Kings 18:27 (NLT)

¹¹ 1 Kings 18:28 (NLT)

¹² 1 Kings 18:29 (NLT)

again!” And when they were finished, he said, “Now do it a third time!” So they did as he said, and the water ran around the altar and even filled the trench.¹³

There must have one time been an altar here, it had once been a holy place. Each stone represented the people who were present – the twelve tribes of Israel – who had made a covenant with God, and he said they would be his people. By this act, Elijah reminded them who they were, and who they belonged to.

What is also interesting is that there must have been a perennial spring nearby that still had water after three years of drought.

The Sunday school teacher was carefully explaining the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal. She explained how Elijah built the altar, put wood upon it, cut the steer in pieces and laid it upon the altar. And then Elijah commanded the people of God to fill four barrels of water and pour it over the altar. He had them do this four times. “Now, said the teacher, “can anyone in the class tell me why the Lord would have Elijah pour water over the steer on the altar?” A little girl in the back of the room raised her hand with great enthusiasm. “To make the gravy,” came her enthusiastic reply.

Elijah is showing off, maybe showing off his God. But then he gets serious.

READ VERSES 36-37

At the usual time for offering the evening sacrifice, Elijah the prophet walked up to the altar and prayed, “O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, prove today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant. Prove that I have done all this at your command. O LORD, answer me! Answer me so these people will know that you, O LORD, are God and that you have brought them back to yourself.”¹⁴

Elijah’s prayer is simple, in contrast to the dancing, carrying on, and self-mutilation of the prophets of Baal. He asks first, that the people will know who God is, second, that the people will know who Elijah is, and then third, the purpose of all of this, to prove that God is working in their lives, “turning their hearts back again.”

My friend, does it seem like there are 850 things that are keeping you from serving God with your whole heart, and stop dancing and hopping on the fork? You bet it does, just like Elijah.

Young adult, does it seem like there are 850 of your friends telling you to have a drink, get high, have sex? You bet it does, just like Elijah.

Parent, does it seem like there are 850 ways your child can get lost in the moral decay and evil of this world? You bet it does, just like Elijah.

Employee, does it seem like there are 850 ways you can lose your job, your benefits, your future? Employer, does it seem like there are 850 things that could take everything you have worked for, everything you have dreamed about? You bet it does, just like Elijah.

Those of you who carry an AARP card, does it seem like there are 850 ways that your body is giving out on you, 850 medical bills that need to be paid, 850 reasons that keep you from having “life abundantly”? You bet it does, just like Elijah.

READ VERSES 38-39

Immediately the fire of the LORD flashed down from heaven and burned up the young bull, the wood, the stones, and the dust. It even licked up all the water in the

¹³ 1 Kings 18:30-35 (NLT)

¹⁴ 1 Kings 18:36-37 (NLT)

trench! And when all the people saw it, they fell face down on the ground and cried out, "The LORD—he is God! Yes, the LORD is God!"¹⁵

Just as God flashed fire from heaven for Elijah, He will help us accomplish what He commands us to do. The proof may not be as dramatic in our lives as in Elijah's, but God will make resources available to us in creative ways to accomplish His purpose. He will give us the wisdom to raise a family, the courage to take a stand for truth, or the means to provide help for someone in need. Like Elijah, we can have faith that, whatever God commands us to do, He will provide what we need to carry it through. God never asks for something that He cannot pay for.

I began the message today asking what you might do if you knew there was no way you could fail. Now I'm asking you to be an Elijah in your world, declaring the word of God, to be a voice in the desert crying, "Prepare the way of the Lord!" You can do so because you know that there is no way you can fail if you trust the God of Elijah.

¹⁵ 1 Kings 18:38-39 (NLT)