

### 1<sup>ST</sup> KINGS

#### Week 29, Chapter 18

We're in that section of the Bible that tells of a man who is perhaps the greatest prophet of God in the Bible: Elijah. And last time we witnessed how Yehoveh used this great man to perform the first bodily resurrection recorded in the Scriptures, when life was restored to the young son of a gentile widow woman who was hosting Elijah as he hid from King **Achav** of Israel and his murderous wife Jezebel.

**Eliyahu** was hiding because it was he that pronounced a drought upon the land on account of King **Achav's** sins and idolatry and it apparently began immediately. What made the drought all the more severe was that the dew that is formed as a result of natural moisture in the ground and in the air that condenses at a certain temperature point, also ceased to appear. This dew helped to water plants and keeps them viable in the dry season. It is hard to imagine a level of oven-like dryness so complete as to not even allow the formation of the tiniest water droplets on the plants, but that is what happened. One can only surmise what physical discomfort that a complete lack of humidity brought upon those who were affected, and of course it ravaged the field crops and tree crops of every kind and brought many people in the region to the point of starvation. Streams and wells dried up. The wild animals would have suffered; the domestic cattle and sheep would have died by the thousands.

But as near as we can tell, what made the drought obviously supernatural is that it generally affected only the northern Israelite tribal territories and the land of Sidon and Tyre. There is no record of failed crops and starvation for the southern kingdom of Judah, or is there for other nations that surrounded the Kingdom of Israel. And this is because the drought was God's wrath upon Israel, and upon Sidon and Tyre. Israel we can understand because it was **Achav's** and Jezebel's kingdom; but why Sidon and Tyre? Because **Achav's** powerful and evil wife Jezebel was from Sidon and Tyre and her father was the king over that nation. It was Jezebel who brought Sidon's gods Ba'al and Ashtoreth with her and demanded all Israel to worship them; and she led the way in murdering God's prophets in a campaign of YHWH-worshipper extermination.

Ironically, after **Eliyahu** spent perhaps the 1<sup>st</sup> year of his hiding on the east side of the Jordan River, where he lived by a brook and was miraculously brought food by ravens, God next sent him to hide in Jezebel's father's kingdom. In the city-state of Sidon, there was a village called **Tzarfat**, and it was here that **Eliyahu** lived with a poverty stricken gentile widow and her son.

So as we open our Bibles today at 1<sup>st</sup> Kings Chapter 18, the drought has been ongoing for about 3 years and conditions have become catastrophic. Unless something changes soon, King **Achav** will have no kingdom to rule over.

### READ 1<sup>ST</sup> KINGS CHAPTER 18 all

The opening words are that a long time passed, or more literally: "it happened after many days". We're told that it was in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of the drought and this is a generalization, and not meant to be precise. We learn in other Bible books, including the NT passage we looked at last week (Luke 4), that the time of the drought from beginning to end was 42 months, 3 ½ years. When this 1<sup>st</sup> verse says that Yehoveh came to Elijah, it doesn't mean that He "appeared" to Elijah. Rather it was in some form of dream or vision or powerful unction that Elijah was led to do what came next. This is the more or less standard way that a prophet of God received God's instructions.

This first verse is also a reminder that whatever power **Eliyahu** seemed to possess, it was the Lord who was doing it all. There it says that God told Elijah that He would send rain. **Eliyahu** was given permission to decide at times when to call on God's power, but the power was not **Eliyahu's**. No doubt this is a fine line, but one which most Believers can properly nuance without too much trouble. That is, we don't see Elijah as a sorcerer. However in Elijah's day, because of the belief in multiple gods, and because knowledge of the Torah and of Yehoveh among the Hebrews was declining due to the rampant apostasy in Israel, it was superstitions and pagan customs that the people believed in. So King **Achav** was as fearful as he was angry with Elijah and blamed Elijah personally for the drought in the sense that it was an inherent power that Elijah held (like a witch) that created the lack of rainfall and the now pitiful condition of the land and the people.

But here we must notice something else of greatest importance: in this chapter we hear not

one word of repentance among the people of Israel or especially of Israel's leadership. Rather they are just bitter as they sit wallowing in their misery and seem not to sense why this calamity is happening even though they were plainly told in advance. And what a lesson there is in this: habitual sin, and insistent rationalization of our bad behavior and ungodly religious observances, leads to a destructive spiritual blindness within us. How often I've seen TV programs about criminals behind bars, in and out of prison all of their lives, and they are the most sad and miserable of people. And yet because their sin is so habitual, and they have spent so many years rationalizing away why they have no choice but to keep repeating their wicked ways, always blaming others or society in general, they have virtually become that sin. That sin is personified in them. Repentance and change is all the more unlikely (although certainly NOT impossible) when a person or a nation has reached such a point.

The NT deals with this matter of spiritual life and death as well and so we'll take a short detour to discuss it. Unfortunately the modern Church has at times misunderstood what is being presented as a foundational principle in this regard and it is this: it is one thing for a human to live a mostly righteous life and to wrongly trespass against God at times (even knowingly). But it is quite another to so enjoy one's own sin, or to so fully embrace one's own wicked behavior, or to make a strong and willful decision to ignore God's commandments and go our own way, that there is virtually no distinction any longer between the person and the sin. That is, one's personal identity becomes that sin.

Paul speaks of this phenomenon in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 6. But unfortunately, most popular translations add some editorial license that causes Believers to miss the point and thus causes much needless confusion. Once such poor translation occurs in our CJB. There we are told:

### **1Cor. 6:9-10 CJB**

***<sup>9</sup> Don't you know that unrighteous people will have no share in the Kingdom of God? Don't delude yourselves- people who engage in sex before marriage, who worship idols, who engage in sex after marriage with someone other than their spouse, who engage in active or passive homosexuality,***

***<sup>10</sup> who steal, who are greedy, who get drunk, who assail people with contemptuous language, who rob- none of them will share in the Kingdom of God***

These passages seem to say that a person who does any of these sinful things will have no share in the Kingdom of God. However the Young's Literal Translation that doesn't include the rather typical editorial license that translators often employ says something different.

### 1Cor. 6:9-10 YLT

<sup>9</sup> *have ye not known that the unrighteous the reign of God shall not inherit? be not led astray; neither whoremongers, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor sodomites,*

<sup>10</sup> *nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, the reign of God shall inherit.*

Maybe you didn't catch the difference, but the difference is critical (and I have heard all sorts of pastoral word gymnastics to try and explain how on the one hand a person can commit one of the these listed sins and be excluded from the Kingdom, and yet on the other hand be forgiven and NOT be excluded).

Here's the thing: our CJB translation focuses on the **sin** and makes it that the commission of these sins excludes the sinner from the Kingdom of God. But the better and un-editorialized Young's Literal Translation focuses NOT on the sin, but rather the **sinner**. That is, in the CJB we have a list of sins that a person might commit at some time or another in their lives and says that the commission of such a sin means that person becomes ineligible for membership in God's Kingdom. But the YLT correctly gives a list of people who have created such a close identity with some particular sin, and they have embraced that sin so thoroughly, that the person and the sin have become one in the same. That person's identity is as one who has united themselves willingly and permanently with that particular wicked behavior and so they are given the same title as the name of the sin.

The key is identification. In God's eyes WHO we are is WHAT we identify ourselves with. If we identify with and embrace Christ, then we are Christians. If we identify with and embrace Ba'al, then we are pagans. If we identify with and embrace thievery, then we are thieves. If we identify with and embrace idols and graven images, then we are idolaters. On the other hand, we can identify ourselves with Christ but still uncharacteristically commit an act of stealing, or commit a sexual sin, or commit a lie, but we don't typically identify ourselves with that sin and neither does the Lord. Oh, it is still sin, it is wrong, and either on earth or in heaven (or both)

there will be consequences. But in God's eyes we have not become that sin. And that is because we can't BOTH identify with Christ AND identify with murdering, or with homosexuality, or with idolatry (among other things) even though some folks might think they can.

Now from God's perspective where does one cross over the line from one who commits the sin, to one who becomes identified with that sin (and thus is excluded from God's Kingdom)? I do not know. That is God's judgment alone to make such a determination. But it is a dangerous matter for us to carelessly dabble in any of these sins believing we can break free whenever we choose to because just as one can dabble in illicit drugs but perhaps not become an addict, most get in too deep and cannot; and one can become so habitual in their sin and in making excuses for it, that one become spiritually blind to their condition and what identity they have actually chosen for themselves. And in these cases, God says He will turn you over to that sin, and thus you will become identified not with Him but with that sin. You are now lost and excluded from the Kingdom. That is what Paul was speaking about.

Is change possible? Theoretically yes, and I've seen some folks make remarkable lifestyle changes for the good that I would have otherwise thought impossible. But I know of no situation in the Bible whereby it is stated that God has completely turned someone over to his sins and wickedness (which is at times referred to as hardening his heart) and from which that person returned. This is another way of describing that cosmic line in the sand where one becomes condemned if you step over it. But also to be clear: this is not that a person realizes their sinful identity and wants God to forgive them and instead to be identified with Him and God says NO to that! Because what I just described IS repentance and if done in the name of Messiah Yeshua, God always (so far as I know) accepts it. Rather it is that a person becomes so entrenched in their identity with their sin that they either see nothing wrong in it and they make that sin the center point of their life, or they fear the consequences and maybe want to hedge their bets; so now they want BOTH. They want their identity with God in Christ and they want their identity with that sin to exist simultaneously. To that God says NO. Choose. One way or the other way. And we're going to see a great example of that exact scenario, shortly, here in our story of Elijah.

After the Lord tells Elijah he is to go to King **Achav** and that there will be rain, the rest of the story explains what happened in the process of accomplishing this divine assignment. So in verse 2 we're told specifically that the famine was severe in **Achav's** capital city of Samaria (although no doubt this is referring to an extended area around Samaria) and so the king summoned **Ovadyah** who was his house steward. And Obadiah was somewhat of an anomaly in the northern kingdom because he still worshipped and feared YHWH. And because he did, he hid 100 prophets of God from the homicidal Jezebel who was going around killing them so that there would only be prophets of Ba'al and Ashtoreth remaining.

Because of his position, he was probably a reasonably well to do man; but nonetheless he undertook the subversive and dangerous action of hiding these prophets from Jezebel and **Achav** and providing sustenance for them at his own expense.

The term prophets as used here is a bit ambiguous. The Hebrew Sages comment that these particular prophets were probably students at the handful of the prophet schools and prophet colonies that had been established around Israel. Even in Samuel's day we read about these prophet schools, of which Samuel was the head of one. It cannot be that these were all prophets in the narrower sense of a special God-anointed messenger of God's Oracle to one king or another of Israel. Nor were they seers. These were not the Elijah's, Samuel's, or Nathan's of the Bible. We must always keep in mind that the more strict Biblical definition of a prophet as being a person anointed by God for a special task was a result of God's selection and election, not of special education at a human institution.

Rather these prophet schools would more resemble the status of a seminary, and the so-called prophets were like seminary students. What were they being trained to do? Probably they were an alternative to the priesthood in the sense that they became learned in God's Word and in some cases behaved like monks who lived apart from society in a "purer" colony of other prophets and devoted themselves to worship. And in another sense some became itinerant teachers of the Torah and likely were invited to officiate at religious festivals and other affairs where people wanted an aura of piety added to it. Remember, in the Kingdom of Israel at this time, the people had been cut off from going south to Jerusalem to the Temple, and so Levite priests that would have been prevalent in the Kingdom of Judah were a rarity up north and no doubt quite unwelcome by King **Achav** and Jezebel.

In verse 5 King **Achav** is getting desperate as the drought drags on and so commands Obadiah to go on a trek throughout Israel to try and find any remaining grass to keep the King's livestock alive. This would have included his cavalry and chariot horses that were so immensely valuable and needed for the national defense. The situation is so dire that the King himself will go to one section of the country and Obadiah to another to scrounge around for animal feed. In fact we're told that each man went alone (most unusual and risky), but as governments tend to do they didn't want their people to know the true depth of the problems they were facing or it could lead to civil unrest. And, no doubt, they intended on stealthily identifying the available grass so that King **Achav's** troops could sweep in unexpected and confiscate it.

We need to notice an important theme that is woven throughout this chapter, and that is division and separation. The wicked king and the God-fearing **Ovadyah** (meaning worshipper of **Yah**) divided and went on separate paths. Not surprisingly it is the righteous Obadiah who first runs into Elijah, who has been in hiding as a virtual fugitive for over 3 years. **Ovadyah** is shocked to see Elijah, but acknowledges his vaunted status before the Lord and so honors him by prostrating himself before **Eliyahu**. Elijah cuts to the chase and tells Obadiah to go tell **Achav** that Elijah has returned. But Obadiah is having none of it. Truly his thoughts aren't towards God's prophet's safety but for his own well being. He surmises that he'll go tell **Achav** that Elijah is here, **Achav** will come, Elijah will disappear like a vapor, and Obadiah will be left holding the bag. He'll be put to death more or less because the King is so frustrated with his inability to get his hands on Elijah.

After all, as Obadiah continues, the King has tirelessly searched for Elijah inside and outside of his kingdom and it's as though Elijah was carried away by God. So in verse 12 **Ovadyah** says that Yehoveh is liable to carry you away to someplace unknown and that will be the end of me. This is not a Hebraic saying: Obadiah is convinced that something supernatural has kept Elijah safe from apprehension and that "something" has to be Yehoveh. Elijah promises him that he will not go away and secures it by invoking a vow in Yehoveh's name.

Obadiah informs the king, and **Achav** comes to **Eliyahu**. **Achav** greets him with sarcasm and asks if this could possibly be the troubler of Israel that he's been hunting for, for the past 3 years. **Eliyahu** is not intimidated and thunders right back at the king that the cause of Israel's trouble is not himself but rather the King. And it is because he has forsaken the ways of God and instead thrown his allegiance to Ba'al that his kingdom suffers under the hand of God's oppression. **Achav** made no response.

Then Elijah told the king that he was to gather all Israel, the 450 prophets of Ba'al, and the 400 prophets of Ashtoreth (Easter in English), and appear at Mt. Carmel. **Achav** complied. Notice that the reason for this gathering is not given but the Hebrew Sages comment that without doubt the king assumed that they would all gather together for Elijah to lead some kind of ceremony to pray for the rain to commence. Since **Eliyahu** had stopped the rain by speaking it, and promised that until HE said it would rain again it would not, the king figured that this was finally the moment when the drought would be lifted. The King was not so unwise as to interfere or threaten when what he needed the most was about to happen.

When all had arrived, **Eliyahu** spoke to the huge gathering. Recognize that the "all Israel" in this context would have been clan and tribal chiefs and dignitaries; it does not mean all the people who lived in the north, which would have numbered perhaps 3 or 4 million or so. And in

verse 21 Elijah makes a demand to the people that was the crux of what we discussed on our little detour earlier in the lesson. Make a choice, he says. If Yehoveh is God, follow him. If Ba'al is god, follow him. But right now, as he says to start verse 21, you are jumping back and forth between two positions. What it actually and more literally says is, "How long will you limp on both sides?" That is, the illustration is of the people behaving as though they are lame in both legs and their weight can't be properly supported by either leg. So they shift uncomfortably from one side to other, and then back again, endlessly. They wanted Yehoveh in some ways, but they wanted Ba'al in other ways. But, when Elijah says, "Make a choice", the people stood silent.

The people wanted both. They didn't want to make a firm choice. They wanted to identify with Ba'al and they wanted to also identify with Yehoveh. Elijah told them that such is not possible. The Talmud explains that everyone knows that idolatry is a horrific sin, but one might rationalize that it is at least better that an idolater also has the Lord in his or her life rather than to exclusively choose to worship the ways of the world or to be totally pagan. But this is not true. When a person divides their loyalties, he or she can be led into a false sense of security that it is acceptable to God to observe some elements of paganism as long as some observation of the Biblical commandments is also present. Even worse it can not only deceive the worshipper but can lead others astray as well.

Another Talmudic thought is that a mixture of good and evil can do more damage than pure evil can by itself, because the good that one has learned or performed can lead one to think that one's sins can be balanced against that good and thus harmony with God will not be interrupted. Actually, what this comment is warning against, and what Elijah is demanding, is one of the fundamental Governing Dynamics of God. And so this principle is of course reflected in an often quoted NT statement.

<sup>KJV</sup> **Matthew 6:24** *No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon. (Mat 6:24 KJV)*

Unfortunately too many modern Christian denominations teach that with our modern intellectual abilities and advanced Western societies we can do exactly that. This is becoming popularly known in our time as the Emergent Church. It also goes by such nicknames as the I'm OK, You're OK Church, which teaches that when you read the Bible anything you take a Scripture passage to mean is acceptable and right; that essentially there is no absolute truth



there is only YOUR truth. And since Jesus is love, that anything we do in “love” is OK. And that since God loves His children, He would never punish us for our sins since we are saved. And that any belief, observance, tradition or activity that we attach Christ’s name to, no matter how pagan in its origin or how opposite of the Biblical commands, is now redeemed and therefore it is acceptable to God.

This kind of mindset is nearly identical to how these Israelites operated that were standing before Elijah. And he was there to try and get them to see the light, repent and change, but if they didn’t, then the consequences were (as we’ll soon see) death.

As we move along we find that for some reason the 400 prophets of Ashtoreth didn’t show up. Why we don’t know, but I don’t mind speculating that in some ways they were the smart ones. They had to imagine that if Elijah called them together, it sure wasn’t going to turn out good for them.

Verse 23 says that Elijah called for two young bulls that would be used as the objects of a test. The bulls were for sacrificing, something that was a common activity for pagan as well as Godly rituals. The Ba’al prophets were allowed to choose which bull they wanted for their sacrifice, and Elijah would take the other. This is interesting because the Hebrew gives us a little more information that is lost in the English translation. There are two spellings for the Hebrew word “two” (in this passage referring to the two bulls). And the two spellings create a slightly different meaning. The word in phonetic English is **shenayim**. However one spelling is Sheen-nun-Yod-mem **shenayim** and the other is Sheen-nun-Yod **shenayim** (no **mem**). The spelling used here is with the **mem**, and it means “two that are NOT the same”. The spelling with the **mem** added means, “Two that are identical”. So the two bulls were not the same (no doubt meaning they were of different quality).

Someone from among the Ba’al prophets chose, and then some of his underlings prepared it (meaning to slaughter it and probably cut it up in whatever manner the ways of Ba’al called for).

But underlying the test was this: you cannot light the wood under the bull on fire. Rather it has to happen supernaturally. Ba’al has to send down fire to kindle the wood for the sacrifice. Well the prophets agreed, and they began their rituals that included shouting, jumping up and down, all manner of chaos. They did this from morning until noon, but no fire came down. About that time **Eliyahu** started making fun of them and suggested that maybe Ba’al was indisposed on the toilet, or maybe he was taking a nap. So they screamed louder, and then began to cut themselves with knives until they bled.

The purpose for this entire affair was now becoming clear to one and all; God, through Elijah, would expose Ba'al and his prophets for the complete frauds that they were. The craziness now increased and went on and on and on until the late afternoon. Of course, nothing happened. Their firewood and the corpse of their dead bull laid there as silent witness to their futility.

We'll end with this thought. All that was happening was but a contrived spirituality, whose effectiveness existed only in the minds of the confused. What was happening was nothing but a cheap, meaningless cacophony of noise and whirling dervishes and hollow religious activities that the participants hoped would substitute for true worship and obedience of the true God of all things. It never has and it never will.

Let him who has the ears to listen, hear.