

THE DAY THE FIRE FELL: A CONFRONTATIONAL STORY (1 Kings 18:1-2, 17-40)

A 31-year-old mother who lives in Seattle took her kids on an outing to a local museum. As they were waiting in line to go into an exhibit, her 3-year-old daughter noticed a goth teen standing in front of them. This young man was fully decked out in a studded jacket, giant boots, chains, torn pants, and black makeup. Her daughter demanded to know, “Why does he get to wear his pirate costume out of the house?” Her mom answered, “I guess his mom said it was OK.” Upon hearing that, the little girl marched up to him and said, “Your mom is nicer than my mom; she won’t let me wear my pirate costume here.”

Back in the late 50’s and through most of the 60’s, Art Linkletter hosted a TV show entitled, “Kids Say the Darndest Things.”

I have an idea for a similar show. It could be called, “Grandma and Grandpa Say the Darndest Things.” Have you noticed that some senior adults lose their filter as they get older? They are at a point in life when they just say what they are thinking. Some may view their comments as inappropriate or maybe even offensive. Personally, I think they have earned the right to say what they want to say.

Most of us avoid being candid and blunt. We don’t want to ruffle any feathers; so, we soft pedal and skirt certain issues. We attempt to be diplomatic and oh so polite.

I have decided there are three groups of people who speak with rare honesty—the youngest among us, the oldest among us, and people from New York.

Twenty years ago, I was in NYC on a mission trip. My family and I arrived before the rest of the group. We went to an old church in Brooklyn where we slept in classrooms. The pastor and his wife met us. Moments after meeting him for the first time, he looked at me and said, “Your breath stinks.” He was right. It did, but I’m from Oklahoma; I’m not used to people openly commenting about such things. I explained, “Well, we just came from a restaurant where we ate Italian food.” He said matter-of-factly, “That’ll do it.”

There was a group of people in the OT who were not overly concerned with making sure people felt good about themselves. Regardless of what people thought or how they felt, the prophets faithfully delivered God’s message and simply stated things as they were.

One of those men was named Elijah. Although there is no book of the Bible named after him nor one that he authored, he is widely considered the greatest of the prophets. During a dark day in Israel’s history, he stood toe-to-toe with the king and spoke the unvarnished truth. In 1 Kings 18 we have recorded for us what I am calling, “A Confrontational Story.” This chapter contains a series of confrontations. They took place “The Day the Fire Fell.”

The story we are going to read comes from a section of the Bible that is known as historical narrative. The Bible is comprised of various kinds of literature. There is law, poetry, prophecy, and 43% of the Bible is historical narrative. That term simply means “stories that really happened.” There are no “once upon a time” stories in the Bible. The Bible tells us about things that happened in time and space. There really was a prophet

named Elijah who lived during the reign of a king named Ahab who was married to a woman named Jezebel. What we are going to read actually happened.

I heard a sermon on this passage preached by Albert Mohler, the president of Southern Seminary in Louisville, KY. He said that this story has everything in it that junior high boy might want. There is drama, adventure, action, fire, swords, blood, and bathroom language. It is one of the most well-known stories of the OT.

Dr. Mohler also said that historical narrative is difficult to preach from for some preachers because it doesn't lend itself to points. Preachers are used to preparing sermons that have points. "Here are three truths or three principles," the preacher will say. Stories don't come with points. The story itself is the point.

Jesus never said, "Here are three truths about God's love." Instead, He just told a story: "A father had two sons," and He told what we call the parable of the prodigal son. It is really a story about God's love for us as our heavenly Father.

Stories don't have points, but they do have movement. As we read this story, I am going to comment on the movement of the story. I will highlight the confrontations that show up repeatedly in the story.

Let's begin with 1 Kings 18:1-2.

The Confrontation of a Task and a Promise

In the first verse, God confronts Elijah. He gives him both a task to carry out and a promise to embrace. What we read in this verse harkens back to 17:1. One chapter earlier, God sent Elijah to King Ahab, and the prophet informed the king that it would not rain again until he gave the word. By saying what he did, Elijah dropped a truth bomb on the religion of both the king and his wife.

Let's take a moment to consider the kind of people Ahab and Jezebel were. We are introduced to them in 16:29-33. After Solomon's death, his kingdom split in two. His son Rehoboam was king over the southern portion of the kingdom which encompassed the territory of two tribes—Judah and Benjamin. The capital in the south remained in Jerusalem along with the temple of YHWH. The Southern Kingdom was known as Judah.

The Northern Kingdom, known as Israel, was comprised of the remaining ten tribes. They chose Jeroboam as their king. Jeroboam realized that his fledgling kingdom faced a real and present danger. The religious people would keep traveling back and forth from Jerusalem to the temple. This might endear them to the south. One day, they might go there and choose not to return. To solve this problem, he erected two golden calves. He placed one in northern Israel and one in the southern portion of his kingdom, and told the people, "These are your gods who brought you up out of the land of Egypt." Then, he built multiple temples and appointed priests to serve the religious needs of the people. He introduced pagan worship and idol worship that kept just a veneer of the Jewish faith.

Jeroboam was the first king of the Northern Kingdom, and Ahab was the fourth king. Ahab was Jeroboam on steroids. He popularized the worship of Baal.

It may be helpful to note that kings rarely married for love. They married for geopolitical reasons. They wanted to make an alliance with this king or that king, and to seal the deal, they married the other king's daughter. Sidon was a significant city on the eastern edge of Ahab's kingdom. The king of that city was Ethbaal. Guess who he

worshiped? It was common for the king's daughter to serve as a priestess. Jezebel was a priestess of the Baal religion, and when she married Ahab, she did everything she could to perpetuate the Baal religion in Israel.

Look at v. 33. Asherah was a goddess. Both Baal and Asherah were fertility gods. As such, their worship was highly sexualized. Gross immorality accompanied the cult of Baal and Asherah. The farmers worshiped Baal and prayed to him to bring the rain. Those who had herds would appeal to Asherah to cause their herds to multiply. Others would look to her to cause their wives to be fruitful. This verse gives us the author's estimation of King Ahab. Every king of the northern kingdom was evil, and King Ahab would have been at the top of the list.

By withholding the rain, God was showing that Baal, the storm god, was not in charge of the weather; He was. By the time we get to 18:1, it hasn't rained in Israel for more than 3 years. According to James 5:17, it was 3 years, six months.

Elijah has been in hiding all that time. Now, God wants His prophet to go see the king.

Has God every confronted you with an assignment? When God gives us a task to perform; He often couples it with a promise. That is what we find in the Great Commission. Our Lord told us to go and make disciples of all nations. Then, He promised, "I will be with you always to the end of the age."

We are going to skip down to vv. 17-19. We find here:

The Confrontation of a Charge and Counter-Charge

King Ahab had been looking for Elijah for more than three years. He had sent search parties all over his kingdom and to other nations as well. Finally, they meet face-to-face, and when they do, Ahab calls Elijah the troubler of Israel. He blames Elijah for the problems his nation has faced—a drought, failed crops, famine, the starvation, the death of countless animals because there was no hay to feed them. "It's all your fault, you troubler of Israel."

Elijah turns the tables: "It's not my fault. It's your fault. You are the one who has brought all these troubles upon your own nation. You are the one who has abandoned God. You are the one who has turned to false gods. You are the one who caused this nation to fall headlong into idolatry."

It's been said, "If we please God, it doesn't matter who we displease, and if we displease God, it doesn't matter who we do please."

You and I are well-aware that we are living in a nation far different than the one into which we were born. The societal ills our nation is facing are much deeper and widespread than we would ever have imagined. We see the unraveling of the family, runaway inflation, an explosion of crime, gender confusion among the young, a debt crisis, a border crisis, gridlock in government, falling church attendance, rising suicide rates, and the list goes.

Some years ago, Pastor Tony Evans wrote:

Now when God is your problem, then only God is your solution. If God is ticked off, it doesn't matter whom you elect or what programs you initiate. Until

His anger is assuaged, you won't be able to fix what's wrong or spend enough money to buy your way out of your dilemma.

In our country, we are playing the blame game. The left blames the right. The right blames the left. The non-religious blame the religious. The religious blame the non-religious. This group blames that group and vice-versa.

I want to go on record as blaming the church. Our nation is in the state it is in because the church has not been the church. Jesus called his followers are both salt and light. Salt preserves and light illuminates. Salt keeps meat from spoiling and light causes the vermin to scatter.

The church hasn't caused the problems our nation faces, but we have not stopped the problems because we have not been functioning as salt and light.

Elijah instructed the king to gather the people along with the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah. They were to meet him on Mount Carmel. Oddly, the king didn't ask any questions. There will be more than 850 of us, and only one of them. He found comfort in numbers.

We know that when God shows up, it doesn't matter who or how many is arrayed against Him.

Let's read vv. 20-24. The movement of the story goes forward with another confrontation.

The Confrontation of a Question and a Challenge

The prophet peered into the soul of the people and asked a searing question: "How long will you go limping between two different opinions?" The word *limping* carries the idea of hopping on one foot. It implies a person is leaning first in one direction and then another. The problem is the people were indecisive. They couldn't make up their mind. Elijah calls upon them to make a decision. "Cast your vote. Will you go with God or with Baal?"

A young man went into a card shop to buy a valentine card for his girlfriend. He told the clerk, "I am looking for something really special." She handed him a card saying, "This is our most popular." He opened it up. On the inside it read, "To the only girl I ever loved." He said, "That's great. I need six of the these."

Elijah is saying, "Decide and decide now. Don't put it off. Don't delay."

Look at the people's response at the end of v. 21.

One man wrote, "Silence isn't always golden. Sometimes it's just plain yellow."

We need the courage of conviction.

Elijah proposed a contest. "The One who sends the fire; He is the real God, the only true God." The people gave their thumbs up. They thought it was a good idea (v. 24).

Look now at vv. 25-29.

The Confrontation of an Attempt and a Fail

The prophets did everything they could to convince Baal to send fire and consume the sacrifice they made to him. They prayed; they cried aloud; they danced around the altar.

The author used the same word that Elijah had used to describe the people—limped (v. 26). This went on for hours, from morning to midday.

Eventually, Elijah started mocked them. “Cry louder. Maybe he is deep in thought. Maybe he has gone to the bathroom. Maybe he has gone for a walk. Maybe he is taking a nap. You need to cry louder to wake him up” (v. 27).

Verse 29 tells us the end result. “No one answered. No one paid attention.”

All their effort ended in a big fail. Those prophets got a big, fat zero because their god was a zero. Their god didn’t exist. He existed only in their imagination. When you pray to nothing, you get nothing.

When you multiply any number you choose by zero, the answer is zero. You can make the first number as big as you want, but once you multiply it be zero; the answer will always be zero.

Those false prophets expended great energy and went to great effort, but they were praying to nothing; so, that is what they got—nothing.

When you need him most, can your God answer you?

We come to the final movement. Look at vv. 30-40.

The Confrontation of the Answer and the Response

Elijah repaired the altar of the LORD. He decided to make it hard for God, so to speak. He dug a trench, a ditch around, the altar, flooded it with water until the trench was filled with water. If you want something to catch fire, you don’t make it wet, but that is exactly what Elijah did. He wanted everyone to know that this was a work of God. He didn’t want to be accused of flicking his Bic while no one was looking.

When all was ready, Elijah prayed a simply prayer. His prayer revealed what his motive was and what it wasn’t. His motive was not to bring glory to himself, to make himself well-known and revered. He wanted God to answer so everyone would know that God is the real God, and so that the people would turn back to Him (v. 37).

Elijah prayed a quick prayer. He didn’t shout. He didn’t dance. He didn’t cut himself. After praying his simple prayer, God answered—He sent the fire. Look at what God did (v. 38).

Then, look at what the people did (v. 39). After the fire fell, the people fell. Immediately, they recognized that YHWH is God, and they bowed before Him.

Verse 40 tells us what Elijah did. He made sure the false prophets were seized. He didn’t want them to slink away. The OT Law in Deuteronomy 13:5 prescribed that false prophets were to be killed, and Elijah made sure that happened.

I have a question for you to answer: Three frogs are sitting on a log. Two of those frogs decide to jump off. How many frogs are left on the log? The answer is three. Deciding to jump off and jumping off are two different things.

Deciding to follow God and following God are different things. God sent the fire. He showed himself to be the One, true God. Ahab saw what happened. Ahab did not start following God. Jezebel heard what happened. She did not start following God. None of the kings of Israel after Ahab followed God, not even one of them. In time, God allowed Israel to be destroyed and the ten tribes were scattered across the world. They are no more.

Will you follow God? Don't plan to follow God. Just follow God. Worship Him. Pray to Him. Read His word. Obey Him. Serve Him. Speak of Him to others.

Does the altar of your life need to be repaired? Has it fallen into disrepair because of disuse? Return to Him.