

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

April 7, 2019, Pastor Jeff Harrison

*Elijah: Finding God on the Hard Road*

**Choosing on the Hard Road** (1 Kings 18:16-46)

### **Introduction:**

#### **A. Refresh of last Sunday**

Let's ask God for help as we come to His Word...

Sometimes, as we journey through life, we find ourselves on the hard road. Sometimes the hard road is lots of smaller stresses, like I shared about last Sunday when over a couple of months our cars died five times and we had a couple of ER trips and the bills mounted.

Other times the hard road is way harder: a devastating diagnosis, chronic pain, a big mental health challenge, losing a loved one. We all, whatever our beliefs, spend time on the hard road.

Some of us are on the hard road this Easter season, feeling this tension of over pain, questions, and struggles, as we prepare to celebrate Jesus' resurrection. So this year, as we prepare for Easter, we're learning from the Old Testament prophet Elijah. It's because Elijah was no stranger to the hard road, and yet he found God there in amazing ways. We'll see this morning that God's Word has much to say about the choices we make on the hard roads in our lives.

So if you've got a Bible or Bible app, open to the Old Testament book of 1 Kings. If not, we'll have the verses on the screen. 1 Kings is the 11<sup>th</sup> book in the Bible, so more towards the front, if you get to Chronicles you've gone too far. And if you're new to reading the Bible, and the big numbers are chapter numbers, and the little numbers are verse numbers, and we're in chapter 18 of 1 Kings.

1 Kings 18 took place about 2,900 years ago. As we saw last Sunday, it was a bad time for the nation of Israel. After King Solomon died, the nation split into a northern and southern kingdom. Elijah was from the northern kingdom, which was on its seventh straight evil king, a man named Ahab, who married a wicked foreign queen named Jezebel. Together they led the northern kingdom in worshipping the false god Baal, which sometimes included things like child sacrifices and orgies, and they also murdered all the prophets of God they could find, prophets like Elijah.

So Elijah was already on a hard road. Then God called Elijah to confront King Ahab and say, “Drought is coming.” Baal, the false god Ahab and Jezebel led the people to worship, was said to be a sky god with power over the weather and fertility, so the promise of drought was a direct challenge to Baal’s power meant to show the people that God is the rain-giver.

So Elijah is a wanted man, and over the next few years, as the drought continues, Elijah continues on the hard road. First God sends him to a wilderness, where Elijah is totally isolated. But there God breaks through as he provides Elijah with water from a brook and food delivered from ravens and time alone to deepen his relationship with God.

Eventually though, the brook dries up, what Elijah depended on is now gone. And God then calls Elijah to travel over 100 miles as a wanted man and stay in evil queen Jezebel’s homeland and get help there from destitute widow. But God breaks through by providing safety and by supernaturally providing food for the dirt-poor widow, her young son, and Elijah. Eventually though, the road gets harder as the young son dies, the widow thinking that her sins led to her son’s death.

On the hard road, Elijah has seen God show up over and over, not in all the ways Elijah wants, but with everything he needs to accomplish God’s purposes. And so Elijah has been learning faith on the hard road, and that faith leads to him praying for something that has never happened before. Elijah prays for the young son to come back to life. And God again breaks through, returning life to the son and showing the widow that her sins were forgiven.

## **B. We choose where we’ll turn on the hard road**

Now God wants to use Elijah’s deep faith to impact the entire northern kingdom here in chapter 18. Like Elijah, and the widow, the people of the northern kingdom have also been on the hard road, facing a long drought and famine, with bad leadership. The people face a decision. On the hard road, where will they turn? We have the same choice, of where we’ll turn on the hard road. That choice has enormous consequences for ourselves and the people we love. So let’s learn from the choices of Elijah and the Israelites in 1 Kings chapter 18.

### **I. The choices on the hard road**

#### **A. Terms of the showdown (18:16-24)**

It’s now the third year of the drought, Elijah has been gone, but now God tells Elijah to return and confront King Ahab a second time. We’ll pick up the story in verse 16.

<sup>16</sup> So Obadiah went to meet Ahab and told him, and Ahab went to meet Elijah. <sup>17</sup> When he saw Elijah, he said to him, “Is that you, you troubler of Israel?” <sup>18</sup> “I have not made trouble for Israel,” Elijah replied. “But you and your father’s family have. You have abandoned the LORD’s commands and have followed the Baals. <sup>19</sup> Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel’s table.”

A few years earlier, Elijah told Ahab that drought was coming because of the false worship with evil practices and the murdering of God’s prophets. But even after seeing Elijah’s word come true with years of drought, Ahab’s heart has not changed. Rather than repent of his sin, Ahab accuses Elijah of being the troublemaker.

Elijah, having learned faith, is not intimidated by the cutthroat king or his false accusations. Elijah boldly tells the king that his evil leadership has brought the trouble and even commands the king to summon everyone to meet Elijah on Mount Carmel. It’s time for a showdown between Baal, the sky god with power over the weather and fertility and life, and the LORD God. Let’s imagine ourselves among the people of Israel, heading to Mount Carmel in verse 20 to watch the showdown.

<sup>20</sup> So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. <sup>21</sup> Elijah went before the people and said, “How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.” But the people said nothing.

In the drought and famine, the people have been wavering between Baal and God. The wavering in verse 21 can be more literally translated “limping between two opinions.”<sup>1</sup> The people’s limping back and forth between Baal and God on the hard road is leading to more struggle, so they’re going to have to choose where they’ll turn.

There’s no such thing as being neutral, everyone has something or someone they’ll eventually turn to for help, security, and meaning on the hard road. Even if you’re an atheist, you choose something or someone that is most important. If we put religious language around what is most important to an atheist, what you live for, we could call it your idol. For example, money can be an idol. If you’re on a hard road and think, “I’ll be happy and secure and find meaning when I have enough money to pay the bills and do everything I want and have plenty in

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, see the NASB translation note for 1 Kings 18:21.

the bank.” If that’s you, then money is your idol, it’s like your lower case g “god”. And as you continue to think that way, money will exercise a big influence over you.

Now unlike the ancient Israelites, none of us are tempted to worship the Baal idol today, but if we’re honest, even us Christians, very much including pastors, struggle with idol worship.

On Sundays we gather to worship the Lord, but as I heard seminary president Craig Barnes say it, when famine comes in our lives, we like to have a Plan B. A “Plan Baal” if you will, you know just in case. An idol where we can turn to find happiness and meaning and security, especially when God’s not working as we want on the hard road.<sup>2</sup>

Many things can serve as “Plan Baal’s” in our lives. We talked about money, another possible idol is a romantic relationship. If you’re a follower of Jesus telling yourself that you’ll only be happy and secure and important if you’re in a relationship, then that’s an idol. Idols of course are appealing for a reason, I get it, I struggle with them too.

Something like a new romance can be very exciting and feel life giving and our society emphasizes that it’s super important, and so it’s easy to start living for it rather than for God. And on top of those appeals, while we can’t fully control a new romance, we can manage it to some degree, unlike God, who is totally outside our control. When you’re on the hard road, it can feel good to have an idol you feel like you can manage to some degree, have some control over as life feels so out of control. And as the Israelites struggle between their idol and God, Elijah sets up a showdown starting in verse 22.

<sup>22</sup>Then Elijah said to them, “I am the only one of the LORD’s prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets. <sup>23</sup>Get two bulls for us. Let Baal’s prophets choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. <sup>24</sup>Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD. The god who answers by fire—he is God.” Then all the people said, “What you say is good.”

These verses give the terms of the showdown between Baal and God. If anything, the terms favor Baal, and the people agree to them. Remember, Baal was a sky god with power over the weather and fertility, and he has 450 prophets present, so surely Baal can hear their cries and be able to shoot a thunderbolt out of the sky that sets fire to the sacrifice.

### **B. Idols demand performance and harm (18:25-29)**

---

<sup>2</sup> A Craig Barnes sermon on 1 Kings 18 not only gave me this joke but helped me understand this passage better.

Elijah's bold faith continues as he next commands Baal's 450 prophets, who follow the orders of God's lone prophet in verse 25.

<sup>25</sup> Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose one of the bulls and prepare it first, since there are so many of you. Call on the name of your god, but do not light the fire."<sup>26</sup> So they took the bull given them and prepared it. Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. "Baal, answer us!" they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made.

Notice that the false prophets must perform. They don't assume Baal cares, they've got to yell and dance to try to get Baal's attention. That's true for our idols too, we've got to perform for them. If being really attractive is your idol, work goes into that, fashion and exercise and hair and skin care and so on, work that only increases with age. In the case of Baal's prophets, their morning-long performance isn't good enough, so in verse 27 Elijah challenges them to step it up.

<sup>27</sup> At noon Elijah began to taunt them. "Shout louder!" he said. "Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened."

Elijah, having seen the great harm that's come through Baal worship, sarcastically challenges Baal's prophets in front of the people. You guys should shout louder, Baal must be deep in thought, or perhaps he's busy, or maybe he's on the road now. Or I know, maybe he's sleeping, so yell louder to wake him up.

Some commentaries on 1 Kings even think one of the terms in verse 27 is a euphemism for defecating, so perhaps Elijah is even saying here, "Hey guys, you should yell louder, maybe Baal is going potty right now."<sup>3</sup> It's amusing, and also a sad irony. Rather than finally realizing their foolishness, the false prophets try harder to get their god's attention in verse 28.

<sup>28</sup> So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed.<sup>29</sup> Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.

---

<sup>3</sup> That perhaps *śîah*, "deep in thought" is equated with *śîah/śûah*, "to defecate".

The false prophets are now cutting themselves and bleeding and frantically yelling in a sad attempt to get Baal's attention. Idols often start by promising much and demanding little, but in the end, we bleed around their altar.

If we're convinced that only career success will make us happy, secure, and important, we'll eventually bleed before our idol's altar. A career idol may ask us to work so many hours that our health and close relationships bleed. Or our career idol may demand us to cut corners to be successful, and we bleed as we see others get hurt and dislike the person we're becoming. Or the company we've given everything to gets acquired and we bleed as we're unfairly let go. And then we bleed again as our career idol condemns us now as a failure, a nobody with no job. And even if we have a wildly successful career, we'll bleed as we discover that our idol can't provide the lasting happiness, security, and importance we crave.

Another sad irony in this passage is that the false prophets keep harming themselves before Baal's altar even though Baal was powerless to provide rain in the drought. Tragically, we also sometimes return to an idol that we've already experienced as powerless to provide something lasting. Like clicking one more inappropriate link or having one more one-night stand.

In the end, as verse 29 concludes, "there was no response [from Baal], no one answered, no one paid attention." Which makes sense, if we make sexual pleasure, or career success, or being attractive, or anything else into an idol, it's no more alive as a god than the idol statues of ancient times. A "god" we've made with our own hands is lifeless, so it can't answer when we cry out to it. In the end, a lifeless idol can't provide what we need, which the people of Israel begin to realize as Elijah invites them to worship starting in verse 30.

### **C. God shows Himself (18:30-39)**

<sup>30</sup> Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come here to me." They came to him, and he repaired the altar of the LORD, which had been torn down. <sup>31</sup> Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD had come, saying, "Your name shall be Israel." <sup>32</sup> With the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD, and he dug a trench around it large enough to hold two seahs of seed. <sup>33</sup> He arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces and laid it on the wood. Then he said to them, "Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood."

The LORD's altar here is in disrepair, a reminder of the people's poor spiritual condition. Elijah invites the wavering people to come near as he rebuilds God's altar. Having watched the 450 false prophets' crazed behavior, the people now watch the lone prophet make an altar with 12 stones. One stone for each of the 12 tribes of Israel, Elijah reminding the people whose they are. Then Elijah digs a trench large enough to hold 24 pounds of seed and prepares the wood and animal sacrifice. Then Elijah adds to this dramatic showdown by asking that four large jars of water be poured on everything. Verse 34 continues with Elijah asking for more water.

<sup>34</sup> "Do it again," he said, and they did it again. "Do it a third time," he ordered, and they did it the third time. <sup>35</sup> The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench.

So the altar is water logged, making it harder for everything to burn. Some skeptical that 1 Kings 18 really happened this way say that there's no way they would have poured that much water on the altar during drought. But Mount Carmel is not far from the Mediterranean Sea, with plenty of water. And remember there were thousands of people present, which makes it really hard to fabricate a story. Let's continue this story with so many eyewitnesses in verse 36.

<sup>36</sup> At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: "LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. <sup>37</sup> Answer me, LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again." <sup>38</sup> Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench. <sup>39</sup> When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, "The LORD—he is God! The LORD—he is God!" <sup>40</sup> Then Elijah commanded them, "Seize the prophets of Baal. Don't let anyone get away!" They seized them, and Elijah had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and slaughtered there.

Wow. In response to Elijah's simple prayer, no yelling, dancing, or slashing needed, God shows up. He reveals Himself to His wavering people in fire, burning up everything on the water soaked altar. And in response the people worship, falling to the ground and crying out that the LORD is God. Revival has come to Mount Carmel as the people worship. Baal's prophets, who led the people away from God and toward things like child sacrifice and murdering God's prophets, experience the destruction they brought on others.

#### **D. God graciously provides (18:41-46)**

Some think the fire that came from heaven was a lightning strike, which might be true, given what Elijah says in verse 41.

<sup>41</sup> And Elijah said to Ahab, “Go, eat and drink, for there is the sound of a heavy rain.”  
<sup>42</sup> So Ahab went off to eat and drink, but Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees. <sup>43</sup> “Go and look toward the sea,” he told his servant. And he went up and looked. “There is nothing there,” he said. Seven times Elijah said, “Go back.” <sup>44</sup> The seventh time the servant reported, “A cloud as small as a man’s hand is rising from the sea.” So Elijah said, “Go and tell Ahab, ‘Hitch up your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.’”

Every time Elijah speaks, others follow, even King Ahab keeps following Elijah’s words. While Ahab eats, Elijah repeatedly asks God to break the drought, and after seeing a tiny cloud, Elijah in faith tells Ahab, “You better hurry up and head home before it pours and your chariot struggles in the mud.” Verse 45.

<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile, the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain started falling and Ahab rode off to Jezreel. <sup>46</sup> The power of the LORD came on Elijah and, tucking his cloak into his belt, he ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel.

God graciously provides rain, and then Elijah’s amazing day concludes with God empowering him to win a half marathon race against Ahab’s chariot. Last week we found Elijah on the hard road, and there, as he kept walking with God and seeing Him show up, God was forming in Elijah a deep faith the Lord uses powerfully to bless the entire northern kingdom.

## **Conclusion:**

### **A. Let’s choose God on the hard road**

And so as we choose God, rather than our idols, on the hard road, we never know how He might delight to work thorough just one disciple, a modern day Elijah. It starts, as we, like the Israelites on the mountain, confess that God is God and stop limping between God and our idols. As we stop living as Christians on Sunday and as idol worshippers on Monday. When, even on the hard road, we keep turning to God rather than to idols who in the end can’t hear us or save us. Let’s not, like the false prophets, keep slashing ourselves, as was their custom, around idols who can’t save us. That’s our next step this morning, to choose God even on the hard road.

And if you're thinking, I know Elijah went through hard times, but his big prayers keep getting answered, so no wonder he has faith, I would too. If that's you, I hope you come back next Sunday as we see Elijah wrestle as God does not answer a huge prayer of Elijah's.

**B. The Lord's Supper reminds us why God is the One to choose**

And in the meantime, let's ask God to help us choose Him, even on the hard road, as we take the Lord's Supper and see one more thing from this passage.

In a minute we'll distribute the bread and juice for the Lord's Supper. If you don't yet know Jesus as your Savior, please let the bread and cup pass. Instead, won't you come to Jesus, trusting that He died for your sins and rose from the dead so that you can receive His forgiveness and love and become part of His people. That's the good news of the Easter season, that Jesus came and lived a perfect life, in your place, on your behalf, and then on the cross took the penalty for all your rebellion against God, for every way you've ever hurt people, for every good thing you've failed to do, for every wicked thought you've ever had. And then on Easter Sunday Jesus rose from the dead, showing His resurrection power over sin and death. If you've got any questions about that, I'd love to talk after the service.

And for Jesus followers, at Northwest we wait until all have been served the Lord's Supper so that we can eat and drink together as fellow travelers asking God to help us to choose Him, even on the hard roads of life. Let's pray... Ushers, please distribute the bread.

Amazing things happen in 1 Kings 18: Elijah's bold faith as he alone confronts the king and 450 prophets of Baal, and as they follow every one of Elijah's commands, as fire comes from the sky and sets the wet altar on fire, as revival comes, as Elijah prays away drought, as Elijah outruns Ahab's chariot, but perhaps most amazing of all is that God's fire of judgment didn't fall on the sinful Israelites.

As a commentary I read described it, God's holy fire on Mount Carmel instead fell on the 12-stone altar that represented the 12 tribes of Israel. This event looking forward to a mount outside of Jerusalem, where God's holy fire fell on another substitute Israel, Jesus, as He died on the cross for the sins of Israel and the whole world.

And like Elijah graciously came back to minister before Israel had turned to God, so Jesus graciously came to Israel and the world, before they turned to Him. God's mercy in

sending a renewing rain in the third year of drought pointing to God renewing the world as He raises Jesus on the third day.<sup>4</sup> That's what we celebrate at the Lord's Supper. That Jesus, in love, took God's holy fire of judgment for us, and then rose from the dead to bring all who believe in Him eternal life.

**Bread** - This bread represents Christ's body, broken for us. Eat it in joyful remembrance of Him. Now let's worship the One who took God's holy fire for us....

As we take the cup, I'd like to share something from Pastor and author Tim Keller. Keller, remembering how Baal's prophets had to slash themselves to try to get their idol's attention, notes that there's only one God who doesn't say, "Slash yourself for me". That there's only one God who was slashed for you.

Every other god demands that you preform, and in the end your blood runs. But with Jesus, He performed for us and then His blood ran for us.<sup>5</sup> And as you see Jesus give you freely what every other god says you must bleed for, it frees you to forsake your idols and choose our gracious God, even on the hard road.

**Cup** – This cup represents Christ's blood, spilled for us. Drink it in joyful remembrance of Him. And if you're on the hard road, or struggling with an idol, which is probably all of us, as I pray, I invite you to open your hands and receive from the Lord....

**Dismissal** – Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

---

<sup>4</sup> Leithart, Peter, *1 & 2 Kings*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible.

<sup>5</sup> From a Tim Keller sermon on 1 Kings 18.