

Elijah II

1 Kings 18

Introduction

It is a fundamental truth of our world that there are two ways men ultimately seek salvation and liberty. One is through the work of man, whether by seeking to gain favor with the true God by his works, or by setting up other idols which he thinks will satisfy his desires. The other is to seek it through the work of the Man, Jesus Christ, believing in Him and submitting to His Word and Lordship. This in turn reflects another fundamental truth of this world, that there is no neutrality, no common ground or middle way, between the worship of the Creator as He has revealed Himself in His Word and the worship of the creature instead (Rom. 1:18-23). Taken in the context of the rest of Scripture, the Mt. Carmel story demonstrates these two fundamental truths: there is no neutrality in this world and that salvation is thus only through the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

The Setup

Elijah had declared a drought on Israel because of their idolatrous worship of Baal (17:1). The Lord had then sent His word-bearer into the wilderness (17:2) and then outside of Israel to a Gentile widow (17:9). In the third year of the drought, the Lord tells Elijah to go back to Ahab, saying also that He will send rain (18:1). Elijah goes back to Israel and meets Obadiah, a God-fearing servant of Ahab (vs. 2-16). When Ahab and Elijah meet, Ahab calls the prophet the troubler of Israel, to which Elijah retorts that rather it is the king and his household that have troubled Israel because of their idolatry (vs. 17-18; cf. Prov. 11:29). Then he tells the king to assemble all Israel, the 450 prophets of Baal, and the 400 prophets of Asherah (Baal's consort) to Mt. Carmel. Ahab complies (vs. 19-20).

No Neutrality

At the top of Mt. Carmel, Elijah asks the people how long they will continue to falter (or limp, ESV) between two opinions (v. 21). If Yahweh is the true God, they should serve Him. If Baal is the true God, they should serve him. The implication is that they cannot both be the true God, and Israel cannot truly serve both of them. This is because there is no neutrality in this world. This is established from the first words of Scripture: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). We either worship the Lord, or we worship something else out of the lust and rebellion of our hearts. "The service of God and the service of sin, the dominion of Christ and the dominion of our lusts, these are the two thoughts which it is dangerous halting between" (Henry). As Jesus and the apostles make clear, you cannot serve two masters (Matt. 6:24, Rom. 8:6-7, James 4:4, 1 John 2:15-17).

So, Elijah challenges the prophets of Baal. They both would set up sacrifices without igniting them and call out to their God. "The God who answers by fire, He is God." And the people give their assent to the contest (vs. 22-25). The false prophets prepare their bull and cry out to Baal "from morning even till noon." But there was no answer from Baal. They even leap about the altar in a frenzy, trying to prompt Baal to respond, thinking it might make him hear better or take notice (v. 26).

Blood Is Required

Around noon, Elijah gets up to stir the pot a bit, mocking the prophets and their foolish prancing (remember also, there is a drought and famine, and Baal was the god of rain and harvest). He tells them to cry loud (as if they had not been), because Baal might be deep in thought, or busy in the outhouse, or on a journey, or sleeping soundly (v. 27). Elijah provokes them to further their pagan frenzy such that they cut themselves, pouring out their own blood and crying out until evening. Still, no god gave them attention (vs. 28-29).

The true God does indeed require blood for sin (Lev. 17:11, Heb. 9:22), and this is precisely why Jesus took on flesh and shed His own blood. He was cut and bruised and pierced in our place. Any sort of self-mutilation (e.g., cutting, genital mutilation) or cutting up of others (e.g., abortion) is diametrically opposed to worshipping the Lord (cf. Lev. 19:27, Deut. 14:1). There is no real satisfaction by shedding blood. You either worship the Creator or you worship the creature and its lusts. The prophets of Baal bled themselves seeking a response from the idol of their lusts. In Christ, though, you have been given the Holy Spirit, by whom you can simply cry out, “Abba, Father” (Rom. 8:15). And because of Christ and the Spirit in you, He hears you.

The contrast between Elijah and the prophets is stark. Elijah rebuilds an altar on Mt. Carmel with twelve stones, prepares the sacrifice, covers it all with twelve jars of water, and fills a trench around it with water (vs. 30-35). Elijah then prays that the Lord would hear him and cause the people to repent (vs. 36-37). God answers with fire from heaven (cf. Lev. 9:23-24, 2 Chron. 7:1-2), consuming the sacrifice, the stones, the dust, and the water (v. 38). The people fall on their faces, crying out that the Lord is God (v. 39). Elijah then takes the false prophets to the Brook Kishon and executes them (v. 40; cf. Deut. 13:1-11). And then, God brings the rain (vs. 41-46).

Conclusion

Was Elijah successful? He does not see great repentance in Israel. Rather, he soon after thinks he is the only faithful one left (19:10,14). The Lord tells him that in fact He has reserved a remnant of 7000 in Israel (19:18). But this is no great revival. That was not God’s plan. Instead, God intended a greater revival, greater repentance, a greater kingdom. Elijah’s victorious failure on Mt. Carmel was a piece of the story God was telling to bring about the salvation of the world. Elijah’s sacrifice pointed to what needed to happen, but it was insufficient to ultimately accomplish that task. Elijah set up a sacrifice to be consumed by God’s fire as a sign for the people. Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice who bore the wrath of God as the Savior of His people. His blood on the cross means there is nothing else you need to pay. There is no real satisfaction that comes from religious posturing or bleeding (like the dancing, cutting prophets). Jesus is the only way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). And so, covered by the blood of Christ, “present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, *which is your reasonable service*. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what *is* that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Rom. 12:1-2). There is no neutrality, and true freedom and salvation is only found in Jesus Christ.