

Sermon 27: The Question of Blessing Answered by Revelation, Part 1, 1 Kings 18:22-40

Closing Hymn: 91A

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The burning question that drives this whole chapter, if you remember, is the question of blessing. How can Israel get rain again? How can the blessing of prosperity return to God's people? The answer is that blessing can only come through Yahweh's sovereign decision to bless His people. It does not come through Baal. It does not come through manipulation, or trying to leverage Yahweh into something. It comes only through God's initial commitment to bless His people. The question for Israel, then, is ultimately not "How do we get rain and bread?" but "Who is the true God?" This whole chapter is organized around the replacement of the question of bread with the question of God. Blessing comes from recognizing who the true God is. But that question--who is God?--can be answered only by revelation. And thus, here we see God revealing Himself in answer to that question. He has determined to bless His people with rain, and therefore He reveals Himself to them as the true God and the only source of blessing, rain, and bread. In this portion of 1 Kings 18, we see God exposing Baal as non-existent and revealing Himself as the God who accepts the worship of His church and as a jealous God who brooks no rivals, whether they exist or not. *In revealing Himself as the only one who can bless His people, God reveals Himself as the hater of false worship and as the rightful recipient of true worship!*

Last week we saw how the narrative frames the question. Is the question of blessing a question of bread? Is it an economic question? No. It is a theological question. Who is the true God? That question, in turn, can only be answered by revelation. And it's God's self-revelation to Elijah and to the OT church that we see preeminently in this section of 1 Kings. What do we see about Yahweh's revelation?

I. Yahweh Exposes Baal as Non-existent, vv. 22-29

We see that Yahweh's self-revelation first takes the form of exposing Baal as non-existent. This too is a part of divine revelation. It is by the revelation of the true God that we know that false

gods do not exist! It is by reading the Scripture that we know we ought not to read our horoscopes or consult the augurs and the omens.

A. The Test Propounded, vv. 22-24

But in this case, God does not just offer us His word for it. He proposes through His prophet an empirical test. Let each group prepare to worship its deity, and the deity who answers by fire, let him be God! The people agree; they like this idea. Baal was supposedly the god of the storm and the lightning. So if he can shine anywhere, it will be here. Surely here he can strut his stuff!

B. The Test Performed, vv. 25-29a

So the 450 prophets of Baal get to work. Elijah warns them that they are not allowed to light the offering themselves. Indeed, his warning reminds me of what I read in a magazine once about arsonists. The best way to burn down a building is this: take a cigarette and two packs of those little cardboard matches. Tape the matches so that they touch the cigarette down near the filter end. Then light the cigarette, stash it in a pile of pillows, and walk away. Only the tiniest bit of smoke will escape; the cigarette will burn slowly for about ten to fifteen minutes, until down at the bottom it will ignite the matches, which will in turn ignite the pillows. Well, that's the kind of device Elijah was warning against. Don't hide a lit cigarette and a half-gallon of gasoline under your sacrifice, you cheating prophets of Baal!

Notice the superficial similarities of worship here. Both the Yahwist and the Baalites sacrifice a bull. Both of them use an altar and wood. Both of them have to pray. But the outward similarities common to all kinds of religious rituals should not blind us to the core difference. The Baalists had to manipulate and bludgeon their god into cooperating. And they didn't get an answer.

So Elijah mocks them in their attempts to get Baal to answer. Now, the question has to come up here: is this right? Did Elijah have the right to do this? Or was he carried away in his prophetic zeal? I believe that he was right to do so. There are a number of reasons I think this.

1. The people of Israel were believing in a foolish idol. They were not reasoned into Baal worship, and they would not be reasoned out of it again. Respectful conversation was not an option here, and mockery is sometimes the only way of communicating. The mockery was not intended to convert the priests of Baal, but to expose their folly to the less-committed Baalists in Israel.
2. Further, Elijah was not in any way misrepresenting the "beliefs" (if we can use that term; mythology is not theology) of the Baal-worshippers. This is no straw man. One Baal myth found somewhere in the Mideast records Baal's sister coming to his house to say hi. He's not home; he's out hunting, and so she doesn't get to see him that day. One commentator put it this way: legit priests of Baal could have made these exact same suggestions, without irony, in a Sidonian temple somewhere to explain why the ritual wasn't working. It is the context of theological truth about the Biblical God that makes the mockery funny--not any deliberate misrepresentation of what Baal ostensibly was.

3. God Himself mocks the futile and vain pretensions of wicked men. See the words of Christ in Proverbs 1:26, and the laughter of the Almighty in Psalm 2. See also the extended mockery of idolatry in Isaiah 44.

So Elijah, like God, laughs and jeers at the pigheaded stupidity of the deluded followers of Baal. He didn't do this to evangelize the priests of Baal; he did it for the sake of the church, so that God's people would embrace the truth.

Elijah was not violating the fifth commandment, which requires preserving the honor and performing the duties due to everyone in their several places and relations. He was not misrepresenting Baal. He was not required to honor Baal's priests as his superiors. In fact, as the prophet of God he had a duty to make crystal-clear the distinction between Israelite theology and Canaanite mythology. "Call him louder, *for he is a god.*" Thanks to our Biblical shaping, we know that a real God can always hear. We know that a real God is always paying attention. We know that the real God never slumbers or sleeps. We know that the real God always answers His children. The prophets of Baal did not deserve honor from Elijah as an office-bearer in the church of Jesus Christ. That would be like saying Pastor Allen is required to treat voodoo priests with respect, to be afraid of their black magic and to say, "His path to god is sacrificing a chicken and sticking a doll full of pins, and I respect that." If our pastor said that, we would rightly think that he had a faulty conception of the dignity of his office.

At this point, we need to glance briefly at the continued existence in our society of people who worship their false gods by means of cutting themselves and using physical pain to enter an ecstatic state. Many young people, even Christian young people, pursue this alternative form of worship by cutting themselves with knives and lances. Brothers and sisters in Christ, if you are doing this in secret, in the dark of night, or if you have friends who are given to this form of idolatry, there is hope. There is help. Jesus Christ died for this sin too, and His Holy Spirit gives power to stop this sin too. The first step is to call out to God for His help. The next step is to begin to think correctly about the sin of self-injury. It is not a harmless amusement or a safe emotional pain-reliever. Nor is it bad simply because of its health risks, though those are real enough. Ultimately, it is bad because it is the pursuit and worship of a false god. Whether that god is the god of emotional peace or the god of a thin, attractive self, or the god of control over a chaotic life, or some other god, the bottom line is that in cutting and slashing yourself, you are offering worship to one of the gods who is no god at all, but a demon.

Even worse than the sin of self-injury, usually pursued in darkness and hiding, is the more open practice of things like body modification, scarification, suspension from hooks placed through the skin, and other attempts to achieve a transcendence of normal human existence, normal human bodies, or normal human consciousness. All of these are manifestations of the same sin that the Baal prophets were indulging in as they leapt on their altar, gashed themselves, and entered an ecstatic state of prophesying from noon until the time of the evening sacrifice. You may be tempted by these sins. You may have friends and relatives who openly practice them. But family of God, these sins are off-limits for a Christian. These are ways of worshipping

the false gods of autonomy, of self-definition, of control in a chaotic world, and all the rest of it. Those who practice such things are openly declaring their allegiance to a false god.

C. Baal Fails, v. 29b

So despite the best efforts of his worshippers, Baal failed. There was no voice, no one answering, no one listening. The narrator makes it very clear that Baal was not sleeping or meditating; the reason he was a no-show was because he doesn't exist at all!

So Baal didn't answer. This is how Yahweh revealed Himself as superior to Baal; Yahweh is the one who exists, who hears and answers.

But just for one moment, before we go on, I want you to think about the time when God did *not* answer. Turn with me to Psalm 22:2. "O my God, I cry in the daytime, but thou answerest not; And in the night season, and am not silent." Why does God always answer you? Why do you not have to resort to the worship techniques of the Baalists? Because Jesus Christ was mocked for you. Because Jesus Christ was cut off for you. Because Jesus Christ endured the broken relationship and the silence of God that you so richly deserve. That's why. You don't have to pursue ecstatic experiences. You don't have to seek self-injury and body modification practices. You can rest content in the love of the true God who cut off His Son that you would be accepted, who didn't answer His Son so that He could answer you. That is the good news of salvation, and it is seen as glorious when contrasted to the impenetrable silence of a false god like Baal.

So Baal doesn't answer. Baal doesn't even send fire, much less rain. Baal doesn't accept the worship of his devotees. But Yahweh does. Yahweh reveals Himself as the God whose purpose of blessing will not be thwarted, the God whose purpose of blessing finds its ultimate fulfillment in the Incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of His only begotten Son. Baal doesn't accept worship; Yahweh does.

II. Yahweh Reveals Himself as the God who Accepts the Worship of His Church, vv. 30-39

Obviously, the most exciting thing in these next verses is the fire of Yahweh, falling from the sky and consuming everything. But though that is cool, and though we would all have loved to see it, its meaning is even cooler. What was Yahweh showing about Himself in His decision to send fire? Well, He was vindicating Himself over against Baal. That much is obvious. As I've said before, even a mainstream critical scholar can see that. But He reveals far more about Himself in these key verses. Indeed, I said that chapter 8 is the theological summit of the book. Now I'm not so sure; chapters 17 and 18 give it a run for its money. (So does chapter 19, as we'll see in a couple of weeks.)

A. Yahweh Reminds His People of their Unity and their Election, vv. 30-32a

The first thing Yahweh does is summon all the people to come up around the altar. Elijah finds the broken altar of Yahweh. Again, the symbolism is almost too perfect. Just as the whole idea of drone warfare, whereby you can deal out death in Afghanistan from an air-conditioned office trailer in Arizona, is almost too perfect a metaphor for alienation and the distancing between us

and life that warfare produces, so the whole idea that Elijah could step right over to the altar of Yahweh that was broken down is almost too perfect a metaphor for the truth that the worship of Yahweh had nearly perished out of the land of Israel. God had once been known and worshipped rightly--but His altar is broken. His worship has perished. His people no longer care about him. A ruined church is an evocative place, because it irresistibly reminds one of the worship that used to take place within it.

But now Elijah rebuilds the altar. He does it with 12 stones, according to the number of the 12 tribes of Israel. Was this a political point? Sure it was. The 12 stones in the altar was a rebuke of the very existence of the Northern Kingdom. But more than a political statement, this altar was a theological statement. In its broken state, it was damp with symbolism. In its repaired state, it positively dripped.

First of all, the 12 stone altar symbolized the necessity of coming to God as part of the church (12 stones = the whole of Israel). True worship is not something that is best done with you and your Bible; true worship is corporate!

Second, revival is ecclesial! The people's hearts would not be brought back individually; they would be brought back as part of the whole people of God. The same is true for our day. The success of ministries like Promise Keepers is in one sense God's judgment on the church. The church ought to be the one preaching to millions. The church ought to be one evangelizing and seeing mass conversions. God did not promise to bring the nations into the parachurch, but into the church! If we want to see revival, but we are not committed to strengthening the whole church, then our vision of revival is not Elijah's vision of revival.

Third, we need to notice how the narrator goes out of his way to remind us of that long night at Peniel, where Jacob wrestled with a man until the breaking of the day. What happened that night? Jacob wrestled with God, and thus, his name was changed to "Israel," meaning "the one who strives with God." Now, just as an aside, was that an accurate name? That's still the character of Israel after the flesh, and Israel after the Spirit too! We strive with God, don't we? I know I do. But back to the point: Jacob became Israel. What did that mean? Jacob was changed from a fleshly hustler and striver, a man whose name means "he cheats," to a God-dependent striver and hustler. He was transformed into a patriarch, a father of the faithful, during that long night at Peniel. In the same way, Elijah's altar is pointing to the fact that the church must recognize her character as a people dependent entirely on God's grace in changing her from people of the flesh (Jacob) to people of God (Israel). Once again, we return to the question of blessing. How will the church be blessed? By striving after the flesh? Or by submitting to God's electing love?

You see, family of God, these twelve stones remind Israel of her unity as the people of God, and of the reality that she acquired that status solely by the grace of God. Once again, God's initiative in blessing all the families of the earth through His elect people is clearly seen. Jacob hadn't christened himself "Israel." Oh no. It was the electing Word of God that had sovereignly chosen him for that role.

The same is true of the church today. The existence of apostate churches all around us is not a cause for self-congratulation. It is a cause of heartbreak. The syncretism with the dominant apostate culture that we see in the RCC and the UCC and many other godless churches is an attempt to undo God's election. Syncretism is the opposite of election; it is an attempt to blur the line between God's chosen people and the rest of the world. Elijah's task was to draw that line clearly. Only so could blessing come back to the people of God. God was making a distinction between His followers and those of Baal because of His overarching purpose to bless the land with rain.

We must recognize the unity and election of the church. We can no more write off the RCC and the UCC than Judah could write off Northern Israel. We must pray for the revival not only of the nation, but especially of the church! Our status as elect does not free us from concern about the rest of the body; rather, it demands of us that we too strive for revival across every denomination and sect of Christians. God's path to blessing leads through the restoration of the church as His one, holy, called-out people.

B. Yahweh Requires a Properly Prepared Propitiatory Sacrifice, vv. 32b-36a
Remember the cigarette-based arson device? Well, Elijah wanted to prove that he was not cheating. He prepared the sacrifice properly, in accordance with the regulations and sacrificial laws. Compare the language of Leviticus 1:7 and 12 with the language here. "And he put the wood in order, and cut the bullock in pieces, and laid it on the wood" (1Ki 18:33 ASV); "And the sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire on the altar and arrange wood on the fire.12 'He shall then cut it into its pieces with its head and its suet, and the priest shall arrange them on the wood which is on the fire that is on the altar.'" Notice when he did so--at the time of the evening sacrifice. The "evening sacrifice" mentioned previously was the one offered in the Jerusalem temple. In short, everything that was going on here was exactly in accord with God's regulations for worship. The water was simply an extra to underscore the fact that there was no cheating and no trickery; everything that was going to happen here at this altar was going to be because of supernatural intervention.

Now, why did Elijah set up the test to be about the God who answers by fire? Why not the god who answers by rain? Wasn't rain what the people needed? The fact of the matter is that before the blessing of rain could come, the curse of fire had to fall on the apostate people. But God in His mercy spared the people and revealed His flaming wrath from heaven on a substitutionary sacrifice. Because of the principle of substitutionary atonement wrath could be poured out on another, thus opening the way for God to bless His people. What was the Lord showing about Himself? That He requires a properly prepared propitiatory sacrifice. And that's what Elijah did. He was God's agent of revelation, showing that God's wrath can be satisfied.

In other words, the preparation of this sacrifice points to the preparation and sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ! Through His immolation on the cross He bore the wrath of God Almighty and opened the way for God's overarching purpose of blessing us.

C. Yahweh Reveals Himself in Answer to Prayer, vv. 36b-38

Well, God fully intended to vindicate Himself. He had set up this whole scene. He had condescended to present a sign to the people who ignored His word. He was not obligated to give this sign, but He did so out of the goodness of His heart. But now, in opposition to Baal the non-answering God He reveals Himself as Yahweh, the answering God, in response to the prayer of Elijah.

What does Elijah ask for here? He calls upon God as the God in covenant with the patriarchs and with His people Israel. He asks God to reveal four things:

1. That He is God in Israel
2. That Elijah is a true office-bearer
3. That God Himself arranged this test on Mount Carmel
4. That God gives His people repentance

In other words, this verse is the key to what's going on here. What is God revealing? He's revealing, in response to prayer, His status as the true God. He is answering the question of who is God in Israel. He is vindicating His prophet, and making it clear that this man who claims to speak the word of God is actually doing so. He is vindicating His wisdom in arranging the test and discrediting Baal. Elijah here mentions again his desire that the people would know that Yahweh is the true God, and concludes with a request that the people would understand that it is Yahweh who grants repentance. (That's the literal meaning of "turning hearts back.") In other words, we see in Elijah's prayer that for him, the most important thing was the relationship between the people and God.

Did God reveal all these things?

Yes, He did. He sent supernatural fire that burned downwards. Earthly fire rises and burns upwards. But this fire was clearly from God, as it burned from the top down. God reveals Himself not only as the true God, but as the God who accepts His people's worship. This supernaturally hot fire consumed everything around the altar. This fire could even burn water. That's not natural!

Brothers and sisters, this is our God. He answers. He shows Himself to be the true God.

Christ, on the other hand, was denied an answer and sign; He endured the silence of God. Do you worship and trust the Lord Jesus? Do you recognize that He endured the silence of God for your sake? Do you realize that if God seems to be silent now--if He doesn't answer by fire in order to show up all the atheist doubters who have set Him an ultimatum and given him 5 minutes to strike them dead--that things are no different than they were for Christ? Even when forsaken, even when enduring the silence of God, Christ believed. He still called out to God. He is the one who makes it possible for us to be reconciled to God. He is the one who shows us faith in the darkness. God gave signs like this to convert His people--but now the only sign He gives is His word and His church. Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have believed!

D. Yahweh's People Respond to His Revelation in Worship, v. 39

God reaching out to His people in revelation demands their response; Elijah could only pray for this response, while Christ could create it. God created this response, though: the people responded to God's self-revelation in worship. They recognized that He was the true God. They fell on their faces.

Is that your response to God's self-revelation? Are you blown away by what you see about the true and living God? Do you recognize that in His plan to bless you, God has revealed Himself and turned your heart back! And for you who do not believe who may be here tonight, cry out to God to turn your heart back. Don't say, "This is all fiction. Yahweh didn't really do that." Yes He did! He revealed Himself as the God who blesses Israel. He revealed Himself as the one with an unshakable purpose to bless His people. He answered the question of blessing by making it clear that His wrath would be appeased by a substitutionary sacrifice and that He would turn in blessing to His united people whose worship He loves. In short, brothers and sisters, Christ is the fulfillment of this passage. The Lord Jesus is the one who bore God's wrath so that blessing might come to the Gentiles. That's right: you can be reconciled with God, blessed in your undertakings, because God has sacrificed Jesus to the fire of His wrath. Because Jesus was burned up for you, you can worship and serve and enjoy God forever.

III. Yahweh Reveals Himself as a Jealous God, v. 40

But even in the midst of this revelation of blessing comes the revelation of God's curse on those who reject Him. The prophets of Baal, and their slaughter, are an integral part of this story. You can't leave them out. The word of God forces the issue. The Word requires you to decide. The word exposes your heart. When God showed Himself to be God in Israel, then false worship had to go. Whether that was the false worship of Baal, or of self-injury, or of images and crucifixes, or whatever else it might be, it had to die. In accordance with the law of God about putting to death those who led to false worship, the prophets of Baal were slaughtered. Not one of them was allowed to escape. The spiritual application to us is obvious: if you have truly seen Jesus revealed as the true God and the source of all blessing, then you will turn on your sin and slaughter it. Not one sin will be allowed to escape.

The reason you'll slaughter your sin is not because Elijah was a good guy and he slaughtered bad guys. You'll do it because the consumption of the sacrifice, and the slaughter of the prophets of Baal, revealed Yahweh as a God of justice and wrath, as a consuming fire. Our God is a consuming fire. He is a jealous God. His glory will not be shared, period.

Brothers and sisters, I want to leave you with this: The reconciliation in Christ is greater than this reconciliation; the judgment Christ will bring will be greater than this judgment.

"Christ will surely have His day of reckoning." What will it disclose? Will you be revealed as a devoted servant of Yahweh, or as a follower of Baal? Oh, people of God, I plead with you: be found in Christ on that day of reckoning. The fire has already consumed Him as a sacrifice on your behalf. Take shelter under His blood. If you don't, then the greater fire of everlasting judgment will consume you to the bitter end and beyond. The question of blessing

has been answered; blessings comes from taking refuge under the shadow of a mighty cross. That's what Elijah showed the people of God that day on Mount Carmel so long ago, and that's what you need to see tonight. Amen.