

“The Fight of Elijah”

Security, Peace and Fear – part #2

1 Kings 18:1-2, 16-21, and 22-39

[Title slide] *Welcome and prayer*

Last week we began a new series on Security, Peace and Fear. It doesn't matter what time of year it is, it seems that people are always wrestling with anxiety. We worry about the weather, our jobs, our finances, our relationships, and so forth. What we need to remember is the Bible promises that our security is ultimately found in God alone.

[scripture] Last week I highlighted **James 5:17**: Elijah was just like us; when he prayed, God answered. When we face anxiety and fear, remember prayer is the antidote. Elijah's prayers were powerful. He trusted God during a major drought, which came upon the people because of King Ahab, who led the whole country to abandon God and instead worship idols, specifically, the pagan god, Baal. If there was anyone who knew about anxiety and prayer, it was Elijah.

[idol worship] Elijah's anxiety was mainly caused by his people's idolatry. Maybe we don't personally struggle with idolatry today, but I submit to you that any time we invest extraordinary amounts of time into something at the expense of our relationship with God, that is an idol. It can be sports, internet (guilty!), our bank accounts, or even just our fears and anxieties themselves. When we focus on fear instead of faith, that becomes idolatry.

[Elijah, the people, and the idol] Elijah and his people did not have internet or a 401k, but the Israelites definitely struggled to trust in God alone. They were all farmers. They needed rain. What if the rain never came? Of course they were tempted, and Ahab led them astray.

[Ahab and Elijah] The first thing I notice in our scripture is Ahab blaming Elijah for the drought. We often misplace the blame when we are responsible for our own situation. Ahab blamed Elijah; after all, Elijah prophesied the drought. But the king was wrong: the drought was God's response to the evil done by the king and his people. They abandoned God, and so, in a tough-love kind of way, God withheld the rain. Elijah told them, unless they turned back to God, the rain would not come.

[Elijah and the people] Confronted on Mount Carmel, it appears that the people did not know what to do. Elijah asked them, point blank, whom they would serve. “How long will you waffle between two gods? Pick one!” (See verse 21). Yet the people made no reply. Even when faced with a decision, their apathy, or maybe their fear, got the better of them.

Why did they worship Baal, anyway? Were they hedging their bets? Maybe Yahweh controlled the rain; maybe he did not. If so, surely it would not hurt to worship the pagan god, Baal, too? When the rains did not come, they were desperate to pray to any god; it did not matter to them. But of course, it mattered deeply to God.

[scripture] Let’s read a little further. **(1 Kings 18:22-25)**

[Elijah and the people] Finally, the crowd reacted. Elijah offered up an unbeatable deal, low risk, high reward. Set up two altars, and whichever god lights the fire under it, wins. Elijah, by himself, challenged 450 prophets of Baal. Oh, and by the way, Baal was the god of the sun and thunderstorms. This is what you call “home-field advantage.” I’m not a betting man, but if I were an early Israelite, I’d back the home team, Baal and his 450 prophets, not Elijah.

[scripture] Let’s read on to see what game plan the prophets of Baal used. **(1 Kings 18:26-29)**

[false prophets] I give them some credit. Dancing and shouting, with sincerity. These prophets were no slouches. They sincerely believed that Baal would answer them. And here is the second lesson this scripture teaches us. Just because we believe something sincerely, does not necessarily make it true. As wondrous as our God-given emotions are, sometimes, we just make mistakes. You. Me. All of us. Sincerity is nice, but we should look at things like scripture, reason, tradition, and experience, as our founder John Wesley taught. Even logic, experimentation, history, and observation will yield better results than pure sincerity and intention. I can sincerely believe that I can fly, but someone hold me back I try to jump off a bridge! We need to use all of our powers of discernment.

[Elijah taunts] I love how Elijah taunted the false prophets. “Shout louder! Maybe Baal is sleeping.” Some commenters even suggest Elijah was insinuating that Baal was in the bathroom. There is a great irony here: Baal’s prophets

believed that in many ways, their god was like a human. Elijah threw their false religion back in their faces.

Baal’s prophets failed the test. Like any crowd, when the show was over, the people all turned away, pretty much not caring. Next, they probably wanted to see Elijah fail. Maybe they would find a new god when the test was all over.

[scripture] But God has other ideas. Let’s read on. **(1 Kings 18:30-35)**

[Elijah pours water] Notice a few things here. First, Elijah called the people to him. He did not seem particularly mad anymore. If anything, I feel compassion in his words. The people had their chance to follow Baal, and it amounted to nothing. Now he showed them what true worship looks like. With the people looking on, he repaired the altar with twelve stones – one for each tribe – a reminder that God is a God of promises.

And then, to prove this is not a hoax, Elijah had them pour gallons and gallons of water over the whole altar. That is pretty bold. Not only did the people not expect God to show up, Elijah made the job even more impossible.

Do we pour water on our prayers? Do we believe in the impossible? I think sometimes we are like the Baal worshipers, hedging our bets, saying, “Look, God, if you do such-and-such, great, but if not, here is my back-up plan.” Elijah had no back-up plan. He just had his faith in his God, and, despite the crowds, the faith and knowledge that he was doing the right thing.

[scripture] So this is what Elijah prayed: **(1 Kings 18:36-37)**

Notice how short and simple his prayer is. The false prophets jumped and shouted and danced for hours – all 450 of them! Yet Elijah simply laid out his plea: “God, you are God, and you are faithful. Vindicate me, and turn the hearts of the people back to you. Amen.”

[scripture] Of course, God answered. This is my favorite part. **(1 Kings 18:38-39)**

God sent fire down, not only to consume the sacrifice, but the wood, the stones, and literally the dirt around it. That was one hot fire! It was a miracle that the people were not also fried, if the stones melted in the heat. This dramatic display of power left only one response: they all fell on their faces and cried, “The Lord is God!” “Yahweh is God!”

[Lightning] Lightning is amazing. I get a little thrill being near a lightning strike – close enough to observe it, but not close enough to be harmed by it. The flash and boom are awesome. The thing is, though, we forget how awesome God is. We think, “I will trust God a little, but let me keep a backup plan in case God does not show up.” We think, “God, I trust you, and I believe in you, but if something else important comes up and prevents me from worshiping you, well, you’ll understand.”

So what do our actions say? “God, you’re second place.” And while I don’t believe God is going to curse us with a three-year drought, I do believe that we fail to see the “lightning” - the signs of wonder. We fail to experience the blessings of the God Almighty because we have not fully given our allegiance to him.

[Praying hands] The Lord is God! That means, sadly, that I am not. I cannot be first in my life. I cannot even be first in my church! This place is God’s altar, not mine. Interesting, isn’t it, how Elijah spent all that time building an altar, and God destroyed it? Elijah was out of business after one display.

It can be tempting, too, in our church, to say that this is the altar we are building for God, when it is just something we are doing for our own egos. It does not matter if you are the pastor, band leader, usher, greeter, or children’s minister, if your ministry is not about God, watch out. If 450 prophets dancing and shouting with all their might do not impress God, neither will our efforts. Instead, God wants our hearts. God wants our passions, our priorities. God, the One who brings fire from heaven, who controls the rain, he alone is God. If God is not your number one priority, watch out!

Here is the beautiful thing about this passage. God did not wait for the people to return; God sought them out. God showed up. And I promise you, as prophetically as I can, God still does the same today. God answers the prayers of the righteous person, because a righteous person prays according to God’s will. You can pray that your team will win their game, and I’m sure God will listen, but the game is probably not on God’s radar. Yet if you pray for someone to be released from anger, addiction, hurt, pain and worshiping false gods – now, that’s God’s will. Pray that someone will confess their sin and accept the free gift of salvation offered through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ the Lord,

become a man or woman of God and seek him in all that they do. That's a righteous prayer! And when God answers that prayer, it will be more amazing than fire falling from heaven, because without God's action, it was completely impossible. With God, anything is possible. (Matthew 19:26)

[title slide] Church, let's pray righteous prayers. Let's pray for our world. Let's pray for our community. Let's pray for our neighbors. Let's pray for peace that seems impossible. Let's pray for the end of addiction and anger. Let's pray for God's holy fire to fall from heaven like it did at Pentecost and ignite believers around the world, starting in this very church. Let's not dabble between two opinions any longer. Let's worship God, and only God, and let our prayers reflect that faith.

Memory Verse: Psalm 141:2

"May my prayer be set before You like incense,
my uplifted hands like the evening offering."

Reflection Questions

1. What types of modern-day idolatry are hard for you to give up?
2. When has a prophetic voice challenged you, your actions and decisions?
Did you listen to them or ignore them?
3. When have you felt tempted to rely on something else other than God?
4. What is the most outrageous prayer you have ever prayed? How did God answer it?
5. Pick an outrageous prayer right now and talk to God about it.