

# Succession | Good News from Bad Kings

## "The Showdown (The Two Opinions)"

1<sup>st</sup> Kings 18.17-40

11.12.23

*When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, "Is this you, you troubler of Israel?"<sup>18</sup> He said, "I have not troubled Israel, but you and your father's house have, followed the Baals."<sup>19</sup> "Now then send and gather to me all Israel at Mount Carmel, together with 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of the Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table."*

*<sup>20</sup> So Ahab sent a message among all the sons of Israel and brought the prophets together at Mount Carmel. <sup>21</sup> Elijah came near to all the people and said, "How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him." But the people did not answer him a word. <sup>22</sup> Then Elijah said to the people, "I alone am left a prophet of the LORD, but Baal's prophets are 450 men. <sup>23</sup> "Now let them give us two oxen; and let them choose one ox for themselves and cut it up, and place it on the wood, but put no fire under it; and I will prepare the other ox and lay it on the wood, and I will not put a fire under it. <sup>24</sup> "Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD, and the God who answers by fire, He is God." And all the people said, "That is a good idea."*

*<sup>25</sup> So Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose one ox for yourselves and prepare it first for you are many, and call on the name of your god, but put no fire under it." <sup>26</sup> Then they took the ox which was given them and they prepared it and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon saying, "O Baal, answer us." But there was no voice and no one answered. And they leaped about the altar which they made. <sup>27</sup> It came about at noon, that Elijah mocked them and said, "Call out with a loud voice, for he is a god; either he is occupied or gone aside, or is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and needs to be awakened." <sup>28</sup> So they cried with a loud voice and cut themselves according to their custom with swords and lances until the blood gushed out on them. <sup>29</sup> When midday was past, they raved until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice; but there was no voice, no one answered, and no one paid attention.*

*<sup>30</sup> Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come near to me." So all the people came near to him. And he repaired the altar of the LORD which had been torn down. <sup>31</sup> Elijah took twelve stones according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD had come, saying, "Israel shall be your name." <sup>32</sup> So with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD, and he made a trench around the altar, large enough to hold two measures of seed. <sup>33</sup> Then he arranged the wood and cut the ox in pieces and laid it on the wood. <sup>34</sup> And he said, "Fill four pitchers with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood." And he said, "Do it a second time," and they did it a second time. And he said, "Do it a third time," and they did it a third time. <sup>35</sup> The water flowed around the altar and he also filled the trench with water.*

*<sup>36</sup> At the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, Elijah the prophet came near and said, "O LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, today let it be known that You are God in Israel and that I am Your servant and I have done all these things at Your word. <sup>37</sup> "Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that You, O LORD, are God, and that You have turned their heart back again." <sup>38</sup> Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. <sup>39</sup> When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, "The LORD, He is God; the LORD, He is God." <sup>40</sup> Then Elijah said to them, "Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape." So they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon, and slew them there.*

**We've been looking at the period of the Monarchy (Kings) and the divided nation in ancient Israel. Today we come to a very famous episode where King meets Prophet, and a showdown takes place. Within the**

narrative there are two very famous quotes: v. 17 where the king asks the prophet, *“Is this YOU, you troubler of Israel?”* AND in v. 21, *“How long will you hesitate between two opinions?”*

And these two quotes (17 and 21) are strangely pertinent to our day when you can be labeled a troublemaker for saying or stating things that are true. It’s the case on both sides of the political spectrum. I heard Billy Bob Thornton’s Emmy award acceptance speech...something like, *“Well, seems like ya’ get in trouble today for saying anything...so, I’ll just say ‘Thank you.’”* And he walked off stage. Even people who are kind and tactful can be labeled troublemakers for stating *“inconvenient truths”* (Al Gore).

There’s a law of logic called the Law of Non-Contradiction, that contradictory statements cannot both be true in the same sense at the same time. But it seems often ignored so that halting or hesitating between two positions that are clearly contradictory is seen as virtuous.

Today, I’d like to show that this ancient passage offers real help to modern people as we try to navigate life in this environment. It IS possible to *“speak truth in love”* to sometimes see and say that there are only two ways to look at a certain issue and I’m convinced only ONE is true. It’s possible to get in *“good trouble”* (John Lewis of Rosa Parks). **Let’s look at three approaches to truth and truth-telling:**

- 1) The Way of Syncretism**
- 2) The Way of Imperialism**
- 3) The Way of the Gospel**

Syncretism is the attempt to blend the two systems of belief. Sometimes it’s a deliberate attempt to do this (e.g., Sikhism is a religion that attempts to combine Islam and Hinduism) AND there are informal ways to syncretize systems of belief as when a Christian says, *“In the next life I’d like to be a bald eagle.”* I realize that’s often said as a joke... as long as we see that Reincarnation and Resurrection (i.e., Hinduism and Christianity plainly contradict one another on the topic of an afterlife).

In ancient Israel, it wasn’t so much a deliberate thing as an expedient thing (often the case). Inwardly the real idols were peace, prosperity, safety, popularity with the people. Ahab married Jezebel (the Phoenician Queen) to secure peace with a neighboring country.

And with Jezebel came Baal-worship. Her father was a priest to Baal and Baal was, again, sometimes worshiped by making human sacrifice especially children (Jer 19.5).

No real thought seems to have been given as to whether Baal was real or true – Baalism made sense politically. *“THEY have their religion and we have ours and to partner with THEM and count on them to stand by us in a war, WE have to adopt their gods and their way of approaching their gods. SO, even though Israel’s God, and Israel’s worship was fiercely MONOTHEISTIC, and their central creed was, “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is ONE!”* (Deut. 6.4) and that means, *“Ya can’t have TWO”* – but that inconsistent, irreconcilable disagreement was ignored.

Judaism was based on the core belief of the self-giving of the ONE true and living God (Schaeffer: *“The God Who Is There”*) who came down and revealed Himself to Abraham. An objectively real God who exists outside of me and exists whether I believe it or not and who rules all nature and all things.

The religion of the Baalites was based on human attempts to figure out the forces of nature and to personify those forces – the wind god, the war god, the sea god, the fertility god and then to influence the powers, to control the forces of nature by giving them valuable things. Paganism and, in fact, ALL HUMAN formulations of religion or spirituality are TRANSACTIONAL. The worshiper gives enough until finally the deity responds.

And to TRANSACTIONAL religion, Elijah, the spokesman for Israel’s God brings the Word of the Lord: 1) he diagnoses the real disease 2) he proposes a treatment 3) Elijah applies the treatment.

FIRST, he says (BY the Word of Yahweh), *“You’ve put aside thinking and rationality and truth in order to get what you really want (i.e., safety and security and prosperity). But I’ve been sent by God to show you that truth is what we really need here. You’ve become absurd, believed an absolute contradiction, believed two contradictory realities and acted like that was perfectly OK.”*

So in verse 21 Elijah addresses the chorus, the people, *“How long will you stagger between two positions? If the Lord is God follow him, but if Baal is God follow him.’ But the people did not answer him a word!”*

They thought the problem was security – they thought the trouble was no rain. Elijah says *“the trouble is spiritual absurdity – the death of truth!”*

SECOND, he proposes a treatment meant to highlight the differences. And when he proposes this showdown (a way of making truth the issue), when he describes the contest, the people start to come out of their hypnosis (end of verse 24) *“That’s a good idea!”*

THIRD, the test is applied. The Baal prophets are *“workin’ it.”* They generate what Baal requires, *“OOO-h-h-h Baal! OOOOOOH-h-h-h BAAL.”* And they do this morning to NOON! *“They think they will be heard for their many words”* (Mat 6.7) BUT, there was NO VOICE... and no one answered! And they jumped around the altar which they had made.”

This is perhaps the clearest place in the entire Bible where you see the essential character of Baalism AND the essential nature of all man-made religion. This raw, unvarnished form of Baalism IS the essence of all religion and spirituality – it’s the worshiper *“workin’ it”* – trying to get the deity to move. Trying to deserve something from the deity. Religion is about putting the deity in debt to me – so he’s forced to bless me, protect me, save me.

And weak Elijah (remember last week?) weak Elijah wants everybody to see this quality of human religion, so he highlights it using humor – HE’S THE COURT JESTER! Verse 27: *“Call out louder – maybe he’s in the bathroom* (most commentators give that as a possible or even probable translation ESV & NLT *“relieving*

himself”) *maybe he’s out on an errand... or taking a vacation; maybe he’s sleeping and needs to be awakened.*”

It's as if Elijah, the Jokerman, appeals to them, “C’mon, guys! Why not just admit it – Baal is your own invention – he’s only an extension of your own psyche! He’s only humanity with the volume turned up – a Superman! And not very super at THAT!”

By using these very human qualities of weakness Elijah’s basically telling them their god is nothing but a projection of their own humanity. Their anthropology is too high, and their theology is too low. It’s exhausting.

But they go on and on and finally start screaming and raving and cutting themselves, desperately showing that they’re so serious, so sincere. Again this is raw religious spirit exposed – just as Elijah wanted. And still (v. 29) *“no one answered, no voice and no one paid attention”* NOTICE: Elijah’s calling the shots and everyone is sort of mindlessly doing whatever he says because they have nothing – no revelation – no word from beyond, only guessing, “shootin’ in the dark”!

And finally, Elijah builds this simple altar... representing the twelve tribes (not just the northern tribes). He dowses everything with water. He really stacks the deck against himself, just as God had shown him when Elijah visited the widow in Zarephath. Elijah shows what he learned: *“this is not about my effort/ability to bring God down (Romans 10.6-8) to control or manipulate God. It’s certainly not my effort to make a god OR my ability to please ‘the God who is there.’”*

And after Elijah does everything he can to get himself out of the way, to show and to emphasize the difference between religion and revelation, he then prays a very simple, short prayer (THEY’ve been praying all day long many repetitious and showy words) but God’s prophet, simply says *“Lord – show up – show that You are the ONE living God, that Israel is Your people, chosen ONLY on the basis of YOUR grace NOT OUR deserving. SHOW that I am Your servant not speculating or groping in the dark but authorized by YOU to speak. Yahweh, take credit for turning our hearts back to You.”*

The fire fell on that altar that represented Israel’s 12 tribes and everything burned up (Elijah baptized Israel with water but One greater than he with baptize Israel with fire and the Holy Spirit - Mat 3.11 [TY2JF]) And the people saw the difference and saw that there can be no mixture (verse 39) *“... They fell on their faces and said, ‘Yahweh, He is God! Yahweh, He is God!’”*

So, that’s syncretism. It’s usually driven by an attempt to GET something deemed necessary to one’s fulfillment (more important than the truth) and often requires a leap into absurdity and non-reason.

Now what about IMPERIALISM (I’ll be much briefer here)? Spiritual imperialism is the attempt to dominate people and force them to convert to one opinion or another. Mostly it’s motivated by a quest for power. This was the criticism leveled at all religion by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century atheistic philosophers Marx, Freud and Nietzsche.

You might ask, “Where is *THAT* in this passage?” Well, it’s NOT where you THINK it is and it IS where YOU DON’T THINK it is.”

You think it’s in the last verse – they execute all the people who held to the wrong opinion. Isn’t that forced conversion...using religion as a weapon to convert people?

No. There was no conversion here. These people (the prophets of Baal) were so obstinate and inflexible and corrupt and addicted to Jezebel’s table (v. 19) that even the obvious miracle and action by God would not move them. They would have continued perpetrating what was now fully exposed as a big spiritual con game. And since, in their case, this brand of pagan worship often employed child sacrifice, and since they were clearly unwilling to stop it, they couldn’t be allowed to continue. This isn’t spiritual imperialism. It’s capital punishment visited on willful murderers and deceivers (they’re the “*Smiling faces lying to the races*”).

The real spiritual imperialism here is with the prophets of Baal. It looks like these con-artists are so open-minded and tolerant and that they’re willing to accept Judaism – “*Why-can’t-we-all-get-along?*” But note that they’re weirdly insistent on THEIR brand of tolerance. “If you’re not tolerant in JUST the way we say, we WON’T TOLERATE it!” (Remember, their sugar-mama, Jezebel, had been killing the prophets of Yahweh long before this episode).

See, often there’s just as much intolerance, self-righteousness and arrogance in the super-open-minded as in the religious fundamentalists. As someone has said, “It all depends on what IS the fundamental?” And IF your fundamental belief is the absolute sovereignty of a TRULY LOVING and self-sacrificing God, you CAN’T be ugly, unkind and arrogant to your opponents because you’re negating your fundamental beliefs.

And that brings me to the Gospel (the basic message of Christianity). It’s different from religion in THAT it actually claims to have come down from God – revelation. You see it here: the God who comes down. He came down (v. 36) “*to Abraham, Isaac and Israel...*” He can’t be coerced by our sacrifices or bribes or even our obedience. He comes to the weak (as we saw last Sunday), those who are lost and confused and who can’t find Him... or perhaps don’t even want to.

He comes to the clueless like the people (the chorus) in v. 21, “*But the people did not answer a word.*” He comes to people staggering between two opinions – He’s the God of grace who comes down.

HERE, He makes a representation of Israel, an altar, an effigy, an image, a substitute of His own guilty people and He gives to the effigy what His unfaithful people deserve – fire. Justice. Death. Israel is REPRESENTED by the altar.

And, of course this reminds us of another Showdown on a hill outside of ancient Jerusalem when the fire of God’s justice fell on the One who represented ALL the tribes, people, tongues and nations of planet

earth (Rev 5.9). God Himself came down in the Person of Jesus Christ – we can't work it to get to Him – HE CAME DOWN TO US.

AND because God came down to me – I didn't get to Him by jumping around or praying hard enough or long enough or fervent or zealous or passionate or sincere or authentic enough. I WAS not (and AM not – present tense) loving enough or tolerant enough. *"While we were yet helpless, Jesus Christ died for the UN-godly"* (Romans 5.6)

AND because I can take absolutely NO credit for finding God or for this sacrifice that saves me – God came down to ME! God gave His Beloved Son for me and by His Spirit somehow got past my defenses and liberated me to see my need and His total sufficiency ... when I see and feel and get a sense of it on my heart, then I MUST look at people in this or that religion and I'm free to admire their devotion or their morality and perspectives.

I can respect them, in fact, I must. As St. Peter wrote, *"set apart Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and respect"* (1 Pet. 3.15) I don't want to negate my message by my METHOD.

God came to me in weakness. He convinced me like He granted repentance to the clueless chorus in today's passage – He convinced me by His giving an Altar, a Sacrifice to take the fire of justice I deserved. He convinced me by Jesus Christ rising from the dead – proving that all my sin was burned up completely.

Because GRACE came down to me, I can and must avoid any holier-than-thou judgmental spirit, like "I found God – why haven't YOU?!" No, I was one of the clueless chorus, weak like Elijah. God's grace found me out.

And since this grace that comes down really IS thē Big Difference between Christianity and every other spiritual or religious or moral or self-help program or approach, I want people to know about it. It's GOOD NEWS! Why would I want to hide it? I want to tell the difference; I want to point them to the Real Showdown that set me free.

And if you're listening to me now – I want it for you.

Think for a moment: if Jesus Christ lived, died and rose from the dead... wouldn't you want to know?

Won't you trust the grace that comes down more than you trust your flimsy morality and comical effort? You may think I'm a troubler, but I still have to say, "C'mon, why hesitate between two opinions? If Jesus Christ rose from the dead – then believe Him, if not, then don't." We'll not get another, greater sign of God's existence and love than that!