

## **Lesson Four: I Kings 18**

(If Discussion is good, it is likely that this lesson will need to become two lessons; it would be better to fully explore this lesson and skip a later lesson or combine two later lessons if necessary)

**Objective:** I Kings 18 brings to the forefront the main choice we all face in our lives:

Who will we follow? We will contrast Elijah's obedience and trust in God with Obadiah's desire and fear to follow God completely. We will discuss how we relate to each of these men in our own desire and ability to trust and obey God.

On Mount Carmel, the people are unwilling to decide who they are going to follow until Yahweh proves Himself to be who He says He is. We will discuss what other gods we are tempted to put our faith in and why it is so difficult to choose to trust and follow ONLY God. We will also discuss where we put our trust and how our lives would look differently if we completely trusted God.

We will read about what God does on Mount Carmel, the power that He shows as well as the mercy He shows in sending rain - even though His altar is ruined and His people cannot decide if He is the only One for them to follow.

### **Read I Kings 18:1-2**

A long time has passed since the drought came, Israel is now into the third year.

According to Canaanite mythology, any rain at this point would have been a sign of

Baal's resurrection. But there has been no rain through at least one full cycle of seasons.

In the third year of the drought, the word of the Lord comes to Elijah telling him to present himself to Ahab, telling him that rain would come. This is not the first time that we have read about Elijah and the word of the Lord.

**What does Elijah usually do when the word of the Lord comes to Him?**

I Kings 17: 1- announces to Ahab that there will be no rain

I Kings 17:2-5 - obeys when God tells him to go to the Kerith Ravine

I Kings 18:8-10 - obeys when God tells him to go to Sidon to be provided for by a widow

In I Kings 17:1, Elijah announces that there will be no rain except by the word of God, and there is no rain. I Kings 17 ends with the Phoenician widow saying, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth" after she has witnessed the Lord miraculously providing for her through jars of flour and oil that never run out and after Elijah has raised her son from the dead.

**So, when the word of the Lord comes to Elijah in chapter 18 saying that He will send rain on the land, what do we expect to happen?**

Paul describes Abraham's faith in this way, in Romans 4:20, 21, "No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised." (NRSV).

**In our lives today, do we expect the word of the Lord to come true? Do we expect God to keep His promises? Are we convinced that God can do what He has promised? What are reasons we do or don't struggle with this?**

Elijah believes God and obeys him. This dry spell will only end when Ahab knows that it is the Lord sending the rain. No one will wonder if it was God or Baal sending the rain.

The author makes a point to tell us that the famine is severe in Samaria. **What do you think Ahab's feelings are concerning Elijah, considering that Elijah is the one who God has used to tell Ahab about the drought?**

**Read I Kings 18:3-6**

As we continue reading, we expect to see a confrontation between Elijah and Ahab. But, instead, we meet a new character, Obadiah. Obadiah is in charge of the palace - he is probably the equivalent of the chief of staff for the United States President, a powerful and prestigious position. (Keck, et. al., 1999)

**Obadiah's name means "One who serves Yahweh;" how do we quickly see that he serves the Lord?**

Obadiah's hiding of the prophets would have taken courage because he is subverting the very palace that he is working for. It would have also taken some good organizational skills to keep everyone hid and fed. His feeding of the prophets, is another way that the Lord is providing for his prophets - Elijah is fed by the ravens and a Sidonian widow; these 100 prophets are fed by a trusted official of the government that is trying to kill them!

The fact that there are 100 prophets that Obadiah hides tells us a couple of things:

1. There are more prophets in Israel than just Elijah.
2. These prophets were likely not just like Elijah but they may have been doing something the Lord wanted them to do because they had to hide in order to not be killed. They were likely prophets who offered counsel and brought God's word to ordinary people in ordinary situations of their lives.

**What does Ahab tell Obadiah to do? Who is Ahab trying to save?**

It seems ironic that Ahab is trying to save his horses and mules while Jezebel was killing the prophets. **What is important to Ahab?**

**How can we see that Ahab trusts Obadiah?**

Obadiah stays in Samaria and serves God while also serving Ahab. In effect, he may be a “double agent,” working for Ahab and for God (Goldingay, 2011). Obadiah is quietly subverting the policies of the palace by saving the prophets of the Lord!

**What risks are associated with being a double agent? Are there physical risks? Are there spiritual risks?**

Elijah and Obadiah are interesting contrasts because one works completely outside of the system, unwilling to compromise - and is called by God to act in that way! Obadiah works within the system (through the structures and political realities of his day), although we do not know if that is what God has specifically called him to do.

**Could God have called Elijah to serve him in a radical, no compromising kind of way and Obadiah in a work-in-the-system kind of way? Are there times when we are called to work within a system? Are there times we should step out of the system and be unwilling to make compromises? Are different people today called to follow God in different ways? What are ways we may all be called to follow God?**

**Read I Kings 18:7-15**

Elijah runs across Obadiah before he runs into Ahab. Obadiah immediately recognizes Elijah and bows down to him. He bows to Elijah, the most wanted dissident of the

country, calls him “lord” and calls himself Elijah’s “servant”. But Elijah refers to Ahab as Obadiah’s “master” or “lord” and Obadiah himself refers to Ahab as his “master” or “lord”. The narrator seems to be painting a picture of Obadiah as one who pays allegiance to two lords at the same time (Keck, et al, 1999). We see here some of the danger of being a double agent. When there is a conflict, one master must be picked.

**As we read this section, what does Obadiah’s dilemma seem to be? Who is he afraid of? What is he afraid of?**

One interesting note is that the charge Elijah gives Obadiah, to tell Ahab, “Elijah is here” can also be heard in Hebrew to mean, “Lo, the Lord is my God!” (Keck, et al, 1999).

Obadiah seems to have difficulty picking a side. He is used to working secretly and to openly side with the Lord through Elijah seems difficult. He wants assurances that Elijah will follow through.

This seems to be a real struggle that many of us could relate to - are we not sometimes afraid that to pick a side will ostracize us? Or that picking a side will destroy us?

**Can you relate to Obadiah at all in his fears? Are there times that it is difficult to step outside of the system and declare allegiance to God without hesitation? To obey God even when He asks us to do something we do not expect?**

**What contrast can you see between the way Elijah obeys God at the beginning of the chapter and Obadiah's struggle to obey?**

Obadiah wants the assurance that everything is going to work out, that he will be okay. Although he is willing to take some risks to protect the prophets of God, doing something this bold makes him afraid. Elijah tells Obadiah that he will present himself to Ahab, but he does not reassure Obadiah that everything is going to be okay. Obadiah gets the opportunity to choose what he is willing to do. **How many of us are also afraid to be bold? Why are we afraid?**

The narrator seems to be setting up the stage for us to see how difficult it is for people to choose one God to follow.

**Read I Kings 18:16-19**

Ahab calls Elijah a "troubler of Israel." The Hebrew word for "troubler" suggests someone whose action or presence is destructive to others. **What is the irony of Ahab saying that Elijah is the "troubler of Israel"? What does Elijah say that Ahab and his family have done to bring trouble to Israel? Who has really brought trouble to Israel?**

**What does Elijah tell Ahab to do?**

Note the number of prophets who serve other gods who are to assemble on Mount Carmel.

**Who has been taking care of these prophets during the drought?**

While Elijah was fed by ravens and the Sidonian widow, while the 100 prophets of Yahweh hid in caves and were fed by Obadiah, the prophets of Baal and Asherah were fed by Jezebel. This attention to provision in these stories, makes us think about where we find our own nourishment and how these sources influence our faith and action.

**Literally and figuratively, are we feeding ourselves with nourishment from God?**

**Are we allowing God to be our provider? What changes in our lives when we trust Him for provision?**

**Read I Kings 18:20-21**

It is interesting to note that in vs. 20, Ahab does exactly what Elijah tells him to do. In vs. 21, Elijah asks the people, “How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God follow him, but if Baal is God, follow him.” (NIV) The NRSV translates it, “How long will you go limping with two different opinions?” The Hebrew idiom in this means literally “hobbling upon two branches;” the imagery is probably that of a bird hopping from branch to branch or of a person hobbling on two crutches made of branches. (Keck, et al, 1999)



As we have discussed in previous lessons, the worship of Baal has completely infiltrated the Israelite population. It is not limited to the Canaanite parts of the population, and it is believed that until Elijah, the worship of Yahweh and the cult of Baal coexisted without any problem (Van Der Toorn, Becking, & Van Der Horst, 1999). The people had been worshipping two gods (or more). To many of the Israelites, worshipping only one God seems like a religious revolution, counterintuitive and countercultural for them to trust in Yahweh for harvest, security, everything. Elijah asks the people to choose. Who will they follow?

**What other gods are we tempted to follow? Where are we tempted to put our faith for our provision instead of putting our faith in God? Or, are we tempted to trust some in God and some in something else? Do we follow God but also follow something else?** Even those of us who do not believe in other gods can be tempted to believe in other powers.

Jesus call attention to one such power in his generation, pointing out that the command to love God allows for no other allegiance (Keck, et al, 1999): **“No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” (Matthew 6:24 NRSV)**. At the heart of Biblical faith is the demand for allegiance to only one God as is illustrated in the command, **“You shall have no other gods before me.” (Exodus 20:3 & Deuteronomy 5:7, NIV)**

## **What do the people answer Elijah?**

It shocks us to hear their silence - are they not the people of God? Have they not just gone through a drought that God brought on? God said there would be no rain except at His word - He has not spoken and there has been no rain. How can they not know that He is God? How can they not follow Him? And yet, while our words might be different (and in America, we do not fear a king or queen who would kill us for confessing discipleship to God), by our actions do we show that we are willing to put our trust 100% in God? **What would it look like to put our trust completely in God?**

Most of us are not tempted to deny God outright, but our greatest challenge is to be faithful to God and to no other - to trust in God even when other ways seem more practical, more immediately relevant, more popular. There is always the temptation to keep our options open just in case God doesn't adequately provide for our needs or give us what we want. Moses and Elijah say that in this following of Yahweh, there can be no compromise, we have to choose to be on one side or the other. If we do not choose, then we are choosing the alternative to God. (Keck, et al, 1999).

## **Read I Kings 18:22-24**

Elijah proposes a "cosmic duel" (House & Mitchell, 2007) to see who is God - Yahweh or Baal? Elijah and God have offered evidence and that Yahweh is God by Elijah

declaring there would be no rain and there has been no rain. But, just in case, people thought that was a coincidence, now there is another plan.

Location of duel: Mount Carmel, a long mountain ridge that runs southeast to northwest and is the border territory between Israel and Sidon, Jezebel's homeland.

Two sides:

1. Prophets of Baal - 450

Some beliefs about Baal to remember (Van Der Toorn, Becking, & Van Der Horst, 1999):

- He is the god of wind and weather, dispensing dew, rain and snow
- He has power over clouds, storm and lightning; power is shown in his thundering voice
- He has defeated the god of the sea, so offers protection to sailors

2. Elijah - one prophet of God

**How will the people know who the true God will be?**

Baal has every opportunity to succeed, every advantage. He is master over lightning and thunder and that is what they need to start a fire during a drought. They are close to the sea, which he is also master over. He has 450 prophets to Yahweh's one prophet!

**What do the people answer to Elijah's idea? Why do you think they thought Elijah's idea "well spoken" (NRSV)?**

**Read I Kings 18:25-29**

The contest has started! **What do Baal's prophets do to get Baal's attention? How long do they try to get his attention? What images does the author paint for us of these prophets?**

The prophets cutting themselves identifies them with the dying Master, Baal. In the summer, the Master seemed to die and when the rains came in the fall, it was a sign he had come back to life. Their cutting was meant to bring him back to life (Goldingay, 2011).

**Does their cutting, limping/hobbling, crying out help them? How does the author say that Baal responds? Why do you think the author may be so clear about the lack of response from Baal? Why would this be important for the exiled Israelite community? Why is it important for us?**

"But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention."

**Read I Kings 30-40**

**What does Elijah have to do before he can do anything else? What does a destroyed or dilapidated altar tell us about the worship of the Lord at this time?**

**How many stones does Elijah take to repair the altar? What do the stones represent?**

The twelve stones, representing the twelve tribes of Israel, also recall the unity of the tribes before the monarchy. In Exodus 24 when the covenant is confirmed between Yahweh and the Israelites, Moses builds an altar of twelve stone pillars, representing the twelve tribes of Israel, at the foot of a mountain.

**What else does Elijah do to prepare the altar?**

Not only does it surprise us that Elijah has water poured all over the altar because it will be more difficult for fire to consume the bull but also because of the scarcity of water during a drought. Now, when fire consumes the bull (and altar), we know that it is not accidental!

**Contrast Elijah's prayer and request of God with the prayers of the prophets of Baal.**

Elijah's prayer is much shorter and simpler than the prayers and dances and cutting of the prophets of Baal.

The Israelites might have noticed some similarities to Moses' prayer in Exodus 32 when Moses asked God to not destroy the people after they worshipped the golden calf. Moses prayed, "Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel..." Elijah invokes the memory of the patriarchs with the same sequence, "Abraham, Isaac and Israel" (Noel, et. al., 1992). Elijah also asks for forgiveness for the people's apostasy just as Moses had done.

### **How does God answer Elijah's prayer? What is the people's response?**

In this story, we see God acting wondrously and publicly to bring people to faith.

God's altar is in ruins, but God is still alive. The altar may be in ruins, only one prophet may be bold enough to be on the mountain, water may be heaped on the altar, but one prayer is all it takes. Appearances are not everything. Even when churches look like they are dying, even when the culture seems to be completely far from God, God is still alive, still powerful, still at work. Elijah calls on God, who immediately answers with a fire that consumes the offering, wood, stones, dust and even in the water in the trench. Our part is to respond as the Israelites did, recognizing that the Lord is the one true God.

### **What does Elijah order done to the prophets of Baal?**

The people confess their faith and help seize the prophets of Baal just as the Levites did in Exodus 32 with Moses, confessing faith in the Lord and killing those who were not confessing the Lord.

This is not a part of the story that most of us want to focus on. However, to ignore this part of the story, is to ignore the type of thing in scripture that bothers many people.

Some ideas for discussion:

**Do you think God wanted Elijah to have the prophets of Baal killed? Why or why not? Does this seem like “typical” behavior for Elijah? “Typical” for God?**

**Why do you think Elijah may have done this? If you believe its something that God wanted Elijah to do, why do you think he wanted it done?**

**What lesson could be in this part of the story for us?**

**Read I Kings 18:41-46**

**What does Elijah tell Ahab to do?**

Elijah knows that rain is coming and tells Ahab to go eat and drink. In these verses, we see that Elijah is in charge and Ahab takes his cues from Elijah.

The Summit meal signals the end of the drought and famine but it also brings to mind a covenant meal that Moses and Aaron and the 70 elders of Israel ate together at the

mountain of God long ago (Keck, et. al., 1999). After Moses established the covenant with the people in Exodus 24, he and the elders of Israel went up the mountain of theophany and ate a covenant meal before Yahweh. Elijah's invitation to Ahab to "go up on the mountain and eat and drink" is an invitation to renounce Baalist sympathies and return to Yahweh as his people have done (Noel, et. al., 1992).

Elijah goes to the peak of Mount Carmel, just as Moses left to commune with God on Mt. Sinai, and like Moses, he has an assistant with him. Elijah crouches on the ground, placing his face between his knees in what may have been a posture of prayer.

Elijah keeps telling his assistant to look towards the sea, on the seventh time, the assistant sees a small cloud.

### **Who is supposed to be master over the sea?**

Baal is supposed to be the master of rain, storms, lightning and the sea, and Yahweh has shown himself to be master over all of these.

This small cloud reminds the reader of the cloud of glory that represented the Lord's presence at the mountain of God in the time of Moses. Elijah recognizes that rain is coming and instructs Ahab to leave in his chariot before it comes. Ahab obeys. Ahab rides his chariot to Jezreel, 17 miles away from Mount Carmel. Elijah supernaturally,



empowered by the Lord, runs the 17 miles faster than Ahab's horses and beats Ahab in getting to Jezreel.

In the Old Testament, we have different stories about people having access to the Spirit of God some of the time. We should remember that we have access to the Holy Spirit all the time. We can do more than we ever imagined because we have the Holy Spirit living in us all of the time.

### **What do we learn about God with this story on Mount Carmel?**

**Since God is the one who initiates the end of the drought with the return of rain, what does it say about Him that He is willing to bring rain to a people who continue to be unfaithful and who do not ask Him for rain?**

### **Conclusion:**

Through Moses, God told his people, "You shall have no other gods before me." This chapter illustrates the demands of this requirement well - not only in Elijah's call to the people to serve the Lord or Baal but also in the realistic and relatable example of Obadiah. We can identify easily with Obadiah and his desire to follow God while also serving his boss, protecting his career, and preserving his life. The text warns us, though, of the dangers of seemingly excusable compromises. We do not want to be a people who cannot choose which god to serve.