



The Message of Elijah

(9) The Futility of Trusting Idols

1 Kings 18:1-2, 17-29

Text: Verses 23-29

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This section of the word of God that we are studying has a lot to say about idolatry. We are hearing the word of God to us in the chapters in which Elijah is an important character and the great issue that Elijah had to deal with is the issue of idolatry. During this time in its history, Israel was worshipping the pagan god named Baal and Elijah's ministry was focused on calling the people of Israel to repent of this idolatry and worship the true God alone according to the first commandment. And so in studying these stories we are learning a lot about idolatry. That is relevant to us because, while we are not tempted to worship the pagan gods of antiquity, we are tempted to have other gods in our lives besides the one true God of the Bible. We are tempted to make gods of things like money and reputation and comfort and pleasure. And so while ancient Israel lived in a world which was very different from the world in which we live, the spiritual principles are the same. God still calls us to have no other gods besides himself and none of us does that perfectly and so the subject of idolatry is an important one in our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ.

The section that we are going to consider this morning makes one point in a striking and memorable way. It is a powerful demonstration of the non-existence of idol gods. That sentence needs some qualification. There is a sense in which idol gods do exist and there is another sense in which they do not exist. Idol gods do exist in the sense that they exist in people's minds and sometimes they exist as created things that are treated like gods. The idea of Baal certainly existed and so did a whole worship apparatus concerning Baal. There were images of Baal. There

were practices of Baal worship. In that sense Baal existed. But there was no actual being corresponding to people's ideas of Baal. There was no being called Baal who actually was responsible for sending the rain. Baal existed in people's minds, but he did not exist in reality in the way that people imagined him to exist. He was a figment of their imagination.

There is only one real God in the sense of an actual being who created and governs all things who is worthy of worship. And so in the most important sense idol gods do not exist. And that is the point of the passage that we are going to look at this morning and so our overall subject this morning will be the futility of idol worship. Our text this morning demonstrates the non-existence of Baal and its point of application for us is the futility of idol worship.

Now the first point that this story makes is that the non-existence of idol gods and the futility of worshipping them does not stop a whole lot of people from worshipping them. In this situation, Elijah was greatly out-numbered. There were 450 prophets of Baal and Elijah was the sole representative of Yahweh, the true and living God. We know from the rest of the story that there were other prophets of God in Israel and there was a remnant who still worshipped the Lord, but the worshippers of Yahweh were a small minority. The vast majority were Baal worshippers.

This is an important part of the biblical story. The Bible insists that everyone knows that the true God exists and that they are accountable to him, but it also insists that apart from God's grace everyone suppresses the knowledge of God and worships some part of the creation rather than the true God. And what we find very often in the Bible is that those who know and acknowledge the truth about God are in the minority.

This is very important to know because being in the minority can be intimidating. It can make you feel foolish when most of the people around you deny the existence or the relevance of the God whom you believe to be very real. But the Bible is showing us here in this text that it is not unusual for the majority to be wrong and a minority to be right as far as matters of fundamental truth are concerned. This story is going

to show us that the majority believed in a god who did not even exist in reality and only one believed the truth about the true God.

This is very important for our faith. The Bible is telling us here not to be surprised if those who believe the lie far outnumber those who believe the truth. The nature of sinful human nature is such that apart from God's grace, men love darkness rather than light, as John puts it in John 3:19. And so if we believe in the God of the Bible we can expect to be outnumbered by those who consider us naïve and foolish. This story is going to demonstrate for us who is really foolish and that is not determined by majority vote.

So Elijah makes this proposal to the prophets of Baal. Both he and they will prepare a bull to be offered on an altar. Normally when people did that in the ancient world they would kill the bull and cut it in pieces and lay the meat on wood which they would then light on fire and the burning wood would burn up the meat and the smoke would ascend to heaven and all of that was an offering to their god/God. Only this time, Elijah proposed that each side ask their god/God to send fire from heaven to light the offering on fire. Elijah allows the prophets of Baal to go first and they agree. The god/God who would send fire from heaven would demonstrate himself to be the real God. Not sending fire from heaven would demonstrate non-existence.

So the prophets of Baal do their thing. The text emphasizes how long and how fervently they called out to Baal. They "called upon the name of Baal, from morning till noon, saying, 'O Baal answer us!'" They could not claim that Elijah had not given them enough time. But nothing happened. The text says, "But there was no voice, and no one answered." Verses 28-29 describes how they keep on praying and even cut themselves to try to get Baal's attention. "And they cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them. And as midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention."

Elijah, of course, is confident that there was no Baal to hear those prayers and to notice those antics. He makes fun of them. Verse 27, "And at noon Elijah mocked them, saying, 'Cry aloud, for he is a god.

Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.” Elijah was mocking them because it is so clear to him that the priests of Baal were calling out to a god who had no objective existence and who was only a figment of their imagination. They were crying out to an imaginary god. There was no one named Baal up there to hear them.

And the text is emphasizing that. The point of the whole story describing the priests of Baal is that there was no answer. There was no Baal up there to hear them. There was no god named Baal in heaven paying attention to them. The point of the text is the non-existence of Baal and thus the futility of looking to him to demonstrate his existence. The point of this text is the futility of idol worship – the futility of trusting in idols.

Elijah’s mockery is interesting. We must be very careful in interpreting it. Generally speaking, the Bible does not encourage us to mock other people – even if those people are doing something that is very foolish. Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, for instance, takes a very dim view of insulting other people or calling them “fools.” When we see someone being foolish, we are not to make fun of them, but we are to be compassionate and seek to help them. So it is puzzling to read of Elijah mocking the priests of Baal at this occasion.

We could say that Elijah was wrong to mock the priests of Baal, but there is no indication in the text that Elijah is being presented in a negative way. Certainly, the passage as a whole is presenting Elijah in a positive way and there is no hint in the text that God disapproved of Elijah’s mockery. We get some help in understanding Elijah’s mockery here from Psalm 2. Psalm 2 begins by describing kings and rulers who rebel against God. And in verse 4 it describes God’s reaction. It says there, “He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision.” This is clearly not joyful laughter. It is scornful laughter at the futility of what the kings of earth are doing. God’s laughs at the rebellion of the kings of earth, because what they are doing is so ludicrous. It is not the laughter of mirth, but a laughter of mockery and scorn at the pretensions and foolishness of the kings of earth. God’s laughter conveys the idea that he is in no way threatened by the

rebellion of the kings of earth. It is a holy laughter that highlights the utter, utter foolishness of man in rebellion against God.

We have to understand Elijah's mockery in this light. Elijah here is God's representative and he is expressing the Lord's indignation at the foolishness of what the priests of Baal were doing. Elijah's mockery conveyed the Lord's contempt for the foolishness of idol worship. The priests of Baal were fervently and zealously calling upon their god. They were even cutting themselves to try to get Baal's attention. But there was no one there. There was no such being as Baal. Their zeal and their belief were ludicrous. It was laughable.

This is an important idea because it highlights the utter foolishness of trusting in idols and it gives us some idea of God's attitude towards idol worshippers. And we are to reflect God's attitude here as we think of the foolishness of unbelief and the desperation of those who reject God. We must be very careful here. God is holy and we are not perfectly holy and so it is very difficult to reflect God's mockery of sin without sinning ourselves. But what we must do is reflect God's attitude at the utter foolishness of idolatry. We must see it for the absolute foolishness that it is.

Isaiah conveys this idea in his treatment of idolatry in Isaiah 44:9ff. He describes a craftsman fashioning an image out of wood. He takes a tree. Half of it he uses as firewood. The other half he makes into a god and bows down to it. Isaiah 44:16-17, "Half of it he burns in the fire. Over the half he eats meat; he roasts it and is satisfied. Also he warms himself and says, 'Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire!' And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it and worships it. He prays to it and says, 'Deliver me, for you are my god!'" This is similar to God's laughter and Elijah's mockery. It is not mirth, but it is mockery of the utter foolishness of the worship of idols. It is rooted in jealousy for the glory of God and a clear biblical understanding of the utter stupidity of trusting in idols instead of trusting in God.

So the point of these verses is the futility of trusting in idols. What I would like to do now is explore how this applies to us. In a certain sense the scene described in these verses of the priests of Baal calling in vain to a non-existent god is far removed from our experience, but as we have

seen before, we are no less tempted to idolatry than the people of ancient Israel were and so what we want to think about now is how this idea of the futility of idols applies to us today.

Now the type of idols that we are tempted to worship that correspond most closely to the worship of Baal are the things that we trust to provide for us instead of trusting in the Lord or besides trusting in the Lord. The story of Elijah and his battle against Baal was about the question of whether or not Baal was the giver of rain and also of fruitfulness. The people of Israel were looking to Baal to send the rain and the true God was demonstrating in this story that he and not Baal was the one who provided the rain.

And rain is about prosperity. The people of Israel depended on the rain for the crops to grow and the crops provided what they needed for food and many other things. The whole issue between the true God and the false God Baal was who could be trusted to provide.

And so we want to explore the idea of where we place our trust when it comes to the source of our provisions for life. We can trust in the Lord, but there are also other options. We can trust in the economy and the government directing of the economy. We can trust in ourselves and our ability to get and hold a job and make the money that we need. We can trust in our health and our strength and our brains. We can trust in our net worth, the money that we have in the equity in our home and in our savings and investments.

Now there is no doubt that all of these things play a factor in us having food to eat and clothes to wear and all the other things that we need. We need a healthy economy in order for there to be jobs. We need to develop our skills and abilities to get and hold a job. We need to have savings so that we can be provided for when we are too old to work. These are the ways in our society that we get the things that we need. But we can make gods out of them if we trust in them instead of trusting in God to provide for us.

It's easy for us to trust in the things that we see. We can see the connection between a good economy and jobs and prosperity. We can see how governments can do things to manipulate the economy that

help it recover from down-turns. We can see the connection between hard work and learning skills and getting a good job. And we can see how money in the bank can provide for us if we lose our job or if we are too old to work. And it is easy to place our trust in the things that we can see.

But God calls us to trust in him to provide for us and not to trust in ourselves or in humanity working together. We can and we must understand the important role that the economy plays and that our own efforts play, but we are to live with the understanding that ultimately God is in control of all of these things and that one of the things that the command to have no other gods besides the Lord means is that we are to place our trust for the things that we need in God himself.

Now this is not easy. The reason that it is not easy is that we don't see God and we don't see his involvement in our lives. What we do see is that how the economy is doing makes a big difference when it comes to prosperity and we see that what governments do with the economy has a significant effect. And we see that hard work pays off and people with education and training tend to make more money than others. We see that money in the bank is very helpful when it comes to security. But we don't see God. We don't see the providence of God. We don't see how God is in control of the weather and of the economy and he is the source of our abilities and our drive and our health and how well our investments do.

And so it is easy for us to place our trust in the things we can see rather than in the God whom we can't see. The only way we know that everything that we need comes from God is from the Bible. God tells us in his word that he is our Shepherd and our provider. But we know that by faith. We do not know that empirically. God's involvement in our lives and in the weather and in the economy is not something that we can discern on the basis of experience. We must believe it on the basis of God's word.

This is what Israel was not doing. Before God had sent the drought, the worship of Baal had seemed to work quite well. The nations around Israel were worshipping Baal and they were going quite well. And so

Israel was tempted to place her trust in the same place where the people around her were placing their trust. And that is what we are tempted to do as well.

Now it is not always easy to tell where we are placing our trust because we know what we are supposed to say. We know how to speak Christianese. We know that we are supposed to trust God to provide for our needs and not in ourselves and not in the government or the economy or even money in the bank. But knowing what we are supposed to do is not the same as doing it. And saying that we are trusting in the Lord is not the same as doing it either.

Here we need to examine our hearts. We need to seek to discern our functional gods to discover where we are really placing our trust. Self-knowledge is very important when it comes to discerning the idols in our lives. We may discover pride and that will indicate that we are trusting in ourselves rather than God. We may discover that we anxiously study the indications of where the economy is going and that may indicate that we are trusting in the economy rather than God. We may find that we feel pretty secure because of the size of our portfolio. We may find that we are anxious about our financial future and that may indicate that our hope is in things that are ultimately not trustworthy.

What we need to do is think of the futility of these things as gods. They are fine and necessary as significant realities in our lives, but they are not fine as gods. To trust in these things is no less futile than the priests of Baal who were calling out to a non-existent god to make himself known. The economy is not God. The government is not God. We are not Gods. Money is not God. All of these are part of the creation. All of these are under God's control. In themselves – apart from God – they have no power and they cannot help us.

Only God exists as God. All other things exist as part of God's creation. And we are to live with that awareness. God sends the rain. God controls the economy. Our health and skills are God-given. Our jobs are God-given. Our money is God-given and can do us no good apart from God's blessing. There is no security in any of these things apart from God's blessing.

And so trusting in them is utterly futile. It is actually no different than the priests of Baal calling out to Baal. We do the same thing when we treat any created thing as a god. We do the same thing if our security is in anything other than the true God of the Bible.

Why is this so important? It is important because God wills to be acknowledged for what he does for us. We glorify God when we trust in his provision and when we acknowledge that all that we are and all that we have comes from him. He uses the economy and our strength and abilities and the money we have in the bank, but he is the ultimate source of our gifts – he is the ultimate supplier of our needs and he deserves our praise and our thanksgiving and our acknowledgement of him as the only true and living God.

Jesus dealt with this same issue in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 6:25 he tells us not to be anxious. “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, not about your body, what you will put on.” Anxiety is a lack of trust in God. Anxiety is an indication that we are placing our trust in gods that are not real as gods and therefore cannot be counted on. Jesus points out the futility of anxiety. In Matthew 6:27 he says “And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?” We get anxious because we are trusting in things that cannot provide for us unless God provides for us through them. And trusting in such things is futile. The economy can do nothing apart from God. Our skills and strength will accomplish nothing apart from God’s blessing. Money in the bank is useless apart from God’s blessing.

So Jesus says, in verse 33, “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.” Trusting in God is not futile because God is real, and he is the one provides for his people according to their needs. He may not give us all that we want, but he does give us all that we need and that is far better.

Jesus tells us where our focus must be. “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.” That begins with entering the kingdom of God through faith in Jesus Christ. And it continues by seeking to live to the glory of God through the life that is Christ. If we belong to the kingdom of God, we have God’s assurance that he will provide all our needs. And

one of the ways that we give glory to God is through trusting in him to provide for us according to his promises.

Placing our trust anywhere else is futile. That is the message of our text. The things that we are tempted to trust in instead of God do not exist as gods. They are all dependent on God. And trusting them is as futile as the trust of the priests of Baal in a non-existent god. God is the one who has the ultimate control of the economy or the weather or our health or of our portfolio. And his promise to his people is “all these things will be added to you.” By trusting him we honor him. By trusting him we relate to him as our heavenly Father. And we can rest in his love and his care and his wisdom as he gives us exactly what we need.

Table Meditation

The Lord’s Supper reminds us how central the death of Christ on the cross is to our lives. Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper so that we would regularly remember his death and also its significance. The purpose of Jesus’ death was to save us from our sins. Apart from Jesus’ death we are under God’s wrath and there is no hope for us.

The point that we have considered in this sermon would only condemn us apart from the death of Christ. If it were not for the death of Christ all we could say from this text is that we are like the priest of Baal and there is no hope for us. For we are all idolaters to some extent. We all look to things besides God to provide for us and to give us security. We are like them in that we trust things that are not God as if they were God. We see that in our anxieties. We see that in what we focus on when we think of meeting our needs.

The reason that we can even think about this subject as an encouragement to spiritual growth is that because of Christ and what he has done for us, God does not count our sins against us. We can think about our lives and our sins and failures without despair because of Jesus and the cross. We can hear the word of God point to the futility of idols and be encouraged to repent of our idolatry and to trust more fully in God because Jesus was willing to pay the penalty of our idolatry on

the cross. The whole life of seeking to put sin to death and grow in putting God first in our lives is completely dependent on Jesus and what he has done for us. And one of the great purposes of the Lord's Supper is to acknowledge that and to remember that and to be strengthened in our reliance on Jesus and his salvation.

At the Lord's Supper, Jesus reassures us of the fact that he died for us and that he gives himself to us as our Saviour. The bread points to his broken body and the wine/juice points to his shed blood and in the symbolism of the Supper he offers himself to us as the one who died the death that we deserve and who rose again from the dead. This is the foundation of everything. All our hope is rooted in Jesus and what he has done for us. And it is on that basis that we hear the word of the Lord calling us toward greater conformity to the will of God which is always towards the fullness of life. The context of our striving is the favor of God and we live in that context because of Jesus and all that he has done for us. And in the supper we are reminded of that. We are assured of the love of God in Christ and we celebrate the good news that is rooted in Jesus.