

## Sermon 22, Elijah Prays, Baal Loses, 1 Kings 17:1

NT reading: Luke 4:14-30; Matt. 22

- I. The Bearer of the Word of God, v. 1a
  - A. He Comes from Across the Jordan
  - B. He Serves a Living God
  - C. He Stands in the Presence of God
- II. The Judgment Announced by the Word of God, v. 1b
  - A. God's Word Confronts Ahab
  - B. God's Word Confronts Baal
  - C. God's Word Confronts God's People (cf. Deut. 11:16-17)
- III. The Man of God's Prayer for the Judgment of God, James 5:17 with 1 Kings 18:1

Last week we looked at the depths of apostasy. How bad can things get when the societal elites willfully depart from the word of God that they once had? Pretty bad. Israel, as we saw, began to be transformed into Samaria by apostasy. It also reverted to Canaanite practices. Just to contextualize this, we can see the same seeds beginning to sprout in our own apostate culture. One stream of thought is taking us “forward,” to an apostate liberal “Christianity” which holds to form of godliness but denies its power. The other stream of thought is taking us backward, to a Native American kind of culture and lifestyle. Now, were the Canaanites all bad? Of course not, no more than the Native Americans were. But they went wrong at the key point of who they would worship. The Native Americans, like the Native Canaanites, were idolaters unless and until they heard about the true God, whether from the Old Covenant believers or from the New Covenant believers.

So apostasy, on the scale we see it here, is the opposite of what Christ talks about. The Great Commission says to disciple the nations; the great apostasy attempts to un-disciple the nations--to close church buildings, to render the true God and His word irrelevant to daily life, to convince the people of God that they have nothing special and they can and should live just like the rest of the world. That's where we ended up last week. But tonight, God's prophet, God's agent of renewal in the face of this kind of nationwide apostasy, makes his appearance. And just as I read somewhere that Karl Barth said, “God's first word to man is ‘no’!”, so we see that exemplified here.

### **I. The Word of God Comes in Judgment, v. 1**

When the Word of God comes to an apostatizing culture, what does it say? It proclaims the coming of judgment. Let that sink in for a moment. Yes, there is a lot in this phrase. God is proclaimed here as the living God. According to Canaanite theology, dry spells were the result of Baal's captivity to the Death god Mot in the underworld. So Baal is dead, and he can't send rain. But the God of Israel is the living God! Further, He is the God of Israel. He is the God in covenant with Israel, the God whom to know is life eternal. Remember how Jesus deduced

simply from the meaning of the phrase “I am the God of Abraham” that Abraham must still be alive, because to be God of someone means to be in covenant relationship to that person, and to be in covenant with God includes the promise of eternal life? So this living God is the God of Israel, *and He’s your God if you are united to His Son by faith*. Do you believe that, Christian? In the face of national apostasy, in the face of widespread turning to false gods, do you believe that the true God is still the living God? The Hebrew writer tells us that God is not ashamed to be called our God; are you ashamed to claim Him as your God?

Well, Elijah’s name means *Yahve is my God*. And, living up to his name, he swears by the life of the God of Israel. He also indicates the source of his prophetic power: he stood before God. What does this mean, but that Elijah was prepared to serve God? Compare the words of Hezekiah in his reform of worship: “My sons, be not now negligent: for the LORD hath chosen you to stand before him, to serve him, and that ye should minister unto him, and burn incense” (2Ch 29:11). What a tremendous privilege it is, to stand at all times in the presence of the true and living God! I keep bringing this up, only because it is so relevant — think of the Queen of Sheba standing before Solomon and rejoicing in the happiness of His men, who could stand before him and hear his wisdom (1 Kings 10:8). Elijah is a blessed man, whatever persecution and opposition he endures (and it’s a lot), simply because he is uniquely privileged to stand before God.

So this is the messenger, this is the man — Elijah the Tishbite, who came from across the Jordan even though that wasn’t his family’s home. Notice the suddenness with which he appears. Every commentator commented on this, and it is certainly surprising that such a major character should come almost literally from nowhere. No father, no journey, no “And behold, the word of the Lord came unto Elijah, saying.” Nope. Just an announcement, that tells us everything we need to know. Elijah the Tishbite is a man who stands in the presence of Almighty God. Remember last week, when we saw that the narrator is perfectly aware of Omri’s mighty achievements, but doesn’t care about them? What mattered about Omri is that his heart was not right with God. By the same token, what’s important about Elijah is that his heart is right with God.

Could you swear this way? Would people believe you when you claimed to stand in the presence of the true and living God? Whatever the attitude of Ahab and Jezebel toward Elijah, they never even tried to deny that the Spirit of God was with this man.

This is our calling, brothers and sisters. We too must endeavor to stand before the living God, to be moved by zeal for His glory and fear of His holiness. I will be the first to admit that I fail spectacularly at this. But part of standing before God is standing before Him in weakness, confessing your sin and asking for His pardon.

Well, this is the messenger. This is the man who in his own person symbolizes the presence of the Word of God among the People of God. And what is his message? It is a message of judgment. It is the message of drought.

Even in natural terms, the message of drought is not a good message. Alexa and I live in Campbell County, Wyoming. That county has just over forty thousand people and is almost exactly half the size of New Hampshire. Why are there so many fewer people in Campbell County than in NH? One word: water. We depend on water, as does every other form of life that we know, and we cannot live in a desert with no water. But this was not just a natural drought; this was a supernatural drought.

Notice God's threat made five hundred years before this time through Moses:

"Beware, lest your hearts be deceived and you turn away and serve other gods and worship them. Or the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you, and He will shut up the heavens so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its fruit; and you will perish quickly from the good land which the LORD is giving you. (Deu 11:16-17)

This drought was the consequence of the national apostasy, as any Bible-reading Jew would have known. Elijah certainly knew it. According to Jesus, and to James, Elijah had been earnestly praying for this drought for at least six months. You can see the NT references in James 5:17 and Luke 4:25. First Kings 18:1 just says that it was in the "third year" that the drought ended. Now, three years and six months is in the "fourth year." In other words, Elijah had been praying for at least six months against rain, because he longed to see the righteousness of God vindicated. It was by the prophetic word that rain would be dispensed — not by the word of Baal, not by natural meteorological cycles, but by the word of God. Period.

So what's God's word in the face of apostasy? It is a word of judgment. It is a word of pain and suffering directed against everyone, both the righteous and the unrighteous within the covenant community. In other words, faithful churches like ours will likely have to suffer because of the unfaithful church down the street. You may bear the consequence of your neighbor's sin. Elijah spent six months in earnest prayer, wrestling with God for a drought, and as we are about to see, the drought cost him personally everything he had. He lost his water supply, too.

So should we pray for judgment? Should we ask God to pour out the covenant curses upon an unfaithful people, with the recognition that we will not be spared either? Well, I can't help but think it's instructive that Elijah didn't pray, "God, please bless the socks off Israel. God, please show that you control the weather by sending years of superabundant fertility!" Before he prayed for rain, he prayed for drought. Now, I don't know whether it's often right to pray directly for judgment. Who among us wants to see a day of persecution and massive judgment on the ungodly? But on the other hand, every time we pray, "Hallowed be Thy name; Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done," we are praying for God's judgment to fall--particularly if that should be His will at a particular time and place. More than praying for wrath, we should seek to avert wrath by praying for repentance--but we should recognize that sometimes wrath is necessary. Sometimes the Christian will pray Psalm 58, and mean every word of it.

So Elijah has appeared suddenly and confronted Ahab face-to-face with the declaration that the covenant curse was happening, and it wouldn't just affect the spiritual world. It would negatively impact the physical world, too, in the form of a multi-year drought.