

I Kings 18:17-40; Joshua 24:14-24; The Final Battle I. The Challenging Rebuke II. The Unequal Contest III. The Dramatic Conclusion

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, most books or movies that include a battle scene end something like this: the hero is trapped in a hopeless situation facing overwhelming odds where defeat seems inevitable. It appears that the hero of the story is going to lose and the good guys defeated- only to have him snatch victory from the jaws of defeat by some heroic, brave and selfless act! Well, today we find a similar pattern in our text. Elijah is facing overwhelming odds only to see a miraculous victory for the LORD. The time has come to settle this matter once and for all- who is God and who is not! The command is given in v. 19 to Ahab- gather your troops, lets finish what we started. Today, we see the matter of who is God as we look at this last battle. We consider this theme: Jesus Christ defeats the foe and rescues His people as He defeats idolatry on Mt. Carmel. We are entering the last battle stage- and just to give you a glimpse of where we are going- it is important to note that our text ends at the brook of Kishon in v. 40- and this brook is in the valley of Jezreel and is the same location of Megiddo in Jezreel Valley in Rev. 16 and 19. So what we find in our text is a dry run- or a foretaste of what is spoken of in the book of Revelation. The Battle of Armageddon or the final battle between good and evil where the armies of darkness gather against church of Jesus Christ is found in part already here.

### **I. The Challenging Rebuke**

In our first point we consider the challenging rebuke that Elijah gives to the people. Last week we saw how Elijah rebuked Ahab as the troubler of Israel- now Elijah speaks to the hearts of the people of Israel. In v. 21 he says, how long will you go back and forth- limping between options and opinions. How long will you pass from one to the other- wavering without commitment. Like shifting your weight from one leg to the other. First in this camp and then in the other. How long will you hesitate- how long will you fail to commit? It is interesting to note that this word- to limp- will be used again in v. 26. As the prophets of Baal will jump or rock back and forth in their cult dance- so the Israelites are shifting around- sometimes around the altar of Baal and sometimes around the altar of the LORD. Their failure to be devoted to one or the other meant that they were doing a poor job at both. If Baal offered rain- they would worship Baal. If the LORD provided- they would

happily worship Him. But a bride cannot have two husbands! You cannot serve two masters as Jesus would say in Mt. 6. So it is time for you to choose, children of Israel. If the LORD is God, follow Him. If Baal is god, follow him. Walk in the way- follow after one or the other. In these words, we catch an echo of what Joshua said back in Joshua 24- choose you this day whom you will serve! The Israelites were trying to keep their options open. Whoever would secure what they wanted- whoever would give them the best gifts- that is the one they would serve. They both forgot their history- and they neglected reason. They did not remember who they were- they were the Israelites as v. 31 reminds us. These were the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as v. 36 says. These people had been brought out of Egypt by His mighty hand and outstretched arm! They had been provided for in the wilderness and given this land flowing with milk and honey- if anyone should know and remember- these people should know that there is a God in Israel! Added to this historical identity, there was the truth to consider. Both Baal and the LORD cannot be God! There cannot be two, supreme gods! Whoever is the true God- whoever is the only true God that is- that is the one you should follow and serve. And since He alone is God- you should serve Him with all your heart! It only makes sense- it is only reasonable- that the one who is God would be the one that we would worship, serve and revere! We see the same thing in our society today- although less now than 50 years ago- it is still quite common to meet people who are both a cultural and an inconsistent Christians. On major holidays like Christmas and Easter- they will be found in church. If asked, they will say- sure, I am a Christian. But like the people of Israel, their commitment is superficial. You cannot be a Christian in name and on a few days of the year- only to follow the ways, desires and mindset of the world every other day! And although we have all heard politicians say- my personal, faith beliefs have no impact on the policies that I make and support- that simply is a lie! What you believe and who you serve absolutely guide the policies that you make and support! You are deceived if you think that the god whom you serve does not change how you live, work and worship! The fact remains, Jesus demands our total and undivided commitment and obedience! To love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength! But note how these Israelites respond at the end of v. 21. They didn't say a word- they were not moved- they remain frozen in their indecision. They want the pleasures of the pagan world and their

inheritance in the Promised Land- but this limping between two opposing positions will not be allowed to stand! You are either for the LORD or against Him! Are we the church of Jesus Christ- or the church of this world?

## II. The Unequal Contest

So in order to break this stalemate, Elijah proposes a battle- a contest of sorts. Let's have a test to see who really is God- whoever answers the cry of his prophets is the one who is God! The one who acts- who listens to the prayers of His worshippers- that one must be the true God! This seems like a good idea for the people in v. 24, so the contest begins. Now this is not an even or equal contest at all. To start off, Baal had the odds stacked in his favor. The battle is taking place on Mt. Carmel- which is on the border of Israel towards the North. Elijah has led the people back towards the Mediterranean Coast Northwest. Here, Ahab has gathered all his forces of Evil- all 450 prophets of Baal. Now this number is just as Elijah had commanded back in v. 21- telling Ahab to meet Elijah at Carmel with his prophets. But we do not read that the other 400 prophets of Asherah have come. Likely Jezebel has kept her own, personal Asherah prophets in reserve. But in any case, the 450 prophets of Baal get to go first. They get to pick their bull first, begin their ritual first, and look for an answer first. Added to this, the contest plays to Baal's strengths. On the top of a mountain, close to the clouds, Baal could simply send down one lightning bolt and ignite the dry wood. Now this wood was very dry- it had not seen rain or dew for 3 years. It would have been ready for a spark to be sure. But the morning comes and goes- the afternoon as well. And nothing happens. The drought continues- no lightning and now rain! These 450 prophets of Baal cry, cut themselves, dance, shout- they are going to any means necessary in their pagan ritual- and yet nothing happens. As these prophets grow weary from all their frenzied dancing, cutting and shouting- Elijah heaps on the scorn in v. 27. He mocks them by saying, perhaps Baal can't hear. Maybe he is sleeping, or on a journey. Maybe he is using the bathroom and has put out the do not disturb sign. Perhaps he is too busy. Elijah taunts the false prophets- those who make and serve idols become like them- foolish! Those who bow down to a block of wood or stone are just as blind and mute as the idols they serve! The

conclusion of the matter is found in v. 29- nothing changes, there is no voice and no on answers! Literally no one pays attention! Why? Because Baal is not real- he is not a god and thus he cannot answer and cannot act! He is nothing but the imagination of man. But now it is Elijah's turn, he calls over the people in v. 30 and sets up his sacrifice. It is now close to evening, the time for the evening sacrifice approaches. He repairs the altar and resets the 12 stones. As the people watch, they start to remember their history- their identity. 12 stones for the 12 tribes of Israel. He arranges the wood and the cut pieces of sacrifice, and then he does something no one expected. He drenches the sacrifice with gallons of water. Now remember that this is after a 3-year drought. The water would be licked up by the thirsty ground- but more and more water is added until the wood is soggy and soaked- and the trench becomes a mote around the stones. Next Elijah prays. No shouting or cutting- just a simple prayer of faith in v. 37. Answer me- so that this people might know that you are God! Turn their hearts back to you! And the LORD listens to the words of this man of faith- and He dramatically answers by fire! Not just a little spark to get this fire burning- but a roaring and consuming fire! So much so that the sacrifice and wood disappear- but also the water evaporates, the dust is licked up, and even the rocks are consumed! Fire does not normally burn up rocks- but this fire did! Note- the rocks do not melt but they vaporize- which takes place around 3000 Degrees Calvin. This was no lightning strike from heaven- it was the fire of God's furnace blazing in all its heat and strength! Nothing can stand in His presence- nothing can withstand His fury! This reminds us- it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living and holy, just and angry God! God does not need 450 prophets in their fanatic ecstasy- He is not hindered by what man can do or think! In fact, God is pleased to use the lowly, weak and foolish things of this world to shame the wise and strong! As II Cor. 12:9 puts it, His power is made perfect in weakness! Elijah doesn't do anything- He simply prays and believes! It is God who acts- and what a mighty act He performs! Really, this is not a fair contest at all? Who can resist the hand of the LORD? Who can say to Him- what are you doing? He alone is God- and there is none other! In His hands are all things! The important aspect in our text is not rain- but right worship! Identifying the true God! And our God never sleeps and never slumbers! His eyes see all and His ears attentive to our cry!

### III. The Dramatic Conclusion

And God hears and answers- and the fire of the Lord falls down- just as Elijah had prayed for! We serve a God who hears and answers prayer! In this we find the dramatic conclusion to this battle! Having seen the power, justice and holiness of God- seeing that there is a God who hears and answers the prayers of His servant- the people fall on their faces and cry out- the LORD, He is God! As a historical event, we too can be assured and convinced of this truth! The only God who is and who was is the God who has answered by fire- so we also know as a fact- the LORD- He alone is God! In v. 39 we remember what the Israelites had promised back in Joshua 24- we will serve the LORD! The hope of Elijah is coming true- the LORD is turning the hearts of His people back to their God! The good shepherd is gathering His sheep! This is God's mercy and grace made evident once again! But we also need to ask ourselves, why was this bull and the offering fully consumed but not the people? These people were still under the covenantal curse for their sin, rebellion and idolatry. Why didn't God consume the whole lot of this nation? Why not destroy them all- burn them all up as He did in Lev. 10 with Nadab and Abihu- or as Sodom and Gomorrah experienced back in Gen. 19? Well, part of the answer is found in the object on the altar and the presence of a mediator. Something else was consumed so that the people might be spared! Someone prayed for them- and interceded on their behalf! There is a sacrifice and there is a true prophet present! There is good news here- mercy and grace! We could say that the death of the object on the altar- or the blood that was shed- worked to secure pardon for the people! Another died in their place and a prayer was heard! In this we learn about pardon- how we sinners might have peace with God! And as we come to find out in Hebrews, there is a one, final and sufficient sacrifice who had His blood shed- once for all! Someone stands in the gap- praying for us! We have a sacrifice and a perfect prophet! It was Jesus who suffered the wrath and curse of God- standing under the heat of His divine fire- so that we His people might be spared! But after this confession, Elijah enlists the people to his cause as well. In v. 40 the people are told to go and capture all these prophets- taking all 450 of them down to the valley where they are killed. Now this sounds like a lot of bloodshed- and it is- but we have to keep this in its context. First of all, this is not

Elijah's idea. It was the will of the LORD. The LORD had revealed back in Dt. 13; false prophets must be killed to rid the land of idolatry. This is the LORD'S land- and He has the right to demand the blood of these wicked prophets who had led his people astray. But we also have to keep in mind that this is but a snapshot of a larger theme! The battle between good and evil- the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent! The important point to see here- and the point that we must not forget- is that Jesus is giving us a glimpse of the future as we read this battle unfold! In other words, the future victory of Jesus over every foe- and the rescue and return of His own people- are illustrated in these words. Jesus is defeating His enemies- destroying the enemies of the church- while at the same time protecting and defending His bride! He is turning their hearts back to Him! This battle has gone on- and will continue until the final battle which we read of in Rev. 20. (Rev. 20:7-10) Here at the battle of Armageddon- or by Mt. Megiddo- Satan will gather all his forces of darkness and march against the remnant of Israel- the camp of the saints. And in the valley of Jezreel- remember that this is a similar location to today's text- as the armies of darkness advance the fire of the LORD will fall down once again. Only this time the armies of darkness will be consumed and God's people will be rescued! So we are reading today one chapter of this story- where Jesus defeats His enemies – defends His people- and gathers His lost sheep! And as we now gather to celebrate the Lord's Supper- we remember that Christ's one sacrifice has been made by which we are spared from the just wrath of God. At this Supper, we are fed and nourished by our loving Savior as He brings us into His fold- where we are reminded that the Lord God is our God! Worship Him alone!

To conclude, our passage reminds us that there is not room for lip service in the kingdom of God. You cannot serve two masters as Jesus said in Mt. 6. You cannot serve the LORD and Baal- you cannot limp between the two as you go back and forth! You cannot love the LORD and money- one of the two will always come out on top! The LORD will not give His glory to another- He alone is God- so let us all worship and serve Him- loving Him with all our heart, soul mind and strength! Jesus Christ defeats the foe and rescues His people as He defeats idolatry on Mt. Carmel. Because he has shown His power in defeating his enemies and destroying His foes! So let us acknowledge, pray to and worship the One, True God!