

Gods Grace And Condemnation

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Preacher: Rev. Kenny Boyd

[0 : 0 0] If you could turn again to the first book of Kings and the passage you read in chapter 18 verses 16 to 40, we're looking this morning at 1 Kings chapter 18 and verses 16 to 40.

Now when you go to a new place to preach and you're travelling quite a distance, so you're staying with a family in the congregation. When you get to Saturday evening you're not always quite sure what sort of normal bedtime and so on and so forth and you just follow the pattern of the house you're staying in, the family you're staying with. So around about half past 10 as seen folks were heading to bed, I was just getting ready to head up to bed and Donnie mentioned, just to tell you who we're staying with, Donnie mentioned that match of the day is starting and I thought yes brilliant, fantastic because that's what I always do when I'm at home. So we watched match of the day and it was cup games from down south in England and of course if you know anything about football in the cup you get drawn either home or away and being drawn at home of course is a huge advantage because you're going to play in front of your own fans and they're going to be cheering for you, they're supporting you and you hope that in a home cup tie you're going to win, go through to the next round. So playing at home is a great, a huge advantage and perhaps that's what Carla we feel when they get drawn in the cup at home to back or mess or whoever is the footballing powerhouse in Lewis at the moment. Well we're looking at the Prophet

Elijah this morning, a Prophet who lived 850 years or so before the birth of Jesus Christ and if we were to jump back to chapter 17 of First Kings we would find that Elijah and the people of Israel were suffering from famine as a result of there being no rain and that for some 3 years and yet Elijah at that time in chapter 17 was sent outside the borders, outside the territory away from home to a widow, a widow whose husband had died and she had only one son and through that widow and her son Yahweh the Lord the God of Israel provided for Elijah but then that widow who had the only one son you'll know you'll remember her son died and yet even there the death, the tragic death of that woman's only son was an opportunity to see the Lord's power and to see the Lord's power even over death.

But of course Elijah is a Prophet of Israel and he was a Prophet to Israel, he didn't often play away from home as it were but rather Israel was his concern and he lived at a time when the King of Israel this Ahab who we met in chapter 18, this Ahab and his Canaanite wife Jezebel had terrorized any people in Israel who remained faithful to the God of Israel. They both encouraged the worship of the Canaanite God Baal and in addition to all this, in addition to famine Elijah himself as the Prophet of the Lord, the Prophet of Israel and to Israel he too was on the run, he was on the run for fear of his life from Ahab and Jezebel. But now as we come into chapter 18 the time had come for a showdown between Yahweh the God of Israel and Baal the God of the Canaanites. Now through Ahab and Jezebel's influence these Israelites had begun to worship this Baal the God of the

Canaanites and the venue for this showdown for this great contest was Mount Carmel. Now if you sort of played a little game of Bible word association if I was to say to many of you Mount Carmel I'm quite sure you'd immediately go Elijah because this great event which I'm sure is familiar to more or less all of us that took place in Mount Carmel is so much associated with the Prophet Elijah. But something that is interesting to consider is that Mount Carmel like so many of our own hills and mountains in Scotland can have more than one name and Mount Carmel was also known as Bail's promontory so that would maybe be Tor Bail or Bail Neat Beach here in Scotland. It was a long backed mountain that jutted out into the sea a promontory into the sea and at this time despite our association of Carmel with Elijah this showdown was undoubtedly a home match for the prophets of Bail. So let's have a little consideration about Yahweh the God of Israel and Bail the God of the Canaanites. Now you see you might ask why were the Israelites worshipping Bail? Okay Ahab had married a Canaanite wife Jezebel and so on and so forth but that doesn't mean the people have to worship Bail does it? Well the worship of Bail you see had an attraction for the Israelites. Well first of all it had royal approval Ahab and Jezebel and perhaps we had a little bit more dismissive of royal approval in our own day and age some of us at least. But you also are aware that just then as today people who want to how do we put it get on, get on in life tend to follow what the rich and the powerful approve of. That's how you make connections that's how you network in institutions, in businesses, in communities and societies it's those who are setting the pace, those who are influential, those are the people you need to get to know, those are the people's favour you need and therefore you know you follow their ideas, their opinions, the sort of things they're interested in. There's no different back in

[7 : 26] Israel in the days of Elijah. Bail worship was also of a very ancient origin that existed before the Israelites had even left their centuries of slavery in Egypt. And there's always a place for a tradition mixed with mysticism in people's hearts. It can have an appeal, it can have an attraction. Do we not sometimes hear in our own country of the attraction of these things whose origins go back to before Christianity? So many of us may have been accustomed to be brought up to view people like Patrick and Colombo as heroes, the people who brought the faith, who brought Christ, who brought Christianity to our islands. And yet, and yet you're aware that there are voices that are saying yes, yes. They brought what was not so good. They caused us to lose our origins, to lose our real roots, to lose the real faith of our forefathers. And you see that sort of mix can have its own attraction. And perhaps there's something of that for these ancient Israelites, that the worship of Bail was even more ancient, certainly before we ever arrived in the land.

Bail was also the God of the weather and of fertility. Now what would you have for a weather God in Lewis? Someone who could do something about the weather. Never mind fertility. He was a God then who could help farmers. He could also, as you see, deal with the things closest to ordinary Israelite people's hearts. Food, family, future prosperity. You see the stuff of religion and people and community, it doesn't change much over the centuries.

All kinds of things change, but this sort of stuff doesn't change. Food, family, future, prosperity, Bail was the God of these things. And you'll notice just tucked into the story that there's reference in addition to the 450 prophets of Bail, there are the 400 prophets of Asherah. So who are they? They don't get mentioned again in the rest of the story, but there was Bail and he was like King Bail and there was Asherah, she was like Queen Asherah. And Bail worship could be highly sensual involving the use of shrine prostitutes.

Now do I have to say any more? But now on Mount Carmel the difference between the God of Israel and Bail would be seen. The first thing that is shown in this great context between the two gods, there only is one, but the showdown was presented as a contest between two gods.

And the first thing we see is that popularity and apparent impossibilities don't matter to Yahweh. As Elijah says in verse 22, he's the only prophet of Yahweh on Mount Carmel that day versus 450 prophets of Bail. When Elijah rebuilds the altar of the Lord, it had been broken down, he not only soaked it with water, he soaked the bull that was lying on top of it, the wood on which the bull was lying, he soaked them with water and he did it three times. So apparent impossibilities don't matter to Yahweh, popularity doesn't matter to Yahweh. In 850 BC people knew that soaked animals, sodden wood, do not go on fire, do not burn well. But it didn't matter to Yahweh. It was not about popularity, how many prophets do you have? How many followers do you have? Bail had already won that contest, but it didn't matter to the God of Israel. Neither was the showdown about logic since both sides, whether Elijah or the 450 prophets of Bail, or the people of Israel who had gathered, even King Ahab and Queen Jezebel themselves, no side believed strongly in spontaneous combustion.

[12 : 49] Things do not suddenly go on fire without explanation. So numbers and all kinds of barriers are not things that concern the true God, no matter how much they may concern a false God and its followers. Now we of course might not, I suspect this morning, be greatly tempted towards the worship of Bail or any similar so-called God today, certainly not in the way that the Bailites and the prophets are seen worshipping Bail. But we are often tempted, are we not, to be too concerned with the things that these worshipers and their false gods were concerned with? Family, food and future prosperity are things that must concern us all. But when we've come too concerned with these things, when we've come obsessed with them, when they are the centre of our life, our decisions, our choices, all our thinking, all our energies and efforts, are we so far removed from the prophets of Bail and those in Israel who followed them? The second thing we learn from a little bit of great contest is that the God of Israel is not easily impressed and certainly not manipulated by the intensity of activity of his worshipers. You see, for hours the prophets of Bail danced around their altar, since our translation says they limped. I suspect they began by dancing but they kind of got worn out and so eventually were limping around the altar. They were calling out, they were crying, they were prophesying, they were self mutilating in the hope that they might catch Bail's attention. And that's the basis of Elijah's mocking, isn't it? Look at what

Elijah says, he encourages the prophets of Bail to shout louder. Elijah's reason for saying this and perhaps the prophets of Bail's reason for listening to Elijah's taunts. It seems to be based on the fact that in verse 27, Elijah says, he is a God. So does that mean that Elijah was willing to admit that Bail is a God, perhaps not just as good a one as the God of Israel? Of course not. What Elijah implies is that there's a need to cry louder and to shout and to even cut yourselves with sword and lances because a God like Bail might be distracted, he might be too busy to answer just at that exact moment. And that was the nature you see of the gods, which ancient peoples like the Canaanites, that was the nature of the gods that they worshiped. And since these gods were after all only the products of human imagination, it's no surprise to find that they have very human traits like they're being distracted and not being able to be in two places at the same time and like most men not even able to do two things at the same time. Elijah knows this and that adds bite to his sarcasm and his treatment of the prophets of Bail. And you see from his, we should not understand, let me just qualify that, we should not understand from this that Elijah was casual or half hearted in his approach to worship, his worship of the true God, the God of Israel. But it is true, as we see from Mount Karma or Bail's promontory, it is true that your theology will have an impact on your worship. And indeed, of course, on the whole of your life. Self-mutilation. Do we go in for that? Do we go in for that?

In Christian worship, I hope you all know we don't and you also can work out why. But it's not even disappeared from the earth today. Self-mutilation is a part of worship in the religions and some religions of the world today. So we may not see the danger, the likelihood that we would engage in such things. Of course not. But are we not ourselves times guilty of a frenetic busyness which is motivated by the belief that we can impress God into action? If only we could have more prayer meetings with more prayer or longer prayers or more shorter prayers, but just more prayer, more Bible study groups, more outreach and community events, a better building. I'm a visitor here, I have no idea what you're doing and what your plans are. So I've written this down already. Better buildings. A training course in evangelism. Regular visiting of local homes and even a football team. Then

God would do something. If only then. Now actual fact, none of the things that I've mentioned are wrong and some of them you almost certainly do as a congregation yourself. I think every single one I mentioned we do in my own congregation in Governing Hill. But if we develop and if only then God theology, we're actually moving towards the paganism, the Baalism of what we're reading here took place in Mount Carmel. We probably, of course, were having a little laugh at the prophets of Baal limping around the altar. Trying to cast the attention of Baal. But when we understand that God knows our needs even before we ask, then that takes some of the frenzy out of prayer. It doesn't say don't bother praying, but it takes any frenzy out of our prayer and out of our activities. They're saying not as a disincentive to prayer or activity, but it should help us to leave behind mere busyness in the hope that we will impress God. There I even say manipulate God into giving us a blessing. As we say, look at our prayer, look at our Bible study groups, look at our building, look at the money I give, look what I'm doing, look what we're doing, they were doing bless us. Paganism rather than mere busyness in all of our activity, in all of our prayer, in all of our worship, in all of our life, we are moving towards trusting obedience of our God. We might ask, we see something of the contest, you know, it's head to head, it's God of Israel up against Baal. What of grace? What is there of grace in this story? On verse 30 to 38, I believe we do see something of the grace of the Lord.

There's no doubting the severity of the story. The contest involves this very black and white choice. The outcome of the contest is uncompromising, let's not forget verse 40. And yet there is grace, since it clearly indicates an invitation. There is an invitation from the Lord for the people to return to Him. Now we can see Elijah as a judge sent from God. There he rebuilds the broken down altar of the Lord. And as he does so, he carefully chooses 12 stones to represent the 12 tribes of Israel. That in itself is a rebuke to Israel, the 12 tribes of Israel. Of course, what was the situation in Israel in Elijah's day? There was the kingdom of Israel in the north, and there was the kingdom of Judah in the south. 10 tribes in the north divided, separated, split apart from the two tribes of Benjamin and Judah in the south.

[22:11] But Elijah is told to take 12 stones representing the 12 tribes, all the people of God. And he prays that all would know that the Lord is God in Israel. Let's not ignore the importance of the altar itself. The altar is a reminder that God indeed provides, he not only invites, but he actually provides the way for sinful, rebellious and disobedient people to come back, to draw near to a perfect, holy and righteous God. What takes place miraculously on Mount Carmel in Elijah's day is a reminder of two other very significant events in the history of Israel. When Aaron, the brother of Moses and his sons, you remember, had been set apart to be priests in Israel, the Lord, sorry, Aaron gave his first benediction at the end of the first service, we want to call it that, first service in the newly constructed tabernacle, the tent of the Lord. And as he gave that benediction, the Lord himself sent down fire into the tabernacle and that consumed the sacrifices that were lying there on the altar. Similarly, when King Solomon, the son of King David, had built the first temple in Jerusalem and there was the inauguration of the temple, the dedication of the temple, and the sacrifices were first laid on the altar of the Lord in the temple. Once again, he sent fire, consumed the animal sacrifice laid on the altar. And they were, of course, clearly signs of the Lord's approval of the service and the sacrifices that were being offered in the tabernacle and then later in the temple. So when that very similar event takes place on Mount Carmel, when the fire comes down, consumes the bull, consumes the wood, burns the stones, burns up all the water and the trench around the altar, the people of Israel are reminded that there is a God in Israel, but also that he is the God who is reconciled with his people through the sacrifice presented on the altar. There is an approved way for Israel to return to their God. So what of that? What of that for us?

Well, today we have a far better way to use the terminology of the letter to the Hebrews. Today we have a far better approved way that outstrips what the animal sacrifices and their acceptance by the Lord represented. We do not come to an altar, we rather come to the cross. There is no other way back to God. When we leave the cross where Christ offered the perfect and once for all sacrifice, we are walking away from God. But he will bring his people back to the cross and it's always the way he brings his people back is via the cross. We cannot leave it, we cannot go around it. As we go on in our faith, we can certainly get deeper into the cross of Jesus Christ. All that it means and all that it achieves for his people. So then finally this morning we come to verse 39 to 40 and you know it would be tempting in some ways just to leave that out because it's one of these, shall we say, difficult passages that we find in Scripture and of course in the Old Testament in particular. Because we've just spoken about Yahweh's grace but we're ending with

Yahweh's condemnation. And again as he is a preacher, I want to finish that way. That is how our section, it's how this part of the story finishes. If you hear this evening, we'll look at the next part in verse 41 to 46. For some you see these last two verses, they spoil a great story. Elijah triumphs against the odds. He was playing away from home but he won. Everyone loves the underdog. At least in Scottish culture anyway. We love the underdog because we're usually the underdog. We are the small country, you know, and what Scotland does is England all about it's because you know like they're big, we're small but we'll take you on and we'll beat you. That's what Elijah had done. What a story. Even from the more spiritual point of view, the Lord, the God of Israel is vindicated. The people admit their errors. They return to the old ways, their old ways, faith in the Lord. But then Elijah orders the slaughter of the 450 prophets of Baal. How do we deal with that?

Well some have tried to defend God by saying that this ending to the story reflects a vindictive streak in the prophet Elijah and that God did not necessarily actually approve of that.

Other people see this rather just as further proof of the unacceptable morality of the Bible. If you read Richard Dawkins' book, *The God Delusion*, that's one of his conclusions.

[28 : 16] Further proof that in fact the morality of the Bible, the morality of the Bible is unacceptable. But all have forgotten a passage like Deuteronomy chapter 13. Deuteronomy chapter 13 specifies that the punishment for those who would lead Israel away from worshiping the true God was death. Well an acceptable morality of the Bible isn't it? Well let's dig a little deeper.

You see in a situation where the ruling authority in Israel is hopelessly corrupt, Ahav and Jezebo, and indeed actually actively encourages the false worship of a false God, Elijah does indeed act as a judge, a judge by special appointment of God. Now today we would say that ancient Israel was a theocracy. We have some attempts at theocracy in our world today.

They're not probably places that you're applying for a visa to move to, let's be honest. Israel was a theocracy, it was not a democracy, it wasn't a dictatorship as such either, but neither were Ahav and Jezebo for instance a constitutional monarchy. But in a theocracy the sentence on the prophets of Baal makes perfect sense, because in that context their actions were basically treason. So rather than condemn Elijah or indeed God, we should ask ourselves why we are so fazed by divine condemnation of such appalling treason, rebellion and sin. Is it perhaps because we do not really see it as such appalling sin? And if that is the case, question and challenge for us is when are we going to repent of our compromises with what is disgusting to God? We should be careful then not to attempt to use this passage as a reason to persecute those of other religions. Let's be clear, this is not what I am saying, but I do not believe the word of God is saying. We look at the word of God in its totality when we are determining these kind of issues. If we attempted to use it as a reason to persecute people of other religions, so on and so forth, whether we can do it or not might be another question, but when we can then we have got our reason, we have got our biblical basis.

I would say we are then confusing things that differ under the New Testament A and the Old Testament H. Yes, I agree that certainly all that is essential continues between the two ages, Old Testament and New Testament. But in the New Testament age in which we live, theocracy is not possible since the church, the people of God inhabit the whole earth and are not confined and never will be to any one kingdom or nation. Yes, unfaithfulness is still condemned. Whether in the Old Testament or New Testament it does not matter, unfaithfulness is condemned. Its final consequences remain unchanged, but the power to act today we see in the discipline of the church, but certainly not in the sword of the state. As I say this evening, we will continue in this chapter, chapter 18 and we will look at the much shorter section of the chapter from verse 41 to 46. Amen.