

Lessons From the Worst King (1 Kings 18)

Big Idea: Pay attention to your pain and the impotence of your false gods, and worship God instead.

Have you ever seen a friend after a short period of time has passed? One of the questions that you will probably ask is, "What's new?" I find that one of two things usually happens:

- You say, "Nothing." There are huge periods of time in our lives in which nothing really happens. You wake up. You go through another day. Rinse and repeat.
- Or, you say, "Everything!" Sometimes you don't see someone for a fairly short period of time, and you have to take a ton of time to catch them up on all the changes in your life.

We're going through the Bible over the course of a year from the very beginning to the very end. From April until last Sunday – over two months – we've been in one of the high points of Scripture. We've been looking at two kings: King David and his son King Solomon, and it's been amazing. It's been a little like sitting on a mountain at a scenic lookout. We've been able to linger a little, and there's been lots to see.

But the lingering is over. Things are moving at breakneck speed now.

Last week we closed the chapter on Solomon's life. Since then, so much has happened:

- Solomon's son Rehoboam succeeded his father, and bungled things so badly that the kingdom split into two nations: the nation of Israel to the north, and Judah to the south.
- In Israel, Jeroboam introduced idol worship to prevent his people from going to Jerusalem in Judah to worship. This caused a great divide between the two kingdoms.
- Many kings ruled over both Israel and Judah during this period. Between Solomon and the king we're looking at today, we have three kings in Judah, only one of whom was good, and seven kings in Israel, all of whom were bad.

So things are generally not looking good. You have a divided kingdom, and most of the kings are bad. Between Solomon and the king we're looking at today,

To put it in perspective, today's story takes place around 60 years after Solomon died, but a lot has happened. Things are going downhill. Things aren't looking great. And then we get to today's story.

The Worst King

You don't have to guess what God thinks of the king we're looking at today. It flat out tells us:

In the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah, Ahab the son of Omri began to reign over Israel, and Ahab the son of Omri reigned over Israel in Samaria

twenty-two years. And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD, more than all who were before him. (1 Kings 16:29-30)

And then it goes on to describe what made him so bad:

And as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, he took for his wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal and worshiped him. He erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he built in Samaria. And Ahab made an Asherah. Ahab did more to provoke the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him. (1 Kings 16:31-33)

Talk about scathing. This is a bad dude. In just sixty years you have a king who's building altars for other Baal, the Canaanite god of storm and fertility. You also have a queen who's killing off the Lord's prophets (18:4). Things have reached a crisis point.

But there's a sign of hope. You also have a prophet named Elijah who suddenly appears in chapter 17, and we're going to look at the interaction between Elijah and Ahab.

Two Questions

The interaction between the worst king and a prophet sent by God is so useful for us to consider. This is not just a story from a long time ago. This question has tons to teach us today.

In particular, it causes us to ask two important questions. Here's the first one:

Will you pay attention to what your pain might be telling you?

Elijah showed up with a message for Ahab. He predicted a drought. "Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, 'As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word'" (1 Kings 17:1).

This is devastating. They needed dew and rain. If they didn't get any rain for years, it would be devastating for Ahab's kingdom. It's hard to imagine how it could survive.

We learn later that this drought lasted three years and six months. Think about that. This year, we've been affected by wildfires throughout Canada, caused in part because of dry conditions. Imagine if it didn't rain for over three years. But even then we'd be in better shape than Ahab, because we can import food from other places where it has rained.

Everything depended on getting rain. Everything. The food supply, the economy, everything. People's lives were in the balance here. To have a drought like this would threaten everything. The consequences were severe.

Why would Elijah make this threat? A couple of reasons. One is that Elijah knew his Bible. He knew that God has said:

Take care lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them; then 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 land will yield no fruit, and you will perish quickly off the good land that the LORD is giving you. (Deuteronomy 11:16-17)

Elijah knew what God had said. When the people were unfaithful, God promised to discipline them, and one of the things he would use is drought. But Elijah also trusted God by praying. We also learn in James 5:17, "Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth."

What do we learn here? God is very good at getting our attention. This judgment was actually a kindness from God. Over 60 years earlier, Solomon had said:

When heaven is shut up and there is no rain because they have sinned against you, if they pray toward this place and acknowledge your name and turn from their sin, when you afflict them, then hear in heaven and forgive the sin of your servants, your people Israel, when you teach them the good way in which they should walk, and grant rain upon your land, which you have given to your people as an inheritance. (8:35-26)

"It was because of God's kindness that he warned the king of the impending disaster," writes [John Woodhouse](#). "The message opened up the possibility of repentance, and the prospect of repentance was the opportunity for forgiveness."

In other words, Ahab faced a question: would he learn from God's discipline? Would he pay attention to what the crisis was teaching him? We face the same question: will you pay attention to what God may be teaching you as you go through various crises in your life?

Hebrews 12 says that God "disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness" (Hebrews 12:10). This isn't punishment. If you've trusted Christ, your sins have already been paid for. You will never be punished for your sins, because Christ has taken the punishment that you deserve. But God may use circumstances in your life to

get your attention, to cause you to change direction. God is very good at getting our attention so that we learn the lessons he wants us to learn.

Never miss what God might be up to when you suffer. It could be that God is trying to get your attention. It could be God's discipline, which is designed to bring you to repentance. God is gracious enough to get our attention so that we realize we need to turn back to him. The pain in your life may be a gracious gift designed by God to bring you to him. Ahab never learned. Will you?

Don't miss the lessons your pain could be teaching you. Pay attention to what your pain may be teaching you. God can use your pain to bring the change that he desires in your life and to bring you to repentance.

Here's the second question:

Will you pay attention to what your gods can't do for you?

I mentioned one reason why Elijah warned that Ahab's obedience would lead to a drought. It was so that the pain would get Ahab's attention.

But there was another reason. It's that Ahab worshiped Baal, who is the god of rain. Baal was responsible for making sure that drought never took place. Elijah was showing Ahab that his god couldn't deliver on what he'd promised.

He didn't leave it at that either. In chapter 18, he upped the ante. He challenged Ahab to gather 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah, Baal's female consort. He wanted to establish once and for all that Baal couldn't deliver what he'd promised.

So he set up a challenge. They constructed two altars. They put a bull on each altar as a sacrifice, but didn't light it on fire. Elijah said, "And you call upon the name of

your god, and I will call upon the name of the LORD, and the God who answers by fire, he is God" (18:24). He wanted to show that their god – the same god who couldn't make it rain – also couldn't light a fire.

What happened is sad. It's a little comical, but also hard to read:

And they took the bull that was given them, and they prepared it and called upon the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, "O Baal, answer us!" But there was no voice, and no one answered. And they limped around the altar that they had made. 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." 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. (18:26-29)

If you underline your Bible, underline verse 29: "No one answered; no one paid attention." If you worship anyone other than the Lord, you're on your own. If you worship your career or a relationship or pleasure, if you put your trust in anything or anyone other than god, they will let you down. They won't answer, they won't pay attention.

We're all religious. We all worship something. But if you worship anything other than God, you're on your own. Whatever you worship will let you down.

But God won't.

Elijah not only set up the altar but drenched it with water. Baal had 450 prophets; Elijah was all by himself. But when he cried out to God, look what happened:

And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near and said, "O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back." Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, "The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God." (18:36-39)

Friends, pay attention to what your pain is teaching you, and pay attention to what your gods can't do for you. And then pay attention to God, who alone deserves our worship, because there is no one like him.

Pay attention to your pain and the impotence of your false gods, and worship God instead.

The worst king has a lot to teach us. In his grace, God used Elijah to help Ahab face two questions. Would he pay attention to the pain? And would he see that his gods couldn't help? Ahab wouldn't listen. Will you? Will you turn to the one true God who is worthy of worship, and who is reaching out with his grace to you?

Lord, help us not to miss these lessons. Thank you for persisting in showing us your grace. Give us ears to hear. In Jesus' name. Amen.