

October 3, 2004

*I Kings 18:16-21: **“Wavering Is Not An Option”***

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Ignorance and the inability to distinguish between truth and error in order to make a good decision is the cause of much human tragedy. When someone is unable to recognize the right path and neglects to make correct choices, it usually creates a tremendous amount of disappointment, loss, misery, and grief. There are countless examples of this in everyday life. Consider how much a business man can lose in sales and profits simply because of his inability to discern the difference between a good deal and a bad one. Make the wrong decision in a battle and you can lose the entire war. If a surgeon cuts in the wrong place it can cripple the patient for life. However, the most tragic example is found in the field of religion and of the spirit. In this area in life we are ultimately dealing with eternal matters.

When one considers it that way, it makes it even more strange that most people probably spend more time in a day reading the TV Guide than the Word of God. The TV Guide, or any other reading material for that matter, should not be more important than our relationship with the Creator of the Universe. Ignorance and the inability to distinguish between truth and error, right worship and wrong worship, the only God and false deities, leads to spiritual disaster that cannot be corrected after our departure from this world. Sales, profits, and losses will not matter, wars won or lost will no longer have consequence, God can repair the crippled patient, but heaven and hell are without end.

Mount Carmel was a place of decision. The worship of idols had been introduced in Israel largely through the encouragement of Jeroboam, who erected golden calves at Dan and Bethel. Nevertheless, the height of idolatry was reached under Ahab and his wicked wife Jezebel, who were powerful supporters of Baal worship. But when things are often at their darkest, the light of God's candle becomes all the more brilliant. God raised up the prophet Elijah to confront the wickedness of Ahab, Jezebel and the people of Israel. This messenger of the Lord declared that there would be no dew or rain and for three years and six months there was no dew or rain. We can well imagine how desolate the countryside appeared toward the end of this drought. The streams and brooks dried up; the fields and hillsides lay scorched beneath the burning sun; the vines and fig trees withered; animals were thirsty and dying; famine and human suffering were great throughout the land.

Ahab blamed Elijah and wanted to kill him. The truth was that it was not Elijah's fault. Rather, the people of Israel had chosen death by running after other gods who do not hear, see, or speak. They were reaping the benefits of their bad choices. Finally, after fleeing for some time, Elijah appeared before Ahab and told him to assemble the children of Israel on the slope of Mount Carmel. With Ahab came the 450 prophets of Baal. When all had gathered together, Elijah presented a dramatic address to the people in which he pleaded with them to make a choice between the worship of God and the worship of Baal. He said to them, "How long will you waver between two opinions?"

Next, Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal to a test by fire. He proposed that two altars be built. Elijah would place his sacrifice on one altar, and on the other the prophets of Baal would place theirs. The prophets of Baal were to pray first to Baal. If their prayer was answered by fire from heaven, that would prove that Baal was a true god. If not, Elijah would then make his request known. And, if his prayer brought down fire to consume the sacrifice on the altar, that would demonstrate that Jehovah was the true God. Since Baal was the god of lightning and fire the prophets of Baal adopted this plan at once.

The prophets of Baal built their altar, killed a bull, placed it on the altar, and shrieked and cut themselves

from morning until late afternoon. It was all in vain. No fire came down from the sky. Elijah repaired his broken altar, dug a deep trench around it, put down the wood and the bull, and ordered his assistants to drench the sacrifice three times with four barrels of water. Taking his stand at the altar, Elijah lifted his voice in a brief prayer and fire fell from heaven. We are told that this fire consumed the sacrifice, the wood, the stones, dust, and even the water that had collected in the trench around the altar. When the people beheld this astounding miracle, they fell on their faces and cried out, "The Lord - he is God! The Lord - he is God!"

With the Word of God and the prayer of Elijah and the fire coming out of the sky, suddenly the wavering people were dramatically changed. Ignorance and the inability to distinguish between truth and error faded away. It was plainly obvious, right in front of their eyes - The Lord - he is God! They saw with their own eyes and believed what had been revealed to them. Here it would be good for us to remember the words of Christ to Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have believed." Early that morning the people were faithless and uncertain. Before nightfall, God was re-established as God and the prophets of Baal were no more.

The contest between God and Baal on Mount Carmel is being repeated endlessly in the lives of human beings through every age. Christians are acutely aware of this fact. Every day there is a conflict that takes place between the new creation and the sinful flesh. As long as we remain on the earth we will be constantly attacked by the forces of evil. No matter how we are attacked, it is always designed to separate us from the gracious presence of God in the means of grace. Sometimes we are enticed to wrong behavior that leads to unrepentance. Sometimes we are enticed to think differently from what is revealed in God's Word. Here we are often bombarded with false teachers and their erroneous teaching. No matter how small or large the false teaching may be, we must understand that there is the constant danger of losing the Word of God entirely.

Just as the prophets of Baal exerted a strong influence on the lives of the faithful in Israel in Elijah's day, so the apostle Paul had to deal with religious figures who had slipped into the church in order to spread their own brand of venom. He writes in 2 Corinthians 11:13-15, "For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve." Those words are blunt, but so we do not forget, they were spoken by the Holy Spirit to warn us. To ignore such a warning, and there are many more we could add, is detrimental to our eternal well-being.

The particular offence with which Elijah had to deal with on Mount Carmel was the wavering of the people. He asked the question, "How long will you waver between two opinions?" That word "waver" is similar to limping or halting. It was as if the people could not take a stand for what was right and truthful because they were injured and not moving. Therefore, the appeal of the prophet to the people was to make a right judgement. It was similar to what Joshua said to the people at Shechem in Joshua 24:14-15. There we hear his words,

Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and Egypt, and serve the Lord. But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.

We have every reason in the world to pursue the Lord and his Word. Consider who you are and from what you have been rescued. Joshua is a beautiful picture of Christ who leads us from one side of the river to the other.

Jesus leads his people from this world into everlasting life. Lest we ever forget, we have sinned against God and deserve his everlasting wrath. Jesus came into this world to live a perfect life, suffer, and die so that we might be acceptable in the sight of God and escape hell. We have been given the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and if we have the keys, we have everything.

Mount Carmel says something powerful to all of us . The question, "How long will you waver between two opinions?" is a question for every Lutheran Christian every day whether we find ourselves dealing with our own sinful flesh or false teachers and their false teaching. Baal still has his altar set up whether it is the altar of worldly pleasure, or supposedly Christian teachings that are contrary to what has been handed down to us by the prophets and apostles. Granted, the altar of Baal is enticing and might even appear to be easier, but it is nothing but shrieking, laceration, exhaustion, and no fire. On the other hand, the altar of God (his Word and Sacraments) is a fire that opens our eyes so that we have nothing left to say except what the people of Israel said at the time of the prophet Elijah, "The Lord - he is God!"

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott