

## Elijah's Showdown | 1 Kings 18-19

January 24, 2021 | Matthew McNutt

2870 years ago<sup>1</sup>, give or take a day ... or decade ... is when my favorite moment in scripture happened. We read about it in 1 Kings, a book that records the different kings that reigned over Israel. It's not a happy book; while some honored God, many did not. The king and queen during this moment of history? Ahab and Jezebel. If you recognize their names, it's because they've come to represent evil – which the two of them were. In fact, *1 Kings 16:30 (NLT)* says that Ahab “did what was evil in the Lord’s sight, even more than any of the kings before him.” He built a temple for Baal, a false god, and staffed it with 450 pagan prophets. He also set up an Asherah pole, which was the representation of a goddess – typically the consort or wife of the male gods.<sup>2</sup> It goes on to say in *1 Kings 16:33* that “*he did more to provoke the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than any of the other kings of Israel before him.*” And Jezebel? She had 400 prophets of Asherah.

All of this in God’s kingdom. It wasn’t good. Which is why God had placed them under his judgement in the form of a draught.

After three years of no rain, Elijah, God’s one remaining prophet, takes the stage and goes before Ahab to deliver a challenge:

*1 Kings 18:17-24 (NLT)* <sup>17</sup> When Ahab saw him, he exclaimed, “So, is it really you, you troublemaker of Israel?”

Can you imagine going before the President and they greet you as the “troublemaker of America”? And this was a guy who had put prophets to death and wanted Elijah dead. I don’t know about you, but I would not feel like this is starting great if I were Elijah!

<sup>18</sup> “I have made no trouble for Israel,” Elijah replied. “You and your family are the troublemakers,

Oh snap.

*for you have refused to obey the commands of the Lord and have worshiped the images of Baal instead.* <sup>19</sup> Now summon all Israel to join me at Mount Carmel, along with the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah who are supported by Jezebel.”

Shockingly, rather than just execute Elijah then and there, Ahab agreed to this faceoff! He must have believed this was an opportunity to both humiliate Elijah, as well as put

<sup>1</sup> NIV Archaeological Study Bible: An Illustrated Walk Through Biblical History and Culture: New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 1491.

<sup>2</sup> Paul R. House, *The New American Commentary: 1, 2 Kings* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2003), Kindle location 3931.

what he believed to be his superior strength on full display: the 850 pagan prophets vs. the one remaining prophet of God.

*<sup>20</sup> So Ahab summoned all the people of Israel and the prophets to Mount Carmel.*

Sounds magical.

*<sup>21</sup> Then Elijah stood in front of them and said, "How much longer will you waver, hobbling between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him! But if Baal is God, then follow him!" But the people were completely silent.*

Completely silent. They knew they were wrong, they didn't want to admit it, and they wanted to keep being wrong. There is both a shame and a stubbornness in their silence, isn't there?

Elijah then goes on to lay out the terms of the showdown: They will each build an altar, prepare it for sacrifice, and place a bull on it. Without setting fire to the altar, they will then pray to their gods or God, and whichever answers by setting the altar on fire is the true God. Everyone agreed to these terms. Elijah then told the 450 prophets of Baal they could go first, since there were a lot of them and only one of him.

Here's the thing: the prophets of Baal most likely thought Elijah was a fool for these terms! Why? Because Baal was a god of thunder, a god of rain.<sup>3</sup> Who better to light a fire than the god of lightning?

And yet, this also reveals the wisdom of God's judgement; to bring a draught on his people who have turned their worship to a supposed god of rain instead of Him.

*<sup>26</sup> So they prepared one of the bulls and placed it on the altar. Then they called on the name of Baal from morning until noontime, shouting, "O Baal, answer us!" But there was no reply of any kind. Then they danced, hobbling around the altar they had made.*

Hobbling? A not so subtle burn from the author. But now we get to my favorite part of scripture: a Biblical justification for trash talking AND bathroom humor:

*<sup>27</sup> About noontime Elijah began mocking them. "You'll have to shout louder," he scoffed, "for surely he is a god! Perhaps he is daydreaming, or is relieving himself. Or maybe he is away on a trip, or is asleep and needs to be wakened!"*

*<sup>28</sup> So they shouted louder, and following their normal custom, they cut themselves with knives and swords until the blood gushed out. <sup>29</sup> They raved all afternoon until the time of the evening sacrifice, but still there was no sound, no reply, no response.*

On a side note, we see something here that secular historians cannot explain. Every pagan religion in ancient times had this in common: the gods did not care about

---

<sup>3</sup> Richard D. Nelson, *First and Second Kings* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 109.

humanity; in fact, ancient texts reveal that the gods were believed to barely tolerate humans if not actually hate them. And so ancient people would essentially try to be so loud or so pathetic that their gods would help them, not because they cared about them, but essentially to get them to shut up or go away. Secular historians cannot explain why ancient Israelites would create a God who actually cared for them, who actually wanted to help humanity and wanted to bless people. And they didn't; the ancients could not imagine or create such a mythology because it's actually true – history points to the truth of scripture.

Back to the story. The prophets of Baal failed, now it's Elijah's turn. He builds a simple altar, digs a trench around it, puts the wood on it, prepares the bull, and then tells them to do something odd. He tells them to take four large jars, fill them with water, and pour them over the altar. He has them do this three times, resulting in it being so drenched that it even fills the trench with water. Elijah wanted there to be no doubt that when his altar lit, it was God. He stepped up to the altar and prayed:

*<sup>36b</sup> “O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, prove today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant. Prove that I have done all this at your command. <sup>37</sup> O Lord, answer me! Answer me so these people will know that you, O Lord, are God and that you have brought them back to yourself.”*

*<sup>38</sup> Immediately the fire of the Lord flashed down from heaven and burned up the young bull, the wood, the stones, and the dust. It even licked up all the water in the trench! <sup>39</sup> And when all the people saw it, they fell face down on the ground and cried out, “The Lord—he is God! Yes, the Lord is God!”*

Wow. What was it like to be there? All of these Israelites, the same ones who were silent refusing to admit their sin just a few verses ago, they hit the ground. Of course they did!

**[Lightning image]** When I was in college, I had a summer job working as a valet at a hotel in Maine. One day it was stormy, I was out in the middle of the lot in my rain jacket, talking to a guest who was in their car, when a bolt of lightning hit the electric pole about 30-40 feet from me. Three things happened: it was blindingly bright, it was deafeningly loud, and I hit the ground. Right in the puddles. Reflexes I didn't even know I had kicked into play! That kind of power? I'm out! There I was, laying in a puddle while my brain caught up to what had just happened.

How much more so on that day 2870 years ago? Whatever this fire called down from heaven looked like, the argument was over. The people repented. Elijah executed the pagan prophets. Even King Ahab seemed broken. And with that, the draught was over.

*<sup>45</sup> And soon the sky was black with clouds. A heavy wind brought a terrific rainstorm, and Ahab left quickly for Jezreel. <sup>46</sup> Then the Lord gave special strength to Elijah. He*

*tucked his cloak into his belt and ran ahead of Ahab's chariot all the way to the entrance of Jezreel.*

So, basically, Elijah has superpowers. The CW needs to introduce him to the Arrowverse, it will be epic.

To recap, in case you think you have ever had the **best day ever**, Elijah has you beat:

- **Elijah faced down the king and the people**
- **Elijah got away with a toilet joke**
- **Elijah called down fire**
- **Elijah beat 850 pagan prophets**
- **Elijah outran horses**

Talk about a spiritual high!

Which makes what happened next so fascinating to me.

Chapter 19 opens with Ahab going home and telling Jezebel what happened. Her response? She sent a message to Elijah which read, ***"May the gods strike me and even kill me if by this time tomorrow I have not killed you just as you killed them."*** 1 Kings 19:2b (NLT)

That's not the part that is fascinating to me. Jezebel's reaction, based on her history, was predictable. Elijah's reaction? Not so much.

*1 Kings 19:3-4 (NLT) <sup>3</sup> Elijah was afraid and fled for his life. He went to Beersheba, a town in Judah, and he left his servant there. <sup>4</sup> Then he went on alone into the wilderness, traveling all day. He sat down under a solitary broom tree and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, Lord," he said. "Take my life, for I am no better than my ancestors who have already died."*

What? Is this the same guy that just faced down a king? The same guy who faced down 850 pagan prophets and then executed them? The same guy who tucked his cloak into his belt and outran horses? The same guy who called down fire and knocked countless people to the ground?

And now he wants to give up, to die, because he got a scary note?

There is a part of me that wants to grab him and shake him. He needs a strong slap to the face, maybe that will wake him up!

Then again, we've all been there, haven't we? A crushing low, a sense of defeat, of wanting to give up – and maybe we don't even know why. Maybe we look around and it doesn't even make sense. Or maybe it does make sense. Maybe we made a mistake, spoke wrong, missed an opportunity, broke a trust, hurt those around us.

Whatever the reason is, you're in the wilderness, under a broom tree, wishing for death rather than any more of this. **"I have had enough, Lord. Take my life."**

We put people like Elijah on a pedestal, don't we? I could never accomplish what he did ... he's a Bible person! I love that scripture shows their humanity. His crash reveals him to be just like each of us.

His greatness wasn't because he was great, it was because God acted.

His low is relatable because he is us. A broken, imperfect, fallen person ... who God was able to use, just like God is able to work in me, you, us.

God's response is so unexpected. He doesn't slap him, shake him, question his faith, call him out for being a failure. Instead, here's what happened:

*<sup>5</sup> Then he lay down and slept under the broom tree. But as he was sleeping, an angel touched him and told him, "Get up and eat!" <sup>6</sup> He looked around and there beside his head was some bread baked on hot stones and a jar of water! So he ate and drank and lay down again.*

*<sup>7</sup> Then the angel of the Lord came again and touched him and said, "Get up and eat some more, or the journey ahead will be too much for you."*

Gentle. Kind. Loving. Supportive. Understanding. Surprising. These are the words that pop into my mind when I read these verses.

It's moving, isn't it?

Over the course of 40 days, God slowly brings Elijah to Mount Sinai to meet with him in person. Maybe you're familiar with the passage; first God sends a windstorm, then an earthquake, and fire; all of which were powerful, but God was not in them. When He does finally appear before Elijah, 1 Kings 19:12 says that He was in "the sound of a gentle whisper."

Now, we could spend an entire message just diving into that portion of the story, which isn't my goal today. What does blow me away is God's gentleness with Elijah.

This is not how we often respond to those who want to give up when it makes no sense to us, is it? We get exasperated, impatient, angry. Elijah has been given everything! Yet when he experienced this incredible low, and he meant the words he spoke wishing for death, God gave him food, gave him sleep, came to him as a gentle whisper.

To me, the showdown between Elijah and the pagan prophets isn't just an incredible story. Yes, it's funny, it has action, it is thrilling. But to me, the real message is what happened afterwards, when God comforted His tired and broken follower.

I want you to remember two things from today; the first is this:

### **1. Elijah was honest**

We can worry too much about our appearance. Elijah told God exactly how he felt. He let it out. And why keep it a secret? God knows our hearts, what's going on in us!

If you are in a season of disappointment, failure, sadness; if you identify with Elijah in 1 Kings 19, then tell God! And tell another believer! Someone who can come alongside and support you, to lovingly let you eat and rest and rebuild.

### **2. God restores**

There is a gentleness to God's response, a patience and grace that is divine. We haven't doubted too much, failed too often, given up too many times – He is there!

*Psalm 34:18 (NLT) The Lord is close to the brokenhearted; he rescues those whose spirits are crushed.*

*Matthew 11:28 (NLT) Then Jesus said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."*

This is what God wants for each of us! God will rescue you when your spirit is crushed. He will give you rest when you are weary. You just need to be honest, to give yourself to Him. Like Elijah, crying out and then being with Him.

If this is you, then don't wait. Be honest to God, reach out to believers you trust, embrace the rest God gives – and use that time to be with Him, to read His word, to embrace the promises He gives.