

The Far Country to the Vineyard

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[0 : 00] when this takes place. And the way that ancient Near Eastern stories are handed down generation after generation means that there were way too many eyewitnesses for this story not to be true.

This is a true story. Elijah's Big Day actually happened. And ultimately this story is about a choice. It's about a choice between death in the desert lands.

Death in the far country. Death in the wilderness. And life in the vineyard. So three things that we have to do today.

We have to see that this passage calls us to first discern the spirits. To discern between the spirits. And secondly we have to ask how do we discern between the spirits.

And then finally we have to see that the passage calls us to choose life in the face of death. The first, the passage in the first half is asking you to discern between the spirits.

[1 : 04] Or discern between the gods. This is the middle of the Elijah story. This is 850 BC approximately. A little bit of time ago.

And the kingdom of Israel had split. There was a northern kingdom and there was a southern kingdom. 75 years before this moment. Ahab was the king of the north.

And the book of kings says that he was the worst king that had ever lived in all of Israel's history. Which is pretty bad because there were a lot of terrible kings in Israel's history. But he was the absolute worst.

And he made it worse because he married Jezebel. And even if you didn't grow up in the church or aren't a Christian you've heard of Jezebel. He married Jezebel. She was a Canaanite bell worshiper.

And together Ahab and Jezebel built a city called Samaria in the north that you read about in the gospels. And there they built at the middle of the city.

[2 : 03] The whole city planning committee was structured around a Baal temple. So Baal was at the center of the entire northern kingdom under this wicked king.

Now it's important to know that Baal is not a specific god. Because it often seems like sometimes a Baal is a generic term for a god.

It's a lower case G. And anything can be a Baal. A Baal is simply any creaturely object that you take and divinize. You pray to some type of spirit that exists behind that object that gives you the reward that you're seeking.

And so in this culture you can worship a rain bell, a crop bell, a cattle bell, a sheep bell, a gold bell, a power bell. Pick your item and put Baal at the end of it and that can be a Baal.

Anything can be a Baal. Any creaturely thing that you desire can be made into a god. And that's exactly what they did. And so in the kingdom of Israel at this time Ahab and Jezebel especially worshiped the Baal of Tyre and Sedon, which is the crop god, the fertility god, the god that brings rain and makes the crops grow and puts food on your table.

[3 : 20] So it's a god of life. That's the god that was their supreme deity, if you will. But at the Baal temple in Samaria you could worship anything you wanted.

It was open season. If you wanted to go to the Baal temple you could worship crop bell on Monday, rain bell on Tuesday, gold bell on Wednesday, and even Yahweh, the god of Israel, the god of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

The true god, the biblical god, was also an object of worship in the Baal temple. And so they would have a shrine to Yahweh and a shrine to the Baal of Tyre and Sedon and a shrine to the Baal of X, Y, or Z, Pictur god.

They worshiped all of them. And that means that the kingdom of the north at this time was incredibly pluralistic, that it was a pluralistic worship setting.

And the basic opinion about the gods was believe in whatever god you wish. In fact, it's best that you don't try to set them up against each other, that you believe in all the gods and that you worship all the gods and all the spirits.

[4 : 24] And at base you fundamentally believe that all the gods are pretty much equal. They're pretty much the same. And you really need something from all of them, so you worship them all.

So it's a context of pluralism. And for that reason, in chapter 17, Elijah had pronounced a drought upon the kingdom of Israel.

A drought. Why? Why a drought? Because they had set up the Baal of Tyre and Sidon, the rain god at the center of Samaria.

And so Elijah says, well, there's going to be a drought. And I'm going to pray to Yahweh, the true god, the god of the Bible that we read about, and God's not going to give you rain. Why?

Because he's trying to show that the Baal that you've put in the middle of this temple is empty. He can't actually give you what you desire. It's an empty idol. You pray to him for rain, but it's not him that gives you rain.

[5 : 22] It's Yahweh, the god of the Bible that gives you rain. And so there was a drought for three years. And for that reason, everybody was after Elijah. He was public enemy number one.

People wanted to kill him. If he was rid of Elijah, then maybe the rains will come back. And so Elijah had gone into hiding for three years. And now in chapter 18, verse 17, he comes back for the first time, three years back into the land of Israel.

And what happens starts in verse 17. Ahab sees Elijah and this encounter is quite Lord of the Rings-ish, you know? If you know what I mean, well, you'll see what I mean.

Maybe if you know the books. Literally it says this, verse 17, Ahab saw Elijah. Ahab said, you, the trouble bringer of Israel.

It could also be translated the chaos causer. Or it could also be the death wielder or maybe the barrel rider or the ring bearer, something like that.

[6 : 29] Not the last two, but the ones before that it could be. He's saying you are the chaos causer of Israel. You are the death bringer to Israel, the troublemaker.

Why? Well, what he's saying is this, our kingdom would have been in peace if we had rain and our crops were growing. But because of your exclusive claims, you have actually brought drought and death into the society.

Because you claim exclusivity that there's only one God that truly deserves worship, that's actually what's caused our society to be in such disarray. So if you would accept pluralism, if you would accept pluralistic worship, if you would see that all the gods are fundamentally equal, then we wouldn't be in this situation.

And so the problem Ahab has with Elijah is that not that he prays to Yahweh, the God of the Bible, but that he's exclusive. And he only prays to this God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

And then of course Elijah turns back the same thing in verse 18 around to Ahab. I'm not the troublemaker of Israel. You're the troublemaker of Israel because you're not exclusive because you can't worship all the gods at the same time.

[7 : 46] And so for that reason, Elijah says, gather the prophets, gather the people at Mount Carmel. We're going to have a confrontation.

And in verse 21, he asked them the question. Elijah came near to all the people and he said, how long will you go limping between two different opinions?

Now, the word limping there is funny. Limping actually means dancing. That's a word for cultic dancing. And so what he's referring to is their temple dances.

They would have danced in the temple as part of their worship. And so he's saying, how long are you going to continue to go to the temple and dance between two different opinions? In other words, how long are you going to worship your true God, the God of Israel, and the Baals at the same time?

How long are you going to choose both? And so what he's saying is there is no religious neutrality.

[8 : 51] You can't be both for God, the God of the Bible, and equally for other gods. There's no religious neutrality. You can't say they're all equal. How long will you go dancing back and forth between both?

And it's interesting because the people in this passage in verse 21, they don't answer him. It says that they do nothing but remain silent. And that's because the people don't want to choose. They don't want to make a choice between the gods. They don't want to discern the spirits. They want to remain neutral. They want to fundamentally say that all the gods are basically the same, that all the gods are equal.

And what that means is that this passage is shockingly modern. It's incredibly modern. Because they're living in a pluralistic context where you can worship any number of gods, any number of deities, and the fundamental claim of the society is that they're all the same.

They're all equal at base. And so you don't have to choose. You don't have to discern the spirits. And what Elijah is saying to them is, no, there is no religious neutrality. There's no being with Yahweh, the God of the Bible, and with the other gods.

[10:01] It doesn't work like that. And so I would rather you be for God or against Him, but not with Him and worshiping all the other deities alongside of Him.

And today in a city like Edinburgh, in a city like London, and New York, or Paris, or anywhere that's what we call secular, many people will be very content to believe in the supernatural world.

Fourth this of the population still believe that there is a supernatural. The secular humanist agenda has failed. Most people still believe in the supernatural and the transcendent.

But if you go into a city like ours and say something like, you have to discern between the gods. You have to discern between the religions. You can't just worship pluralistically.

You have to find out which one is actually true. You have to come up against reality and ask yourself, what claims actually make sense of the world we live in, which claims actually make sense of the needs of the intellect and the needs of the heart, that many people in a city like ours will say, but why do I have to discern?

[11:08] Why can't I just at bottom say that all the religions are equal and that all of them are basically saying the same thing? I've been to a number of debates between different religions, a Christian theologian and a Muslim theologian, for instance, on the stage.

And probably some of you have as well, or you've heard or seen these on TV or something like that. And in one of these debates, a Muslim theologian and the Christian theologian both will do a really great job of explaining the differences between their theologies.

They'll talk cordially and explain that they at base have two different conceptions of who God is and of what true religion really is. But it almost never fails if these debates take place in Western societies that somebody in the Q&A; will stand up in the end and say, look, I appreciate you guys. I'm thankful that you've clearly explained your own views. But at the heart of it, when I listen to you, what I actually hear is you saying that your two religions are fundamentally the same, that at the end of the day, it's about loving God and loving your neighbors.

And if you do that, all will be well with you. And any Muslim theologian and Christian theologian that are part of the standing tradition of their religions would absolutely balk at that claim.

[12:32] Because to claim that the religions are fundamentally the same is actually to not listen. It's a refusal to listen. It's a refusal to listen to religions that have been defining themselves and their theology for thousands of years.

And it's a refusal to listen so much that it's not tolerance, as it's often said. It's actually total intolerance. It's unwillingness to actually come up to grips with the claims of the traditions, of the religions.

For instance, just to give you an example, in Islam at the core, there can be no visible representation of God's essence, the image of God, in the material embodied world that we live in. And Christianity, Christianity is the fact that God can be, in essence, embodied, the image of God come down into this physical world.

And you see, so at base, there are very two different conceptions of God bumping their heads against each other. And so to say in the Western culture that all religions are fundamentally the same or equal at base is to refuse to actually take seriously the claims of those religions.

[13:52] This is not new. This was happening in the ancient Near East in Elijah's day. And Elijah is saying here, there is no religious neutrality. You can't be religiously neutral.

You are for the biblical God, or you're against the biblical God. You believe in him. That's the true God, or do you don't? And that's the only two options that are available according to the Bible.

So we have to look for what's true, and that's what this disputation, this confrontation is about. So secondly, how? How do you discern between the spirits?

And basically, quite simply, you actually have to let the religions confront one another. You have to let religions be examined. You have to look at their truth claims, and you have to ask what makes sense of the world we live in, what makes sense of the needs of the intellect and the needs of the heart.

And in this passage, in this confrontation, you have two religions doing just that. You have, on the one hand, Baalism and biblical religion, what will be biblical Christianity, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob confronting Baalism in the contest.

[15:03] And so Elijah says in verse 24, prepare a sacrifice, call on your God to come down and consume the sacrifice by fire.

And in verse 25, he tells them, you guys go first. You guys go first because you are many. Now why does he say that?

Because they have 850 prophets on that mountain, Baal prophets. Elijah is by himself.

And they think that the religions are fundamentally work in the same way. And so Elijah is saying, if these two religions, these two views of God work the same way, then it's 850 to 1.

If the religion is fundamentally about performance and getting God to listen to you and come down, then the odds are terrible for me. You guys go first. You've got 850 prophets to me, just me, and let's see how your gods perform.

[16:06] And so what happens in verse 26 and following is we get a picture of how one religion works, the religion of Baalism. And it works in three steps in this passage from verse 26.

But for four to five hours, they cry out to their Baal, their gods, in a cultic prayer.

And the text is, this is a poem, by the way, this paragraph. They cry out to their gods and then it says, but no voice.

And then when you are God, the creaturely object in this world that you have put all your hopes in, your deepest desires that you have associated your very identity with, fails you and doesn't listen to you, you have to intensify your performance.

And so secondly, it says that they limp, which there's that word again. It means they danced. So when their shouts didn't work, they resorted to intensification of their performance and they started dancing before their Baals.

[17:19] People worship dancing. And then in a poetic form, the text says, no answer, literally. So no voice, no answer. And then thirdly and finally, when you're Baal, when the thing in this world that you've put all your hope in doesn't listen to you, it doesn't give you what you want when you dance for it.

Then thirdly, your resort to spilling your own blood, giving up your whole life for your God, for your idol. And so they cut themselves and they spill their blood onto the altar.

And then it repeats the three. There was no voice, no one answered, no one paid attention. In other words, Baalism isn't one religion.

It describes many religions and it describes the basic thrust of what the Bible means by idolatry. It's taking an object, it's assigning it an ultimate value, it's worshiping it by performance, by your own success, by trying to get it at whatever means necessary, whatever costs to you for the sake of a reward.

In the ancient Near East there are rain baels, crop baels, fertility baels, beauty baels, money baels, power baels, and everything else. And to the modern 21st century reader, this passage looks incredibly primitive, incredibly juvenile and almost silly, but it's not primitive at all.

[18:56] It's incredibly modern because we have the exact same thing today. Beauty baels, money baels, power baels, family baels, career baels, success baels.

Baalism is taking any creaturely object in this world and making it into your God. And that means potentially anything is a Baal.

Baalism is the religion that takes something that's good, makes it ultimate, and destroys it by trying to make it into a God.

One month ago, exactly, I quoted from David Foster Wallace, the novelist that committed suicide in 2006. This is from his address to Kenyon College, his commencement speech in 2005.

This guy was not a Christian, but he nails the point of this passage. In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, he says, there is actually no such thing as atheism.

[19 : 59] There is no such thing as not worshipping. There is no religious neutrality. Everybody worships. Every choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing someone like Jesus Christ is that pretty much anything else that you worship will eat you alive.

If you worship money and your things, your possessions, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough. You will never feel like you have enough. It's the truth.

Worship your body and worship beauty and sexual allure, and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you.

Worship power, and you will end up feeling weak and afraid. And you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fears. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, and you will end up feeling stupid, afraid, always on the verge of being found out.

But the worst thing, he says, about all these forms of worship is that they're unconscious. They are the natural default of every human being to worship, to put your absolute hope in a creaturely object.

[21 : 15] They're the kind of worship you just gradually slip into day after day. And Walter Bruggemann, who's an Old Testament commentator that writes a commentary on this passage in First Kings, he says something pretty similar.

He describes the contemporary scene as modern balism. And this is what he says, modern balism, it reduces the mystery of life to manageable techniques into a power play at your own success.

It's a life of independence, not dependence. And if you live a life that tries to take control of everything by means of your performance, as soon as you suffer, as soon as you lose that something that you're chasing after, you will be crushed.

Your bail will fail you. Your God will say, dance for me, and in the end you will be forced to spill your own blood for it.

And that means that balism at the heart is performative religious idolatry chasing after an idol, some creature in this world.

[22 : 27] And it leads to drought, it leads to death, it leads to blood loss. It makes you spill your own blood for the God that you can never capture.

Elijah is here in this passage to say, the God of Israel, the God of the Bible is different. That the Christian worldview is different from that religion and from all the other religions.

And so thirdly and finally, and briefly, how? And in this passage, there's a call to choose life instead of death. So the confrontation, it's Elijah's turn from verse 36.

And he makes it extra hard for God because he pours water 12 times in total all over the altar, even in a trench, basically saying this is not going to be a trick.

Even if I was to pour a lighter fluid all over this thing, it's soaked in water. There's no way it's going to burn unless God answers us. And so he asked God from verse 36 to make God known.

[23 : 34] He asked specifically that God would reclaim the hearts of the people. And in verse 38, the fire falls down and the people fall on their faces and they say he is truly the Lord.

Now the basic point, the basic point of this passage is pretty simple. Bales are creatures. They are not truly gods.

They don't accept your sacrifices. You can dance for them and they will not answer you. And in the face of Baalism, it is only the true God, the God of the Bible, that can give human beings what they desire, what they were made for.

Now that's the basic point. But there is a bigger picture here. There's a bigger picture here. In chapter 17, we have to remember to understand this passage in full that the context was drought, that death came upon the lands.

Why? Because a wicked king brought in, invited in foreign spirits, evil spirits, the spirits that come from the lineage of the serpent of Satan, evil spirits came into this kingdom and corrupted the kingdom.

[24 : 49] And for that reason, the only man of God, the man of God that's left in the land, this is God's land. This is the garden of God. This is the promised land. This is the land of milk and honey.

That man, Elijah, he is forced to go east in chapter 17. He is forced to go east of the garden of God. He's forced to go east of Eden. And for three years, he lives outside of the land. Three years, the kingdom of God lives under the state of condemnation and death, the state of no rain, which means no food, drought, no life.

And then finally, when the man of God comes back from the east, comes back from the east of Eden, back into the picture, he comes on a mission of reclamation, and he only goes to one place, and that's to Mount Carmel.

He goes up the mountain. And Mount Carmel, literally translated, is the vineyard or the garden of God. That's what Carmel means.

[25 : 59] And so in the midst of a situation, a context of drought, of death, of no food, of lifelessness in the kingdom of God, the garden of God, Elijah comes back in and stakes the reclamation point of God's kingdom in the vineyard, in the garden of God.

It's there that he will reclaim the kingdom that had been corrupted, that forced the people of God to go east of Eden. And so the big picture here is actually the picture of Christianity, and it's what makes Christianity so different from all the other religions.

It's this, that God so loved the world, not that he, like the Baals, said, sing to me, dance for me, cut yourself for me, spill your blood for me, but because you have corrupted the garden of God and turned it into a place of death, I will come down on the mountain of God and spill my blood for you, so that you can have steak in the vineyard once more.

And so that means that this passage is not about Elijah. This passage isn't about Elijah. Elijah is a prophet, and prophets point somewhere else, prophets point to things other than themselves. And in this passage, Elijah is there not to talk about himself, but to point to the truth. And where's the truth in this passage? It's not Elijah. Where is the point of reclamation? Where is it that the vineyard of God has reclaimed?

[27 : 23] The kingdom brought back, and it's actually at the altar. It's the sacrifice. It's the fire come down from heaven and eat up the sacrifice.

That's the place of atonement. That's actually how this salvation occurs. And just to close, in the New Testament, in Matthew chapter 11, the crowds come to Jesus, and they're asking him about John the Baptist.

What's up with you and John the Baptist? How does your relationship work out? And this is what Jesus says. Jesus speaking to the crowds about John. Truly, I say to you of all those born of women, there has never arisen one greater than John the Baptist.

And that's a big sample size, all those born of women. It's a large number. For all the prophets in the law prophesied until John. And if you today are willing to accept this, John is the Elijah to come. He who has ears, let him hear. What Jesus is saying is, what's the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus? He is saying, John the Baptist is the new Elijah.

[28 : 32] He's the greatest of all the prophets that came not to point to himself, but to point somewhere else. John the Baptist was never about John the Baptist. He came from out of the wilderness, east of the Promised Land, east of Israel.

In 1 Kings 17, Elijah is fed by the food of ravens in the wilderness, east of the land, and just like John the Baptist, who's fed in the wilderness by God through locust and honey and wild animals, they both come from the west, back to the east, pointing to reclaim the truth, pointing to the truth of reclamation found somewhere else, not in themselves.

They are both the great prophets of the reclamation of the Garden of Eden, of the victory of God, of the vineyard of God. Just listen to this in Luke 1.17. John the Baptist will go before the Messiah in the Spirit and in the power of Elijah.

That's how it pictures him in the Gospels. John the Baptist was never about John the Baptist. He was there to point to the truth. That means that Elijah, the original John the Baptist, was there to point elsewhere, and he was pointing straight at the fire come down.

That was nothing but a shadow. Hebrews chapter 10, consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, O Lord, but a body you have prepared for me.

[30 : 00] In burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. It hasn't worked. The kingdom has not been reclaimed, not by the blood of this bull or any bull.

And I said, Jesus said, behold, I have come to do your will. I have prepared my body. And the writer says, by that we have been sanctified through the offering of a better body, the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Now, this is truly the close. Luke chapter 9, Jesus has turned his face towards the cross, towards Jerusalem, and he's coming from the north to the south, and he sends his disciples ahead of him to

Samaria, the place that Ahab and Jezebel built to announce that the Messiah was passing through. But the people did not receive him. They didn't receive his prophets, James and John. And so James and John come back to Jesus and say, the Samaritans won't have us.

Could we look up to heaven and call down fire upon these people? And you see what they were thinking. They were saying, we are the new Elijah's.

[31 : 18] We're in Samaria, the kingdom that Ahab and Jezebel built, and they've rejected the true Lord just like they did in 1 Kings chapter 18. And now we're going to do again what Elijah did. He took the prophets of Baal down to the brook and he killed them.

He brought justice. We're going to bring justice. We're going to bring the fire down on them just like Elijah did. Who you let us, Lord? And Jesus turns and he rebukes them.

He says, no. Why? Because a fire will come down from heaven, but it won't be for those people. It will be for his body that has been prepared as the ultimate sacrifice for Baal worshipers like the Samaritans and for Baal worshipers like us.

He will go into ultimate exile. He will go east of Eden. He will enter into the far country. He will be the judge, the true judge that was judged in our place on that cross, the true body prepared for a burnt sacrifice.

[32 : 24] What should have happened to Ahab at the end of this passage? Ahab, like the prophets of Baal, he was the most wicked king in all of history. He should have been destroyed.

This should have come down on Ahab. In verse 41 of this passage, at the very end, when the kingdom is restored, after the servants of Baal are dead, Elijah turns to Ahab and says, in our passage, go.

It could also be translated as an invitation, come. Come up, a wicked king. Eat and drink for the rains are coming.

Come up the mountain with me, the vineyard of God. Eat and drink, eat the bread, drink the wine. The rains are coming. Do you hear life coming back?

That's an invitation to the one man in this kingdom that did not deserve grace. That's an invitation to the prodigal son, to the prodigal daughter, to any Baal worshiper.

[33 : 30] To any who place their ultimate hope and some creature in this life. Will you choose to come back home from the far country?

It's an invitation. Ahab's invitation. It's an invitation for you. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for the beauty of the Old Testament, for the sign of Christ, the shadow, the sacrifice, the body prepared for us.

We ask that you would give us faith for us as Christians again, that you would give faith to somebody here for the first time.

In Jesus' name, amen.