

Introduction

I'll never forget that day. I was 18. I finally had my driver's license. And now a windy gravel road lay before me, and I couldn't help wondering what it would be like to let the wheels spin out while I drifted round the corners. It was exhilarating... for a few moments. And then it turned into a nightmare. My bald tyres were slipping, the car was sliding, and I knew it wasn't going to end well.

It was a horrible feeling, being out of control. I felt like all my efforts to turn the wheel were powerless. It reminds me of my struggle as a Christian, my struggle with sin. I know I'm technically in control, right? If I want to avoid a particular sin, I can. But then, how come day after day I keep choosing the wrong thing?

I can't count how many times I've opened my mouth and said the wrong thing... then decided I won't make the same mistake again... and then lo and behold, I do it again. I keep straying back to things that I know aren't good for me, that won't offer me the rest and encouragement and strength that I need.

Maybe you can relate to this struggle. The apostle Paul knew what it felt like. Romans 7: 'Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me.' Whether its anger, or grumpiness, or the tongue, or sexual purity, or a million other sins and temptations... *many of us feel like we're in a war that we're losing*. Some of us start to wonder if we really love God at all, if our repentance is even genuine, if our faith is even real. Some of us despair of ever being free. We feel weary and hopeless. Should I just keep trying harder? Even though I can't seem to do what I want to do?

Well, in our passage today we find God's people in a situation like this. And thankfully, God reveals a way forward. Last week, Jack opened up the first part of chapter 18 and gave us a precious reminder that God is always in control, even when everything seems to be going wrong. Today, in the remainder of the chapter, we're going to see the proof of this. God offers hope and healing for our wayward hearts. How? Let's jump in to find out!

Droughts and Limps

Our passage begins in verse 16, when Ahab and Elijah meet. After three years without rain, the drought in Israel is becoming desperate. The question is, why? Where is this trouble coming from? Ahab points the finger at Elijah... but Elijah says, 'Na-ah. *You* created this mess when you abandoned the one true God and started worshipping Baal. You think the drought is the problem... you think *I'm* the problem... open your eyes! The real problem is between you and Yahweh.'

So Elijah says, Let's sort this mess out, once and for all. Let's have a contest, a show down. Let's work out which God is really God: Baal or Yahweh... Which leader is helping the people and which one is harming them: Ahab or Elijah... Which prophets are telling the truth: the 850 prophets who live in your back pocket and tell you whatever you want to hear, or Elijah.

So Ahab summons all the people to assemble on Mt Carmel, presumably because he thinks Elijah is about to be humiliated. The nation gathers, along with the 450 prophets of the god Baal and the 400 prophets of the god Asherah. Elijah wants this event to be broadcast live on national primetime TV. Everyone needs to see this.

He turns to the people in verse 21 and says, 'How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.' Literally, the word for 'waver' is actually 'limp'. How long will you *limp* between two opinions? This is a really important verse. What's the doctor's diagnosis? They have a limp. They're not walking confidently down the road, following God. They're at a fork in the road, and they're trying to go in both directions at the same time. They're wavering between two gods, two ways of living. Could it be that we're sometimes like this too?

Israel are still God's people... of course! But they're also drawn to this god called Baal. Why? All the other nations are worshipping him. And he promises to meet their needs – rain, crops, babies. And on top of this, worshipping Baal is a bit more fun than following God, because it involves sleeping with prostitutes at Baal's temple.

Can you see why they're feeling enticed? Aren't these the same things that often tempt us? 'Everyone else is doing it. FOMO – fear of missing out. It seems like it will make my life better. It looks more fun than following all of God's rules.'

We know deep inside that God is real, but we want to delay that act of total commitment. Can't we have a bit of both? I'm happy to have God in my life and come to church, but surely I don't have to give my money to church? I mean, one day I will... I just have to finish the reno, pay off the mortgage, service the car and upgrade my phone. And do I really need to do evangelism? I'd rather not. It would be awkward with my friends. And having a big night with the lads isn't really a big deal, is it? It's not like we got totally wasted. Surely it doesn't matter if I watch porn every now and again? God wouldn't ask me to cut back on my social media usage, would he? I know it takes up a lot of my time, but it's not that big a deal. I know it's important to spend time with God every day, but you don't seriously expect me to set the alarm 20 minutes earlier to make it happen, do you? I need my sleep. And what's with all these church events and growth groups and training nights? It's all a bit over the top, isn't it?

The list could go on and on... **endless ways that we limp**. Trying to somehow serve two masters. Sometimes we call these things 'idols'. They're not wooden statues, but they are *things that stop God from being first in our hearts and lives*.

In verse 21, Elijah lays it out nice and simple: 'If Yahweh is God - follow him. If Baal is God - follow him.' It's pretty logical, isn't it? If I can prove that your idols are useless and God is real, will you commit? And what do the people say? *Nothing*. They can't bring themselves to repent or really commit to God. It's a confronting picture of the human heart. Unable to be faithful to God. Unable to commit. Unable to get rid of the sin in our lives.

What's God going to do with these limping people? Well, he's already told us what he's going to do back in verse 1. It's surprising! Have a look. *He's going to send rain*. But the people haven't repented! They're still limping along after Baal! Which shows us something amazing about God. *He doesn't wait for us to turn to him before he shows us grace*. He decides in advance to bless us. And then, and this is amazing, having determined that end goal, he does whatever it takes to bring it about. If he wants to bring his limping rebellious people back into relationship with himself, to shower them with grace and rain... *he will*. And he will overcome every problem and barrier so that it happens.

And so God devises this contest as a way of turning his people's hearts back to him. Jump ahead to verse 37 with me, this is a fantastic verse. Elijah is praying and he says, 'Answer me, Lord, so these people will know that you, Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.'

That's what this whole passage is about. God wants us to know that he is God and that only he can change our hearts. He's the only one who can deal with our sinful limp. How does he do this? This passage is going to show us five things. Five ways that God turns our hearts back to him.

First, he exposes the foolishness of our idols.

Verse 25, Elijah says, 'Alright, I've got a couple of bulls here. You choose one, I'll take the other. We'll lay them on the altars, we'll each call to our god, and whichever one answers with fire... he is God.'

But the thing is, it's a totally unfair competition. It's rigged. Baal has all the advantages. He has 450 prophets; Yahweh has one. Baal has a home-ground advantage; Mt Carmel was his territory. And he's the god of lightning, so fire is his specialty. Baal's prophets get to go first, they get to choose which bull they want, and the wood on their altar is bone dry, unlike Elijah's sopping wet mess. It's pretty obvious who's going to win, right?

So, first thing in the morning the prophets of Baal start shouting. 'Baal, answer us!' But verse 26, 'There was no response, no one answered.' So they try to get Baal's attention. They dance, they scream, they slash themselves with until their blood flows. It's past midday now, and Elijah starts teasing them. 'Maybe he's deep in thought, or busy (which is probably a reference to using the toilet), or travelling. Maybe he's sleeping and must be awakened.' The prophets don't quite pick up on the sarcasm because they actually did think that their god did human things like this. So they keep prancing and screaming till 3pm. What's the conclusion? Hear the damning repetition of verse 29: 'There was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.'

Do we ever stop to put our idols to the test? Do we ever ask ourselves whether the things we're chasing are actually worth it? Can they deliver what they promise?

When it says in verse 26 that the prophets 'danced' around, that word is actually 'limped', the same word we saw before. I don't think it's a coincidence. When we choose to pursue things other than God, we end up limping through life. I know you've experienced this... I certainly have. Things in this world never provide the peace and meaning and satisfaction they promise. The world may pretend it's an exciting dance, but in reality it's just a pathetic limp. It's a complete contrast to what we see at the end of the passage, where Elijah runs with supernatural speed and endurance because he is filled with the Spirit and faithful to Yahweh.

So, how does God turn our limping hearts back to him? First, by exposing the foolishness of our idols.

Second, by reminding us that we belong to him.

Verse 30, Elijah says to the people, step away from Baal's altar and come over here to me. And then he starts repairing God's altar which had been torn down. It's a picture of what has been happening in Israel: God's altar has been destroyed. Now, with beautiful symbolism, Elijah rebuilds it. It's a picture of rededication.

The altar is made of twelve big stones. Each stone represents one tribe of Israel. Elijah is reminding the people of their true identity! You're God's people! Remember! You're different, you're loved, you're chosen. You don't need to go looking everywhere else for blessing... you belong to the God of blessing and steadfast love. Verse 36, he's the God of their great, great, grandparents – Abraham, Isaac and Israel.

Which God do you want? A god who's deaf and lifeless? Or an eternal God who is always faithful, always near, always listening, always caring? Our hearts are drawn back to God when we see how faithful he has been, in spite of our failures. After all our rebelling and limping and wandering, he says, 'Come back here to me. You're mine.'

So, how does God turn our limping hearts back to him? First, by exposing the foolishness of our idols. Second, by reminding us of who we are.

Third, by revealing his incredible power and glory.

After rebuilding the altar, Elijah digs a trench around it and calls for 4 large jars of water to be poured all over the wood. And then they do it again. And then they do it a third time, until the altar is a sopping soggy mess and even the trench is overflowing.

You know what Elijah is doing, don't you? If you've been camping and tried to light a fire with wet wood, you know what's happening. Elijah is making it very clear: there are no tricks here. Only a miracle from heaven is going to light this fire.

This is made even more obvious as Elijah steps forward to pray. He's not a magician. He's a man of prayer, entirely reliant on God. He doesn't shout or dance or cut himself. He simply prays to the God who listens. Verse 36: 'Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, Yahweh, answer me, so these people will know that you, Yahweh, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.'

And immediately, God answers with fire from heaven. It makes one of Abco's bonfires look like a party sparkler. The fire is so fearsome that it obliterates the bull, the wood, the water, and even the stones and soil! Elijah is left with his eyebrows singed, standing in front of a crater in the ground! It's terrifying. No wonder the people drop to the ground and cry in awe, 'Yahweh, he is God! Yahweh, he is God!'

We suddenly feel incredibly stupid for ever thinking we could ignore this God, for doubting him, for trifling with him. When God reveals even a glimpse of his glory, we suddenly understand why he calls for total allegiance, for total commitment. Take a moment to consider the enormity of this God, your God. We will only be healed of our limp if again and again, week after week, we are stretched and boggled by the glory and power of our God.

In verse 40, Elijah instructs that the prophets of Baal be seized and killed. It's an uncomfortable verse. Is this an example of excessive Old Testament violence and bloodlust? We might be tempted to think so, but Elijah is actually just obeying God's law in Deuteronomy 13. If a prophet leads the people astray, he will face capital punishment. Today, the church and state are separate. Criminals are punished in the courts, not the church. Jesus calls us to forgive our enemies and leave God to punish the wicked. But in Israel, state and church were combined. So Elijah is acting like a judge here, ensuring that justice is done. If we feel uncomfortable about this verse, it might be a sign that we don't appreciate the horror of our sin, that we don't grasp just how holy and glorious our God is.

I suspect we also overlook how merciful and forgiving God is. That brings us to our fourth point. God turns our limping hearts back to him...

Fourth, by showering us with mercy and forgiveness.

Do you know what I find truly amazing about our passage today? I find it amazing that God didn't just send this fire on his people and completely destroy them. I find it amazing that God even bothered with this contest. Why does he 'compete' with a god like Baal who doesn't even exist? For years, the people have been insulting and snubbing God. Why doesn't he just wipe them out?

The answer is so important: *because he wants our hearts*. He wants us! He wants our love and praise.

He wants us to fulfill the purpose for which we were made: to glorify God. He wants to spend eternity with us. You know, the drama on Mt Carmel isn't really a contest between God and Baal at all. Baal doesn't even exist. **It's really a contest for the hearts of God's people.**

But what about justice? How can a holy and glorious God let his adulterous people come back to him? They should be slaughtered along with the prophets... *But!* Something else has been sacrificed in their place. Remember the altar, with its twelve stones, representing Israel. This altar has been completely consumed by God's fire. In other words, *an Israel-substitute has been consumed so that the people are not.*

Does that sound familiar? There was another substitute. Someone who took the place of God's people, who took all the fire of God's wrath on himself so that our sin could be forgiven. Jesus! The one who never limped, who never wavered in his commitment to God. He took the fires of hell for us.

By trusting in him, we're welcomed back into relationship with our covenant God. The Holy Spirit is poured into our limping hearts, to heal us, to light a fire in us of burning love for God.

How does God cure our limping hearts? So far, we've seen that he exposes the foolishness of our idols, he reassures us that we belong to him, he reveals his incredible power and glory, and he showers us with mercy and forgiveness. But this isn't quite the end of the story. The last way that God turns our hearts is...

Fifth, by providing for all our needs.

In verses 41-46, God fulfills his promise made in verse 1: I will send rain. Now that the peoples' hearts have returned to him, they're ready to receive rain as a precious gift... not from Baal, but from Yahweh.

While Ahab has a meal, Elijah goes to the top of the mountain and prays. This moment is mentioned in James 5 to remind us that prayer is powerful and effective. Elijah knows that he can't make rain, or send fire, or change hearts. But he knows that God can, and so he prays. God will be true to his promises... so pray. God will show mercy... so pray. God will provide... so pray.

But will God answer his prayer? The tension builds as Elijah's servant scans the horizon for rain clouds. Seven times he repeats this, until he at last sees a tiny cloud. Rain is coming! God's grace is coming!

You know, there's something very ordinary about rain. We had a lot of it this week in Launceston. It's normal. It's not very spectacular, certainly not like fire from heaven. Because of this, we sometimes overlook the thousands of mundane ways that God cares for us every single day. He is not just the God of the spectacular but *the routine*. When we miss this, we stop appreciating all his good gifts, and that's how we end up drifting away from him to other gods.

God heals our limping hearts by showing us his grace, every single day. If God stopped sustaining me, I'd drop down dead right here. If he fell asleep for one second, we would vanish to dust and the universe would implode. If he stopped working in our hearts through his Spirit for even one day, we would instantly lose our salvation. It puts things in perspective, doesn't it? It stops us from thinking, 'God, if you would just do a miracle like this every now and again, I'd believe!' It shows us that our whole existence is miraculous.

Our passage ends with Ahab rushing home in his chariot before he gets caught in a storm. And then bizarrely, verse 46 says 'the power of the Lord came on Elijah and, tucking his cloak into his belt, he ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel.' It reminds me of one of those old-school cartoons with the spinning legs and the cloud of dust! It's a bit strange, but this seems to be a picture of the prophet and the king working together. This is how it should be: God's prophet is leading the way, and the king is following. It's an invitation to Ahab. 'Ahab, you've had an epic day. You've seen fire from heaven, you've received rain, and now God is graciously offering relationship with you again, in spite of all your past sins. How are you going to respond?'

What about us? Will we admit that we have limping sinful hearts, and that on our own we're powerless to change them? How will we respond to this glorious God who exposes our useless idols, and reassures us that we belong to him, and amazes us with fire from heaven, and sends his Son to die in our place, and showers us every day with mercy and life and everything we need?

Mt Carmel isn't really a contest between God and Baal... *it's really a contest for the hearts of his people*. And actually, that's what every day of our lives are about: a contest for our hearts. Every day, every hardship you face, every previous revelation of power or grace or forgiveness, every glimpse of God in a sermon or a friend or a ray of sunshine or another meal on the table... it's all the work of God, showing himself to us and healing our hearts. Until one day we reach paradise, and we will love him perfectly, without even the slightest limps.