Buzz King
buzz@BuzzKing.com
BuzzKing.com
303 437 7419

1 Kings 18:29, **NRSV.**

[29] As midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice, no answer, and no response.

When it seems impossible.

As a chaplain, it is very common for people to lament to me that the world is beyond salvation. They usually mean this physically, not spiritually. There is extreme poverty, with hundreds of millions of people starving or on the verge of starving, and lacking even basic medical care. There are vicious wars and civil conflicts on multiple continents, some of them not even making the news media. Around the world there is an erosion of freedom and democracy, with polarized ethnic and religious groups, forced migrations, and radicalized populations. We're confronting rising global temperatures, with parts of the world becoming uninhabitable, extreme weather events occurring around the globe, and with floods, hurricanes, and wildfires, and animal populations disappearing. We have deforestation in tropical areas like the Amazon, massive damns being built without any consideration of animal species being displaced and millions of people being put at risk of floods, and micro-plastics filling oceans and waterways.

We're facing powerful AI systems whose development are being driven by economics, not common sense, growing global cybersecurity threats, and engineered pathogens. I'll stop, but two things stand out. One, the list seems endless. And two, every problem on the list seems to be growing in magnitude.

King Ahab ruled Israel, the Northern Kingdom, which did not include Jerusalem, and he was born around 895 B.C., and died around 853 B.C., dying probably in his early forties. Note that King Ahab should not be confused with King Ahaz, who ruled in the southern kingdom of Judah. Ahab ruled for about 22 years from his capital north in Samaria. We read about him in 1 Kings. Early on in his career, King Ahab fell to moral corruption. We read this in 1 Kings 16:

[31] And as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, he took as his wife Jezebel daughter of King Ethbaal of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal, and worshiped him. [32] He erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he built in Samaria.

King Jeroboam was the first king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and he ended up setting the biblical standard for moral depravity. We're told that Ahab walked in his footsteps by marrying Jezebel, a worshipper of Baal, the pagan god, and that King Ahab then erected an altar to honor Baal. Jezebel introduced her religious beliefs to the people of Israel and maintained hundreds of pagan prophets. Jezebel spread her faith among the Chosen People in the Northern Kingdom, leading to moral corruption. She also murdered true prophets of Israel.

Elijah served during the reign of King Ahab, from perhaps 874 B.C. to 850 B.C. He is famous for never dying, being taken up in a whirlwind of fire. After King Ahab marries Jezebel and the people turn their backs on God, the Prophet Elijah prophesizes a great drought. Baal, Jezebel's god, was supposed to have full control over rain, fertility, and the harvest. So, when Elijah introduces a three year-long drought this is a direct challenge to Baal and a great insult to Jezebel. During the third year of the great, devastating drought, Elijah challenges 450 prophets of Baal who served Jezebel. They meet on Mount Carmel for a showdown between the true, single, omniscient God and Baal, the pagan god of fertility and the harvest. The challenge is this. Each side prepares a bull and places it on wood, but with no fire. Then each side calls on their god to light the fire to consume the sacrifice. The 450 prophets of Baal cry out from morning until noon, calling upon their god, Baal, the burn up the bull. Nothing happens. Elijah then taunts these prophets, asking if their god is busy or something. We read:

At noon Elijah mocked them, saying, "Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened."

The 450 prophets of Baal redouble their efforts. We read this:

[28] Then they cried aloud and, as was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them. [29] As midday passed, they raved

on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice, no answer, and no response.

Elijah doesn't just call on God to light up the wood below the bull he is sacrificing. Rather, he makes the task seem impossible. He wants to prove beyond any doubt that the God of the Israelites is infinitely more powerful than Baal. He digs a trench around his altar and fills it with water, soaking the wood. We read:

36 At the time of the offering of the oblation, the prophet Elijah came near and said, "O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your bidding. 37 Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back." 38 Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench.

With a simple prayer, and no shouting, no cutting himself with swords, no raving at the sky, and with the wooden altar covered with water, Elijah has God burn the sacrificial bull offered to the true God of the Israelites. When the Chosen People see what has happened, they respond accordingly. And in typical, brutal Old Testament fashion, Elijah comes down hard on the 450 pagan prophets who have, along with Queen Jezebel, corrupted God's people. Kishon, referenced below, was a deeply sacred place to the Israelites as it was the site of a divine victory:

39 When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, "The LORD indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God." 40 Elijah said to them, "Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape." Then they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Wadi Kishon, and killed them there.

Keep in mind that in Hebrew Scripture tradition, this is not a massacre carried out in a rage. It is a legal execution, ordered by the mouth of God. Also remember that Queen Jezebel had been hunting down and murdering legitimate prophets of God. This is how the drought ends:

41 Elijah said to Ahab, "Go up, eat and drink; for there is a sound of rushing rain."
42 So Ahab went up to eat and to drink. Elijah went up to the top of Carmel; there he bowed himself down upon the earth and put his face between his knees. 43 He said to his servant, "Go up now, look toward the sea." He went up and looked, and said, "There is nothing." Then he said, "Go again seven times." 44 At the seventh time he said, "Look, a little cloud no bigger than a person's hand is rising out of the sea." Then he said, "Go say to Ahab, 'Harness your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.' " 45 *In a little while the heavens grew black with clouds and wind; there was a heavy rain*.

This would seem like a this would make a perfect ending to the story. Elijah has shown God to be not only all-powerful, but also able to do things that seem like they are physically impossible. Even the laws of nature cannot stop God: he burns up a bull and wood, along with the water that covers them. However, the story doesn't end here. Queen Jezebel goes after Elijah. Terrified, he goes into the wilderness, that is, the open desert. He asks God to just let him die. He is exhausted and isolated. God rebukes him gently, by sending an angel to encourage him to eat. Elijah spends forty days and forty nights getting his strength back. Remember that the number 40 represents a full divine cycle of purification and regeneration in the Hebrew Scriptures. We learn that Elijah is

like us, a man and not God. Several hundred years later, Jesus does something very similar by spending 40 days and nights in the Judean desert by himself, fasting and thus setting the tradition for the Christian season of Lent. Elijah does survive, and he prophesizes that judgement will come for Jezebel. He says:

'The dogs shall eat Jezebel within the bounds of Jezreel.' [24] Anyone belonging to Ahab who dies in the city the dogs shall eat; and anyone of his who dies in the open country the birds of the air shall eat."

Jezebel later dies a violent death when the new king of Israel, Jehu, orders her to be thrown from a palace window.

In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus says that with God, unlike with men, the impossible is possible. In Matthew 19 we read the Parable of the Rich Young Man. A wealthy young man approaches Jesus and asks him what he must do in this world to inherit eternal life. Jesus tells him to keep the Ten Commandments. The young man says he has done this and wants to know what else he must do. Then Jesus gives him a test: He must sell all his possessions and give the money from the sale to the poor. The young man cannot do this, however; he has many possessions and cannot handle losing them. He goes away grieving, knowing he lives for the things of this world, not God's world. We read:

[23] Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. [24] Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

[25] When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded and said, "Then who can be saved?" [26] But Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible."

The idols that Jezebel and her fake prophets worshipped, they all existed on two levels. They were world things and people, forming concrete problems that confronted the people of God. But they also represented the world of people, where humans pursue power and wealth, not a life with God and not a joyful life shared with other people. The big thing that's seemingly impossible with us but quite possible with God is that we can avoid the idols of this life. They are societal power, earthly wealth, and being able to exercise ruthless control of other people. This is what is behind much of what's wrong with our world today.

When we read the Bible, in particular, material that we are not sure is historically accurate, we must remember that the stories of the Creation, the Patriarchs and the founding of Israel, the reign of the Judges and then the Kings, the lives of the Prophets, the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions, the return from exile, the construction of the two Temples, and the New Testament eras of the Gospel of Jesus and the founding of the early Church, all of this exists on two levels. First, biblical authors were doing their best to record history and tell us the story of God and our relationship to God. Second, the characters and individual stories were cast to make specific theological points. For this reason, we must

acknowledge that the Bible was never meant to be a simple history. The parables of Jesus are not true stories. They are abstract lessons offered by Jesus, delivered in words that are meant to as closely as possible approximate the actual words of Jesus – but they have been engineered to teach specific moral and ethical lessons. They are thus probably NOT the exact words spoken by Jesus. The entire Bible, while it is based on real history and is not simply a giant parable, serves the same purpose. One of the biggest lessons of the Bible has to do with God being able to do anything, literally. It is about God's willingness to spiritually support us, and it is about his dependability. He will do anything that needs to be done for us to keep living in his kingdom. This lesson is repeated many times in Scripture.

Jezebel is a true historical person. Her existence is supported by records outside the Bible and archeological findings that bear her name. But scholars believe that biblical writers took a lot of liberty in describing the actual things that she did and the specific events in which she took part. There was bound to be a strong theological bias against her. She was a foreign-born queen who did not follow their faith and influenced Israelites to join her faith. And while we don't have clear archeological evidence or literature outside of the Bible that supports the existence of Elijah, the basic characters that appear in his story are definitely

real: King Ahab, for instance. There is a good chance that Elijah, like Jezebel, has had his story tailored to portray specific, eternal theological truths.

And one of the biggest truths that we learn from his life and the life of Jezebel is that we can always count on God, no matter how desperate or impossible our situation. Things do look impossible in today's world, with a common belief being that it is too late to avoid massive natural disasters, widespread warfare and civil unrest, rampant starvation and disease, and a global lowering of our standard of living. But we cannot be destroyed spiritually, we cannot lose our joy of life, if we maintain our trust in God. We also can also have a strong hope that humanity can overcome all that confronts us in this life - if we let God lead us. The bottom line is a simple, old school Christian truth: the problems of this world are due in very large part to people not living by those two commandments to love God and to love our neighbor - and instead living only for the ability to collect the material things of this world.

I'll end with a very famous passage from Chapter 12 of Paul's letter to the Romans. It tells us how simple it would be to fix much of what is wrong with the world. Paul provides a simple standard for considering yourself a Christian:

[9] Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; [10] love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. [11] Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. [12] Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering,

persevere in prayer. [13] Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

[14] Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. [15] Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. [16] Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. [17] Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. [18] If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

If you are stressed about the state of the world, if you dread seeing any news on TV or online, here are some suggestions. One way to deal with this is to truly live your Christian faith every day of your life, if only in very simple ways. Hand the major problems of the world off to God. Focus on what you can do as an individual. If you have a neighbor with a disability, volunteer to do their yardwork. Try to never get angry with other people; the best way to accomplish this is by doing your best to always see things from their perspective. Don't get stressed at rude people in traffic or with demanding or fussy people at work or with neighbors who park in front of your mailbox. If a waitperson seems distracted and not attentive, give them a generous tip anyway. Taking the grace that God gives you freely and always reflecting it back on others gives you a powerful sense of peace. If you think consciously about being kind and generous, after a while it will become second nature. You will be naturally empathetic. It's too bad I wasn't aware of this when I was young. Live in a way where you know that if everyone were to live that way, we would literally transform the world.