

“The God Who Answers By Fire” (pt. 1)

1 Kings 18:20-46

Let's turn in our Bibles once more to the eighteenth chapter of 1 Kings. I suppose there are certain stories in the Bible that have become so well-known that when we mention the person's name, we automatically think of a particular event. For example, if I were to mention Noah, you would think of the flood. If I mentioned Moses, you'd think of the Exodus. If it is Joshua, we'd think of Jericho. Or if it is David, we'd think of Goliath. When we say Daniel, we think of the lions' den. And when we hear Elijah's name, we automatically think of the story that unfolds on Mount Carmel. This text presents the story of the monumental showdown between Elijah on one side and the prophets of Baal on the other side. Elijah is standing for up God and His truth against a generation that has turned its back on Him. (Read)

Though it is one of the most epic encounters in Scripture, it begins quietly behind the scenes. God had been preparing Elijah for this moment for the past three and a half years. It is also evident that He had been preparing Israel. That is the purpose of the drought. As the land began to get drier and more brown, it was intended to be a vivid illustration of how the wages of sin is death. Those who worship a false god are destined to reap the consequences of their idolatry.

Psalm 115:4-8—“Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat. Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them.”

And so God has been setting the stage for this showdown to happen, but He has also been preparing Elijah. Three long, difficult years pass by in chapter 17. Elijah has been a prophet in hiding, first by the brook at Kerith, and then in Zarephath. We only know a couple of the details that take place during that time. What had Elijah been doing for the other 99% of the time he spent there? Based on what we know about him, I'd say that he had been spending time in prayer and doing what he could to serve, all while waiting for God to give him his next directions. When you stop to think about it, that's how so much of the Christian life goes. We tend to emphasize these 'epic moments' like we read about here in 1 Kings 18. And yet the vast majority of the Christian life is spent in chapter 17. Praying, waiting, and trusting. If we had our choice, we'd spend our life on the mountain top of excitement. But those moments in life are short lived. It is down in the valley of preparation where we live day by day, where God builds strength into our lives as He teaches us to depend on Him.

Verse 20 says that King Ahab gathers the people of Israel, along with the prophets of Baal, together at Mount Carmel. I've been to the spot where this epic showdown took place. It is about 9 miles east of the Mediterranean Sea, and it is roughly 1,800 feet in elevation. From the top, you can see for miles and miles in every direction. There is a statue of Elijah there on the top of Mount Carmel today, as well as a monastery ([see my pictures on screen](#)).

God does some awesome things on mountains in the Bible. Mount Carmel was one of those important places. It was a strategic location, for whoever held it controlled the northern half of the nation. To control the worship that took place here influenced the nation spiritually. The priests and the prophets of Baal knew that. That is why years earlier they had built an altar to Baal on top of Mount Carmel. We know from history that Baal worship was a particularly degrading

religion. It was a bizarre mixture of idolatry, perverted sexuality, and child sacrifice. The Phoenicians believed Baal controlled the rising and the setting of the sun. He was also considered the god who brought forth the seasons, and the god who brought forth or withheld the rains. Because ancient Israel was an agricultural nation, Baal worship was enticing. It appealed on one level to the mind, on another level to their economic well-being, and then on a deeper level to the desires of the flesh. And so we shouldn't be surprised that even in Israel, a nation dedicated to the one true God, Baal worship was extremely popular. It enticed the mind, the heart, the body, and ultimately the soul. Under the reign of King Ahab, Baal worship had taken the northern kingdom by storm. Much of that is due to his wife who promoted it. So the worship of God had been almost completely extinguished. It is against this dark backdrop that we read the story of Elijah's contest with Baalism. Remember he's a mountain man whose name means "The Lord is My God." And so for the time remaining, I want us to consider this showdown on Mount Carmel between Elijah and Ahab, or better yet, Baal versus the Lord. The full story takes place here in 1 Kings 18:20-46. And I've divided these verses into four separate headings. First of all, notice with me the:

1—CONFRONTATION of the people (18:20-24)

"So Ahab sent to all the people of Israel and gathered the prophets together at Mount Carmel. And Elijah came near to all the people and said, 'How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, then follow him.' And the people did not answer him a word. Then Elijah said to the people, 'I, even I only, am left a prophet of the Lord, but Baal's prophets are 450 men. Let two bulls be given to us, and let them choose one bull for themselves and cut it in pieces and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it.

And I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood and put no fire to it. And you call upon the name of your god, and I will call upon the name of the Lord, and the God who answers by fire, He is God.’ And all the people answered, ‘It is well spoken.’”

Elijah has called for an assembly of all the people of Israel on Mount Carmel. At issue is the question of who is God in Israel? Is it Baal, or is it the **LORD** God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? And so Elijah’s confrontation of the people is all about the one they worship. No matter when or where they live, all people are worshipers. We all find something to which we assign ultimate worth. That is the meaning of the word ‘worship,’ an abbreviated word for ‘worth-ship.’ A person will always declare the ‘worth-ship’ of the thing they find most beautiful, most deserving of their devotion, most worthy of their time, energy, and attention. We might think that the scene before us in this text comes from a time that is unlike our own, a bygone era of primitive superstition. A person says, “Look at all these pitiful, ancient people with their gods!” We think we are much more sophisticated and advanced. But we worship the same things in our own day that they did back then. It is what the Bible calls ‘idolatry.’

What does the Bible mean whenever it refers to idolatry? It is the number one sin that is mentioned more than anything else by far. The core sin of man is idolatry. God made us to love and worship Him above all things, and yet our sin consists of the fact that we’ve chosen a bunch of other things to love and worship more than God. The message of the Bible is that God confronts our idolatry and rescues us from our worship of false gods.

At its most basic level, idolatry involves the worship of the creature or the creation rather than the Creator. The very first commandment God gives His newly redeemed people in Exodus 20 is the command, “You shall have no other

gods before Me.” Nothing must come between you and Me in your life. God says, “There is to be nothing else in your life that is to be found in first place.” There is to be nothing else from the creation that I look to as my ultimate source. Idolatry is worship of the creation rather than the Creator. An idol is any unauthorized noun that has become ultimate in your life—a person, place, thing, or idea that is elevated to some god-like status in your heart so that it absorbs your imagination more than God. Your idol is anything you seek to give you what only God can provide. Let me talk about that for a minute:

First, idols are anything that promises us a life of security and joy apart from God.

I’d say for most of us, idolatry isn’t going to manifest itself in bowing down to a stone statue in a temple. More often, an idol is a good thing that you’ve turned into a God thing that then becomes a bad thing. And we all have at least one. We think about an idol, “If that is present in my life, I’ll have security and joy.” There are several categories of idols:

- Personal idols—romantic love and family; or money, power, and achievement; or access to particular social circles; or health, fitness, and physical beauty
- Cultural idols—politics; status; technological progress; science; economic prosperity
- Intellectual idols—science; education; ideologies

It may be influence, success, beauty, or money. It could be romance, fame and respect, or having children. It may be some possession like a beach house, a mountain house, or whatever. Idols are not usually bad things by themselves, but good things that have become god things, things you believe guarantee you security and joy and without which you don’t think can have security and joy.

Many people look to these kinds of things for the hope, the meaning, and fulfillment that only God can provide. The idols of traditional societies include family, hard work, duty, and moral virtue, while those of Western cultures involve individual freedom, self-discovery, personal affluence, and fulfillment. Bear in mind that these are all good things. All these good things can and do take on disproportionate size and influence within a society. They promise safety, peace, and happiness if only we base our lives on them.

Second, idols are rooted in our affections and reflected in our decisions.

The polytheistic cultures like ancient Egypt, or Greece and Rome, depicted virtually everything as a god. There were fertility gods, work gods, war gods, money gods, and so on. And the idols functioned as visible representations of some deified idea. They fashioned images of the gods with their hands so as to depict the invisible and the intangible. They latched onto the image because they were driven inwardly by the pursuit of the idea.

We've been made to worship, and we will always worship something. John Calvin once said that the human heart is a perpetual factory of idols. Man's heart is built to crank out idols like General Motors is built to replicate its cars. All the heart needs is the right data, or the right desire, and it will 'idolize' it. The factory of your heart always builds its idols around its affections. In other words, the 'affections' pertains to what a person loves, or what a person desires. I want the idol to do something for me. The Lord said to the prophet Ezekiel:

Ezekiel 14:3—"Son of man, these men have taken their idols into their hearts, and set the stumbling block of their iniquity before their faces."

God is saying, "My people have set up idols in their hearts so that their affections are not for Me, their pursuits are not of Me. I am not the pleasure that they seek.

I am not the priority that they pursue.” That’s why Jesus said the great commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and strength. Instead, we take the things that God has given and make them idols in and of themselves. Again, it is ‘good’ things that become ‘god’ things.

Timothy Keller — *“For example, physical beauty is a pleasant thing, but if you ‘deify’ it, if you make it the most important thing in a person’s life or a culture’s life, then you have Aphrodite, not just beauty. You have people, and an entire culture, constantly agonizing over appearance, spending inordinate amounts of time and money on it, and foolishly evaluating character on the basis of it. If anything becomes more fundamental than God to your happiness, meaning in life, and identity, then it becomes an idol.”*

We often have a ‘root idol’ that determines a lot of the way we live our lives, whether it is power, control, comfort, or the approval of others. In many ways, our sinful actions and sinful emotions are like smoke from a fire. If you see smoke in your house, you’d be a fool to deal with just the smoke. Can you imagine? Billows of black smoke start to pour out of your kitchen, so you just open a few windows and close the door. And yet far too many of us take this approach with our idolatry. We treat the smoke but leave the fire untouched. Instead, find the source of the fire and put it out!

Peel back the layers of your sin, and you’ll find an altar to an idol there. Idolatry drives our sinful choices. It corrupts our hearts, which in turn corrupts our behavior. It makes us frantic, always striving in pursuit of that thing. Your idol is anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living. An idol has such a controlling position in your heart that you can spend most of your passion and energy, your emotional and financial resources, on it without a second thought. Your idol is whatever you

look at and say deep within, “If I have that, then I’ll feel my life has meaning, then I’ll know I have value, then I’ll feel significant and secure.”

Third, idols are often strongholds of demonic influence.

This is the subject of 1 Corinthians 10. We see that fully on display with Egypt. Wherever idolatry is rampant, so are demons. It is a tragedy is that we fail to recognize spiritual forces at work because in our day Satan has figured out he can do more damage by keeping himself cloaked. He will show up as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:4). Satan whispers the same lie with every idol that he whispered to our first parents in the forbidden fruit—“if you obtain this, you’ll be like God.” You will have happiness, surely you won’t die.

That’s where the people of Israel are in 1 Kings 18. The people on Mount Carmel looked to their idol Baal for rain, fertile fields, and successful harvests. They were treating Baal as the source of life and prosperity. We may not bow before a statue, but we can give ‘created things’ the same place in our lives. Elijah is confronting this very thing in the lives of God’s people. Notice how:

He confronts their divided hearts

Look at the question that Elijah asks the people of Israel in verse 21 —“How long will you go limping between two different opinions?” How long will you waiver between two opinions? It is this picture of someone who is trying to straddle a fence. Elijah says, “If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, then follow him.” Quit riding the fence of indecision. Abandon your double-mindedness. James 1:8 says that a double-minded man is unstable in all his ways. To be double-minded is to be divided in loyalty, like trying to trust God while holding back another part of your heart for some other source of security. Such divided allegiance will always keep you wavering. Which means that you and I are to

make a choice. Israel is at a place where they have to make a choice with reference to God. For too long, they've been hesitating between two opinions. And so Elijah is saying, "Either you serve idols, or you serve the Lord!" And to not make a decision is in itself a decision.

Now, we need to point out the fact that the people of Israel had not entirely abandoned the worship of God. They just added Baal worship to their routines. And I think Ahab is a prime example of the 'syncretism' of the day. Do you know what 'syncretism' means? It is the blending together, or the meshing together of worldviews. It is dabbling in a little bit of this, and little bit of that. Believing a little bit of this, and believing a little bit of that. Syncretism tries to borrow from everything. It wants to follow Jesus, but not exclusively. It tries to incorporate elements from other world religions that it finds interesting. And you see this represented by those 'Coexist' bumper stickers on the back of cars, right beside their rainbow flag and favorite progressive politician sticker. It wants to believe everything and ironically doesn't believe anything, sort of like the 'James Talarico' version of quasi-Christianity. That's syncretism. And that's Ahab.

Roger Ellsworth — *"Ahab himself appears to have been a syncretist. The names he gave his children indicate that he not rejected the worship of God ('Ahaziah,' the Lord has grasped, 'Jehoram,' the Lord has exalted)."*

Jezebel and her prophets were sold out in their viewpoint and wanted Baal worshiped without rival. Ahab and the rest of Israel had not yet gone to this extreme. You could say that they wanted the best of both worlds. They wanted what God could give them, but they also wanted what Baal supposedly had to offer. And so this 'best of both worlds' approach is what Ahab promoted among the Israelites in his day. And they attempted to create a blending together of the worship of both God and Baalism. That's why Elijah throws down the gauntlet

with what he says in verse 21, “How long will you people go limping between two different opinions?” Make up your mind about who you’re going to serve! And I think their response is an indication of their indecisiveness. The last sentence in the verse says, “And the people did not answer him a word.”

This is where a lot of people are with God. Maybe they’ve not outright rejected Him, but they’ve not openly chosen Him either. If you rejected God, I don’t think you would be here this morning. At the very minimum, you are at least open to the idea. But that doesn’t mean that you’ve gone all in. Plenty of you here this morning may find yourself in the same place as these Israelites. You’re limping between two opinions. You want heaven, but you want the world too. You want Jesus as your Savior, but you want to call all the shots in your life now. You don’t want to bow the knee to Him as Lord. And someone says, “What’s the big deal? Why can’t I have the best of both worlds? I’ll have Jesus and a little bit of Baal, too!” I’ll call myself a Christian, but I’ll let the world determine my understanding of sex. I’ll let the world determine what I do with my body, or how I spend my money, or how I raise my kids. Folks, our loyalties may be divided much more so than we realize. Then notice:

He confronts their deceived prophets

In verse 22, Elijah lays out the terms of the challenge. He says to the people, “I, even I only, am left a prophet of the Lord, but Baal’s prophets are 450 men. Bring two bulls to be presented to us, and they can have the first choice. Let them prepare it for a sacrifice, but put no fire to it. And I will do the same with the other.” And he says in verse 24, “You call upon the name of your god, and I’ll call upon the name of the Lord. The God who answers by fire, He is God!” So all the people agree. Elijah is one man squaring off against 450 false prophets of Baal and this spineless majority who won’t come down from the fence of indecision.

Who are the ‘prophets of Baal’ in our modern generation?

There’s certainly no shortage of voices in our own time of those who tell us to place our ultimate trust in something other than the Lord. And these voices come from a variety of different places, don’t they? There’s progressive pulpits, podcasts and social media, the entertainment industry, government and politics. The modern day ‘prophets of Baal’ are always in the majority, and they are always vying for our allegiance in life. They tell us where to find security, identity, pleasure, and hope. And they want our obedience. But the question that Elijah raises at Carmel is the same question today—“Who is truly Lord, and who deserves our allegiance?” That’s the confrontation of the people. But I want you to notice something else:

2—REFUTATION of the idol (18:25-29)

“Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, ‘Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many, and call upon the name of your god, but put no fire to it.’ And they took the bull that was given them, and they prepared it and called upon the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, ‘O Baal, answer us!’ But there was no voice, and no one answered. And they limped around the altar that they had made. And at noon Elijah mocked them, saying, ‘Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.’ And they cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them. And as midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention.”

Notice how Elijah gives the prophets of Baal the home field advantage. He lets them pick which bull they want, and he lets them go first. Which means he gives them all of the advantages. That's strategic on his part. He knows that Baal is nothing, and that the Lord is the only one who will answer with fire. But he has to prove Baal to be the dead and worthless idol that it is. So he says, "Y'all go first."

Their fervent cries

Verse 26 says, "And they took the bull that was given to them, and they prepared it and called upon the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, 'O Baal, answer us!'" For hours they cry out to the idol, but there is no response. So verse 28 says they cry out louder, "O Baal, answer us!" But still no response. There is no voice, no one answered, and they 'limped' around the altar they had made. It is the second time the word is used. They're just hobbling back and forth on this altar, crying out to a god who is supposed to be in control of the storms. You would think that if Baal is the storm god, he can provide a little lightning bolt. It is such a small thing for a great god to do, am I right?

Verse 27 says, "And at noon Elijah mocked them, saying, 'Cry a little bit louder! After all, he is a god. Maybe he is off somewhere in thought.'" I mean, you can't help but find the humor in this. While they're ranting and raving and limping around their altar, Elijah is laughing. He says, "Maybe he's relieving himself!" (In my neck of the woods, we would say, "Maybe he's gone to see a man about a dog.") Maybe he's 'indisposed' at the moment. Maybe his TV is turned up too loud and he can't hear you. Maybe he is on Facebook or something. Maybe he is asleep, or he is on a trip. And the point made is that Elijah is mocking Baal's silence. Baal isn't answering because Baal isn't God.

Their frenzied efforts

When Baal doesn't respond to their cries, notice how they turn to more drastic efforts. Verse 28 says, "And they cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them." They cut themselves and shed their own blood to get their god to notice them. This shows the pitiful lengths that people will go through to try to 'procure the blessing of the gods.' You know what I'm referring to, don't you? To procure the gods' blessing means you try to obtain divine favor through some ritual worship, offerings, sacrifices, or other actions. In the worshipers' thinking, they're performing all of these acts to persuade the god to send rain, ensure a good harvest, give victory, or whatever.

The prophets of Baal cried out, danced around, and even cut themselves, all in an attempt to make Baal respond. It is really no different from anyone else who thinks they can get God's attention through their own efforts. Religion will bleed you to death trying to secure some divine blessing. I've met many a person who thought they had to atone for some past failure in their life before God would ever give them the time of day. And so they beat themselves to the point of death. What about those who are trying to secure the blessing that some idol claims it can provide? But no matter the amount of sacrifice, or no matter the amount of their own blood they shed to try to appease it, their thirst can never be satisfied. Idolatry will bleed you to death, but the gospel of God's grace says that Jesus bled for you!

Their futile attempts

All their frantic efforts could not produce the blessing they wanted—Baal gave no answer. Verse 29 says, "And as midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention." In spite of all their efforts and self-attempts at atonement, no one

paid attention. They have given themselves entirely to a thing that cannot save them. The prophets of Baal have been deceived into believing a lie. And in turn, they had been deceiving God's people into believing their lie. But friends, let me explain to you some things that our secular culture doesn't understand:

- *Just because something is popular doesn't make it true*

What determines whether or not an idea is true? There's a lot of people who think that just because an idea is popular, it must therefore be true. Consensus by the crowd doesn't make something true.

- *Just because something is legalized doesn't make it true*

What determines whether or not an idea is true? Maybe it is the laws of the land that determines what's true. Sort of the 'might makes right' mentality. Endorsement by the government doesn't make something true.

- *Just because something is sincerely believed doesn't make it true*

There are those who say, "It doesn't matter what a person believes, just as long as they sincerely believe it!" I can sincerely believe that I am a bird, but that doesn't mean that if I jump off the roof that I'm going to fly. Sincerity in belief is not what makes an idea true.

- *Just because something moves our emotions doesn't make it true*

We can become emotionally moved by something so that it affects us deeply. And you can give your time, energy, and resources to the pursuit of what affects you emotionally. It doesn't make it true. There are plenty of people who have given themselves wholeheartedly to the pursuit of a lie. I mean, let's just ask these prophets of Baal. Was Baalism popular? Yes. Was Baalism legal? Yes. Was Baalism sincerely believed by them? Yes. Was Baalism something that

moved them emotionally? Yes, look at their cries and their frenzied way of worshiping. But did any of that make Baalism true? No, it did not! Just because they gave it all they had, in no way does it mean Baal can answer by fire. Not in the least. But the God of Elijah can and will, and we will see that next time...

How long are you going to straddle the fence? That's the question I want to ask you before we finish. You're limping between two opinions—God on the one hand, the world on the other. Elijah tells the people, "If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, then follow him." For you to not decide if you are going to serve God or something else leaves you limping in life. But let's bring this a bit closer to home:

If money is your god, then serve it with all you have. Get all you can while you can. Burn the candle at both ends so you can keep up with the Jones's. If you have to sacrifice your family in the process, that's a small sacrifice, right?

If the approval of other people is your god, then seek it with all you have. Go ahead and do whatever you have to do to earn the acceptance of the crowd, even if it means losing or compromising your convictions.

If your appearance is your god, then go all out for yourself. Nip it, tuck it, lift it, tighten it, tan it, tat it, color it. Whatever. Spend whatever you have to spend on yourself to procure the look you're going for. After all, physical appearance is all that matters, right?

If pleasure is your god, then do whatever you have to do to get it. Sleep with whoever you want to sleep with, drink or smoke whatever you want to. If you have to abandon your spouse to get it, that's just a small sacrifice to pay, right? It is worth it, isn't it? Follow hard after whatever suits your fancy. Forget about

your responsibilities to your wife and kids, to your church, or anyone else for that matter. “You go and just do you!” That’s the motto of idolatry.

But if Jesus Christ is Lord, if His will is ultimate, then serve Him with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your strength. How long will you go on limping between two opinions? If you’re going to be saved, then be saved all the way. Jump in with both feet. Whatever you do, don’t ride the fence. Lukewarmness makes Him sick.

J.D. Greear — *“Most Christians are trying to be a little into the world and a little into God; but they are enough into the world to be miserable in God, and enough into God to be miserable in the world. Choose one and go all in with it!”*

You can take all of the world’s religions, and all of the idols that people worship, and all of the false gods of this world with all of its lying saviors—there’s not one of them that can answer by fire. There is only one true and living God who answers by fire, the God of Elijah, the God who has made Himself fully known to humanity in the person of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible says that we’re separated from God by our sin and that the only way we can be saved from eternal judgment is to trust in Christ, believing that His death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead will deliver us from sin’s penalty. And friends, this message is what makes Christianity different from the world’s religions!

Consider this...

- Idols will bleed you to death, but Jesus bled and died for you.
- Idols are dead and cannot save, but Jesus lives and saves those who come to Him in faith.

- Idols will lie to you and deceive you, but Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life.
- Idols can't call down the fire, but Jesus gives the fire of His Spirit to all who trust in Him.

Paul David Tripp—*“Only when awe of God rules your heart will you be able to keep the pleasures of the material world in their proper place.”*

God has come to rescue us from our idols. What it means to be converted is to return to God as God. A lot of people don't understand that. They think when you come to God, you are arranging a deal with God. In response, you agree to be a little more moral and go to church. But true conversion is returning to the worship and love of God as God.

1 Thessalonians 1:9—**“You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.”**

The true God alone gives life. The contest of 1 Kings 18 is a reminder to us that there is no God but God. He alone is the God who answers by fire!

2—DEMONSTRATION of the Lord (18:30-40)

3—RESTORATION of the rain (18:41-46)