

Who will be your God?

I. Baal?

II. The Lord?

(1 Kings 18:16-39) So Obadiah went to meet Ahab and told him, and Ahab went to meet Elijah. {17} When he saw Elijah, he said to him, "Is that you, you troubler of Israel?" {18} "I have not made trouble for Israel," Elijah replied. "But you and your father's family have. You have abandoned the Lord's commands and have followed the Baals. {19} Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table." {20} So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. {21} Elijah went before the people and said, "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him." But the people said nothing. {22} Then Elijah said to them, "I am the only one of the Lord's prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets. {23} Get two bulls for us. Let them choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. {24} Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD. The god who answers by fire--he is God." Then all the people said, "What you say is good." {25} Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose one of the bulls and prepare it first, since there are so many of you. Call on the name of your god, but do not light the fire." {26} So they took the bull given them and prepared it. Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. "O Baal, answer us!" they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made. {27} At noon Elijah began to taunt them. "Shout louder!" he said. "Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened." {28} So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. {29} Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention. {30} Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come here to me." They came to him, and he repaired the altar of the LORD, which was in ruins. {31} Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD had come, saying, "Your name shall be Israel." {32} With the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD, and he dug a trench around it large enough to hold two seahs of seed. {33} He arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces and laid it on the wood. Then he said to them, "Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood." {34} "Do it again," he said, and they did it again. "Do it a third time," he ordered, and they did it the third time. {35} The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench. {36} At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: "O LORD, 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. {37} Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again." {38} Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench. {39} When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, "The LORD--he is God! The LORD--he is God!"

Tell me, have you ever wondered whether what you believe is actually the truth? For example, out of all the different religions in the world, how do you know that yours is the right one? How do you know that your God, the God of the Bible, is the True God? How do you know that Jesus is really is the only way to heaven? What if there isn't such a thing as Heaven or Hell? Could it be that all the time you spent sitting in church was just a waste of time? Imagine all the pleasures you could be indulging in if you didn't believe that there is an all-knowing God in heaven holding you accountable for your behavior.

If you think about it, there's an awful lot riding on what you believe about God. How much you enjoy your life on both sides of the grave will be largely dependent upon who or what you put your faith in. Who are you going to believe? Who will you trust? Or to put it another way,

Who will be your God?

On the basis of the word we have before us, you basically have two choices:

I. Will your god be Baal?

Or II. Will it be the Lord?

You realize, you're not the first congregation that has been presented with those two

choices. 2900 years ago, it was the nation of Israel that was confronted with a similar choice. It was the Prophet Elijah who came to them and basically laid it on the line: *“How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.”*

Now to understand why one of God's prophets would offer people a choice like that, maybe we need to fill in a little background information. Elijah was a prophet who served during the time when the nation of Israel was a divided kingdom. You had the ten northern tribes, sometimes referred to as Israel, governed by one line of kings. And you had the two southern tribes, sometimes called Judah, governed by another set of kings. Elijah spent the majority of his time working in the northern kingdom, which was ruled by kings who became progressively more and more ungodly. At first, the northern kings tried to mix the worship of the true God with various local religions. Jeroboam, the first king of Israel, set up golden calves at each end of his kingdom to keep his people from traveling back to Jerusalem to worship. But it was really King Ahab who took it to the next level. Scripture describes Ahab with these words. *Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the LORD than any of those before him. He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, but he also married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and began to serve Baal and worship him. He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. (1 Kings 16:30-32)* In other words, Ahab went all in on Baal worship. He married the daughter of the high priest of Baal. He built a huge Temple for Baal worship in the city of Samaria. And then he allowed his wife Jezebel to start killing as many of the Lord's prophets as she could find. As you might expect, this all led the nation of Israel further and further down a path of flagrant idolatry. The nation as a whole began to call Baal their God.

But the God of their forefathers did not give up on the nation of Israel. Instead, he sent them a prophet. A prophet whose mission was to lead the people to see the error of their ways, and instead, see who the true God really is. The Prophet Elijah does that by asking them basically, “Who will be your God? Will it be Baal? Or will it be the Lord?”

Now, if Elijah were here today and asked you, “Who will be your God? Will it be Baal?” you might find yourself thinking, “Well, that's an easy choice. It's not like I'm going to worship a god named Baal.” Wait a minute. Are you sure about that? Do you know anything about Baal? The Canaanites and Phoenicians worshipped Baal as the god of the sun and the rain. He was often depicted with a lightning bolt in his hand. Baal, and his female counterpart Asherah, were also regarded as the gods of fertility. People thought that these were the gods who caused their sheep and goats and wives to conceive. And so the worship of Baal was almost always associated with some form of sexuality. Whether it was putting up wooden Asherah poles carved in the shape of female body parts or whether it was going to the temple of Baal to have sexual relations with the temple prostitutes, the bottom line is, Baal was the god of sexual immorality.

So now let me go back to my original question. Are you sure you're not worshipping the god named Baal? Whenever we succumb to the sins of the flesh. When we say, “C'mon, everybody is hooking up these days. It's what people do. God, you're not going to deny me a little harmless entertainment, a little physical pleasure, are you?” Well, I guess that depends on who your God is. In the words of the prophet, “If Baal is your god, then follow him.” Go ahead and do what it seems like everyone else is doing. But understand which god you're bowing down to.

But now, maybe you are thinking, “Actually, I don't have to worry about bowing down to that form of Baal. I'm kind of biologically past that stage in my life.” So do you think that means you are not tempted to bow down to Baal? Wait a minute. Why did the Canaanites look to Baal

to bless them with bigger harvests, bigger herds, bigger families (which in an agrarian economy meant more cheap labor)—all those things amount to more what? More wealth. In Elijah's day, Baal was not just the god of sex. He was the god of material riches and prosperity. So let me ask you again, are you sure you're not tempted to bow down to that god? To say, "Pastor, I don't have time for church. I have to work. I want to make sure my children have all the good things in life." Or, "Pastor, God has blessed me with a place up north" or, "We like to get away every weekend, so don't expect to see me in church this summer." Okay. In the words of the Prophet Elijah, "If Baal is your god, then follow him."

My friends, if we are honest with ourselves, maybe we have bowed down to Baal, or at least found ourselves wavering in our allegiance to God. "Who is number 1 in my heart? Where am I going to look for joy and fulfillment in life? Who is going to meet my needs? Who will be my God? That's exactly the dilemma that the people of Israel faced here in our text. And so, to help them resolve their wavering hearts, Elijah proposed a contest. You might call it a showdown between two gods. Elijah invites the priests of Baal to put a bull on an altar and then call on their god to light the fire miraculously. Elijah would do the same thing. And whichever God answered by sending fire, that God would be declared the true God. You heard the people's response. "*What you say is good.*"

Now you might think that this sounds like a fair contest. But actually, Elijah did everything in his power to stack the deck in favor of...Baal. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if the people fully expected that Baal would win this contest. Why do I say that? First, because there were 450 priests offering prayers to Baal and only one man praying to the Lord of Israel. Secondly, the request is to send a lightning bolt from heaven to light the altar. Hello. Baal is the storm god, right? He has a lightning bolt in his hand. This should be no problem for Baal. This is right in his wheelhouse. And finally, Elijah ends up dumping 12 buckets of water on the altar. Like that's going to help light it. Apparently, Elijah never learned in Boy Pioneers that you need to keep the firewood dry. And yet, in spite of every advantage given to Baal, after hours of pleading and dancing and self-mutilation by the priests of Baal, what was the result? Scripture says, "*There was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.*"

Really, there's no surprise there, right? It's just as the Prophet Jeremiah once said. *Like a scarecrow in a melon patch, their idols cannot speak. They must be carried because they cannot walk. Do not fear them, they can do no harm nor can they do any good (Jeremiah 10:5).* The way of idolatry, whether a lust for money or a lust for pleasure, is always a dead end street. Or to put it another way, no matter what form Baal takes in your life, in the end, he never keeps his promises. Baal never answers your prayers.

Fortunately for each one of us, there is another option. And Elijah reveals it here in our text. What does Elijah do? First, he takes 12 stones, representing the 12 tribes of Israel, to whom the Lord had originally given the land of Canaan. Elijah takes the stones and builds an altar in the name of the Lord. He puts the wood and the bull on it, douses it with water, and then at the time when the Law of Moses stipulated that the evening sacrifice be made, Elijah offered a simple prayer, without any theatrics, or bloodletting. He simply prayed, "*O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel*—notice the name he uses for God: The LORD, in all caps. We learned about that name last week. It's the God of free and faithful grace. The God who kept his promises to the Patriarchs. The God who delivered his people from Egypt. The God who promised to send a savior to rescue a fallen world—to that God Elijah prayed, *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.*"

In other words, Elijah prays, “This really wasn't my idea. It's not like I'm demanding a miracle from you God. I'm just carrying out your orders and trusting that you will accomplish what only you can do.” And then Elijah hits the real heart of his prayer. “*Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.*”

You realize, that's the ultimate purpose of every one of God's miracles. His goal is always to lead people to trust in him, not only for their earthly needs, but for their eternal salvation. For example, after Jesus turned water into wine, what does Scripture say? *Jesus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him (John 2:11)*. Or you think of what Jesus said to his disciples in our Gospel reading today. “*Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves.*” (John 14:11). That's always the purpose of miracles: to lead people to know and believe in the true God. In fact, isn't that exactly the effect that the miracle that God performed for Elijah had on the people? When God finally rains down fire from heaven and it consumes the bull, the wood, the stones, the soil and even the water in the trench, what impact does it have on the people? They fall face down on the ground and cry out, “*The LORD--he is God! The LORD--he is God!*” For the Israelites, the miracle on Mount Carmel is what led them to know and believe in the true God.

For most of us, it wasn't what happened on Mount Carmel that changed our hearts. It's was what happened on a different Mountain. A mount called Calvary. That's where a holy God loved sinners like you and me so much that he came to this earth to take our place, to endure our shame, to die our death, to be laid to rest in a tomb and then on the third day, breaks forth as our triumphant and resurrected Lord! There's the miracle that sets our Savior God apart from every other god in the world. No other God in the world gave his life to set sinners free. No other God in the world gives eternal life away as a free gift in his Son.

My friends, on this Mother's Day weekend, if you have a mother who taught you about that God. If she taught you how much Jesus loves you. If she showed you what it means to walk in God's path, then thank God for your mother.

And, on the other hand, if your mother is still wavering in her spiritual life, if she still worshipping the Baals of this world, don't give up on her. Instead, pray for her. Love her. And point her to the love that Jesus has for her. For then, maybe one day, by the power of the Holy Spirit, she'll join you and me in saying, “The Lord—he is God. The Lord, he is God.” God grant it, for Jesus' sake. Amen.