

# Idolatry on Trial

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 24 August 2025

Preacher: James Ross

[ 0 : 00 ] So we come to this point in Elijah's life where it is time for a showdown. And of course, history is littered with famous showdowns.

This week I was reminding myself about the epic battle between Hannibal and the armies of Carthage! traveling over the Alps and their elephants in order to take on the might of Rome in 200 BC.

But those epic contests don't just belong in history and military battles. We also see them in sport. There's the rumble in the jungle, the Messi and Bappi World Cup final most recently.

And so often we find that in these epic battles there's a revelation, which is stronger, which is greater. Often weaknesses, vulnerabilities are exposed.

There are, of course, some famous showdowns within the Bible itself. Perhaps most famous is that of the shepherd boy David taking the field of battle against Goliath.

[ 1 : 01 ] Or perhaps we think of Moses against the might of Pharaoh and Egypt. And we can add to that list Elijah taking on the prophets of Baal.

Now, of course, whenever we get to these showdowns within the Bible, there's an extra layer of significance. Because these showdowns represent a battle between the one true God and the gods of other nations.

They become events in which God's glory is revealed and the emptiness of idolatry is exposed. So it's a very dramatic scene.

And I think it's helpful for us to picture ourselves there on Mount Carmel. Not, as maybe our instinct might be, to imagine ourselves as the great hero Elijah, standing firm against evil, faithful in this bold mission, calling the nation back to God.

But it's also almost certainly not us putting ourselves in the position where we are King Ahab, or one of those false prophets where we're deliberately giving our lives to idolatry, where we're viciously opposed to God and His people.

[ 2 : 14 ] We don't live in that realm either. I think perhaps the most honest and realistic place for us to find ourselves in the story is on the sideline. Listen, listening to Elijah, ask us, how long will you wait for?

As we are invited to see once again the power of God as fire from heaven falls, as God's glory is demonstrated, and our hearts are reminded again, yes, there is one and only one true God and Savior.

Because I think this is what we find we so often need. It's the answer to our wavering faith, the answer to our limping along faith, that kind of faith where we can feel strong one day when things are going in our favor, but when disappointment comes, perhaps we so quickly fall back on old ways or looking to something else to rescue us.

What we need is to encounter the God of power and to give our hearts to follow Him. We need to hear His great prophet, ultimately the Lord Jesus, and the message of Mount Calvary as the antidote to the fear and the wavering that we so often experience.

As we get into the story, we're going to use really some of the themes of the text. So, we're going to think about the beginning, the first couple of verses, when the people are silent, to recognize with Elijah the reality of the idols who are silent, and then to spend a few minutes thinking about the true God who is not silent.

[ 4 : 02 ] So, verse 20 and 21, the people are silent. So, the stage, if you've been here for the last few weeks, the stage has been set for this showdown.

It's been building. Ahab has turned the nation away from worshiping God, and now he summons the nation together for this crucial moment. They're going to see for themselves, we're going to see

for ourselves, who is the true God who is worthy of worship?

And as Elijah meets them there on the mountain, he brings that question, how long will you waver between two opinions? Literally, that word is how long will you limp between two opinions?

They've been pulled by these rival claims of authority and weight, and they're lacking power because of it. They're also robbing God of glory.

And so, Elijah comes with this message, if the Lord is God, follow Him.

[ 5 : 07 ] And so, Elijah says to us, do we know who our God is? Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, that He's the only true and living God.

And if we know that, then let's follow Him. And to take up this challenge from Elijah, to follow Him with undivided hearts.

But isn't it striking to notice at the end of verse 21, the reaction of the people? It simply says, the people said nothing. This call to choose is met with a deafening silence.

So, we don't know what the reason for the silence was. Did they feel a sense of shame? We don't know. Were they skeptical towards Elijah's claims? Are they waiting to see, well, show me Elijah, before I decide which team I want to be on?

We don't know. But as we move from the experience of the silent crowds to ourselves, I think it's helpful for us to ask the question, what makes us limp in our faith?

[ 6 : 18 ] Or what makes us waver between two opinions? There is almost the word picture of a desert traveler, someone who has come to discover an oasis.

Here is where fresh water is, but not satisfied with that. The desert traveler then walks off to see if there's a better one. Is there a better source somewhere else?

And in so doing, strength begins to go, and they're dragging themselves along. It is easy for us to be sapped of spiritual strength, to find ourselves running from one Savior to another because we can't fully trust, or we wrestle with unbelief, and we keep falling back into unbelief.

When the next challenge comes, perhaps we look in on ourselves, and we think, well, what can I do? How can I fix it? Rather than looking up.

If we turn to ourselves, we can feel drained or we can feel alone. Maybe we can think about Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount. In those battles for belief, we need to learn as God's children to beat a path to our Father's door and to beat on the door for the help that He can give and that He wants to give.

[ 7 : 51 ] The people of Elijah's day, they had adopted a pick-and-mix approach to religion. They hadn't totally abandoned the God of the Bible. They were still looking to worship Him, but they'd also added in local gods and especially Baal.

And we might think, well, why on earth would they have made that choice? But they were living in a culture where so many people were saying, it's these idols that will give you life.

In this land, to have security, you need to give your offering to Baal. If you want wealth, if you want hope, around here, you choose Baal.

That was the challenge that the people were living in. Think about the people who first read this, the exiles. They've fallen under God's judgment because they've also believed that lie. They've turned to idols and so judgment has come.

But it's important for us to ask the question, are we any different or do we see some of those same tendencies? When we think about what is an idol, you know, an idol is anything in life that we would run to or even that we would limp to to find our sense of security and well-being.

[ 9 : 09 ] And so our hearts, too, can find themselves divided. You know, when we're living by faith, I'm following Jesus, I'm going to trust Jesus. But maybe a hardship comes, opposition comes, a disappointment comes, exhaustion comes, confusion comes, and our thinking can become confused, too.

I need to find something else, someone else that's going to deliver me in this moment. Elijah's words confronted the people and they still confront us with that very stark reality that we cannot afford to be double-hearted.

Jesus said, you cannot serve God and money. You could ask Elijah, Elijah, can't I serve God and money or job and success?

Sometimes, when it seems to deliver a more instant hit, what's Elijah's answer? If the Lord is God, follow Him.

We need to know our God and follow Him, that He is our Savior God, that He is our promise-keeping God, that He is our Emmanuel God, God with us.

[ 10 : 29 ] And for all these reasons and so many more, He is the one who deserves all our heart, all our worship, all of the time. And so it's important that we know ourselves, that we would sense where we waver, when we would be tempted to limp back to our old idols.

And when we are aware that we're in that position of weakness, that's when we need to pray. That's when we need to remind ourselves of the truths of the gospel, that Jesus is better, that our Father is for us and He does provide, and we would ask for the strength that we need.

I think following on from the people's silence, it's also important for us to ask ourselves, what kind of silence is ours when we are confronted by the challenge of God's Word?

And we know the saying, silence is golden. I'm trained as a librarian. I agree wholeheartedly.

Silence can be a wonderful place of reflection. Silence is a place where we can hear another speak.

But sometimes silence can be the silence of defiance, can't it? I'm not interested in your authority.

I'm unwilling to engage and to respond. Again, we don't know why Israel was silent in response, but we know our own hearts.

[ 12 : 06 ] We know the times when we are more likely to sit and listen as God speaks from His Word. But perhaps, as we know ourselves, we also know those times where we sit, but we're not going to engage, and we really don't want to listen to God's Word.

And so, again, it's important for us both to know ourselves, but more than that, to know our God.

And as we know His goodness and His glory, that we would follow Him.

Well, having seen the reality of the people's silence, let's now move to the next scene as the showdown begins to recognize the idols that are silent. So, it's interesting, on the face of it, this could seem like a very uneven contest.

You know, if this was made into a movie, the odds against Elijah seem to be 450 to 1 against. And not only that, the geography is against Elijah as well, because this is taking place on Mount Carmel, which is right smack in the middle of Baal worship territory.

And as well, it's important for us to know, and we've said this a few times, that Baal, he's the storm god. So, ancient art will picture him holding the lightning bolt.

[ 13 : 22 ] So, he seems to have all the cards. And then we get to that point later on in the story where Elijah further tips the scales with a soaking wet sacrifice. But in so doing, the whole story is going to demonstrate with greater power the glory of the one true God.

But notice, as the story is told, the emphasis on the noisy worshippers. So, look at verse 26. Here they are, calling on the name of Baal from morning till noon.

Baal, answer us, they shouted. Verse 28, they shouted louder, they're slashing themselves with swords. Verse 29, they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice.

So, literally, all day, getting louder and louder and louder in their worship. Again, just to observe this, in verse 26, end of verse 26, it says, they danced around the altar they'd made in our NIV here. Again, literally, the language is, they limped around the altar. And so, we're being drawn attention to how powerless and how pointless their worship really is.

[ 14 : 39 ] It's full of energy and commitment, but it's a waste of time because their worship is directed to the wrong God who will be of no help in this key moment.

And so, the message at the same time rings loud and clear that while the worshipers are making a racket, their God is silent. Verse 26, after their shouting, there was no response.

No one answered. Verse 29, there was no response. No one answered. No one paid attention. And Elijah's kind of sarcastic responses to them, it really served to expose that reality and to expose for them and for us the folly, the weakness of trusting in any created thing rather than the creator for their life and their well-being.

That this contest is a rebuke to the nation for leaving behind the one true God in order to pursue worship of the false.

It's one thing that you find all through the work and the ministry and the writings of the prophets. So, early on in the prophet Jeremiah's ministry, God comes and speaks through Jeremiah and says, my people have committed two sins.

[ 16 : 10 ] Not only have they rejected me, the source of living water, they're also drinking from empty cisterns. They're going to broken cisterns that hold no water. They could have had fresh, wonderful, life-giving water, but instead they're choosing to drink from dirty puddles instead.

And so, this great showdown between Elijah and the prophets of Baal is putting idolatry on trial and in this very public stage, this very public spectacle, with the eyes of the nation watching, Baal again comes up empty.

That must have been something of a shattering experience, certainly for the prophets, but perhaps for the people as well. We place so much hope and emphasis on this idol and now we're discovering it is of no value when the time comes.

And again, maybe we've learned that ourselves from bitter experience. In a time of weakness, in a time of crisis, perhaps we've looked to that person in our life or to that sort of wealth or that status, that position, whatever, that we relied on before, thinking, deliverance will come again, only this time it failed to satisfy.

Sometimes that's what brings us to church. We come to an end of ourselves. We've been looking for salvation from other things and they come up empty and we're looking for something more.

[17:44] We're open to God. We can draw two important lessons for ourselves, I think, here. The first, and it comes from a book, a really helpful little book by Greg Beale, *We Become What We Worship*.

It's one theme that runs through the Bible. We sang it in Psalm 115. He summarizes this whole book in a sentence. What we revere or what we worship, what we revere, we resemble, either for ruin or restoration.

We become what we worship for good or for ill. And the message of the Bible and especially the message of the prophets is that if we choose idols, if we give our hearts to a non-thing, then what happens is that our hearts become hardened.

Our senses become dulled. Our spiritual sense becomes dulled. We become spiritually lifeless and we come to be ruined.

Our need is to be remade, to be restored, to become new creations in Christ, for God to work in us by His Spirit to give us a new heart with a new capacity to love, with a new and restored worship to worship the God we were made for.

[19:08] And when we worship the God who made us and who we were made for, we discover that God's masterpiece, you and I, we find ourselves being restored more and more into the image of the Lord Jesus.

But Elijah's message becomes really important for us to hear in that we always need to be careful who or what we give our hearts to. But there's also that wonderful promise within the gospel if we give our lives and our hearts to Jesus that He will never fail us, He will never disappoint us, He is the Savior to trust.

Perhaps within this little section there's also a challenge for us that is the need always to be toppling our idols. Maybe we're familiar with that famous saying of Calvin that our hearts are idol-making factories.

It is so easy for us to hunt around and look around and say if I have this thing then life will go well. This person or this thing is going to be the key to the good life.

That's really easy for us to do. The Bible says we give our hearts to something and we don't give our hearts to God. It's idolatry. So if we find our spiritual smoke alarm is going off we have that sense am I giving my heart to the wrong thing?

[20:42] Or if you sense that you're more hardened perhaps to God's word or to the gospel. If you look back and say well there was days when I had much more joy in worship.

There was times when my identity as a child of God that meant everything to me but not so much now. That may be not definitely but it may be a sign that we're giving our heart to something less than the one true God and we may be being sapped of spiritual strength.

So we ask ourselves the question and we join Elijah in looking to tear down our idols which we do as we encounter afresh the glory and love of God for us in Christ Jesus.

It's as our hearts are captured by that greater love that we are then able to replace those lesser loves. As we come to understand this is the one who my heart is made for then we're able to set those lesser things aside.

Jesus said we cannot serve God and money so it's important for us to do that kind of heart analysis where might I be giving my heart away and to give our hearts to the gospel to remembering God's love for us in Jesus.

[22:14] Well let's think about the third part of our story where the showdown reaches its climax. Verse 30 to 46 the true God speaks and he is not silent.

So Elijah the prophet began by speaking and the people were silent and then the people were making a racket but the idols were silent. The lack of power of the idol is out in the moment. It's out in the open. It's exposed for all to see. just to pause for a moment and to think about this scene in the setting of our own day.

You and I know that many people have turned from God. Alternative choices for happiness or freedom or for purpose or for meaning. people are busy, consuming, experiencing, building, but at the same time the gods are failing.

We've never had it so good, but yet we've never had such high levels of anxiety and loneliness and loss of purpose and a sense of fear.

[ 23 : 36 ] fear. There are so many people today who are limping and lacking power and looking to find hope and they're searching for more.

And wonderfully, as we know, there is more. There is hope from the God who speaks. And so, very briefly, we're going to think about the three ways that God speaks in these last verses.

The first way, the most dramatic way perhaps that God speaks is that He provides the fire for the sacrifice. Look there at verse 30 down to verse 39.

We see Elijah rebuilding the original altar. We see him soaking the offering so there is no doubt that glory is going to be given to God if He answers.

And we hear Elijah pray. Verse 37, as his prayer closes, answer me, answer me, Lord, so these people will know that You, Lord, are God and that You are turning their hearts back again.

[ 24 : 45 ] He prays for glory to be seen in such a way people would have such an encounter with the glory and the presence of God that their hearts would be transformed.

That's not going to be a people thing, that's a God thing. And the fire falls and everything is consumed. The people see the true God provides a sacrifice.

Perhaps they remember the God who provides sacrifices for their sin and they bow down. The Lord, He is God. The Lord, He is God.

He speaks by providing fire for the sacrifice. But He also speaks on this mountain as He brings judgment on evil.

Because the story doesn't end on that high. We then look at verse 40. Seize the prophets of Baal, don't let anyone get away. They seized them and Elijah had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and slaughtered there.

[ 25 : 55 ] So this mountain scene becomes a place of judgment as God brings decisive judgment on the wicked who willfully, deliberately reject and oppose Him.

It's one of these pictures that we get in the Bible of future judgment brought into the present to give us, as we read, a warning, a reminder of the certainty of the Holy God's judgment of evil.

But the story doesn't end there either. We get that scene verse 41 to 46 of Elijah and his servant and Elijah being sent to look for the cloud with the promise of rain and God speaks finally by providing the gift of life.

So where the conflict began three years before with Elijah going into Ahab's presence saying, I swear there's not going to be Jew or rain as a judgment and now the rain is going to fall and it's going to fall because God has spoken because the true God is going to give life.

And it's so interesting that there's this emphasis on Elijah speaking to Ahab telling Ahab to get ready for the rain. Perhaps we remember that reality of God's goodness causing the rain to fall on the just and the unjust.

[ 27 : 21 ] wicked Ahab gets the rain that will give the crops that will give life. But God speaks by way of sacrifice.

God speaks in this act of judgment and God speaks as he provides the gift of life. It was Francis Schaeffer who wrote the book with a wonderful title, God is there and he is not silent.

We see that so vividly on Mount Carmel but our God is always speaking. He's speaking to us in the beauty of creation. He speaks to us when we read his word.

He speaks to us by his spirit into our conscience and he speaks to us especially as he brings us the good news of the Lord Jesus. The same God who spoke on this mountain years later will speak on another mountain.

would speak that same message again. Think about Jesus there on Mount Calvary. Jesus becomes the great, the final mountaintop sacrifice provided by God to take away our sin and our guilt.

[ 28 : 42 ] Think about what happens there on the cross. The cross is a moment of judgment from a holy God against sin and evil and unbelief but remarkably the judgment doesn't fall on us, it falls on the righteous Lord Jesus.

But the cross also, alongside the resurrection, speaks to us of the gift of life, new life that is ours in Christ, arisen and reigning Lord Jesus.

And so, as we think about this great scene in Elijah's story, we recognize that it points us to a still greater story that reminds us of Jesus, the true and better Elijah, sent into this world both as God's messenger and as God's message, sent in order to reveal in a new way glory of God, the power of God, the life-giving nature of God, and he is the one who calls us saying, follow me.

He is the loving Lord God who calls for our undivided loyalty. He loves us so much, he wants our best, he will not share our heart with another.

Jesus is the one we need to hear, Jesus is the one we need to believe in, Jesus is the one our confused and hurting world needs to discover.

[ 30 : 24 ] Will we come to him and come to him again to receive the strength and the help that we need? And then will we go for him with a mountaintop message of Calvary written on our hearts so that we might proclaim it in our lives, that we might live with hope and we might point people to hope, pointing people away from their idols to show them that something more that they're looking for is found in and only in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let's pray together.