

Will the real God please stand up?

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[0 : 00] Our reading today is 1 Kings 18 verses 17 through to verse 46.

When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, Is it you, you troubler of Israel? And he answered, I have not troubled Israel, but you have, and your father's house, because you have abandoned the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals.

Now, therefore, send and gather all Israel to me at Mount Carmel, and the 450 prophets of Baal, and the 400 prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table.

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.

[1 : 23] 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. 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.

[2 : 39] But there was no voice, and no one answered. And they limped round 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.

Then Elijah said to all the people, Come near to me. And all the people came near to him. And he repaid the altar of the Lord, repaired the altar of the Lord that had been thrown down.

Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of tribes of the son of Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord came, saying, Israel shall be your name. And with the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord.

[3 : 55] And he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two sheaths of seed. And he put the wood in order, and cut the bull in pieces, and laid it on the wood.

And he said, Fill up four jars with water, and pour it on the burnt offering, and on the wood. And he said, Do it a second time. And they did it a second time.

And he said, Do it a third time. And they did it a third time. And the water ran round the altar, and filled the trench also with water. And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near and said, O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are the God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word.

Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.

Then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt offering, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, The Lord, he is God.

[5 : 17] The Lord, he is God. And Elijah said to them, Seize the prophets of Baal, let not one of them escape. And they seized them, and Elijah brought them down to the brook, Kishon, and slaughtered them there.

And Elijah said to Ahab, Go up and eat and drink, for there is a sound of rushing of rain. So Ahab went up to eat and to drink, and Elijah went up to the top of Mount Carmel.

And he bowed himself down on the earth and put his face between his knees. And he said to his servant, Go up now, look towards the sea. And he went up and looked and said, There is nothing.

And he said, Go again, seven times. And at the seventh time, he said, Behold, a little cloud, like a man's hand, is rising from the sea.

And he said, Go up, say to Ahab, Prepare your chariot and go down, lest the rain stop you. And in a little while, the heavens grew black with clouds and wind.

[6 : 29] And there was a great rain. And Ahab rode and went to Jezreel. And the hand of the Lord was on Elijah. And he gathered up his garments and ran before Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel.

Well, good morning, everyone.

I think you'll find it a help to keep that open. 1 Kings chapter 18. Hopefully people have remembered to print off the outline, the sermon as well that Vicky sent around.

If you've forgotten and you've got a phone or something on you, you might be able to get it up quickly from her email or on your screen if you're watching from home. Shall I lead us in prayer as we begin?

The psalmist writes in Psalm 119, I hate the double-minded, but I love your law. You are my hiding place and my shield. I hope in your word.

[7 : 43] Our Father, we pray that you would help us to be those who love your law, your word, and who therefore turn from double-mindedness. And we pray this morning that you would help us to be those who hide and hope in your word.

Amen. Well, in an article written in the Wall Street Journal in June of last year, Sam Walker, the newspaper's deputy editor, reflected on Theresa May's time as UK Prime Minister and attributed her failure to her attempt to ride two horses in her Brexit policy, wavering between leavers and remainers.

The article contrasted her strategy with that of John Adams at the time of the American War of Independence, quoting Adams' contention that in politics, the middle way is none at all.

We fail by groping for the middle way. Now, regardless of whether we agree with that particular writer's assessment of Theresa May, it is often the case that trying to ride two horses rather than wholeheartedly committing to one is a dangerous enterprise.

And it's not just in politics where this is true. The same article goes on to explain how companies such as Kodak and AOL declined because rather than wholeheartedly embracing the digital era, they tried to ride two horses, focusing on dated products as well as new technology.

[9 : 14] And what can be true in politics and business is also true in the spiritual realm. Because for many of us, the great temptation is to try to ride two horses when it comes to what or whom we worship.

Yes, we go through the motions of worshipping God when it's comfortable and doesn't involve social or personal cost. But we also worship at the altars of the false gods of 21st century London, whether the decadence of Soho or the affluence of the city, the kudos of Westminster or the crowds of Wembley, the stores of Oxford Street or the status of an Oxbridge education.

We so easily think we can ride two horses in our spiritual lives. And this isn't a new phenomenon because this was precisely the problem that had infected the kingdom of Israel in Elijah's day.

Have a look down with me at verse 21 of 1 Kings 18, which in many ways takes us to the heart of the issue in our chapter this morning. Elijah came near to all the people of Israel 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. Do you see what Elijah's saying? There was to be no middle way in Israel between the Lord and Baal.

[10 : 47] After all, only one of them could be the true God and whoever it was deserved the people's whole allegiance. And yet notice at the end of that verse, the people did not answer a word.

So compromised were they. So used to wavering between different gods. And so in response, Elijah forces them and us to confront the great question this chapter answers.

Who is the real God? And that's the first thing I want us to consider from our passage. Who is the real God? It's a big question in this part of 1 Kings because there were two religions in town.

There was the old one represented by Elijah just as I guess the vestiges of Christianity remain in our country today. And there was the new kid on the block represented by King Ahab and his queen Jezebel who'd introduced Baal worship into Israel.

So who was the real God? The Lord or Baal? And who is the real God today? The God of the Bible increasingly ignored in our nation or the idols of contemporary London?

[12 : 06] Now our passage this morning covers the whole of chapter 18. It's a long passage and we didn't have time to read it all earlier. So let me fill in the blanks at the beginning of chapter 18 since where we left things last week.

You'll remember Ahab has become king over the northern kingdom of Israel and turned his back on God. As a result there's drought in the land and we left Elijah in Zarephath Gentile country away from Israel which was a big deal because God had promised rain would only come in Israel at Elijah's word.

Well we're now in the third year of this drought and in verse 1 of chapter 18 we're told after many days the word of the Lord came to Elijah in the third year saying go show yourself to Ahab and I will send rain upon the earth.

Great news we think rain is about to arrive the drought will be over but it actually takes 44 more verses before the rain arrives.

Why? Well I guess because before sending the rain God needed to make absolutely clear who is the real God. In other words Baal needed to be discredited so everyone would know that the rain came from the hands of the Lord rather than this being a case of Baal finally showing up to save the day.

[13 : 35] We're in election season at the moment in America and one of the many arguments that has raged between the candidates concerns who was responsible for the economic growth the US enjoyed in the early years of Donald Trump's term in office.

was it Trump or did he simply reap the fruits of the policies of the Obama Biden regime he inherited? I'll leave you to make up your own mind on that but it seems in 1 Kings 18 God wanted Israel as they prepared to answer that challenge of Elijah in verse 21 to cast their vote for their chosen God to be in absolutely no doubt whatsoever that Baal could take no credit for the economic upturn they were about to experience when the rain returned and so in the 44 verses before the rain arrives we get on the face of it two great showdowns two clashes of the titans let's pick up the story at verse 2 Elijah heads off to find Ahab and we're told now the famine was severe in Samaria the capital of the northern kingdom and the following verses show us just how severe it was in verse 5

Ahab sends his head of the civil service a man called Obadiah who'd remained faithful to the Lord to help him look for any pasture and animals that remained but these verses also show us two very different priorities because not only was there a famine of food there was also a famine of God's word since first four Jezebel had cut off or killed the prophets of the Lord and whereas Ahab's concerns were with saving livestock Obadiah had become an ancient Oscar Schindler and was concerned with saving God's people hiding those prophets who'd survived Jezebel's genocide in caves well Elijah bumps into Obadiah in verse seven and after getting Elijah's assurance that he wouldn't face Jezebel's execution squad for failing to kill Elijah on the spot Obadiah becomes an ancient Frank Warren or Don King a kind of boxing promoter who negotiates the terms for the first great showdown of our chapter that between

Elijah and Ahab they meet in verse 17 if you look down and Ahab tries to land the first blow is it you you troubler of Israel he says a reminder to us that the elites who worship the gods of this world will often see law abiding peaceful Christians as troublemakers because we threaten the status quo and refuse to bow down to their gods while Elijah dodges the punch and lands one of his own verse 18 he answered I have not troubled Israel but you have and your father's house because you've abandoned the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals now therefore send and gather all Israel to me at Mount Carmel and the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah who eat at Jezebel's table so Ahab sent to all the people of Israel and gathered the prophets together at Mount

Carmel I guess this is a bit like the weigh-in before a fight where the boxers trade jibes and together they agree to the great showdown that follows the venues decided not Madison Square Gardens but a mountain the VIP list is drawn up all the prophets of the day and tickets are dispatched to every person in Israel so the undercard is now complete and the stage is set for the main event the second great showdown of the chapter Elijah's God the Ahab's God the God of Israel the Baal and the author wants us to feel the tension here I don't know if you've ever watched WWE wrestling my recollection of it was that a Hulk Hogan or the Undertaker or whoever it was would enter the ring and stir up the crowds to increase anticipation levels ahead of the contest and so it is with

[18 : 05] Elijah in that verse we noticed earlier verse 21 where he shows the crowd exactly what's at stake here two gods and there can only be one winner and the winner must go off with all the spoils whoever wins the crowd must follow now we all love a good showdown don't we whether it's in music think back to the Beatles be the Rolling Stones take that or Boyzone or the battle of the bands Oasis against Blur or in sport yesterday we had the Merseyside and Old Firm Derbies or think of great rivalries like Ali the Foreman or the Ashes or entertainment the ratings war between Strictly and the X Factor or the battle each year to be Christmas number one or politics with Trump and Biden set to debate again this week great showdowns are epic aren't they and none seemed greater than this one in 1 Kings 18 those who gathered on

Mount Carmel must have been exhilarated to have ringside seats and yet in terms of being a contest the battle of the gods proved to be something of a damp square because this was the most one-sided showdown in history making Germany's 7-1 demolition of Brazil in the 2014 World Cup semi-finals seem like a close match in comparison so secondly I want us to notice from this passage that worshipping false gods is absurd worshipping false gods is absurd one thing we overlooked earlier is that when Elijah and Ahab agreed the terms for this showdown Elijah agreed for the contest to be an away match because Mount Carmel was quite literally home territory for Baal the annals of an ancient Assyrian king described Carmel as the mountain of Baal and Baal also has the crowd on his side notice verse 22 then Elijah said to the people

I even I only am left a prophet of the Lord but Baal's prophets are 450 men Elijah is the only prophet of God not in hiding or in the grave while Baal has a huge support staff to assist him and just as the home team in a cricket test match so often sets the pitch conditions bouncing pitches in Australia spinning wickets in India seamers conditions in England so the wicket is favourable to Baal here because the winner of the contest would be the first to send down fire from heaven and Baal was the fertility God harvest festival would have actually been devoted to him and being responsible for fire was part of his portfolio so the conditions couldn't have been more favourable for Baal the bookies had him odds on to win Elijah even allows Baal to win the toss in verse 25 and to bat first on a batting wicket well Baal's team battle morning but never score a run have a look down with me at verse 26 they took the bull that was given them and they prepared it and called upon the name of

Baal from morning until noon saying oh Baal answer us but there was no voice and no one answered it's an almost comical scene and so the efforts get more desperate and more disturbing actually look on to verse 28 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 ablation but there was no voice no one answered no one paid attention and the lesson for us is surely that worshipping false gods like Baal like the gods of 21st century London is absurd that was certainly the lesson Elijah took from this whole event did you notice his mockery in verse 27 where he taunts Baal's prophets speculating that perhaps Baal wasn't answering because he was lost in thought or out of the office or having a nap or even on the loo worshipping false gods is absurd and this passage shows us why because false gods are silent the end of verse 29 they don't answer us they don't pay attention in fact not only are they powerless to help us but they actually enslave us and damage us isn't that what we see in verse 28 with the self harm false gods whether in the guise of false religion when I lived in tooting a few years ago

I remember a Muslim festival that used to happen where Muslim men would flagellate themselves in the street or in the form of the more sophisticated modern gods of power popularity and prestige enslave and harmless pagan religions always demand their pound of flesh but so does the promise of the promotion in the office or the contentment we think the new home makeover will give us or the happiness that illicit relationship will supposedly bring us bail actually meant master and false gods always master us enslaving us now don't get me wrong i'm not denying that false gods can be very alluring after all we all like to fit in with the crowd and elijah must have felt very lonely next to the 850 prophets of baal and asherah and don't forget baal enjoyed the queen's patronage so whereas serving the lord might have led to a death sentence following baal would likely have led to royal favor and reward back in verse 19 we learn the false prophets ate at jezebel's table so baal worship was attractive it encouraged sexual permissiveness and looked impressive with its altars and asherah poles but when confronted by the similar attraction of the gods of today the lure of money and sex and comfort we must remember worshipping such gods is absurd they aren't real they can't save us when drought and death around the corner and they enslave us in fact worshipping the baals of the world in their ancient or modern forms is a scam those who work in the city will remember some of the great scams of recent decades

[25 : 14] Nick Leeson Bernie Madoff and Enron to name a few how awful to invest your whole fortune in a company and discover it's a sham that it doesn't deliver what's promised there's nothing really there and so it is when we invest in false gods how awful to discover they don't deliver what they promise to put your time and money and your all into something and yet it's hollow sure it might look superficially good Baal's prophets put on a good song and dance no doubt but to worship such things is worthy of mockery absurd and therefore it makes sense to worship the Lord alone and that's our final heading so worship the Lord alone back in verse 21 Elijah has told the people if the Lord is God follow him worship him alone and in the remaining verses of our chapter we see that's the only sensible thing to do let's pick things up at verse 30 it's now

Elijah's innings and he calls the people to him he repairs an altar to the Lord using 12 stones symbolic of all the people of Israel who'd been divided since the northern kingdoms break from Judah and he then does something very odd he stacks the odds against himself by saturating the altar with 12 jars of water now during a drought when waters at a premium you have to be very confident of yourself to do that but Elijah knew his God he knew he'd deliver and he wanted everyone to know that what would follow was not trickery or coincidence God can bring fire even when the dice are loaded against him well Baal had gone 12 rounds in the ring and not landed a punch but the Lord prevails with one strike in verses 36 and 37

Elijah prays a simple prayer have a look oh Lord God of Abraham Isaac and Israel let it be known this day that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and that I have done all these things at your word answer me oh Lord answer me that this people may know that you oh Lord are God and that you have turned their hearts back it's a simple prayer with none of the frenzied rituals we found with the prophets of Baal and incidentally that's a reminder to us that we don't need to try and somehow twist God's arm into acting as if he's reluctant sometimes we can slip into a kind of Christian paganism where we think certain activities 24-7 prayer perhaps or prayer walks claiming ground for God or having extra long quiet times will somehow make God more likely to respond to us but wonderfully God isn't like that Elijah simply prays and look what happens verse 38 then the fire of the

Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust and licked up the water that was in the trench the Lord wins the great showdown was a total mismatch the Lord was God and the people understand what this means we're to worship the Lord alone verse 39 and when all the people saw it they fell on their faces and said the Lord he is God the Lord he is God and while God is gracious to them the Old Testament expert Ralph Davis argues fire from heaven landing on the altar here is a picture of atonement and God's restored presence with his people just as fire had come from heaven when the tabernacle was first built in Leviticus 9 and the temple in 2 Chronicles 7 the prophets of Baal on the other hand meet their comeuppance in verse 40 Elijah slaughters them in obedience to

God's commands in Deuteronomy 13 and although that may seem shocking to our sanitized modern minds it was of course necessary for the revival of true worship in Israel Baal worship had to be fully eradicated so the worship of the Lord could be restored so do we see it makes sense to worship the Lord alone mixing Baal worship with Jesus worship trying to ride two horses makes no sense it's foolish sometimes like John Adams in the American War of Independence the sensible thing to do is to go all in there's no need to hedge our bets with God you see remember Elijah's question again how long will you go limping between two different opinions if the Lord is God follow him well we've been reminded today that the Lord is God and so we're to follow him to go all in like a married couple on their wedding day who pledged to share all that they have with each other or the poker player with a royal flush we're to go all in and I guess that will mean different things for each of us because we all probably have our own alters to bail that need tearing down in our lives things that have started to compete with God when it comes to our affections or ambitions and where we need to remember the

[31 : 19] Lord he is God and to remember that God has made atonement for us also when the fire of his wrath fell on Jesus so we can be restored to relationship with him and just notice as we close that it is worth going all in with God because in the remaining verses of the chapter God lifts his judgment and sends rain again and he does so in response to another prayer of Elijah in verse 41 and amazingly the New Testament tells us Elijah is actually an example for us here so I want us to finish by turning to James chapter 5 James chapter 5 when starting an Old Testament passage it's always important to see how the New Testament understands or applies that passage and James picks up on 1 Kings 18 at the end of his letter so James 5 and verse 16 it's page 1218 if you've got the

Bible I think like the church Bibles therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed the prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working Elijah was a man with a nature like ours and he prayed fervently that it might not rain and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth then he prayed again and heaven gave rain and the earth bore its fruit my brothers if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins James writes to a double-minded people just as the people of Elijah's day were double-minded in wavering between the Lord and Baal and while there are undoubtedly many ways we're unlike Elijah James tells us we are like him in one sense he was a man just like us and just as he prays and God brings rain so we can pray for one another perhaps especially if we know a folk who've started to wander from the truth maybe during lockdown that we turn from sin and so be restored shall I lead us in prayer to that end now we thank you our father for this reminder this morning that you are the one true

God and we pray therefore that you would help us not to waver between you and serving other gods but to go all in and we pray for those known to us who are wavering and who have wandered from you please we ask might you bring them back so that they would be saved from death and their sins might be covered and we ask it in Jesus' name amen amen