

Trial by Fire (Evening Service)

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[0 : 0 0] Hello, everybody. It's really nice to see you all. If you don't know me, my name is Aaron, and I'm the minister for this service.

If you've just sort of popped in tonight, I want to catch you up a little bit. So we are in a short series looking at the life of Elijah and one Kings.

And let's talk about the book of Kings for a start. So the book of Kings is about, do you remember what we said? What's Kings about? It's about Kings. Great. Right.

So at this point in the story, the kingdom which David had united, he united all these tribes into a kingdom right at the beginning of the end of Samuel, beginning of Kings.

The kingdom had split in two due to sort of terrible leadership, civil war, idolatry, etc. And what happened after that is you just had a series of kings ruling the northern and southern kingdoms.

[1 : 0 0] Series of kings ruling these kingdoms. And mostly they are really sketchy. A couple of good ones, but mostly really sketchy and unfaithful to God. The worst of these kings was Ahab and his wife Jezebel.

And they actively promoted idolatry. They actively promoted the worship of the pagan god Baal. And it seemed that despite God's great kindness to his people, the people liked Baal.

They liked this worship. They were grabbing a hold of it. And you may ask yourself, given all that God had done for his people, why was Baalism so attractive?

I've got three ideas. One, it had royal sanction. Baalism was what the elites of society believed. It's what, you know, the kings, the king and the queen worship Baal.

The rich and the wealthy, they worship Baal. And weak-hearted people tend to align themselves with what the powerful believe. And I don't think much has changed in our society.

[2 : 1 6] I was thinking this week about influences. Do you guys know what influences are? People who use social media to just influence you.

And I was reading about it this week. It's an \$8 billion industry in North America. And it works because famous people, what they do, what they think, who they wear, it has influence.

That's one of the reasons I think Baalism really just took off. Another reason the popularity of Baalism amongst God's people was it addressed felt needs. So Baal's specialties were rain and fertility.

So you wanted rain for the harvest? Baal, he's all about rain. I'm going to go to that temple. You wanted to have children? Baal, he was all about fertility.

And again, I don't think much has changed. I think people today, their beliefs are often shaped by the question, does it address my needs? Does what I believe address what I actually want?

- [3 : 21] Which is not a terrible question. But there's another question that should go before that. The question, is what I believe true? Third, Baalism was packed with sexuality.
- Temple prostitution was a thing. So a lot of Israelites fell into Baal worship because, well, you could believe A, and follow the commandments of God, and you could believe B, and indulge your sexual appetites.
- I have known a number of people that have fallen away from faith. And for some, the issue is an intellectual issue. For some people, they've had a terrible experience in faith.
- But for a whole lot of people, it's simply, if I believe this, X, Y, Z, over here, if this is the Christian faith, if I believe X, Y, Z, over here, this allows me to do a whole lot of things I'd quite like to do.
- So Baalism was popular. And what does God do? What's God's response? Well, I've been working through that the last few weeks. And his big response is that God sends prophets to speak the word of God over these kings and queens.
- [4 : 39] Of these prophets, Elijah is probably the most famous of these prophets. Before our reading today, we're introduced to Elijah in the chapter previous to this.
- Basically, just out of the blue, this guy Elijah appears, and he goes to see Ahab, and he says God is going to bring a drought. He's punishing his people for idolatry.
- He's calling them back, so there's going to be a drought. No rain will fall until I say so. So that is what's leading into this story.
- Now, a few verses before we started reading tonight, the Lord had said to Elijah, I'm ending the drought. So the drought had been going on for a number of years. He's ending the drought.
- And now you're all caught up. Are you with me? Okay, 1 Kings. What chapter are we in? 18. Verses 17 to 19. Okay, let's look at 17 to 19 first.
- [5 : 43] So Elijah goes to see Ahab. So we're into the text now. And he says to Ahab, okay, bring all the Baal priests and all the priests of Asherah to Mount Carmel, and we'll have a contest.
- And it'll work like this. We'll set up you guys, your Baal guys. We'll set up a little altar over here. I'll set up a little altar over here. There's going to be like stones. There'll be some wood on top of that.
- You'll sacrifice a bull. We'll carve it up. We'll put that on there as well. And then you call upon your gods. I'll call upon my God.
- And we'll see how we go. We'll see who answers. It's great, right? It's fantastic. Ahab loves this idea. And you have to think he loves the idea because he's thinking, I'm going to win this.
- He's got 850 priests calling upon Baal against one prophet on Mount Carmel, which was this very important.
- [6 : 47] Apparently, it was like the home of Baal. He's thinking, I'm going to win. Elijah, the troublemaker, he'll be gone. He'll be humiliated. This is going to be fantastic. Let's do this. So they all turn up.
- But before we get there, you might be thinking, a contest? Like a contest? Isn't that beneath the Lord to do something like that?
- Isn't that the kind of thing you do in a frat house or something, right? So why, why, like why a competition? Like, why was there a need for a competition?
- I think two reasons here. First, listen to the words of Elijah in verse 21. 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 it's Baal, follow him. It's a very important question. Actually, you know what, this is a question that most people today would say does not need to be asked. So the average person's response to Elijah today would be like, why do I need to choose?

[7 : 57] Like, why can't I have a little bit of Baal and a little bit of Yahweh? Why do I have to choose anyway? Why not believe a little bit of this, a little bit of that?

And Elijah's saying, you must decide. You must decide. Why? Because if you don't, if you keep trying to live in these two different worlds and these two spiritual realities, you're going to limp through life.

Limping is the word he uses. It's like the spiritual equivalent of going lame. It's this word picture of imagine you're walking and then the road forks and you're trying to walk in both pathways.

You will hurt yourself. The same word is actually used later on the passage to describe the priests of Baal. It says the same word. They were limping around their altar after spending, you know, six hours screaming and cutting themselves.

That's a very contemporary question Elijah asks, I think. A very relevant question for today. You should decide.

[9 : 05] Is it God or is it Baal? Is it the Lord Christ or is it something else? Because you can't have them both. You follow one or the other. You can't be neutral.

So let's have a test to work out what's true. Because they both can't be right. And if you think they can both be right, it will hurt you.

I think the other reason is this. The other reason for the need for this contest is because if you look at 18 verse 1 there, it says that the drought's actually going to come to an end.

And the Lord did not want Ahab to give Baal the credit for when that drought comes to the end. So imagine the drought ends and Ahab's like, yeah. You see? Baal came through.

This is all. Everything's fine again. We don't have to ask the big questions about what's really true or not. Baal came through. We lived in this tension.

[10 : 04] We lived in with a bit of this and a bit of that and actually worked out okay. For us moderns, you could say it like this. A happy life is a dangerous thing.

Because what it can do is it can confirm you and your idols. Life's really good, man. Life is really, really good. Why bother reassessing my internet-assembled philosophy of the world?

That was a bit snarky. But, you know, why bother thinking about the great truths of the world? Because life's actually okay right now. The rain has come.

Everything's fine. Don't have to worry about it anymore. So before the rain comes, the Lord wants Baal worship completely discredited. Publicly discredited.

And living color. Shown to be vacuous. To be a fiction. The Lord doesn't want people to continue getting comfy in this sort of syncretistic space that they were living in.

[11 : 06] So he wants to present them with the truth of the situation. That there is a God. It's Yahweh. He is real. Let's move on.

So Elijah proposes the contest for the reasons we just gave. And he lays down the rules. Remember the rules. He says, okay, Baal goes. You can go first. So stones and the wood and the bull.

And pray that your God will light it. And then it's my turn. So it starts. And the Baal sacrifice is set up. And what, as you read it there, what a palaver.

Now, do we have this word in Canada? No. Okay. Do you know what I'm talking about, Josh? Okay. Thank you. Does anyone know the word palaver? Oh, well done.

Educated, sophisticated people. It's an archaic word. I think it's actually originally Portuguese. But it basically means drama.

[12 : 09] Like, what a huge drama. So New Zealand would say, oh, what a palaver that was, right? Just what a drama. So these guys are just, they're dancing around the altar. And they're yelling.

And then they start cutting themselves. Blood's pouring out of them. And they're doing, it says, from the morning till noon and afterwards. And twice the passage says, despite the palaver, twice the passage says, there was no voice.

No one answered. No one paid attention. At this point, Elijah helpfully jumps in.

In verse 27, he's like, wow, so guys, what do you think's going on? It's so weird. There's so many of you doing all this stuff with the cutting.

Wow. And he's got these great lines here. He says, Baal, is he musing? Is he just sitting around thinking? Is he relieving himself?

[13 : 15] Is he on a journey? Is he asleep? You should waken him. Now, I'm not suggesting that mockery is an effective evangelistic strategy. But in this point, I think Elijah's just trying to make a point here.

And the point is, all the stuff that he's suggesting that Baal is doing, thinking, going to the toilet, on holiday, sleeping, what are these things? And this is just stuff that, this is just what I do.

This is what breed, this is what you, this is just people stuff, right? This is what regular, regular people do this. See, in paganism, the gods do human things.

They just do human things. And Elijah mocks that. He's trying to show them, guys, you've just invented a god in your own image.

And this is the god that you want to trust in. This is the god you want to throw your hopes at having children in. This is the god that you want to throw your hopes at having a good harvest in. This is the god that you want to put all your faith in, that things go well in your life.

[14 : 26] Someone who can't hear your prayers because they might be on the toilet. This is the god you are trusting in.

This is what you're banking on. We could spend a lot of time there talking about the sort of vacuous nature of the idols in our modern time.

But I will let you think about that yourselves because let's move on. So now it's Elijah's time. And he does this very interesting thing. He wants to stack the odds against him here.

So he sets up this thing. Remember, he's got the stones that represent the 12 tribes of Israel. He's got the wood. He's got the bull cut up on that. And remember, the idea is call down fire and that'll be great.

But he doesn't want anyone to think it was an accident or spontaneous combustion. So he goes, get me gallons of water. Pour gallons of water on the wood. One more time.

[15 : 26] One more time. So there's this soaking wet altar. He wants everyone to know this is God that does this. And then he prays. And in great comparison to the Baal priest, it's like all of 25 seconds.

It's just a beautiful thing.

Beautiful, short prayer. He prays two things. That they would know God and their hearts would be turned towards that God. And God responds.

And it's brilliant. Fire comes down. Burns up the wood. Burns up the bull. Burns up the stones. Burns up the water.

And it's just a simple, earnest prayer from Elijah. He didn't have to make all the noise that the Baal priests make. He didn't have to try and get God's attention.

[16 : 50] God doesn't need a show from us. Which is a great relief, isn't it? And then the people say, your God is the God.

And then they take all the Baal priests and they kill them. And you might think it was such a great story up to that point. Because I know that sounds so harsh to us.

And I'm not going to make any excuse for it. Let me just tell you this, which I think will be helpful. Remember that at the time, in history, this was a theocracy.

So church and state was just one thing. There's no separation. Church and state was one thing. And the punishment for idolatry. Well, idolatry in their constitutional law of the time.

Idolatry, this was a capital offence. They're simply carrying out the law of the day. Let me finish up here. It's interesting that the contest wasn't who can make a rainbow.

[17 : 59] Or who can summon a unicorn or a patronus or whatever. Who can do something random. The contest was around a sacrifice.

The burning of bull. And the coming down of fire. And this is actually a picture of God firing up this kind of sacrifice.

It's happened a few times before in the Old Testament. And when it happens, it represents something. It represents God's acceptance of that sacrifice. A fire burning up this stuff.

You can say it like this. It was like it's God's green light saying, I accept you. I accept this sacrifice. I accept you. And that means even though God's people were in immense trouble in their idolatry, God's picture for showing who he was, was a sacrifice.

It was a picture of this message to all the people saying, there's a way back to God for you. So what do we learn here? We learn that Baal is a fiction.

[19 : 14] And two, that God is real. But not that he's real. Not just that he's real. He's gracious. And he's a reconciling God. And even though sometimes we do silly things and we limp through life trying to be a bit syncretistic, God wants to bring us back to him.

And he makes a way for that to happen. Now us being born this side of Jesus, it's so much clearer to us.

I hope it's clearer to us. We have Jesus. And unlike the Baal priests, we don't have to perform for God. See, the Baalists, they would do all their dancing and cutting.

They couldn't assume friendship with God. They could not assume that. We can assume friendship with God because of Christ's sacrifice. Because of God's big green light through Jesus.

God has made a way to God through Jesus. And one that, unlike the Baal priests, it doesn't exhaust us. Which is why Jesus can say things like, which we've already said in the service today, Come to me all who are heavy laden and give you rest.

[20 : 26] Which we sung it. Come to me all who are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Folks, sometimes we navigate our relationship with God like we're coming before Baal.

Stop it. You don't have to do that. We worship the God who made a way for us.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.