

1 Kings 18:20-40 “God-hopping or God-hoping?”

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[0:00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama.! Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

! It is good to worship God and God alone. That's our hope. Nothing will give you more purpose. Nothing will give you more comfort. Nothing will give you more hope than a relationship with the one true God who lives and works and hears you and loves you.

He wants to tell you that Himself today. So open your Bibles so that you hear Him speak to you.

Y'all remember, that's why we put this slide up here each week.

Rather than putting all the words up when I read through the whole passage, we want you to have God's Word open in front of you.

[1:12] To study it and hear from Him now and later. Kids, I'm not bringing you up on the steps this week.

Okay, I learned my lesson last week. We won't do that. No, I'm just kidding. We'll do it again sometime. But kids, I want you to get a Bible too. Okay?

And I want you to make sure that you can turn to that page. It'll tell you where to look if you use the one that's in the pew here. I want you to remember that this is the most important part of every sermon, right?

Whenever we read God's Word and hear Him speaking to us, I want you especially to pay attention.

And as I read, I want you to see if you can tell what the most important point of this story is.

There's going to be the same words repeated several times, okay? So you look and listen for that and I'll help you a little bit. Before I read, here's the context of today's story.

[2:18] God's people have had King Saul and then David and then Solomon.

And then 10 tribes out of the 12 broke away to follow a king, not in David's line at all, not following God's covenant.

The people of Israel have wandered off on their own. Ahab is now their king. Jezebel is their queen. And they have brought other gods in from the queen's country, from her nation. And they've brought them among God's people. So God has stopped the rain for three years.

No rain there. But He's about to send it again. And He wants His people to know that Yahweh, the one true God, has sent the rain.

And so His prophet Elijah goes to King Ahab and proposes a contest. It's a little less familiar than David and Goliath. So let's read the whole story in 1 Kings 18.

[3:28] What is this all about? Verse 20. So Ahab, the king, sent to all the people of Israel and he gathered the prophets of Baal 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.

[4:36] And all the people answered, It is well spoken. So 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, Oh, 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's a God.

Either he's musing or he's relieving himself or he's 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 the 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.

[5:42] Then Elijah said to all the people, Come near to me. And all the people came near to him. And he repaired the altar of the Lord that had been thrown down. Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons 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. And he made a trench about the altar as great as would contain two seas 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 four jars with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood. And then 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 around 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 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.

[6:59] 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. 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. Lord, you are God.

Speak to us. Answer us. Help us hear your voice. We ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen. Elijah jumps right in here to pointing out the issue with God's people.

[8:01] I want to do the same thing. Verse 21. How long will you go limping between two different options?

If the Lord is God, follow Him. But if Baal, then follow Him. He's talking to Yahweh's people.

Right? The Israelites. And He's saying, we need to decide who's really God. Yahweh or Baal? And the issue is, you're God hopping.

God's people don't even know how to answer. Unbelievable. Because they're hopping. Limping between the two.

It means they're undecided. The word is translated a lot of different ways. Your version may say hobbling or wavering.

[9:04] One of the pictures it's used for in Hebrew is a bird hopping from branch to branch. Back. Oh, this one. Nope, nope, nope. This one.

Nope. Maybe it was that one. Hopping back. Maybe there's some food over here. I don't know where to stay. Hopping, hopping back and forth. Here He's talking about God hopping.

This is different from the practical atheism that we saw last week in God's people acting as though all that was real was what they could see with their own eyes, right?

Didn't account for God at all. No, these people, they like gods. Very religious people. But instead of atheism, it's a syncretism, a combination of gods.

Let's have a little bit of all of them. They do things like this. They go to Yahweh's temple on the Sabbath and they go through the motions of the ceremonies and they sing praises to Him as the

God of all creation.

[10:11] But then that night they're bowing down to a wooden statue of Baal and asking for rain for their crops. You tracking with me? They go during the day to teach Torah to their kids, including Yahweh's design for marital faithfulness and what that should look like.

But on the way home, they stop by the temple of the fertility goddess and break their own marriage vows. God hopping, limping between two different opinions, a little bit of whatever works today. God's people are supposed to pray for undivided hearts, wholly committed to Him. But now they seem to be happily divided, happily hopping from Yahweh to Baal, our God to an idol.

Thankfully, that stopped a long time ago and idolatry is not something we struggle with anymore. No wooden statues. No things we look to for life besides God.

No things we give more time and attention to than God, right? Actually, religious people, the kinds who go to church a lot, even when it rains in the morning, are still often experts at God-hopping idolatry.

[11:53] Some of it comes from a really good instinct. We all have this sense that I'm here for something big. I'm meant for something beyond myself because we were made, remember, for relationship with the God of all creation, the God of the universe.

That's what you're made for, so you sense that. But idolatry looks for that big purpose, that significant value somewhere else besides Him.

Three big reasons God's people in Elijah's day looked to Baal. You may recognize them. The first was power. That's how I'll get big.

Yahweh, He's all right for church, but He seems not to help my social advancement. Too much of that humility talk and such.

But the king and queen have brought Baal into the picture. I sure want to be on their good side. Won't hurt my social connections one bit to have his picture on my wall.

[13:04] I mean, I'm not going to quit going to church, but my political loyalties are more important than my family in Christ. I mean, if I need to reject the guy in the pew next to me, or if I need to vent my anger, you know, you've got to do what you've got to do sometimes.

Hopping over to power. Or pleasure. You know, this Baal guy is cool with me doing some things that Yahweh's not.

He's got a lot of rules, but ritual prostitution? And if too many kids result from that, child sacrifice feeds the idol and it keeps me comfortable.

Yahweh's got so many rules. I like doing what feels good to me. Painfully, tragically familiar. The idolatry of power and pleasure make Baal an appealing God.

So does profit. Baal was the fertility God. The one in charge of rain, lightning, fire, fertility for people, as well as for the land.

[14:30] And you know, remember how significant that is for these people, right? In an agrarian culture, this feels like where life comes from. This is idolatry of profit.

Three years into this drought, I better hedge my bets and make sure the rain God is on my good side, right? I'm not stupid. I'll get back to Yahweh once I get my bank account built back up.

Once I'm financially secure, I'll care for the poor eventually, but Baal takes care of me. Not all those other people Yahweh seems so concerned about.

By power, pleasure, or profit, I'm going to find something big. I'm going to be something big. I'm going to find life.

I'm going to be a somebody. And they'll even respect me at church as an important leader, a big giver, a community influencer. I mean, that's why I still bother to show up among Yahweh's people.

[15:39] It feels good. I tip the cap. I shake some hands. I look the part. I am an expert God hopper. God says this is alive and well in churches to this day.

When Jesus writes to the church in Laodicea in Revelation 3, he says, I know your works. You're neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot.

So because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. Elijah says, be one or the other.

If Yahweh is God, follow him all the time in every way. If Baal, then follow him. But quit this limping, lukewarm hopping.

If you're still not sure if you struggle with God hopping, a couple of questions to ask yourself. If anything besides God and his word gets your first, your best, and your most time, you may be God hopping.

[16:56] If you're compromising morality to do outside of church things that you would never do inside of church, you may be God hopping.

If you're excited about anything. If you're excited about anything, your raise, your team, your kids' success, anything more than you're excited about God's name being honored, his kingdom having new members, his ways being lived out to the blessing of more people, you may be God hopping. You probably are. So what do God's people need when we struggle here? How if we see ourselves in the same place as these Israelites in Elijah's day, what for us?

This passage says what we need is a vision of the one true God and the difference that it makes to be in relationship with him above any other so-called God.

So, the contest, the one we just read, is number one ranked Baal versus number two currently in their hearts, Yahweh.

[18:14] Who is God? That's what it's all about, right, kids? Who is the real God? And Elijah sets it up to make sure that the other team's got every chance possible.

The big game is going to be played on his home field, Mount Carmel, a center of Baal worship. The numbers in his favor, 450 to one.

And the game? Fire. One of his specialties, supposedly. The people say, this is more than fair, Elijah.

Well done. Probably with a hint of, this isn't going to go so well for you. But, all right. You asked for it. Baal, you go first.

As they prepare the sacrifice. As they start calling for fire from the fire God, what do we learn about following idols since we do some of these same things?

[19:19] Idols always seem to demand more activity, more performance, better performance from us. 450 priests for several hours.

Think of the man hours going in to getting Baal's attention. They're yelling to him loudly. They work up a flurry of religious activity. They're going through religious rituals.

They are raving, it says, on and on. Eventually, they cover the mountainside with their own blood. Blood. We know that feeling, don't we?

Sometimes figuratively. Sometimes literally spilling our own blood, sweat, and tears. Hoping to get God's attention with our religious fervor.

Hoping to get the attention of other people with our physical attractiveness. Our professional success. Working long hours.

[20:21] Obsessing over our bodies to the point of mistreating them. Thinking if we do enough. If we perform well enough. If we look good enough. We'll be big.

We'll get what we long for. It's just there. Notice next that sincerity is not sufficient.

These priests had dedicated their lives to this God. Likely making a decent living off of his ministry. They sincerely expect him to respond. This could be a sermon on its own.

But many in our day say only sincerity matters. The reality of the God or the philosophy or the good life that you follow it.

That doesn't really matter. As long as you sincerely believe and try to follow it. Friends, no. No, not all gods are the same. Not all roads lead to the same place.

[21:24] Look here. The silence here is deafening. Verse 26. There was no voice. No one answered.

Verse 29. As they ramp up the raving still, there was no voice. No one answered. No one paid attention. In spite of their sincerity.

Nothing to show for it. No fire. No rain for three years. I hope you can feel some of the sadness of this picture.

It is heartbreaking, isn't it? The loneliness, the emptiness of chasing after the thing that's going to give you life. And just having it elude your grasp.

After all you've done. After how hard you've tried. Of crying out to someone and never getting an answer. I've felt this in India.

[22:34] Watching people go into a Hindu or Buddhist temple to pray. And thinking. That idol that they're bowing before. It does nothing.

It hears nothing that they say. It sees nothing of their lives. And they're hurting. They need help. And they're going to walk out just as alone as they were when they went in.

That's heartbreaking. Do you feel that sadness? Would you feel that sadness? For people walking into a brothel.

Looking for life in pleasure. When you know how short-lived it will be. Would you feel it for someone walking into a bank?

Looking for life in profit. When you know that there are things in life that will come. And their money will not answer their cries for help.

[23:34] Would you feel it for someone walking into a business and looking for life in power. When you know how lonely it can be at the top.

How powerless your power is when you're estranged from your loved ones. Or when you're lying on your deathbed. Listen. I'm pushing us to examine our hearts.

Okay. Of course it is not sinful to walk into a bank or a business. Please don't hear that. But if in our hearts we're walking into God's house.

To bow to an idol. It is deadly sinful. I also want to be honest as we turn to the second half of the contest.

First half not going so well. Halftime speech. Okay. Most of us can feel that sadness. For people walking into an idol's temple.

[24:46] Not hypothetically. But because we've felt it. At some point in time we've probably felt it with God himself. Walking into a church like this.

Elijah has felt it. By the way. Read the rest of his story. Many of us have experienced praying to our God.

And feeling like nothing happened. The words are hitting the ceiling and bouncing back. No fire fell from heaven.

It's what it feels like. God I don't feel like you're there. And I don't want to pretend this morning as we go to the rest of the story. That Yahweh is some automated chat bot.

Where you always see clearly an immediate response to whatever you type in. Something just pops up. And you see it. And you know it. And it's that simple. But as we turn to his response to Elijah.

[25:53] I want you to know that the God who sends fire here from heaven. The God who sends his son from heaven to earth.

He tells us that he hears. And that he answers our prayers. Even when we don't hear his answer. If you're struggling right there.

And I'm pretty sure some of you are today. It's important you know from this story. That it's not that your belief is not sincere enough.

It's not that your performance is not good enough to get his attention. That's not it. So come and talk to me. I'd love to talk with you.

Talk with someone you trust. Know that we'll walk with you in what can sometimes be a lonely and seemingly silent place. But he does hear.

[26:51] And he does care. And he does respond. Watch what it looks like here. Notice that not merely the miraculous response.

You couldn't have missed that the first read through. But it may not always come that way in your life. I don't always have fire fall from heaven when I pray. I don't know about you. But notice more importantly how our God is always different from the idols.

Verse 30. Elijah said to all the people, come near to me. I need you to see this. All the people came near to him. And he repaired the altar of Yahweh that had been thrown down.

Elijah took 12 stones. Don't miss it. He's going to tell you why. According to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob. What about them? Well, they're the ones.

The word of Yahweh came saying, Israel shall be your name. And he takes those stones and he builds the altar in the name of Yahweh. See, what's required with Yahweh for those of us who have broken relationship with him like these 10 tribes, and that is all of us.

[28:02] What's required is not self-deprecating activity or improved performance. It's humble repentance. Elijah is highlighting that here by rebuilding Yahweh's altar for these 10 tribes who should still be worshiping Yahweh with the other two at Solomon's temple in Jerusalem.

But they're far off. They have abandoned the covenant people. They've abandoned the covenant king. They've abandoned the covenant God, haven't they?

Show them. Elijah prays in verse 37. Show them that you are turning their hearts back to you. Repentance.

Away from idols. To the true God. Next thing to notice, simplicity is sufficient.

Just come home. You don't have to have the strongest faith, the longest performance record, the loudest testimony. You might think you would need that after Elijah sets the bar so high for Yahweh, doesn't he?

[29:18] Water. Water. Water. Pour it on there. See what he can do. Certainly he'll never be able to handle this sacrifice.

But then actually, what does God respond to? It's a simple prayer. That's in contrast to Baal's prophets, what Elijah offers. O 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 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. I'm just doing what you've told me to do for the glory of your name, for the good of your people.

So please answer me, God, that they may know and trust you. Finally, Yahweh answers simple repentance with great grace.

Here it is. It's amazing, isn't it? The fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering. Now, that's amazing enough, but it just keeps overflowing.

[30:38] And the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. Just as God has done when accepting tabernacle and temple worship, each of those the first time, God sends fire.

Here the people are at the time of the evening sacrifice. They can't miss it. Yahweh is communicating in no uncertain terms where they should have been all along with him.

It's an amazing demonstration of his reality. And all the people jump up and high five and sing praises. No. They fell on their faces, saying, Yahweh, he is God.

I think they realized at least some of what was true here. By all rights, where should that fire from heaven have fallen?

Upon them, right? Upon the God hoppers, the covenant breakers, the disloyal people.

[31:55] They're seeing what they deserve, but instead it falls where? Upon the sacrifice. They're all that's left unscathed.

The way Yahweh had always told them he would deal with their sin. The sacrifice is burned up instead.

According to God's law, in this unique theocracy, not where we are now, the New Testament is quite clear. A false prophet leading God's people after other gods away from him must be killed. That's the penalty. That's the penalty. And these people would deserve the same. Except the sacrifice covers God's people's sin.

Friends, Jesus is the ultimate sacrifice. Who as he tabernacles with us, offers himself on the cross.

[33:01] And the fire of God's wrath from heaven falls upon him. God's gracious answer to our prayers for mercy in our time of need.

See, because the true and living God answers. That's what it means to be God. To be real. To be powerful. To be able to rescue. So powerful that he has answered many of your prayers before you prayed them.

And he sent his son to be that sacrifice. So that's, it's good news for us. Listen, no matter what you have done. No matter how disloyal you have been.

You don't have to go slashing yourself. Please hear that. That's not what is required of you. You don't have to perform. You don't have to look right.

You don't have to do enough to attract God's attention. You so have his attention that he came and was slashed in your place.

[34:01] That's the difference with the one true God. While we struggle with multiple loyalties, with divided hearts, he has a singular focus.

A gracious vision to see his glory displayed through restored relationship with his people. He comes for you.

We've seen it over and over in these stories. He's so committed to restoring that broken relationship that he rescues even wanderers in syncretism.

God hoppers, 21st century Americans who mix Jesus with power and pleasure and profit and we think they're gods.

He rescues by showing the reality of him as the one true God. Then he showed it through fire and the people knew. Later he shows it at the cross.

[35:01] Today he shows it through his word. He answers and allows many to see and hear to repent and find restoration with him.

So if you are convinced this morning that you are the worst God hopper around, good news. The fire hasn't fallen on you yet and he loves to rescue God hoppers.

There is a sacrifice who has taken the fire for you. His name is Jesus. Run to him. I plead with you this morning.

If you are in the sound of my voice, you are definitely in the reach of his. Please, please, no more limping between two opinions. No more God hopping.

If God is God, follow him with all you are, with all you have. Not just lip service. Don't just say it on a Sunday morning. With life service all the time.

[35:59] God, may Gordon Dahl's pointed critique not be true of you and me. That we worship our work. We work at our play. And we play at our worship.

No. No, follow the one true God. Listen, I want to talk to different groups. Young people. Anybody who feels young.

You have your whole life ahead of you. Decide now that God is God, not you.

Why not when you've got your life ahead? That you're going to live for him, not for yourself. You could waste so much time. For his glory, not your own power.

Take it from anybody. Find somebody older than you. Ask them. Will money do it? It won't. Ask them if being thought beautiful will do it. It won't.

[36:58] Being famous won't do it. What will it profit you to gain the whole world and forfeit your soul? To win the game, but find out you're playing for the wrong team.

At his right hand are pleasures forevermore that far outshine and far outlast the ones that you're tempted to chase.

Take Jesus' sacrifice for you. Live with him with your victory secure for your whole life. You could live with him like that. People in the middle.

That's those of us who are thinking right now, I don't know what you're talking about, but I am too busy to give this another thought. Work. Kids.

Life. I'll get back to who the real God is one day, but just let me get through for a little while. No. Decide today not to limp between zeal for God and apathy for God.

[38:02] If it's football or fashion or work or play that makes you more excited than God, his invitation is repent. He'll turn your heart back to him.

He will answer your cry for an undivided heart that will bless your family, that will transform your work powerfully. Take Jesus' sacrifice this morning. Live with him.

You don't have to go sacrifice yourself for him first. He's given himself for you. He's given himself for you. All right, older people. If you're thinking, Pastor, I've God hopped for decades and gotten by with it.

And after all, isn't it a little late? What's the use of changing now? I've heard it before. I'm running out of time for it to make any difference.

No. No, you're not. You have an eternity to live in relationship with this one true God. And that eternity can start today.

[39:14] Right now, as you take Jesus' sacrifice for you, as you live as the apple of his eye, you don't have to perform for him for decades for this relationship to start.

You don't have to do that to attract his attention. He's already come to take the fire for you. You can receive him right now. Friends, the one true God is not running you off for your half-heartedness, but assuring you that he refuses to be silent while you God hop.

He is wholehearted in his sacrificial commitment to restore. The Lord, he is God. The Lord, he is God.

Trust him. Worship him. Follow him. Let's pray to him. God, hear our prayers.

Help your people. Forgive our weakness. Turn our hearts back to you again.

[40:26] You're so good. You're so faithful. You are so real. Meet us.

Assure us of that. That we might live with you and for you.

For we ask it in your name. Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org. Thank you.