

1 Kings 18

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[0 : 00] And turn back to 1 Kings 18, which we'll look at now. The big question that this passage asks really is, who is the real God? That's the question. Will the real God almighty please stand up?

The contest between the Lord, Yahweh and Baal punctuates the second half of this chapter. We might look at Obadiah's story another week, but I want to focus on the Baal-Yahweh contest.

If you look at verse 21, that's the question, isn't it? If the Lord is God, follow him, but if Baal, then follow him. It's the contest between Yahweh in the blue corner, Baal in the red corner.

Verse 24, Elijah challenges Baal's prophets. You call on your God and I'll call on Yahweh. And let's see who answers by burning the offerings we present. Let's see who the real God is.

There can only be one real God. So let's see which one it is as they face off against each other.

We've been following Elijah, haven't we? This is our third Sunday with him now.

[1 : 21] And he is God's man sent to a lifeless and faithless land in Israel. And Elijah is sent as a kind of covenant enforcer. He is God's man to bring about covenant curses or covenant blessings on Israel.

So back in chapter 17, remember he pronounced in verse 1 a covenant curse. It was the drought on the land, which was a sign, wasn't it, for when the covenant had been broken with God, the relationship had been broken and his grace rejected.

And this drought has gone on and on and on for three years, we're told now in chapter 18. And so as Baal enters the ring in this contest, he already looks pretty ragged. The storm God, they thought he was, Baal, but the fertility God. And so his reputation already is literally drying up.

God has removed his blessing from the land and Baal has not been able to do anything about it.

But God does decide, doesn't he, at the beginning of our chapter that he is going to end this drought and he is going to send rain.

But before that happens, Baal must be completely discredited. Rain is going to come, but when it does, Baal is not the one that they should thank for that.

[2 : 51] And they've got to know who and where blessings really come from in their lives. They've got to know who the real God is. So there's going to be a God contest.

A very clear, a very public, decisive, kind of prime time, full colour contest. And as we witness this, we've got to ask ourselves, who is the real God?

Who is my real God? Who am I looking to for everything that I need in my life? When I get up tomorrow morning and thoughts of the week sort of flood my mind before I take my head off the pillow.

When the fears and the worries and the joys and the sorrows flood in, who or what do I turn to in that moment? And is that person or is that thing really God or not?

In this contest, I want us to see three things this evening. First of all, the real God calls to be followed. The real God calls to be followed. Elijah lays down the gauntlet, doesn't he?

[4 : 03] Verse 21. Elijah comes near to all the people and says, How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him.

But if Baal, then follow him. So the first thing to see about this contest is that it's not just an intellectual contest. Or an intellectual question.

Who is the real God? But that is not just a question that you can sort of debate in a library or watch a debate on TV. It's not just an academic theory.

This is a question which involves the direction of our lives. Elijah's challenge isn't, is it? If Yahweh is the real God, then assent to the facts of his existence.

Or if Baal is God, then agree with that and sign up to his credo. It's not even just about belief, actually, is it? No, verse 21.

[5 : 04] If Yahweh is God, follow him. If Baal is God, follow him. This isn't intellectual apologetic stuff.

Where we get to sort of sit outside of the ring in the audience and watch the match go on. See who wins and then eat a hot dog and then go home and do whatever we want.

Everything is involved in this question. All of who we are and why we are is involved. Do you remember the old atheist bus campaign?

There is probably no God, so just get on with your life and enjoy it. It was a good campaign. It was a good campaign and atheists there are more clever than Christians like to think.

They're clever because they realise the implications. That this isn't merely a theoretical question.

Because if there is a real God, then he is somebody who demands more than a nod of recognition.

[6 : 10] The question is about your life and how you live. That ad campaign understands what Elijah is trying to get them to grasp here.

That this is about following. About action. And about life. And filling out a life with a purpose.

With a goal. With a God. Who your God is shapes what your life is. It is to decide for whom and for what you are willing to get out of bed in the morning.

For whom and for what you are willing to say, my life has meaning now. Now maybe we are thinking this is all great stuff. But this is not the kind of decision that we need to make now, is it?

Between Yahweh and Baal. This is just some ancient problem that they struggled with. Some weird battle between gods of antiquity. But let me say, while Baal may not be known by name today, he is very, very much a popular God today.

[7 : 20] There are some things about Baal that are still alive today. Let me show you some of them. Number one, Baal was a God who seemed to meet people's felt needs.

He seemed to scratch where people were itching. And so he was known as the storm God. And if you lived in an agricultural society, then that was a really important thing, wasn't it?

You need rain for all of your life. And so Baal, the storm God, pretended to address the felt needs of the people. He was also the God of fertility.

So he could legitimise sexual expression and sexual desire in any way he wanted to express it. And with Baal, there was a whole system of temple worship which involved cult, prostitution.

And so he was the perfect God to give me what I feel I need. To provide what I need for the life that I want to live. And express myself the way that I like.

[8 : 29] He pretended to scratch where the people were itching. Number two though, he was also steeped in tradition. And he was familiar to the Israelites.

Because we know that ever since the book of Judges, Baal has been a kind of household name all throughout Israel. He's been there.

He's now part of the religious and social furniture. He is the God of the elite, of Jezebel, the queen. We're told in verse 19, she's got Baal's prophets eating at her table.

So he's like the state-sponsored deity. And so even if you don't want to look to him for rain and fertility stuff, you would get on much better in this world if you just fall in line with the traditions and the religions of those in power.

So we don't know the name Baal today, do we? But we know many gods like him today. Who seem to appeal to us on the basis of how we feel.

[9 : 36] On what we want. Who pretend to scratch where we're itching. Today when we follow anything that we put our ultimate hope in, it becomes our God, doesn't it?

In self-expression or in sensuality or in self-orientation. Baal today is very much alive and well. But the real God makes huge demands of us.

The real God intrudes upon all of our life. And claims us. And he wants you and he will have all of you. And you will follow one God or you will follow the other.

And the God you choose will shape the whole of your life. You can't domesticate Yahweh, the God of the Bible. You can't have a mixed opinion about Yahweh.

Or theorise about him simply. Now the real God calls to be followed. He calls to be followed with all of our lives. Secondly, the real God calls you to freedom.

[10 : 41] The real God calls you to freedom. As Baal and Yahweh face off here. We don't just see a difference between them.

But we see a difference between the lives of their servants as well. And those who worship these gods. And we see, don't we, that Yahweh's servant is of one disposition.

And Baal's are of another. Yahweh's servant is relatively quiet in this passage actually. And as the competition gets going.

He trusts in the God of the Bible. And he knows a certain kind of peace. But Baal's servants are nothing like that, are they? They are hysterical in this chapter.

So verse 20. All the people of Israel come along with all the prophets of Baal and Asherah. And this scene, it rings a bell. Because it's a bit like when God's people were slaves in Egypt.

[11 : 46] And there is this mediator like Moses, Elijah, who comes to liberate the people from an oppressive pharaoh-like figure.

Ahab, the troubler of Israel, Elijah calls him. And Baal is the name of the oppressive force that Ahab sponsors. So Elijah is sent to free Baal's servants from a god, from a pharaoh who is weak.

And unable to give them what they really need. And all through the narrative, by looking at his servants, we get the measure of Baal. He is a god who requires much, but delivers nothing.

And they need freedom from him. In all their hysterics. And just look at the numbers. We're told the figures, aren't we?

We're told that Yahweh versus Baal is a numbers game. It's Elijah versus 450 prophets and 400 prophets of Asherah.

[12 : 52] It's another god that was worshipped alongside Baal. And so what is striking is the ridiculous amount of assistance that Baal seems to need, isn't it? It's 1 versus 850.

And then there's the volume of the frantic, frenetic activity that Baal requires of his servants. If you look at verse 26 to 29, there are these scenes, aren't there, where Baal's prophets call out to him from morning until noon.

They cry out loud. They cut themselves. As was their custom. They dance around. They limp around this burnt offering. They rave on and on and on.

Until their blood gushes out all over them. And twice after all the ranting and all the raving, they call out to Baal. But verse 26, there was no voice.

No one answered them. Verse 29, no one answered. No one paid attention. Baal is useless here. He requires much from them, but he delivers nothing.

[14 : 04] And he promises much, but he gives nothing. And if we sort of don't laugh at the kind of comedy of this passage, we've got to cry at it really, haven't we?

These people who are utterly enslaved to a God who does not give them anything and who demands all of this activity from them. And they are trapped by their own desires.

Slave to a God who is a God of their own making. And that is the point that Elijah makes when he mocks Baal. In verse 27. Cry aloud.

Either he's musing. He's having a little think. Or he's relieving himself. He's using the facilities. Or he's on a journey. Or he's asleep. Maybe you need to wake him up.

He is being sarcastic. But he's also using their language of understanding how pagan gods worked. In that they engaged in human activity. They were just kind of bigger versions of us.

[15 : 08] They did human stuff all the time. And so Elijah pushes the logic to the extreme, doesn't he? And you need to be free from this God. Because he's only a God of your own making.

The real God has made you in his image. But you've made this false God in your own image. And I want to say, Baal is alive and well today, isn't he?

Because it is so easy to make the real God into a God who demands much and who gives little. A God who is either powerless to do anything for his people or just heartless.

A reluctant and stingy God who doesn't hear us. And we become more and more frantic.

As people. As his servants. We become more frenetic. And we can get into a kind of evangelical Baalism. Where we think God will do stuff for us.

[16 : 15] If we kind of do more and more for him. If I perform and I do more. Busy, busy, busy. All of the time. God will work for me.

If only I do this thing. Now of course we want a full church calendar, don't we? And we want to be really active as God's servants.

We want this building to be used. Seven days a week. And we want to do more. We don't want to be lazy. And that is good. But we've got to ask, why?

Do we want to be so busy all of the time? Is it because actually we think God is like us?

And we've become evangelical Baalists. As if God is on a journey or he needs waking up. Or he has any insufficiency in himself.

[17 : 13] That he needs to go and use the facilities or something. Is it because we've remade God in our own image? Yahweh comes with Elijah to release these people from thinking like that, doesn't he?

And just look at the difference between them. They rant and they rave from hours on end. And nothing happens. Elijah soaks the wood of the burnt offering three times.

As if to say, God can do it when it's even harder. And then look at verse 36. O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel.

Let it be known this day that you are God in Israel. And that I'm your servant. And that I've 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 falls, doesn't it?

[18 : 15] And consumes the offering. Now what strikes you about that? Verse 36. Well it's such a contrast. After the hours and hours and hours of activity.

And all the frantic, frenetic activity. Elijah utters a simple, sincere prayer. The real God does not require frantic frenzy.

He requires faith. And faithfulness. And this is the relief. The freedom of following this real God. The freedom of having him. But Yahweh is always powerful. And always able. And Yahweh is always in control. So that you don't have to be.

So that you don't have to be frenetic. Just faithful to him. You don't have to be justified. You don't have to justify yourself by your work.

[19 : 21] Or your parenting skills. You don't have to do something. To be something. You don't have to endure the slavery.

Of serving a God. Of your own making. Who requires your assistance. And numbers. And a show of your human force. No.

You've come to the God of simple faith. The God whose burden is light. And whose yoke is easy. Not a God to mount up endless words.

In repetitious empty prayer. Just as the Pharisees did. Jesus warned. Not one who as Luther says. We've got to overcome his reluctance.

In prayer. But simply to lay hold of his willingness. In prayer. And so the real God calls you to follow him.

[20 : 18] The real God calls you to freedom. And thirdly and lastly. He calls you to forgiveness. The real God calls you to forgiveness. Now I want you to see another important feature of this story.

That might easily slip us by. It's not only that Yahweh wins in a spectacular way. But it's how he wins.

And it's the sort of set up. Notice he doesn't win in a sort of gloating way. There's no see I told you so. Is there? It's actually the way Elijah sets this up.

Shows that the real God gets the glory here. Whilst offering grace. To the people. And forgiveness. Now look at verse 30 and 31 for a second.

You just drop your eye there. There's a little detail there. That packs a big theological punch. Elijah gets the people together.

[21 : 17] Doesn't he? Around the burnt offering. And he repairs the altar of the Lord. That had been thrown down. And he sets up 12 stones. Verse 31.

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 those 12 stones.

He builds this altar in the name of the Lord. Now what's going on here? Can you imagine one of those films. That's like these romantic comedies isn't it? Where the guy has messed up.

And the couple split up. And he wants to get her back. And usually what he does isn't it? He's got to kind of delve into the memories of the relationship.

And find some token. That can sort of win her back. And remind her of how good it was. The cuddly toy that he won her at the fair.

[22 : 18] Or ticket stubs from their first movie. Or a photo. Some symbol. That she will remember and think. Oh he's a good guy really isn't he? And that is a bit like what's going on here.

Elijah sets up these 12 stones. And it's a tender reminder from Yahweh. Of the very beginnings. Of God with his people.

When the Lord spoke to Jacob. Saying. Israel shall be your name. Right back when the relationship began. Notice in the passage.

How Elijah keeps referring to them all. As Israel. He calls them the sons of Jacob. He's talking about them. Before the tribes split up.

When you were all family. Together. With God. God. And the symbols of 12 stones. And a burnt offering. Were the symbols of high points. In their relationship together.

[23 : 21] So in Exodus 24. Moses sets up 12 pillars. And a burnt offering. After the giving of the law. As a confirmation of their new life together.

Joshua sets up 12 stones. Just before they come into the promised land. Each stone. Representing the 12 tribes. All of them together. In God's land.

And at the inauguration. Of the temple. And of the tabernacle. On two separate occasions. Moses and Aaron. And Solomon. Witness fire. Coming down from heaven.

And consuming burnt offerings. As temple activity begins. So these symbols. Were God's way of saying to the people.

Come in. My people and I. Come together. And be with me. And no rest.

[24 : 18] And no peace. You see. I found a way. That you can be with me. By sacrifice. All of my people. All my 12 tribes. By promise and sacrifice.

When I've consumed. In a burnt offering. Your wrongdoing. And I've opened the way. To my temple. My dwelling place. And God.

Then. Here. In 1 Kings 18. Is delving. Into the past. Isn't he. And pulling out. Those special symbols. Again. For this faithless.

And lifeless. People. This time. Though. It's the offended party. Offering the tender. Token of forgiveness. As the fire. Comes down.

And consumes. The offering. On those 12 stones. They realise. Here. Don't they. God is not just saying. I am. Really God. He is saying. I am really.

[25 : 15] Good. To you. This is God saying. Even after all you've done. When you've trusted in these false saviours. And you've become slaves of your own gods.

I am now making a way again for you to be forgiven. And I'm making a way for you to start again. And to bring you together. As my people to be with me.

One of the leaders of the great awakening. William Romaine said. That no sin can be crucified. Either in heart.

Or in life. Unless it first is pardoned in conscience. Because there will be want of faith to receive strength from Jesus.

By whom alone it can be crucified. It cannot be mortified. If it not be mortified in its guilt. It cannot be subdued in its power.

[26 : 18] And he's right there. That is why God did it in this way. Because it's no good just knowing who the real God is tonight. And it's no good just seeing that it would be a wonderfully liberating thing to have him as your God.

It's no good even knowing that you want to have him as your God. Because we've got to know that he wants us. And that he is willing to accept us.

And until we do know that. Our false gods will always have the power in our lives. When we feel guilt. And when we feel shame.

And the need to frantically self-justify. Busy. Busy. Busy. They will always have the power. And we'll never turn to be free from false gods completely.

Unless the real God. Deals with our consciences. And we're free. From shame. And we're free from justifying ourselves.

[27 : 26] And working ourselves into a frenzy. To please him. We're free from those things that we just cringe when we remember them about ourselves.

The things that hold us back from praying to him and seeking him. And the only way that we can have this cleansing of our conscience. Is to go to Mount Carmel isn't it?

Where they are here. Where God sends fire to burn a sacrifice at the entrance of his holy temple. Where he says to you. Let's all come together.

And let's start this again. Because I want you to be mine. Yahweh tonight demands more than just a willingness to part with your gods.

He demands you to part with them. And this is the place isn't it? Here on Mount Carmel. This is the place that makes the difference for these people. Making this choice.

[28 : 25] The place that the mountain. The mountain of sacrifice and of consuming fire. And of course it reminds us of the mountain of Calvary doesn't it?

And until we meet the real God there. At the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. We will never be able to turn from our false gods.

We will never be free from them. But in Christ he is the God who is always in control. And he is the God who is great. So that you don't have to be.

And he is the God who doesn't just give you your felt needs tonight. What you think you need. But he is the God who deals with your conscience.

And with your shame. And the God who has made the way to be free. In knowing him. He is after all the God who is real.

[29 : 30] Let's pray.