

Are there things in your life that receive a great deal of your loyalty? Does something other than God and family get the most of your money and/or time? Are you trying to serve God and be a great success in the world? Do your value system and employment ethics demonstrate that you rely too much on accumulating the things of this world? You are not alone! People throughout the ages have struggled with these issues, trying to serve God, career, and power. Today we will struggle with who and what we are to serve.

Our scripture lesson is from the book of 1 Kings, which tells us about the reign of King David; the reign of his son King Solomon; how the nation of Israel was divided; the reign of those kings that ruled Israel (the ten northern tribes); and the reign of the kings that ruled Judah (the two southern tribes). One of the most ungodly or disobedient kings of Israel was King Ahab. He, like the kings before him, led many of his people into worshipping idol gods and generally disregarding the teachings of Moses and the Prophets. God sent a mighty prophet named Elijah to confront King Ahab and these people.

To understand this “show down” between the prophet of God and the prophets of Baal we need to know the situation and the environment. More than three years before our scripture a prophet named Elijah whose name means “my God is Jehovah,” had told the King Ahab that there would be no rain until Elijah prayed to Yahweh, the God who made the heavens and the earth, for rain. King Ahab worshipped and served gods called Baal. Baal was the most popular Canaanite god. The Baal idols were often made in the shape of a bull, representing strength and fertility and reflecting lust for power and sexual pleasure. Elijah has been away for the three years and now he instructs King Ahab to gather the people of Israel and the prophets of Baal to gather at Mount Carmel and the king agreed. Elijah challenged the King to bring the leaders of his religion to demonstrate that

they really served a powerful god. Mount Carmel a good location for the showdown because it was situated between Israel and Phoenicia, the lands of the original worshippers of Baal. Mount Carmel was regarded by the Phoenicians as the sacred dwelling place of Baal. So King Ahab was pleased with this suggested site for the contest because it would have given the Baal prophets a definite advantage. It was also a geographically prominent location; no one would have difficulty finding the place, so it was a fit setting for Elijah's contest.

When all the people had assembled. . . . Elijah stood before them and challenged them to end their double mindedness, their wavering between two opinions. It was not good to try to "walk the fence" worshiping two gods. Apparently the Israelites thought that if Yahweh let them down they could turn to Baal, and vice versa. Some may not have been sure why they were worshipping Baal. Others knew that the Lord was God, but they enjoyed the sinful pleasures and other benefits that came with following King Ahab and his wife Queen Jezebel in their idolatrous worship. Before we are too hard on these folks and shake our heads at them lets remember the gods that we serve today. Power, status, appearance, and material possessions can become our gods if we devote our lives to them. I must confess that I did worry over my investments until I remembered who God was and that all blessings come from God!

Elijah said that if One is the true God and the other false they should follow the true One wholeheartedly and forget about the impotent, powerless impostor. The people could not argue with this statement, so they said nothing.

Elijah then pointed out that in this contest the odds would be 450 prophets to 1—a humanly impossible situation in which to win! Elijah knew there were other prophets of Yahweh besides himself, but as far as this contest was concerned, he was the only one of the LORD'S prophets left.

Of the two bulls required, Elijah let the prophets of Baal select their favorite. Each side would prepare to sacrifice its bull as a burnt offering to its god. Then they would each call on their god and the god who answered by fire would be shown to be the true God. Baal was supposedly a fertility god, the one who sent rain, caused the crops to grow, and provided food for his people. He was the one who supposedly sent fire and lightning from heaven. The three-and-one-half-year drought and famine had been a great embarrassment to the worshipers of Baal. It seemed as if Elijah and his God rather than Baal were in control of the fertility of Israel. So Elijah's test to Baal's followers seemed like a good opportunity to vindicate their god and they readily agreed to it. When the preparations were completed, the test began.

All morning the prophets of Baal called on their god and danced around his altar to arouse him to action. At noon Elijah began to tease them, mocking them because their god did not answer. Sarcastically he suggested that Baal was thinking about other things, or busy (a polite way of saying that he had gone to the restroom), away on a trip since the Phoenician sailors believed Baal traveled with them on the Mediterranean Sea and elsewhere, or he suggested maybe their god was sleeping! Baal's prophets responded by increasing their worship and prayers, working themselves into a frenzy. To please their god they even mutilated their own bodies as the custom of pagan worshipers has been for centuries. This continued for six hours, until 3:00 in the afternoon, but still there was no response. No one answered or paid attention. But Baal did not respond to their chanting for lightning, even though the Carmel mountain range was a place where rain and lightning often came because it was where the winds from the Mediterranean Sea dropped its moisture when it passed over this high elevation.

When it was obvious to all that the prophets of Baal had failed, Elijah invited all the people to come near and observe what he would do. An altar to the LORD

had been built on the site long before but it was in ruins. Elijah selected 12 stones, one for each of the tribes. Although the tribes had been divided into two nations they were still one people in God's purposes—with a single Lord, a single covenant, and a single destiny. With these stones he built an altar . . . and . . . dug a trench around it . . . to hold about one-third of a bushel of seed.

After the bull had been slain and laid . . . on the wood, Elijah gave another strange directive. He called for the whole sacrifice and its wood to be soaked with water three separate times. The excess water . . . even filled the trench. The water—four large jars filled three times each!—probably was collected from a spring on the mountain or in the Kishon Valley below, or from the Mediterranean Sea. The purpose of this soaking, of course, was to show everyone present that the burning of the sacrifice that was to take place was not a natural phenomenon or a trick but was a miracle of God.

At 3:00 in the afternoon, the time of the Israelites' evening sacrifice, Elijah stepped forward and prayed. Without any of the dancing or chanting or mutilating of his body as the prophets of Baal had done, Elijah simply addressed God as one addresses another living person. His words were designed to demonstrate to all those gathered that all he had done as God's servant had been in obedience to God's command and not on his own initiative or authority. Elijah simply asked God to show the people that He is the true God and to turn the hearts of the people back to Himself.

Instantly fire (lightning) fell from heaven, burning the sacrifice, the wood, altar, and even the surrounding soil and water. Instantly the crowd cried in amazement. Since the LORD (Yahweh) had answered by fire; they acknowledged that God is the true God.¹

¹Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 1:526

For us, we learn that we can't just drift along with whatever is pleasant and easy; we will someday discover that we have been worshiping a false god...usually that means that we have been satisfying ourselves and worshiping ourselves. We also must remember what Jesus said, where our treasures are, that's where our hearts are also. So the where we spend our time and money is what we worship, whether that is power, status, appearance or our material possessions. But when we reach times of crisis and desperately call out to these gods, there will only be silence. They can offer no true answers, no guidance, and no wisdom.

The proof of God's working may not be as dramatic in our lives as in Elijah's, but God will make resources available to us in creative ways to accomplish God's purpose. God will give us the wisdom to raise a family, the courage to take a stand for truth, or the means to provide help for someone in need. Like Elijah, we can have faith that whatever God commands us to do God will provide what we need to carry it through.

We must decide if we will believe and serve the God that made heaven and earth. We must decide if we will believe and serve the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We must decide if we will believe and serve the God of Moses and the Prophets. We must decide if we will believe and serve God of Jesus. Remember what God has done in the past and trust God for now and your future.

Thanks be to God!