

## 1 Kings 18:16-46

### Introduction

The issue that God's addressing in our passage this morning is doublemindedness: wavering between two different opinions.

We've seen over the last couple of weeks that the Israelites were caught between the worship of Yahweh and the worship of Baal.

And that doublemindedness is still an issue for us today. We may not be tempted to worship Baal, but our hearts are so easily captivated by the allure of any number of false gods. Whether it's the pursuit of popularity or pleasure, riches or romance, career or comfort, we readily devote ourselves to things that are not gods at all and allow them to draw us away from the Lord.

We need to hear the challenge of these verses as much as the Israelites did in their day.

The preceding verses have been building up to a head-to-head contest between Yahweh and Baal. And now we finally reach the decisive confrontation that will publicly reveal which is the real God. And this contest is for a purpose. Through his servant Elijah, the Lord is calling his people back to himself.

So now, it's decision time. And that's our first heading.

### Decision time

Elijah tells Ahab to summon the people from all over Israel to meet him on Mount Carmel. And then he challenges them to give themselves wholly to the Lord.

Look at verse 21.

**Elijah went before the people and said, 'How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.'**

**But the people said nothing.**

Their response is disappointing to say the least.

And that's because Baal worship was attractive.

It had royal sanction. Queen Jezebel was a zealous evangelist for Baal.

And it had a long tradition. It went back hundreds of years. Baal had been worshipped in Canaan long before the Israelites had entered the land. Having been delivered from slavery in Egypt, when they eventually crossed the Jordan, Baal worship is what they found.

And it was relevant. Baal was said to be the storm and fertility god. It was claimed that he was the one who sent fire and rain. He made crops grow and gave children. With Baal onside, so it was said, the land would burst with life.

We can understand why it was appealing.

But what matters is not Baal's pedigree or what was claimed about him. What matters is whether it is Baal or Yahweh who is the real God.

And whoever it is, this is the one the Israelites should follow.

And it's the same for us. There are many things that hold appeal, things that promise to be life-giving if only we can possess them, things we might gladly devote ourselves to pursuing.

That's exactly what people around us are doing when they live for wealth and possessions and a comfortable life. They're treating those things as gods in the hope they will make life satisfying and fulfilling.

It's not that there's anything wrong with being wealthy or being able to afford a comfortable lifestyle. But Jesus said you cannot serve both God and money. And the same's true of the other things we might set our hearts on. We must decide what we're living for.

The question we need to answer is who or what can truly deliver life. Where is real life to be found?

We need to make up our minds who the real God is.

And if it's the Lord, then we need to follow him, says Elijah.

Verse 21 again.

**Elijah went before the people and said, 'How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.'**

In the New Testament, James lays the same choice before us today, when he contrasts living for God with living like those around us. He says this:

**You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.** (James 4:4)

And he goes on... **Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.** (James 4:8-10)

When you order dessert in a restaurant, sometimes you're asked whether you'd like to have it with ice cream or custard. You've ordered apple crumble. And then the waitress says to you, 'Would you like that with ice cream or custard?'

You have to choose. It's one or the other. Of course, there'll be some among us who, given the chance, will have a bit of both. I'm one of them! Vanilla ice cream melting into hot custard is delicious.

But although we might be able to do that with dessert, we can't do that with God. It's one or the other. We need to decide.

We can't both live for God and, at the same time, chase after the idols the world chases after.

Sadly, it's all too possible to go through life claiming to be a Christian yet without committing ourselves to serving God. We can come to church and be around Christian things without giving God first place in our affections. We can pay him lip service without giving him our hearts. We can call ourselves Christians without giving him our allegiance.

But if the Lord is God, Elijah says, we need to make up our minds to follow him wholeheartedly. To live for him alone.

That's the choice Elijah lays before the Israelites: it's either God or Baal. And then comes the showdown, which is our next heading.

### The showdown

The Israelites have been called to meet Elijah on Mount Carmel. In the ancient records of Assyria, Mount Carmel is described as 'the mountain of Baal'. If that's so, then this is Baal's home turf. He has home advantage.

And not only does Baal have home advantage; he also has numerical advantage.

Look at verse 22.

**Then Elijah said to them, 'I am the only one of the LORD's prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets'**

Yahweh is outnumbered. Baal has 450 prophets present. Yahweh has just one. Elijah.

But Elijah lays down his challenge.

Verse 23.

**'Get two bulls for us. Let Baal's prophets choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and**

**put it on the wood but not set fire to it. Then you call on the name of your god, and I will all on the name of the LORD. The god who answers by fire – he is God.'**

**Then all the people said, 'What you say is good.'**

The challenge is accepted.

The prophets of Baal prepare their bull and call on the name of Baal all morning till noon. But nothing happens. No one answers.

At noon Elijah starts taunting them to raise the volume. **'Shout louder!'** he says. 'Perhaps Baal is deep in thought and isn't paying attention. Perhaps he's on the toilet, or away on holiday, or having a nap. Perhaps he needs waking up.'

So, they shout louder, even slashing themselves with a sword until their blood flows. And they carry on, getting more and more frantic, until the evening. No one could doubt the effort they were putting in.

But to underline the futility of it all, verse 29 says three different ways: **But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.**

Why? Because there was no one there. Baal doesn't exist. He isn't real.

By contrast, Elijah's approach couldn't be simpler.

He makes it as difficult as possible. He repairs the altar of the Lord, which had been torn down. And then not once, not twice, but three times he drenches the sacrifice with water.

Look at verse 33.

**He arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces and laid it on the wood. Then he said to them, 'Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering on the wood.'**

**'Do it again,' he said, and they did it again.**

**'Do it a third time,' he ordered, and they did it the third time.**

Wet stuff doesn't burn. Elijah's stacking the odds against the wood catching fire. But if fire should come there could be no explanation other than the hand of God.

Then Elijah prays. There's no shouting, or slashing, or frantic activity, just a prayer.

Verse 36.

**At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: 'LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, LORD, answer**

**me, so these people will know that you, LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.'**

It's a simple prayer which contrasts with the frantic activity of the prophets of Baal. It's the kind of prayer Jesus commends. In Matthew chapter 6, he says, '**...when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.'**

Pagans pray a certain way because they think a certain way. They think they need to badger, and manipulate, and coerce. Yet the real God knows what we need before we ask him.

And when Elijah prays, he sends fire! It burns up the sacrifice, the wood, the stone and the soil. It even evaporates the water. It's no small fire. It's a raging furnace. There's no contest. It's clear who the real God is, and the Israelites fall on their faces and acknowledge that fact.

Verse 39.

**When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, 'The LORD – he is God! The LORD – he is God!'**

And with Baal finally discredited, the chapter ends with God sending a rainstorm, just as he had promised, after three years of drought.

Today, we might long to see God do something similar. It would certainly get people's attention. Something like this would go viral on social media in no time at all.

But of course, sending fire and rain is not the most spectacular thing God has done. He has shown that he is the one true God, supremely, by raising his Son from the grave. He has acted decisively in history to defeat death and open the way to heaven. There is no other so-called god who can bring us safely through the grave. The empty tomb of Jesus is the most spectacular display of God's power we could imagine. It's the proof we need that there is a true God in heaven.

And he's not distant and uninterested - he's watching over us. He hears us and answers us when we pray.

What greater reason do we need to give him our allegiance?

And he still loves to make himself known to people today in response to prayer.

If you have doubts about God's existence, then pray to him. Ask him to make himself known to you in a real and tangible way. Ask him to show you he's there. It's the kind of prayer he loves to answer.

But only do that if you're willing to give him your whole allegiance. And that means turning from sin to follow him. That's what happens in the aftermath of this great showdown, which is our final heading.

### The aftermath

Please look again at verse 40.

**Then Elijah commanded them, 'Seize the prophets of Baal. Don't let anyone get away!' They seized them, and Elijah had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and slaughtered there.'**

As we read those words, our first response might be shock. Elijah's actions do seem shocking. He's ruthless. He shows no mercy.

But what he's doing is carrying out the punishment of Deuteronomy 13.

Before they entered the promised land, Moses had warned the Israelites that prophets would appear among them who would turn them away from God. And he said, **'That prophet or dreamer must be put to death for inciting rebellion against the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. That prophet or dreamer tried to turn you from the way the LORD your God commanded you to follow. You must purge the evil from among you.'** (Deuteronomy 13:5)

God's people must not tolerate idolatry.

If someone's got a cancerous tumour, there's no point sticking a plaster over it. What's needed is not a plaster but surgery. The tumour must be removed. And it's the same with idolatry. The cancer of idolatry is serious. It results in death, spiritually, and it must be removed. That's what Elijah's doing. He's removing the cancer of idolatry from Israel.

And the New Testament tells us to do the same. Giving our allegiance to God means being ruthless in our fight against sin and idolatry.

The apostle Paul writes this: **Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these the wrath of God is coming.** (Colossians 3:5-6)

That should be your and my attitude to anything that will draw our allegiance away from God. We cannot afford to cosy up to sin and idolatry. We need to be ruthless.

Anything that might draw us away from wholehearted allegiance to the Lord must be put to death.

What will that mean for you and me?

What idol threatens to draw your allegiance away from the Lord? Perhaps a relationship. Perhaps money. Perhaps a career. Perhaps a desire for pleasure and popularity.

And what will it mean, figuratively speaking, to put it to death?

## Conclusion

You and I must resolve to follow the Lord and to do so wholeheartedly. It isn't enough merely to acknowledge that he is God. If he is God, then we need to give him our full allegiance. And that means putting to death the idols that lure our hearts away from him.

That's the challenge of these verses. It's to give ourselves wholeheartedly to the Lord.

What we can't afford to be is doubleminded Christians, who waver between loyalty to God and loyalty to something or someone else that we've turned into an idol. If that's how you and I are living, then we need to hear the challenge of these verses in 1 Kings.

And we need to listen to James once again, speaking in the New Testament, and hear both his rebuke and his promise.

He says this: **Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and here's the promise... and he will lift you up.**  
(James 4:8-10)

Let's pray.

Lord God, please forgive us for the times we have allowed our hearts to be drawn to idols and our devotion to you has wavered. As we read your word, the Bible, and pray to you, and gather together as your people, please convince us of your existence as the Lord of heaven and earth, and assure us of your loving presence with us. Please grant us an ever-strengthening resolve to follow you wholeheartedly. Please help us to give our complete allegiance to you day by day. And as we do, please be glorified among us. We ask it in the name of Jesus. Amen.