

Speaking Truth to Power:  
The Prophet Elijah, #2

## “Elijah and the Prophets of Baal”

### 1 Kings 18

--CEFC 1/19/20

(Read 1 Kings 18:1-40)

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That cultural icon from the 1950s and 60s, [project image]

the movie star, Marilyn Monroe

was once asked if she believed in God.

She answered, “I just believe in everything—a little bit.”

[take down image]

With apologies to America’s fifth president,

and his policy of opposition to European interference,

in the words of Wheaton College president Phil Ryken,

Marilyn’s answer is now the new “Monroe Doctrine.”<sup>1</sup>

Just believe in everything—a little bit.

Believe in the Christian God—oh, sure.

But just a little bit.

But don’t forget about Allah and Buddha and the higher power,

however you may conceive of him, her, or it.

<sup>1</sup> Cited in *1 Kings, REC*, p. 454.

A little New Age mysticism?

Or the Secret law of attraction?

And how about some hardcore scientific materialism?—

Throw that in, too. Why not?

As Ryken suggests,

“The Monroe Doctrine has become the basic religious principle of American culture.

People do not want to be intolerant,

so they believe a little bit of everything.

A majority of Americans believe in God, the Bible, Jesus,

the power of positive thinking, the basic goodness of humanity,

luck, alien life-forms, and checking their horoscopes every day.

The only way to believe all those things at the same time

is to adhere to the Monroe Doctrine: believe everything a little bit.”<sup>2</sup>

After all, as Justice Kennedy famously said in his *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* decision,

“At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence,  
of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.”

It's a free country--we can believe whatever we want to believe.

So people believe all sorts of things.

As G. K. Chesterton once asserted,

“When people stop believing in God, they don't believe in nothing;

they believe in anything.”

And who are you to tell me I'm wrong?

In fact, we've reached the point that the law will enforce the right of some people

to demand that you can't tell them they're wrong.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

You might offend them.

There can be no such thing as exclusive truth—

that would exclude people.

We must be inclusive of all.

All truth claims must be treated equally—

that is, as equally true.

So you can believe everything—a little bit.

We call it pluralism,

but a better name might be syncretism—

it's a mishmash of various beliefs blended together

in some incoherent mess.

It's exemplified in that fastest growing segment of the American population—

that group called the “nones”—

Not N-U-N, but N-O-N-E,

for when asked for their religious affiliation,

they choose “None.”

They're not atheists—real atheists are relatively rare.

After all, it's hard to prove a negative.

No, the “nones” are mainly the “spiritual but not religious” sort—

those who reject “organized religion”

and create their own individual religion,

with their own version of god or the gods.

The “nones” are growing in our culture,

but I suspect that the “nones” have always been around.  
They used to list their religion as “Christian,”  
but that no longer has any social value.

Now the “nones” are just coming out of the closet, so to speak.  
No doubt, lots of them can still be found lingering in our churches,  
I wouldn’t be surprised if we had some among us this morning.

For we are all influenced by our culture—more than we realize.

And the Monroe Doctrine is now the dominant religious principle in America—  
“just believe in everything—a little bit.”

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This, I would say, is not unlike the world that the prophet Elijah was up against  
in the northern kingdom of Israel in the days of King Ahab.

Under the leadership of this wayward king  
and through the powerful influence of his wife,  
the pagan Queen Jezebel,  
the people had been set adrift religiously.

Oh sure, they continued to worship the LORD, Yahweh,  
the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,  
but they did so alongside the other gods of their world—  
Baal and Asherah and any others that happened to pop up.

Why not?

We wouldn’t want to leave anyone out—  
don’t want any offended gods out there,  
they might harm our crops.

Better to believe in everything—just a little bit.

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But this Monroe Doctrine did not sit well with the LORD, the God of Israel.

Quite frankly, he was offended by it.

You see, the LORD had chosen to reveal himself to this people  
as the one true God.

They were to be his people,  
and he was to be their God.

They were to have no other gods before him,  
and they were to love him with all their heart, soul, strength, and mind.  
It was as if he been joined to them as in a marriage,  
and there could be no other lovers.

But like an adulterous wife, the people of Israel  
had promiscuously scattered their affections  
and had given themselves to other gods.

We read back in 1 Kings 16:33  
that King Ahab, in his idolatrous practices,  
**“did more to arouse the anger of the LORD, the God of Israel,  
than did all the kings of Israel before him.”**

In fact, the Lord declared, through the prophet Elijah,  
that because of Ahab’s sin,  
he would punish these people  
and there would be a drought in the land—  
as a demonstration that the LORD, not Baal,

controlled the rain.

We saw last week how the Lord provided for his servant Elijah during this time  
and in the process showed Elijah to be his true prophet.

Now, as we move to chap. 18, the Lord initiates a new episode  
in his dealings with his people.

1 Kings 18:1—"After a long time, in the third year,

the word of the LORD came to Elijah:

"Go and present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the land."

2 So Elijah went to present himself to Ahab."

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We could skip immediately to v. 16, where Elijah does meet the king,  
but in vv. 3-16 our author first wants to set the scene  
and to introduce us to some characters  
to help us better appreciate what is about to happen.

First, we're told that "**the famine was severe in Samaria**"—

so much so that Ahab initiates a national search for some grass  
to keep his horses and mules alive.

That's what concerned this king—

not the lives of the many people suffering in this famine,  
but his own animals.<sup>3</sup>

Then we are introduced to a man named Obadiah—

not to be confused with the prophet with an Old Testament book to his name.

<sup>3</sup> Needed to supply his chariots and cavalry—the defense budget must never suffer!

We are told that this Obadiah was Ahab's palace administrator—his chief of staff,  
perhaps the most trusted member of his court.  
Now that may be surprising when we see that Obadiah,  
whose name means “servant of the LORD,”  
is described as a “**devout believer**”—  
literally, he “**feared the LORD.**”

So what was this devout believer doing serving the wicked King Ahab?

Many question just how devout Obadiah could have been.

Was Elijah making a point when he says to Obadiah in v. 8—

“**Go tell your master [Ahab] , ‘Elijah is here.’**”?

And in his long rant in vv. 9-14,

Obadiah is terrified at the prospect

of getting on the wrong side of the king--

“**If I go and tell Ahab and he doesn't find you, he will kill me.**”

Three times he mentions the grave danger

that Elijah was putting him in--

quite a contrast to the unshakable courage of Elijah.

“What did I do to deserve this?” Obadiah protests.

“Don't you know what I've done already, Elijah,

hiding the one hundred prophets of the LORD

that the Queen was trying to kill.”

Is Obadiah protesting too much?

Is he a quisling,

a compromiser?

Had he been seduced by the allure of power  
and sold out his faith,  
so as to become just a religious pawn in the king's court?

Some think so,

and there are many believers who do just that.

They betray the Lord for the sake of professional success  
or just personal peace.

But I choose to take the biblical writer at his word—

Obadiah "**feared the Lord.**"

He was seeking to be a light in a dark place,

salt in the world.

And surely, it was no small thing to covertly contravene the wishes of Jezebel  
in saving one hundred of the Lord's prophets, as he did.

In that case,

he obeyed God rather than the government,

something every believer must be willing to do.

I think Obadiah shows us that it is possible

for devout believers to work in dark places—

Joseph served the Egyptian Pharaoh;

Daniel was in Nebuchadnezzar's court;

Queen Esther served the pagan King Xerxes.

And you may be called to serve an ungodly boss—

You may do so, just so long as you know that there must be limits

to what you are willing to do for them.

But who knows what good your service could do?—

like Obadiah, perhaps—saving the lives of the Lord’s prophets. /

Yes, Obadiah “**feared the Lord.**”

But there is no doubt that he feared the king also—

not an unreasonable position, I would say.

Not everyone will be an Elijah,

for Elijah truly knew his God—

v. 15—“**As the LORD Almighty lives, whom I serve,**” he says,

“ **I will surely present myself to Ahab today.**”

Elijah serves “**the LORD Almighty**”—

literally “**the LORD of hosts**”—

that is, the hosts, the armies, of heaven.

He is the living God.

If you know God as Elijah did,

a mere human king is nothing to worry about.

But note well—

In the end, despite his fear,

and at the risk of his own life,

Obadiah went to meet Ahab and told him, “**Elijah is here.**” /

So the scene is set,

and this encounter with Obadiah surely impresses upon us

with just how terrifying these days were for those who feared the Lord,

and just how dangerous it will be for Elijah when he confronts the king.

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The story continues—

we read in v. 16, ‘Ahab went to meet Elijah.’”

“When he saw Elijah, he said to him,

“Is that you, you troubler of Israel?”

“troubler of Isreal”—that’s the term once used of Achan—

You remember Achan—

When the walls of Jericho came a tumblin’ down,

Achan was the one who plundered the city for his own gain,

contrary to the command of God—

and as a result, Israel was defeated badly at the battle of Ai (Josh. 7:25).

Ahab accuses Elijah of being like Achan--

a “troubler” who was bringing this terrible famine on the nation.

This is not the last time that God’s people would be labeled “troublemakers,”

when they refused to bow to the idols of their culture.

John the Baptist was a troublemaker to Herod Antipas,

and he lost his head.

The Apostle Paul was called a troublemaker

for “advocating customs

unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice,” they said (Acts 16:20-21),

and Paul was stoned by an angry mob.

The Emperor Nero labeled the Christians troublers of Rome,

and blamed them for the fire that consumed that city,

and Nero burned Christians alive as punishment.

Augustine wrote his *magnum opus*, *The City of God*,

to defend Christians from the charge

that they caused the fall of the Roman Empire.

But it was, of course, Jesus himself who was the troublemaker supreme.

They crucified him.

To call out the idols of any age,

to upset the status quo,

to go against the prevailing powers of any culture—

will be perceived as making trouble.

I have to ask,

What gods are Christian believers offending today?

Are Christians causing trouble by not going along with the cultural consensus,

and refusing to worship at the altar of enforced tolerance,

the altar of self-expression and authenticity,

or the altar of personal pleasure--

especially in the realm of sexual norms

or materialistic greed?

**“Is that you, you troubler of Israel?”** Ahab asks Elijah.

Not so, says the prophet--

**“I have not made trouble for Israel,”** Elijah replied.

**“But you and your father’s family have.**

**You have abandoned the LORD’s commands and have followed the Baals.”**

And Elijah proposes a contest,

a showdown,

a heavy-weight bout,

to determine who is really God.

Gather the people—and you bring your prophets,  
and I will meet you on Mount Carmel,  
and we will see who wins.

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Elijah comes to the people and first lays out just what is at stake in this contest.

No more of this “believing in everything—just a little bit.”

No more “**wavering between two opinions**,” he says.

That expression, which is difficult to translate,

has the sense of “limping along,”

not taking a strong stand,

being double-minded.

That is no longer acceptable.

No, says Elijah, there can be no middle ground.

You must decide—

“**If the LORD is God, follow him;**

**but if Baal is God, follow him.**”

“**But the people said nothing.**”

They had to think long and hard about this—

Sure, the LORD had brought them out of Egypt and all,

but Baal worship had lots going for it.

Think about it—

First off, it was the state religion, imposed upon them by the king

at the insistence, no doubt, of his domineering wife.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Jezebel had her own company of court prophets whom she supported with royal funds. But their absence at the Mount Carmel showdown we surmise that Ahab had little voice in their affairs.

Baal worship was promoted by all the levers of political and cultural power.

Surely, advocating for the LORD could get you “cancelled,”

or blackballed,

or at the very least, you’d become the object of severe social shaming.

In addition, Baal worship had a rich tradition and history—

It existed in the land long before the religion of Yahweh came along

On top of that, Baal worship directly addressed the people’s strongest felt needs--

Baal was a fertility god and the god of the storm—

more children, crops, and cattle—that’s what Baal promised.

And finally, the worship of the LORD

just couldn’t hold a candle to what the temple of Baal had to offer.

Its display of tangible idols provided wonderful worship aids,

while the temple of the LORD was empty.

And the temple of Baal featured lots of ecstatic prophecies

and dancing and dramatic rituals,

not to mention the sexual attractions—

those temple prostitutes were hard to resist.

The LORD or Baal?

The LORD or Baal?

Not an easy choice at all.

No wonder they wanted to hold on to both, and to believe in everything.

So when confronted with this choice,

they said nothing.

But Elijah insisted—

it must be one or the other—

that's the choice they must make,

for that's what's at stake in this battle of the gods.

**“If the LORD is God, follow him;**

**but if Baal is God, follow him.”**

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And then Elijah sets the rules—

we'll each lay a bull on an altar with wood, but not set fire to it.

**“Then you call on the name of your god,**

**and I will call on the name of the LORD.**

**The god who answers by fire—he is God.”**

Elijah gives Ahab's team every advantage—

Theirs is the home field—

Mount Carmel was in the heart of Baal territory,

They had the upper hand in manpower—450 to one.

Elijah let them choose which of the bulls they wanted,

so they couldn't claim that their bull was defective.

And they got to go first

providing them the opportunity of a preemptive victory.

This was a sudden-death match, remember.

If Baal responds, it's all over.

Elijah wouldn't even get his turn.

So they took the bull and prepared it,

and began to call on the name of Baal to light the fire.

“Baal, answer us!’ they shouted—from morning till noon.

But there was no response;  
no one answered.”

Now Elijah just couldn’t resist—

He starts taunting them, trash taking—

“Shout louder!” he said. “Surely he is a god!

Perhaps he is deep in thought—

trying to figure out what to do,

or perhaps he is busy—

attending the call of nature, off using the facilities, perhaps,

or perhaps he is traveling—

on a journey with some Phoenecian merchants.

Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened--

he may be taking a much-needed nap.

He is mocking them,<sup>5</sup>

for that is all their empty gods deserve.

But Baal’s prophets just keep going—all day,

shouting all the louder,

ranting and raving in their ecstatic prophecies,

and even slashing themselves

as a show of passion in their desperate pleading.

<sup>5</sup> The Canaanite myths of the day spoke of their gods in very human terms, doing very human things—and Elijah is echoing their language.

But to no avail.

It was no use.

Despite all the best efforts of these 450 prophets of Baal,

**“there was no response,**

**no one answered,**

**no one paid attention.”**

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Now it was Elijah’s turn.

He first called the people to him,

for he wanted them to watch carefully what he was about to do.

He repaired the altar of the Lord,

which had been torn down..

And he deliberately used twelve stones,<sup>6</sup>

one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob—

as a statement that the division of the nation

with ten tribes on one side and two on the other—

that was not God’s design.

In the eyes of the Lord Israel was still one people,

and they were his people.<sup>7</sup>

He instructed them to drench this altar with large jars of water—three times!

so that there would be no doubt about what was about to happen.

<sup>6</sup> And even twelve buckets of water (four large jars poured three times).

<sup>7</sup> cf. Ahijah’s prophecy to Jeroboam—Solomon’s kingdom will be divided, **“but not forever.”** (1 Kg. 11:39).

And then, instead of ranting and raving, and dancing around in some religious frenzy,  
Elijah simply prays—

**“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.”**

As if to say—“Don’t try this at home!”

This great experiment was God’s idea, not Elijah’s,  
and he wanted that to be known.

He was not putting the Lord to the test (Dt. 6:16).

All along, he had been obeying God’s command.<sup>8</sup>

v. 37-- **“Answer me, LORD, answer me,  
so these people will know that you, LORD, are God,  
and that you are turning their hearts back again.” /**

**“Then the fire of the LORD fell  
and burned up the sacrifice, the wood,  
the stones and the soil,  
and also licked up [even] the water in the trench.”**

**“The god who answers by fire—he is God.”**

I should say so!

There is no doubt,  
there’s no need for a further review--

<sup>8</sup> so Woodhouse.

the outcome is clear and decisive.

v. 39—"When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried,

"The LORD—he is God!

The LORD—he is God!"

He is the one and only God.<sup>9</sup>//

Elijah had said,

If the Lord is God, follow him—

and he is, and they do.

v. 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." //

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So that's the story.

What are we to make of it?

I think it speaks for itself.

But just to make sure we don't miss what's being presented here,

I want to spell it out in three propositions,

all relating to the God who is revealed in these events—

the God who must be worshipped.

<sup>9</sup> This is emphasized by the unusual use of the article before "God" here and in vv. 24,24--My\$!høITaDh  
a...wâh <hîwhøy

First, and quite simply, this episode makes clear that the LORD is God,  
and there is no other.

*“The god who answers by fire—he is God.”*

And there can be no mistake—

“When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried,

“The LORD—he is God!

The LORD—he is God!” /

Are all religions the same?

Do all roads lead to the same destination?

Are they all different ways to the top of the mountain?

Many people are sure this must be so.

But how they can be so sure of that I do not know.

It may seem like a modest thing to say—

but, in fact, such a claim implies a knowledge of the truth about all religions  
that makes the claims of each religion false.

No Muslim claims that Allah is just another name for the Hindu god Brahma.

Nor is the God of the Bible the same as Zeus—or Baal.

Do they all really lead to the same destination?

Why would you say that?

How would you know?

For us to know God at all, he must make himself known—

and that is what Christians claim that he has done—

through the prophets of the Old Testament at many times and in many ways—  
as in the events we have just considered.

But we also believe that God has revealed himself supremely  
through his Son Jesus Christ.

“No one has ever seen God,” John writes in his Gospel,  
“but the one and only Son, . . . has made him known” (1:18).

“He who has seen me has seen the Father,” Jesus said.

And Jesus, the Son of God, has demonstrated his unique supremacy,  
not by fire, but by resurrection—  
the tomb was empty.  
He has risen from the dead,  
and he has been exalted to the highest place  
and given the name above every name.

The LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—  
is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Lord is God, and there is no other.

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The second thing this story teaches us  
is that **the LORD demands exclusive devotion**,  
**and he judges those who reject him.**  
*“If the LORD is God, follow him;  
but if Baal is God, follow him.”* (v. 21)

It makes sense, doesn't it?

If the LORD is God, shouldn't he be treated as such?

If he is God, he is not a religious idea to be toyed with;  
nor a philosophical proposition to argue about.

He is a King who rightly demands our allegiance.

How can it be otherwise?

There can be none of this nonsense

about believing everything--just a little bit.

That won't do.

Either the Lord is God or he is not,

and if he is God, you must submit to him.

What is the first of the Ten Commandments?--

**"You shall no other gods before me."**

And what did Jesus say was the first and greatest commandment?--

**"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,**

**with all your soul,**

**with all your strength,**

**and with all your mind."**

He deserves no less./

And what I find so interesting when I turn to the Gospels

is the way that Jesus makes this same claim about himself.

**"Come, follow me,"** he says.

But he says more than that.

Luke 14:26--“**If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother,  
his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—  
yes, even his own life—  
he cannot be my disciple.**”

You talk about exclusive devotion!

But isn't there at least an echo of such a demand in any marriage proposal?

When a man and a woman agree to marry,  
aren't they agreeing to make the other

the pre-eminent person in their life?

Aren't they promising to set aside parents, brothers and sisters,

and all their other friends,

and to devote themselves first and foremost to the other?

Aren't they giving up sole ownership of all that they own

and sharing all that they have with each other?

Those are incredible commitments--

but that's what marriage means, doesn't it?--

No other lovers on the side,

no secret bank accounts,

no higher human loyalties—none.

Marriage creates a new union—

a new personal identity for all those who enter into it.

That's what marriage means—at least it ought to.

And throughout the Bible, both in the Old Testament and the New,

our relationship with the Lord is compared to a marriage.

And the Lord is described as a jealous God—

one who rightly demands the exclusive loyalty of his spouse.

It can't work any other way.

This is what it means to put your faith in the Lord—

it requires an exclusive loyalty.

None of this “believing everything just a little bit.”

As with marriage, you've got to go all in.

No casual cohabiting is allowed.

Our God demands a public pledge of commitment--

a commitment to an exclusive, unconditional, life-long, loyal love.

That's the form that a relationship with God must take.

You can have a half-hearted, semi-committed relationship with a pagan god, perhaps,

but not with Yahweh, the Lord-- the God of the Bible,

not with the God who created the heaven and earth,

the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,

not with the God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ.

It's just not possible.

He is a jealous God;

He will tolerate no rivals—

you shall have no other gods before him.

There is simply no other way to relate to this God.

So get off the fence.

Quick wavering between two opinions.

**If the LORD is God, and he is,  
then you must follow him.**

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But be warned—

there is a consequence if you don't.

That's where this passage ends, doesn't it—

v. 40--“*The people seized [all the prophets of Baal]  
and Elijah had them brought down to the Kishon Valley  
and had them slaughtered there.*”

You may have thought I was just going to let that bit slide, without comment—

it's too violent, and maybe a little embarrassing.

I mean, what kind of God would sanction such bloodshed—

the slaughter of the 450 prophets of Baal?

Surely, Elijah just got carried away—

surely, this was not God's doing.

Really?

Why would you say that?

Didn't we read in chap. 16,

that in leading the people to turn away from him to worship Baal,

King Ahab “**did more to arouse the anger of the LORD, the God of Israel,  
than did all the kings of Israel before him**” (16:33).

The Lord is angry;  
the Lord was jealous for the devotion of his people,  
and these prophets of Baal were leading them astray,  
seducing them with their sensuous forms of worship.  
He had a right to be angry.

And in executing God's judgment,  
wasn't Elijah just obeying the law of Moses—  
false prophets were to be put to death.

Listen to Dt. 13--"If your very own brother, or your son or daughter,  
or the wife you love, or your closest friend secretly entices you, saying,  
"Let us go and worship other gods" (. . . )  
do not yield to them or listen to them.  
Show them no pity. Do not spare them or shield them.  
You must certainly put them to death" (Dt. 13:6-9).

You see, Israel's very existence as a nation  
was contingent on their loyalty to the LORD.  
False prophets were terrorists, threatening their national security.  
They could not be tolerated. /

Now, let me make myself very clear—  
No nation now stands in the same relation to God  
as did Israel in the Old Testament—  
certainly not America and not even the secular state of Israel today.

King Jesus has now come,  
and today is the day of salvation.

When Jesus' disciples were rejected by a Samaritan village  
they asked, "**Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven  
to destroy them?**"  
and Jesus rebuked them (Luke 9:52-55).

The Lord is now patient with human rebellion,  
but that patience will not last forever.  
As Paul preached to the Athenians,  
The Lord "**now commands all people everywhere to repent.**  
**For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice  
by the man he has appointed.**  
**He has given proof of this to everyone  
by raising him from the dead**" (Acts 17:30,31).

**"he will judge the world with justice"**

These judgments of God in the Old Testament—  
like this slaughter of the prophets of Baal—  
they seem so harsh to us.  
But that's only because they occur in this life,  
while the judgment that Jesus so often speaks of  
occurs in the life to come.

But make no mistake, that judgment is even more harsh  
than anything you see in the Old Testament.

To the religious hypocrites Jesus declared,  
**"You snakes! You brood of vipers!**

**How will you escape being condemned to hell?" (Matt. 23:33).**

Jesus said that those rejected as subjects of the kingdom,

**"will be thrown outside, into the darkness,**

**where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth"**

(Matt. 8:12; cf. 13:42,50; 22:13; 25:30).

Stressing the seriousness of sin, Jesus urged,

**"If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off.**

**It is better for you to enter life maimed**

**than with two hands to go into hell,**

**where the fire never goes out" (Mark 9:43; cf. Matt. 18:8),**

That's a place where **"their worm does not die,**

**and the fire is not quenched,"** he says (Mark 9:48).

This is Jesus speaking.

Jesus spoke in stark terms of the two ways set before every human being.

**"Enter through the narrow gate,"** he said.

**"For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction,**

**and many enter through it.**

**But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life,**

**and only a few find it" (Matt. 7:13-14).**

For **"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, . . .**

**he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. . . .**

**and he will separate the people one from another**

**as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.**

**He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left" (Matt. 25:31-33).**

with those on the left **"going away to eternal punishment,**

**but the righteous to eternal life" (Matt. 25:46).**

According to Jesus, one is either on a road to life or on a road to death,  
one is either among the sheep or among the goats,  
one is either a believer or an unbeliever—  
there is no middle ground.

It's the truth—

**the LORD demands exclusive devotion**

**and he judges those who reject him.**

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But there's one more message from this passage that we must take to heart—

and this is one that we might miss.

And it is this: **The LORD is gracious,**

**and he acts to turn our hearts toward him.**

First, look at where our passage begins--

v. 1—"the word of the LORD came to Elijah:

**"Go and present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the land."**

All the action of this chapter is initiated by the Lord himself.

Years before, Solomon had said that the Lord would only give rain to a sinful Israel  
if they acknowledged him and repented (1King 8:35,36).

So the Lord was sending Elijah to elicit repentance from the people  
so that he could once again send rain.

Then look at the way Elijah sets up his altar-

v. 30—"he repaired [literally, "he healed"] the altar of the LORD,

**which had been torn down.”**

This restoration, this “healing,” is a picture of what the Lord was doing in Israel.

This was an “**altar of the LORD**”—the phrase is given twice.

The mention of the twelve stones

again reinforces the notion that this is a restoration of Israel.

And then, notice how this event is described—

it is a “**sacrifice**” (v. 36),

and the water is said to be poured “**on the offering**” (v. 33)—

the word used there is used of the burnt offering

which in Leviticus is used as an atonement for sin.

Elijah was preparing for more than just a “fireworks display”

but for a real sacrifice.<sup>10</sup>

And in v. 38 we read—“**Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice,**”

This display of holy fire not only stopped the prophets of Baal in their tracks.

It also turned the beast on the altar into a “burnt offering”—

No one “offered up” this offering

The people added nothing to it;

in fact, what they added—

twelve buckets of water—was like their own sin—

it only made things worse.

This offering was the Lord’s doing—

Elijah had done all this at the Lord’s command.

<sup>10</sup> So Woodhouse.

It was the Lord himself who turned it into a burnt offering.

“The Lord himself was making atonement for the sins of his people!”<sup>11</sup>

And the purpose of this demonstration

according to Elijah’s prayer in v. 37

was that the people would know that the Lord is God

and that he was **“turning their hearts back again.”**

All of this is the Lord’s gracious work in providing a sacrifice to atone for their sin

and to act in power to turn their hearts back to him.

And it accomplished its goal—

**“When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried,**

**“The LORD—he is God!**

**The LORD—he is God!”**

And they decisively rejected the prophets of Baal.

Here the Lord shows himself to be holy and gracious at the same time. /

And isn’t that exactly what we see on another mount—

the mount of Calvary.

Where the Lord, in his grace and mercy, provides the sacrifice

and in his wrath consumes his own Son in death

to atone for our sin.

There, he acts on the cross to turn our hearts back to him.

What other God could act with such love and grace? /

<sup>11</sup> So Woodhouse.

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The Lord is God

and there is no other.

The LORD demands exclusive devotion

and judges those who reject him.

And the LORD is gracious,

and acts to turn our hearts toward him.

What more could he do than for you he has done,

to offer himself in the form of his Son.

“How long will you waver between two opinions?

If the LORD is God, follow him;

but if Baal is God, follow him.”

Which will it be?

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Prayer—

Closing Song: #484 *Who Is on the Lord's Side?* vv. 1,3 4

Benediction:

1Tim. 6:15,16 to God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords,  
who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light,  
whom no one has seen or can see--  
to him be honor and might forever. Amen.

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Speaking Truth to Power:

The Prophet Elijah, #2

Jan. 19, 2020

## Elijah and the Prophets of Baal” (1 Kings 18)

In a “battle of the gods,” Elijah prays and the LORD displays his presence and his power. It is no contest. The LORD is God, and we must all bow before him.

### I. The Story:

- The Characters (vv. 3-16)
- The Confrontation (vv. 17-20)
- The Contest (vv. 21-38)
- The Response (vv. 39-40)

### II. The God who must be worshipped:

A. The LORD is God,  
and there is no other.

*“The god who answers by fire—he is God.” (v. 24)*

B. The LORD demands exclusive devotion  
and judges those who reject him.

*“If the LORD is God, follow him;  
but if Baal is God, follow him.” (v. 21)*

*“Elijah had [the prophets of Baal]  
brought down to the Kishon Valley  
and slaughtered there.” (v. 40)*

C. The LORD is gracious,  
and acts to turn our hearts toward him.

*“Answer me, LORD, answer me,  
so these people will know that you, LORD, are God,  
and that you are turning their hearts back again.” (v. 37)*

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Sermon Response:

## **“Elijah and the Prophets of Baal”**

**(1 Kings 18)**

- “When people quit believing in God, they don’t believe in nothing; they believe in anything” (G. K. Chesterton). Do you find that to be true? Why would that be so?
- What do you make of Obadiah? Approve or disapprove? Like Obadiah, have you ever had to serve an “ungodly” boss? How did you handle it?
- Can you think of a time when you did something that you were afraid to do, but you did it anyway, because it was the right thing to do? What helped you do it?
- What gods of our culture seem most attractive to you? What do they promise?
- Why must the worship of the LORD be exclusive? Why can’t we worship multiple gods?
- Why are so many people offended by the slaughter of the 450 prophets of Baal? Why is the biblical writer not offended?
- Have you accepted the challenge that Elijah presents here: “If the LORD is God, follow him”? What would “following him” look like in your life?

- How does this story show us the grace of God? How does this story point us to Jesus?
- Take some time praying about the lessons of this passage and praise the God it presents.