

1 Kings 16

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 09 May 2010

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] I wonder if you were one of the undecided voters who approached Thursday morning, or maybe Thursday afternoon, or perhaps even Thursday evening, unclear as how you would cast your vote. You were perhaps wavering between one or other of the alternatives that were set before you. I imagine that most of you did finally bite the bullet and mark your X, and I trust you chose well. Life is about choices. A bad choice can have disastrous consequences, and a good choice can set your life in the right direction. This morning, I want to consider a general election in Israel nearly 3,000 years ago where the people had to make a choice. A choice was set out before them, and they had to choose where they would mark their X. We have read the passage that presents to us the occasion, a passage no doubt very familiar to many of us. And I want to focus our attention this morning on the question that is posed by Elijah, or rather the challenge that is posed by Elijah to the people. We read that in verse 21 of chapter 18 of 1 Kings,

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. A question and a challenge that required a response.

The people had to choose who was to be their God, and there were two names on the ballot paper, the Lord and Baal. And there is much to explore in Elijah's question and challenge, like any good referendum question, because it is, in a sense, a referendum question.

It is carefully and precisely constructed, and yet also it is brimming with passion and urgency.

But before we do consider and apply the question to our own circumstances, we need to very briefly explain the historical context of the occasion before us. In 931 B.C., following the death of Solomon, Israel was split in two, the northern kingdom under Jeroboam and the southern kingdom under Rehoboam.

[3 : 1 4] Now, the occasion that we are considering is some 60 years later. In the northern kingdom, five kings have come and gone.

And we are in the year, or rather in the year 874 B.C., Ahab becomes king of the northern kingdom, better known as Israel.

Now, Ahab inherited a stable and relatively prosperous northern kingdom, thanks in good measure to the solid political foundations laid by his father, Omri.

Now, religiously, the northern kingdom was a mess. It had been from the time of Jeroboam, and each succeeding king was often worse than the one before. But economically, politically, it was in a relatively healthy state. And so, Ahab had the good fortune, as it were, of inheriting such a situation.

And Ahab himself, according to the measures that you wish to use, could be described as a successful king. He certainly presided over a prosperous chapter in Israel's history, with growing international presence and influence.

[4 : 37] That influence, that international influence, was greatly enhanced by his marriage to Jezebel. And in marrying Jezebel from Sidon, there was cemented a strategic, though very unholy, alliance with Tyre and Sidon, and all the consequent commercial advantages that would be gained from an alliance with these very prosperous cities.

Under the influence of Jezebel, though it would be wrong to lay all the burden of blame on Jezebel, for this was an evil that was already very much in the fabric of the northern kingdom, but certainly under the influence of Jezebel, the worship of Baal and Asherah, the worship of these false gods, these idols, that had been tolerated by previous kings, and sadly practiced by previous kings alongside the worship of Yahweh, was now formally granted the preeminent place in the spiritual life of the kingdom.

Baal and Asherah had now formally, as it were, displaced the living and true God. Well, fourteen years into his reign, all seemingly going very well, economically prosperous, growing influence and prestige in the international community.

But fourteen years into this reign, a strange and stern figure appears on the horizon, and it is the prophet Elijah. The prophet Elijah, a bearer of bad news. He informs the king that there would be, as an act of judgment from God, a drought that would afflict the kingdom. And so, the prosperity of the kingdom is threatened, and there follow three long years of drought.

And in the drought's wake, there is, of course, recession, economic crisis, and famine. And we're told something of that in the chapter that we have read. But then, following these three years of drought, news begins to filter that the prophet of doom, Elijah, has spoken of an end to the drought. And the people gather at Mount Carmel. I wonder if we could imagine, in some measure, the expectation of the people as they gather there at Mount Carmel. They have been called to hear what the prophet would say.

[7 : 36] They have been told that the king will be there and that the prophets of Baal will be there. This is a significant moment in the life of the nation. And so, they gather with great expectation.

We can picture the scene as the king in all his splendor arrives, with all the fanfare that would surround his arrival. We can imagine the hundreds of prophets of Baal and Asherah taking their place in all their majesty and splendor. It would have been a very impressive sight. And then, Elijah arrives, a far less impressive sight. But what will he do? What will the prophet of the Lord do? Will he call down rain from heaven? Will he bring a message of hope in the midst of the crisis that the nation is living? Will he give the people the message they want to hear? Rather, he comes to the people with this question. He comes to the people and addresses them in the manner that we have already noted.

How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him. But if Baal is God, follow him. And what can we say of this ballot paper? What can we say of this referendum question, this choice to be made? And as we do consider the question, let us be very clear that this self-same question is today being directed to you. You are being directed this question this morning. You cannot sit on the sidelines as an interested observer and consider how others answer the question, for the question is being addressed to you. In God's providence he has brought you here this morning that you might be faced with this question. Well, we want to think and consider a few questions concerning the question.

To whom is the question posed? Who are that original electorate who have to decide? Who are the candidates that are placed before them? What does the choice that they have to make involve? What is the dilemma that they face and that is implicit in the very manner in which Elijah poses his question?

And what is the answer given? What is the result of this referendum? How do the voters respond to the challenge that is set before them? Well, let's consider these questions each in turn.

[10 : 30] To whom is the question posed? Who are the electorate? Who are the people who have to mark their acts? Well, they are the people of Israel. They are God's chosen people, those certainly that formed the northern kingdom of this divided kingdom. They are those who would have identified themselves in some measure with the God of Israel. They are the ones who must respond. The question is not addressed to the pagan nations. The question is not addressed to the followers of other gods. The question is addressed to the people of Israel. Who would be the equivalent electorate today? Well, church folk, those who call themselves Christians, indeed those who are Christians, those who have been perhaps baptized in the church, those with some or considerable sympathy and interest in the Christian faith. And I suspect, without knowing all who are gathered here this morning, that probably covers just about everybody here today.

And notice that though the question posed by Elijah implies very clearly severe criticism of the audience, severe criticism of those who must respond, though it is very uncomfortable in that regard, it is also a very blessed thing to be part of the audience to whom the question is addressed.

Now, why do I say that? Well, to simply emphasize what I just mentioned a moment ago, that the question is not addressed to all. The question is not addressed to the prophets of Baal. It's not addressed to the prophets of Asherah, and I suspect it's not addressed to King Ahab, who had sold out lock, stock, and barrel to this false religion and these false idols. It is addressed to the people. And though uncomfortable and though accusing, it is a blessed thing that the question is addressed to them, for it provides them with an opportunity.

It provides them with an opportunity. And that remains true today. Perhaps there are those gathered here this morning who suspect that this question is intended to accuse you, is intended to make you feel uncomfortable, is being lobbed in your direction. And perhaps this question does justifiably accuse you.

Well, so be it. But be assured that it is a blessed thing that the question is being addressed to you, for it provides you with an opportunity.

[13 : 32] But who are the candidates? Whom must the people choose between? Well, they are clearly identified by Elijah, the Lord, and Baal. Clearly identified in the question we're considering, but not visibly present before those who are required to vote. Rather, what the people can see are those who represent these two candidates. The representative of the Lord is present in the person of Elijah.

The representative of Baal is there in the person of his prophets. And if we want to judge the candidates on the basis of the candidates on the basis of the appearance of those who represent them, well, who is the most impressive? A very simple question, really, to answer. You see, in the one corner you have Elijah, the one accused by Ahab of being the troubler of Israel. With Elijah, there is no entourage, no fanfare, no visible evidence of wealth, of power, of prestige. And in the other corner, you have King Ahab and his hundreds of prophets. You could find no more eloquent, visible display of wealth and power and prestige. You have one, in the opinion of many, one miserable git in one corner, and close on one thousand of the movers and shakers, the beautiful people, the elite of Israel, in the other. Whose God would appear more powerful, more worthy of the people's vote?

But let's go beyond the appearances. Let's go beyond those who represent the candidates in this election and consider the gods themselves. Elijah says, if the Lord be God, the Lord, Yahweh, the one who revealed himself to Moses in this way as the great I Am, the living and true God, the eternal and unchanging God, the all-powerful Creator of the heavens and the earth, the Lord.

He is one of those who is presented as an alternative to be chosen. But then also Baal. If Baal be God, Baal is an imposter, and yet in many ways so very attractive he is, and certainly has been in the recent history of the people of Israel who are gathered there, he has been the popular choice.

He is a far less demanding God, a far less severe God, a much more tolerant God. He's a fun God, an accommodating God, a malleable and acquiescent God, a God who can be fashioned after our own likeness and after our own prejudices and preferences. His name is also on the ballot paper.

[16 : 33] Who will they choose? Who will you choose? What is the choice before you this morning? Are there today different candidates? No, they remain the same. They remain the same.

On the one hand, you have the Lord, the same Lord who is presented to the people of Israel by Elijah, the eternal God, the unchanging God, and yet the Lord who has become visible in the person of Jesus Christ, the Lord who came into this world and died a sinner's death in your place and rose again, triumphant from the grave. This is the one who is presented before you today. The Lord, he is God.

Follow him. Jesus of Nazareth is Lord. Jesus is Yahweh. His name is on the ballot paper. But today also, Baal finds himself there as an alternative. And some might say, you know, surely today we don't believe in such gods. We are much too sophisticated to follow the likes of Baal. But Baal is anybody or anything that takes the place in your life that Jesus Christ rightfully deserves. That may be yourself, your own opinions or agenda, your stubborn refusal to hand over the reins of your life to King Jesus. It may be your job, your career, the pursuit of money or pleasure or popularity. It can be any of these things and many other things. Anything that takes the place of prominence and authority that is due to King Jesus is Baal for you. And Elijah is very clear.

It is one or the other. It is the Lord or Baal. You can't choose both. Imagine if on Thursday in your uncertainty you had gone in to mark the ballot paper and had marked two options. What is the outcome of having two X's on the ballot paper? Well, you know what it is. It's a spoiled ballot paper. It is no choice at all. That is not an option. One choice. And so here with this question before you, it is one or the other. It is the Lord or Baal. You can't have both. You have to choose. Will you choose the Lord?

Will you follow Jesus? Or will you choose the world with all its glitter? The gods of the world who, as we've read, as we've read the passage, you can cry to till the cows come home, and they don't hear you, and they don't answer you, and they're not interested in you? Who will you choose?

[19 : 27] What does the choice involve? What does this choice involve? What did it involve for the people of Israel on this occasion? You see, it wasn't simply a question of philosophy or religion. Who is the true God? What religion shall I choose? Neither was it a popularity contest. Who do I prefer?

The Lord or Baal? Who is more attractive to me? No, rather the choice that was set before them was a choice with consequences. That's what I am seeking to get at by asking, what does the choice involve? It was a choice with consequences. You see, a coherent choice would be a life-changing choice, for it involves following. It involves following. Elijah is very clear. How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him. Elijah doesn't just say, if the Lord is God, recognize that, declare that. No, if the Lord is God, follow him. And if Baal is God, will follow him. This choice had life-changing consequences. Now, on Thursday, you could go and mark your choice. You could leave the polling station and get on with your life as before. Very little consequences for yourself.

Maybe even as you went in, wavering between one or other, but you leave the polling station and life carries on pretty much as before. But not with this choice. For in this choice, you have to choose and follow. And this business of following. Does this business of following not remind us of somebody who came a thousand years later? The Lord Jesus, who addressed those who were surrounding him then and addresses us this morning, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. Follow me. What does following Jesus involve? Well, it involves, in the first place, recognizing your need of Jesus, recognizing that you are a sinner in need of a Savior.

It involves identifying with Jesus. One who follows is one who identifies with. One who is close to. One who nails his colors to the Mass and says, I am with him. I am following him.

It involves listening to Jesus. It involves obeying Jesus every single day and in every single circumstance. And so, I ask you this morning, are you following Jesus? Because if you are not following Jesus, then you have not chosen Jesus. Because the choice that we are presented with here is a choice that requires that you follow the one you choose. What is the dilemma before those who had to respond to this question, to this challenge? There clearly was a dilemma, and it's implicit. Very clearly, we can feel the sense of it in the question. How long will you waver between two opinions?

[22 : 51] This question, though it is being very clearly presented to the people on this occasion, Elijah is eloquently verbalizing the question. It's very clear that the question is not a new question.

It is a question that has been before them for some time. It is a question that in some measure they have been considering. How long? How long will you waver between two opinions? You see, the people are struggling to choose. They're conscious that there are indeed these competing deities. There are indeed these gods that are presented to them. There is Elijah presenting to them the god of their forefathers, and there is Ahab presenting this new god. And they have to choose, and they're struggling to choose. They're undecided voters.

They're wavering. And the verb used here by Elijah is a very vivid one. Wavering or limping between two opinions, tottering between two opinions, one day with one and one day with the other. They just can't make their mind up. The people are in a quandary. Many of them, I'm sure, deep down know that the Lord is God is God. But the king, King Ahab, has chosen a different God. And they fear the consequences of choosing the Lord. They fear the consequences of following the Lord.

They don't want to suffer being on the wrong side of the king. They don't want to be that small, despised minority. And so they try and fashion a coalition faith. A coalition faith. They try to find room in their affections and loyalties for the Lord and for Baal. But how can they follow both?

How can they walk in opposite directions at the same time? Is that possible? Is it possible to walk in the opposite direction at the same time? Does anybody want to try it this morning? See if you can do it. Walk in the opposite direction at the same time. It is impossible. You can't do that.

[25 : 05] The Lord is going in one direction and Baal is going in the other direction. And you have to follow one. You can't follow them both. And so they're in this quandary. Who will we follow? One day they follow one. The other day they follow the other. And they're in this... They appear drunk as they stumble from one to the other. They totter and stumble and waver. What about you? What about you? Perhaps you might very sincerely say, I have no intention or desire to reject Jesus Christ. I recognize that what the Bible says concerning Jesus is true. I have been taught it from my earliest years, and I recognize that this gospel is true. And that is a good thing. And yet, do you remain unwilling to embrace this Jesus as your Lord and your Savior? Do you remain as yet unwilling to follow Him all the days of your life and in every circumstance of your life? You're not against Him, and yet you're not unreservedly for

Him in your own opinion. Still drawn by the attractions of the world, still bowing down to the imposter gods of our generation, trying to accommodate loyalty to the Lord with friendship with the world.

Is such a stance tenable? Well, don't take it from me. Take it from Jesus Himself. He who is not with me is against me. He who is against me is against me. Or listen to even more solemn words from King Jesus.

You are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot. But because you are lukewarm and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.

It is a very important matter for you this morning to determine whether these words are directed to you, whether they apply to your situation. That is for you to determine.

[27 : 25] You see, this question posed by Elijah, how long will you waver between two opinions? It's essentially the same question posed by Moses to a previous generation. Who is on the Lord's side?

And it remains as relevant and as current and as contemporary and as urgent and as pressing this morning? Who is on the Lord's side? How long will you waver between two opinions?

What is the result of this challenge that is laid before them by Elijah? How do the people respond to this question, to this challenge? Well, we're given the answer to that question at the close of verse 21, and it is a solemn conclusion, or a solemn answer. We read, But the people said nothing. But the people said nothing. Why did they say nothing? Why were they silent?

Was it shame? Did they recognize that Elijah was right, that they were wrong, that they had been disloyal, that they had been unfaithful? Were they ashamed of the stand that they had taken, or the failure to take a stand? Were they afraid?

Were they desirous of saying, yes, the Lord is God, but there was King Ahab and the prophets of Baal? They were all looking and listening. Who will answer the right way, the wrong way?

[29 : 04] Were they afraid? We don't know. Were some of them looking around to see how others responded? Might there have been those in that great company who were wanting to say, yes, Elijah, the Lord is God, but they looked around, and nobody else was saying anything?

And I'm not going to be the only one. I'll wait for others to answer, and I'll join in. You see, there may be no bandwagon for you to jump on. This is a question that is addressed to you, never mind how others respond to the question. But the people said nothing.

What about you? What do you say? Who will you choose? Who will you follow? Will you choose Jesus Christ? Will you follow Jesus?

Surely there is no one better to follow. Surely, as you compare Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, with the tawdry imitations that our world offers. Surely you will choose Jesus. Surely you will close in with Jesus. But when will you decide? On Thursday, some waited to the very last moment to vote.

Much has been made of this. And the door of the polling station was slammed shut in their very face, so near, and yet so far. You see, returning officers, in explaining their actions, gave this explanation.

[30 : 33] They told us the law dictates that 10 p.m. and not a minute later, the doors were to be closed. Well, on a much more solemn note, God has ordained a time when the door of opportunity will close for you, you who waver, you who limp along between two opinions, you who are tottering about in your life and not closing in with Jesus. The door of opportunity will close, be that when you die or when the Lord returns. And will that day catch you unaware, still wavering, still undecided, still waiting for a more opportune moment. On Thursday, why did the people wait? We're told that students arrived at quarter to ten. Some of them fairly suggested they'd only just gotten up. But they had different reasons for arriving so late. They had different reasons for risking it, as it were. Some said they were too busy.

How many are too busy to close in with Jesus? You have other things to attend to, other matters to deal with. The time will come, but not now. Others were doing other things. Others had approached the polling station, had seen the crowds, and said, I'll come back later. I wonder how many have dealt with Jesus in that way. You've come close on different occasions. You've approached Him on different occasions. You were so close to putting your trust in Jesus, but you said, no, I'll come back later.

Not just yet. What if that opportunity never presents itself again? How long will you waver?

Close in with Jesus. Recognize your need of a Savior, and recognize in Jesus the only and perfect Savior, the one willing today to save you, to forgive you, to receive you.

And do so today, before the door finally does a close. Let us pray.