

1 Kings 18:16-46

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[0 : 0 0] And so to 1 Kings 18 verses 16 to 20 to 39. You're probably familiar with the Chinese proverb, May you not live in interesting times.

And in recent times, times have indeed become interesting for Christians in this country. In Edinburgh University, in Exeter, in Birmingham and in other places, Christian unions have been attacked, have been shut down in some places, have been not allowed to use university premises because they've fallen foul of political correctness.

Because they have borne witness to the Lord Jesus Christ as the only saviour of the world and to the gospel as the only power of God to salvation.

We've had the incident of the woman on British Airlines being disciplined for wearing a cross. And all these kind of things are showing us that the comfortable, easy coexistence of Christianity and the state that most of us have enjoyed for many years, maybe breaking up.

A reminder that as Christians, we are always living in a difficult and dangerous world. And so we turn to the story of Elijah when these issues are very, very sharply dramatised.

[1 : 3 0] The first thing I want to say is that, first of all, this is a remarkably exciting story. It's a well-told story full of suspense. I mean, the way, for example, we have the frantic, dervish-like behaviour of Baal's prophets, followed by no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.

It's very vivid dramatising of what's happening. Very graphic detail and then the dramatic climax as the fire falls from heaven. Now, Elijah essentially is saying there is only one God.

This is a story about who God is. What do we mean when we say we believe in God? Because if we say the words we believe in God, that can mean anything. It depends on the content we give to the word God.

And the situation is a very, very bad time in the history of Israel. King Ahab, a very vigorous and effective king in many ways, supported by his Phoenician wife Jezebel, were determined to establish a religion other than the faith that had been given to Moses and which had been passed down.

He wanted to turn people away to the worship of Baal, and we'll come in a moment or two to what that means, and a drought is sent. And this is very relevant.

[2 : 5 6] We live in a kind of drought in the parched spiritual landscape of Britain. It's good to see many people out at church today, particularly many younger people, but we know very well that in Britain, in the Western world, the church is not on the ascendant.

We are not living in a time of great spiritual revival. We're living in a time when it's difficult. And that's why it's so important for us to turn to the word of God. I want to say three things about this passage we've read.

Let me say what they are in case there are innumerable sub-points. My wife always tells me I simply say there are three points in order to lull people into security, and there's actually about a hundred under each of the three.

Now you can judge for yourselves. I'll tell you what the three things are I'm going to say, so that when we come to the end of the second, you can begin to take heart. Your salvation will be nearer than when you believed.

First of all, we have the choice that is to be made. That's the first thing I want to talk about, the choice that is to be made. Secondly, the responses to that choice.

[4 : 05] And thirdly, God's answer. So let's look at the first then, the choice that is to be made. Very starkly put in 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. Now the first question is, who or what is Baal?

And you'll notice in verse 18, Elijah accuses Ahab of having abandoned the Lord's command and followed the Baals, plural. Now Baal is simply a word meaning Lord or Master.

And it's applied to a variety of gods, the Baalim. And it's the name for many, many different gods. You see, the heart of the pagan, in a sense, is like a cake cut up into many slices.

Many different gods are responsible. There is the weather god, who sends the rain and the sun. There is the war god to whom you pray when you go into battle. There is the love god or goddess to whom you pray about your relationships and so on.

[5 : 22] And of course, if you have a religion like that, then it's very convenient because you can play them off against each other. Your heart is not fixed on one spot. And that's the relevance of Israel's confession of faith that ancient Israel had.

When the pious Jew tumbled out of bed in the morning, the first words would be, Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one Lord. Now that sounds really just like a fairly dry theological statement, but think about it for a minute.

If when you get up and out of bed in the morning, you say, The Lord our God is one Lord. If you say, Jesus is Lord, which is what believing in the gospel means, then you are saying, There is no part of my life that is not under the control of that God.

When I go to work, when I go to study tomorrow, whatever I do, that God is going to be there just as much as he is here, in my relationships, in my leisure activities, in everything I do, in everything I am, there is only one God.

He's the God of my holidays as well as the God of my work. He is the God to whom I owe single-minded allegiance. And there were two things that marked Bialism.

[6 : 42] One was the sense of the other, of the supernatural. Kind of feeling you get looking up at the heavens on a moonlit night. Kind of feeling you get as you walk along by the shore and listen to the song of the seabirds.

Feeling you might get in some vast building, or in a woodland, or something like that. The sense of the other, the sense of the supernatural. But on the other hand, there is also what you might call hedonism.

Bial worship had no Ten Commandments. Bial worship made no inconvenient moral demands. And of course, if you've got these two things in the same package, it's always going to be very popular.

If you've got, if you've got on the one hand, something that appeals to our sense of something beyond ourself, and on the other hand, something that appeals to our desire to enjoy ourselves, that's always going to be a very popular package, and is going to be accepted.

And the problem is, of course, that these are not wrong in themselves. Both are God-given. After all, Ecclesiastes tells us that God has put eternity in our hearts.

[7 : 57] We are always seeking something beyond. And similarly, joy is not wrong. It is a God-given gift.

It's not a sin to be happy. Although sometimes we do give that impression. True enjoyment and the sense of the other are both God-given. And as we present the gospel in our world, valism really is a kind of post-modern religion.

You've got your truth. I've got my truth. If this makes you feel good, that's fine. If this makes me feel good, so on. When we share the gospel, we've got to remember that's the kind of world that we are preaching to.

That's the kind of world that we are witnessing in. And what does God do in this situation? How does he bring this choice to people? And what he does is he sends a prophet.

And what is a prophet? Now, if you read the Old Testament, you'll find that often the word prophet is used in a derogatory sense.

[9 : 04] Jeremiah, for example, the great prophet much later on, uses the word prophet many, many times in his book. It's almost always in a bad sense. Amos famously said, I am not a prophet.

In fact, Elijah isn't very often called a prophet. He and his disciple, Elisha, tend to be called man of God. And that's very significant. Because what that means is this, that they are coming with the message of Moses.

The man of God in the Old Testament is Moses. There is no authority in the Old Testament. He's greater than or bypasses Moses. And God raises up the prophets when the words of Moses are being rejected.

So God sends this Moses-like figure into his people. And that's very much the sign of a true prophet. Is he loyal to the words of Scripture?

Does he take the ancient words of Scripture and apply them in a living way to the contemporary situation? Because that's so important. Not just does he say the words of Scripture.

[10 : 11] That could just be a history lesson, an antiquities lesson, a kind of words from the past. Is that words from the past coming into the present? That's what Elijah is about.

Jesus said there are two signs of a true pastor, a true shepherd, a true preacher. One, that he will feed the sheep. That's so important. But also that he will fight the wolf.

Elijah here is fighting the wolf. And there are many wolves in our society. There is pluralism. There is the wholesale attack on Christian standards. And the wholesale, let's say, this political correctness that will not, that will resent bitterly the life-giving gospel being preached.

Indeed, in Sweden and in Australia, some pastors have been prosecuted for preaching the gospel. So that's the choice we have to make. Do we believe in a God whose claims are absolute? Do we believe in a God who demands our allegiance and the allegiance of others?

That brings us on to the second main point, which is the responses. And there are really four of these. You see why I gave the points at the beginning. If I had said there were three points and got to the second and said there were four, you would have been totally confused.

[11 : 28] Anyway, there are four responses. First of all, the response of Ahab. Ahab. And Ahab, king of Israel, is essentially a politician.

Verse 17. When he saw Elijah, he said to him, Is that you, you troubler of Israel? The one thing you must never do if you're talking to Ahab is rock the boat.

You must do the right thing. You must tow the party line. You must always say what you're expected to say. Is that you, you troubler of Israel?

Now, the problem with people like Ahab is that they, while not being particularly wicked themselves, allow other wicked people to flourish.

The second response is in verse 21. It's not much of a response. The end of verse 21. This is the response of the people. That's the people of Israel, gathered there.

[12 : 32] The people said nothing. In other words, they had no opinion one way or the other. And as I think it was, I think it was Burke who said, all it needs for evil to succeed is for good people to do nothing.

In other words, you don't have actively to be evil. If you simply allow it to happen, simply say nothing. There's so much harm is done in this. For example, the church in Nazi Germany, leaving it to a few brave voices like Bonhoeffer, that sort of thing.

It's not good, you know, that in the great disputes today that only a few voices are raised. We must, as Christians, be more proactive in our standing for the gospel, not simply leaving it to a few bold voices to write letters to the newspapers, to appear on the media, and so on.

Now, what is at stake here is very clear in verse 21 as well. How long will you waver between two opinions? Rather clearer in Hebrew than in English because in verse 21, the word for waver or hobble is exactly the same word as in verse 26.

The priests of Baal danced, or the priests of Baal danced around the altar. Now, I think the author is making a very important point. These guys who were wavering, who were hobbling, who were on neither one side nor the other, were actually on the wrong side.

[14 : 05] They were on the side of Baal himself. By failing to make the choice for the Lord, they were declaring for Baal. That's why I think there is so much defeatism today.

So what so often, see, part of the reason I think many people find church very dull, very boring, very unrelated to their lives, is because they do not actually believe the Lord your God is one Lord.

They don't actually believe that the God whom you meet here is the same God we will meet tomorrow morning, the same God we will meet on Friday afternoon. And when that happens, when, if you like, religion, a word I don't like, let's use it for one for the better, when religion and life become separated, then both of them suffer.

Our church going, our Christianity becomes formal, becomes dull, becomes stale, becomes predictable, becomes boring. It's awful when the gospel is made to be boring, isn't it?

The one thing no one ever said about Elijah, I imagine, was that he was a bore. Can't imagine Ahab saying, he is that old bore, Elijah. Elijah is a troubler. Elijah knows what he means, says what he means, and means what he says.

[15 : 22] So we have the response of Ahab, we have the response of the people, and they are both of a kind. They are both muted, silent, uninspiring.

Then let's look at the response of Baal's prophets, verses 25 and following, this vivid little incident. These are fanatics, these are people who are utterly, utterly devoted to the religion.

Notice what they did. Let's look at verse 28 again. They shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom until the blood flowed.

Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time of the evening sacrifice. Now, if you're up against people who are fanatically devoted to their faith, apathy and keeping quiet is simply no match to this.

This is why this religion has such success in Israel. This is why the great early New Testament churches fell so early, because they had left their first love.

[16 : 33] Now, don't misunderstand this. The text is not saying in order to be committed you have to shout loud, slash yourself with swords and spears and dance around the altar.

That's not what it's saying at all. What it is saying is that those with a strong conviction will always overbear those who don't. Part of our problem with Christianity in our country is we've been so limp, so divided, so unable to take a stand on so many issues.

And notice the literary art of this, as I've said already. There is this frantic shouting. If this were a film, it would be a marvellous film. You'd have loud music playing, you'd have this dancing around the altar, you'd have the blood flowing, and then suddenly the music would stop and we'd come on to, there was no response.

No one answered. No one paid attention. Why did Val not answer? Because Val didn't exist. That is the whole point of this story, surely.

That this God, who was given such frantic worship, such enthusiastic following, just did not exist. My help, says the Samus, is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

[17 : 55] Then we have the response of Elijah. Let's look at that. Elijah is not above a little sarcasm. Verse 27, Elijah goes, shout, loud, surely he's a God.

Perhaps he's deep in thought or busy or travelling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened. We are told in the Psalms that the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth, neither slumbers nor sleeps.

But this apparently is a God who takes time off, has doofy days and so on. And this God is clearly not up to it. But notice what Elijah does as he responds.

First of all, he repairs the altar and he digs a trench. Now it's very important to see what's happening here. Elijah is not God. Elijah cannot bring the fire from heaven.

But Elijah does what he can do. He repairs the altar. Now the broken altar was a sign, of course, of the people's lack of faith. Just as, I mean, it's so sad when you see church buildings that are derelict that are now garages and flats.

[19 : 04] Not that buildings, of course, matter in themselves, but very often the sign of a dead faith in a particular church is the derelict nature of the building, allowing in the place where we worship the kind of things we'd never allow in our own houses.

You know, the kind of person who says, oh, I've got some old damaged crockery and some broken chairs. Do you think the church wants them? This is that kind of attitude. The altar needs to be repaired and the trench needs to be built.

Once again, Elijah is not going to create the water, but he is going to dig the trenches. Interesting, if you study Jesus' miracles, particularly in John's Gospel, you find a similar principle.

The disciples were not able to turn water into wine, but they were able to fill the water pots, to be turned into wine. They could not raise Lazarus, but they could roll the stone away from the grave.

And that's what we need to do as a church. We need to remove hindrances to the work of the Spirit. We need to make straight in the desert a highway for our God. We cannot convert people, but we can bring people into places where they'll hear the Gospel.

[20 : 15] We cannot cause people to grow in grace, but we can remove the hindrances to that. We cannot cause the fire and the rain, but we can prepare to receive it.

And what else does he do? Verse 36, he prays, at the time of the sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed. And notice he prays two things.

He prays to the Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel. He looks back to the past where God had worked spectacularly, speaking of things like the call of Abraham and above all the Exodus event and so on.

And he says, God, you worked in the past. We honour that work in the past. But notice what else he says, let it be known today that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant.

You know what, don't idolise the past because God is not there any longer. Don't idolise a period in history where God moved particularly powerfully.

[21 : 24] Read it, respect it, learn from it. But we must, but don't make a mythical past our trust. After all, the past wasn't all that wonderful, was it?

The past gave us a present. We cannot trust in the God only who worked in the past and in the God who works now. I was born and brought up down the coast in Fife in a little place called St. Monance near St. Andrews and this used to be called the Holy City not because of the sanctity of its inhabitants but because of the number of churches there.

And these churches, most of them were the products of a great revival that swept through the fishing communities back in the 1920s. My grandfather was a young man and associated with the fisherman turned evangelist Jock Troup who preached up and down the fishing communities right down to Lowestoft in the south east of England.

As a result of his preaching many were converted and flourishing churches were planted. by the time I was growing up many of them still existed in that village but many of them had lost the fire.

They were living in the past still singing the same kind of hymns dressing the same way perhaps as they had done in the 1920s and 1930s. The whole thing had become a museum.

[22 : 55] The living faith had gone. They were trusting in the God of the past not in the God who speaks now. God is the living God.

So the response of Elijah is to pray not only to that God of the past but to the God who is now. That brings us on to the third thing which is God's answer.

You notice that Elijah's simple prayer contrasts with the lengthy ballistic ravings. Very short and very simple prayer verses 36 and 37 Answer me O Lord answer me so that people will know that you O Lord of God that you are turning their hearts back again.

See the challenge is who is the Lord? The God Baal is often shown in is often talked about in the ancient text and there are little figurines of him in different museums where he holds a thunderbolt.

He is the God of rain, wind and lightning and yet this God of wind, rain and lightning had neither been able to prevent the drought nor to send the rain that would end it.

[24 : 09] But there are two things I want to say about God's answer and if you turn back to verse 24 remember Elijah says get the sacrifice ready verse 24 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.

That's a very strange thing isn't it? Why should it be the God who answers by fire? Fire wasn't the problem why not the God who answers by water? After all drought was the problem why not say the God who sends rain?

He is the one who will answer. And I think the point that Elijah is making is saying you show that you are the authentic God whom we believe in after all what is fire associated with?

First time we read about fire in scripture is in Genesis 3 when Adam and Eve are expelled from Eden the flaming sword guards the way back to the tree of life the presence of God is symbolized by fire where do we next read about it?

We next read about it when Moses confronts that same God in the bush that burns then that God comes down in fire and smoke and thunder on Mount Sinai and on the day of Pentecost the spirit manifests himself as tongues of fire Elijah says Lord show you are the true God show yourself by fire and you'll may remember John Wesley's great conversion experience when he in Aldersgate in London he said my heart was strangely warmed the thing that transformed him from a merely intellectual believer into the powerful evangelist and teacher he became in a later generation when when the Methodists of that day felt that early Methodism had lost its power they spoke about the spirit of burning and called on him to fall again but there's a problem here isn't there this doesn't always happen indeed it doesn't often happen let me read the verse again and this time I want to miss out two words verse 24 you call on the name of your God and I will call on the name of the Lord the God who answers he is

[26 : 38] God the God who answers that is the point he answered here by fire by spectacular means but he always answers even if he doesn't answer by fire this is a God who listens who speaks who acts this is the foolishness of idolatry very often the Old Testament doesn't so much call idolatry wicked as foolish you've got a God who can't see well that's great when you're up to no good there's not much help if you want guidance though a God who doesn't listen well that's great when you're saying things you'd rather he didn't hear what help is it if you're in trouble and need him a God who doesn't speak great I can do anything I want what if I'm really in a mess and need his guidance we're saying to the children this is not a God you could either say sorry to or thank you or help so you see what Elijah is saying Elijah is saying God you are the only true

God I want you to show you're the only true God but above and beyond that and we'll see that this evening in the next chapter chapter 19 he is the God who answers as we finish this story is pointing beyond itself pointing to something greater this is a great victory for Yahweh the God of Israel this is a great victory over Baal this is a demonstration that this is the Lord who made heaven and earth verse 36 at the time of the sacrifice that is to say the time of the evening sacrifice at the time of the evening sacrifice several centuries after this something else was to happen the son of God was to die on the cross and by his cross and resurrection he was to defeat these enemies once and for all this was a local temporary victory over Baal and over the dark power

Satan himself who stood behind Baal but one day these enemies were going to be met face to face and defeated at the time of the evening sacrifice so this story comes to us then doesn't this is a great challenge a challenge to be Elijah rather than the prevaricators who sit on the fence it also comes with a great encouragement the encouragement is that the victory has already been won by the Lord Jesus Christ the conviction that God will be God and the world will know it let's pray a