

1 Kings 18

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Preacher: Fergus MacDonald

[0 : 0 0] I'd like us now for a few moments to turn back to the passage in the first book of Kings, chapter 18, which extends from page 359 through to 361, and to look particularly at the words of verse 21.

The words of 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. I would like to begin what I want to share with you this evening by inviting you to undertake an imaginative exercise.

I would like you to imagine three things. First of all, that Elijah is alive today. And that Elijah lives today not in Israel, but in Scotland.

That he did not come from Tishbe and Gilead, but he came from, let's say, Durness, in the far northwest of Scotland, near Cape Wrath.

[1 : 2 0] The second thing I would like you to imagine is that King Ahab is not really King Ahab. King Ahab today is the Prime Minister, is Tony Blair.

The third thing I would like you to imagine is that the First Minister of Scotland, Jack McConnell, is visiting Sutherland, and he's doing a walkabout in the streets of Lurg.

When suddenly, Elijah, who hadn't been seen or heard for months, appears and confronts him on the street and tells him to get on the phone immediately, to get the Prime Minister and tell him that Elijah is here.

Elijah demanding that the Prime Minister leave everything he is doing in London, fly by a private jet to Inverness, travel by a police escort to Lurg to meet Elijah.

I think using our imagination in this way helps us to begin to understand the momentous events of this chapter.

[2 : 3 8] It is one of the most dramatic in the entire Bible. I'm sure if there were newspapers in these days, the Samaria Sun, assuming there would have been a newspaper of that name, would have had a front page headline, when Prophet summons King.

According to the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, we read not only that Ahab immediately came as he did, but that he came running.

He came as quickly as he could to meet with Elijah. And when they met, the King Ahab was defiant.

He said, Is that you, you troubler, of Israel. Troubler was a technical term in the Hebrew language.

Ahab was in effect, by using this term, accusing Elijah of a crime against the state, which was worthy of death. It was equivalent of calling Elijah a traitor. This use of the word goes back to Achan, who during the capture of Jericho, pillaged, from among the personal effects of the local inhabitants, a fine Babylonian robe, 200 pieces of silver and a gold bar, that weighed the same as 50 pieces of gold.

[4 : 0 1] Before the assault on Jericho, Joshua, the commander of the people, had made clear to the Israelites that there would be a taboo on all these objects found in the ruins of the city.

The silver and the gold and everything made of bronze and iron, he said, belonged to the Lord and must be put in his treasury. And because of Achan's sin, the whole Israelite army suffered a humiliating defeat in the next battle, which was against a much smaller city, the city of Ai.

And when Achan's treachery was discovered, he was condemned to death and executed. So when Achan comes and accuses Elijah of being a troubler of Israel, he's making a charge of the utmost seriousness.

The modern equivalent would be to accuse a person of treason. But there's a sense in which, in doing so, Ahab played into Elijah's hands, because Elijah immediately throws the accusation back at the king.

And he says, in effect, it is you who are the troublemaker, it is you, O king, who is the traitor in this nation. You and your family have disobeyed the Lord's commands by worshipping Baal.

[5 : 22] And so here, we have the king being accused by the prophet. By deflecting the charge and throwing it back at the king, Elijah ensured that the issue would be settled publicly.

And just as the identity of the troubler in Joshua, chapter 7 was cleared up in public. So Ahab had little alternative but to acquiesce in the prophet's demand.

And he immediately called a national assembly on Mount Carmel to resolve which of them was the real troublemaker. And so, the contest was not simply a contest between the Lord and Baal, which it was above all else, but it was also, in a secondary sense, a contest between the king and the prophet.

So thus the scene is set for a dramatic encounter between the prophet of the Lord and the prophets of Baal. Ahab summoned the key leaders of every locality in the country to appear in Mount Carmel.

Now, this assembly probably took place just one or two days after the meeting between Elijah and Ahab because Israel was a small country and the royal directive could be quickly communicated and responded to.

[6 : 40] Once this assembly had gathered, it was a big assembly with representatives of every community in the nation present. Elijah stood in the front. Elijah still taking the initiative. And then he said to them, no doubt in a voice that all could hear, how long will you waver between two opinions?

If the Lord is God, follow him. But if Baal is God, follow him. And we read that the people said nothing.

How long will you halt or waver between two opinions is a graphic phrase. The Hebrew word that is translated waver, translated halt in the King James Bible means to limp or to hobble.

How long, said Elijah, will you go limping between two opinions? How long will you sit on the fence? How much longer will it be, will it take for you to make up your minds?

how much longer will you try to have things both ways? At first, Elijah's challenge went unanswered.

[7 : 57] We read that the people said nothing. The people were undecided. The future of the nation hung in the balance.

they were not sure whether they would worship the Lord, their own, their traditional saviour, or whether they would worship the Baals of the land of Canaan.

But Elijah doesn't accept silence for a response. He goes on and he presses for a decision. He urges them to realise that they cannot sit in the fence, that they have to make their minds up.

And so he proposes what we today call a trial by ordeal to determine whether it is Baal or the Lord who is God. He proposes, as we have read, that two sacrifices be prepared, one by the prophets of Baal and the other by him.

But in neither case is the wood to be lit. The God who answers by fire, says Elijah, he is God. Now, Baal was reputedly a god of the weather and therefore the god who controlled thunder and lightning.

[9 : 13] According to the word of the Lord through the prophets, the Lord was the creator and sustainer of the weather. Psalm 104, the beginning, in verse 3, envisages him riding the thunderstorm as his chariot.

The winds and lightning bolts of the thunderstorm are in that psalm personified as the agents of the Lord. And so the crucial test would be which deity, Baal or the Lord, would succeed in sending a lightning bolt at precisely the right time and place to ignite the sacrifice.

The narrative vividly recounts the day-long frenzied praying and dancing of the prophets of Baal around their altar. As they tried through imitative and manipulative magic to activate their god Baal.

And on the other side we have the biting irony of Elijah's ridicule at the lack of response. And when finally they give up, either from exhaustion or disillusionment, we find that Elijah himself takes over.

He calls on the people to help him to repair the broken altar of the Lord. He commands them, instructs them to dig a trench around this altar. And he thoroughly soaks the sacrifice with water, which was probably fetched from the nearby Mediterranean.

[10 : 45] And then praying one of the boldest and most urgent prayers in the entire Bible, when he prayed that the Lord would hear his prayer and authenticate his ministry as a true prophet of God.

Now, Elijah did not only do this for Ahab, he did not only do it for the people of Israel, he did it for us, he did it for the whole community of the people of God, not only in his own generation, but in every succeeding generation.

And that is why it is recorded in Scripture, that we also might become participants in this scene. Because God has given us his word as a master story, which explains God's purpose for the world.

And this master story is a story which has begun, but is yet to be completed. And we are part of that master story. And we are invited in our imagination to move back just three millennia previously.

And imagine what it would be like to be standing there as one of the people of Israel, as one of these spectators, one of these representatives of the different communities of the land.

[12 : 16] And so we are invited tonight, not simply to listen to the story, not simply to admire it, but to enter into it. And to recognize that for the principle that is being exemplified here is one which is being reenacted today in the lives of many communities and in the life of many individuals.

We are participants, we're not spectators. It's very important for us to realize that. We're not sitting in an armchair looking at a film on television. This is real.

The Bible presents to us, as we're trying to say this morning, the real world. The world not simply of space and time, not simply the world of the physical creation, but the spiritual creation that is there as well.

And in that, we are participants. We cannot simply opt out. We cannot leave the playing field and enter into the seats in the stand.

We are on the playing field. We are where the players are. We're not spectators. We are participants. And that's why Elijah's question to his generation is also a vital question to our generation.

[13 : 39] How long will you waver between two opinions? We live in a nation which is doing precisely that. We live in a nation which in 1638 in Griffroyer's churchyard in Edinburgh made a solemn legal covenant to serve only the Lord.

Our monarchs still, when they are crowned, take a solemn oath to defend the faith. And yet, we live in a country where a growing number of people are turning to the multiple idols of consumerism.

And Baal, in one sense, was a kind of consumer religion. And what we are witnessing today is not so much atheism, but a false consumerism has become a religion.

You remember how Jesus challenged people to serve God rather than to serve mammon, serve possessions? Possessions, he says, become like an idol, become like a God.

And today, people's worth, people's worth is determined in the eyes of so many people by what they possess, by what they have.

[14 : 56] people who are becoming people who are dabbling in the occult, people who are turning to other religions.

We're not living in an unspiritual age. We're living in a world which is intensely spiritual. people are perhaps more interested in spirituality in inverted commas today than for many previous generations.

We're living in an age of idolatry. We're living in an age of false gods. We're living in an age in which the prophet Elijah is speaking to us and saying, how long will you waver between two opinions?

Will you serve idols? or will you serve the Lord? I'm sure if Elijah were here today and if he were interviewed by the BBC or by whatever news channel, he would say, how long will you waver between two opinions?

Now, Elijah's challenge comes to us in a threefold way. First of all, he challenges the people and he challenges us to follow the Lord. If the Lord is God, follow him, he said.

[16 : 20] He doesn't say, if the Lord is God, kick the box. It's something much more practical than that. He's saying, if the Lord is God, follow him.

When Jesus called his disciples, he didn't say, do you believe that I'm the Messiah? He said, follow me. And Christian commitment is always active. He is calling us to service.

He's calling us to discipleship. He's calling us to be his followers. But many people find that difficult today.

So often, we are content with simply having our names on the role of a church or being publicly identified with the Christian faith and then living as we like.

We're not called upon simply to inscribe our names on a role. Important as that is, we're called upon to follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

[17 : 29] We're called upon to be active in the service of the kingdom of God. We're called upon not to be spectators, but to be participants, to be players in this story of which the encounter of Elijah with the prophets of Baal was one incident.

And so Elijah comes to us tonight and he says, how long? How long? How much longer do you wish to have it both ways? How much longer will you try to sit in the fence?

He urges us to follow the Lord. And so the gospel comes to us personally. It comes to us and addresses us at the very core of our personalities and it's challenging us to follow him.

But the challenge that Elijah brought was not simply a challenge to follow the Lord, it was also a challenge to hear the word of God. They were to hear the message.

He was a prophet and God's word came through the prophets, not through the idols. His word came through these men, sometimes women, whom God raised up to be his spokespeople to the nation and through the nation to the world.

[18 : 56] And it's easy for us today to forget this. We live in a world and a culture in which image seems to matter more than words. A program on Radio 4 a year or two ago spoke about assassination as people of the book becoming the people of the screen.

Of course, God can speak to us through television and through video. He can speak to us through pictures. And these are important. But God's primary revelation has come to us in word.

Not in symbol, but in word. The prophets of Baal, the worship of Baal was primarily a religion of symbols. The prophets of Israel had words to describe these symbols, these likenesses.

They called them idols. Some of these images of Baal have been found by modern archaeologists and can be seen in museums in Israel and elsewhere today. The prophets called them idols, first because they believed that Baal did not exist, that Baal was a hoax, Baal was a facade.

And secondly, because the images had become an end in themselves and were identified in the perception of the worshippers with the deities they represented. And of course, it is possible for us, even in the Christian religion, to make symbols, Christian images or Christian symbols, to make these ends rather than means.

[20 : 29] And so, in effect, they can become an idol. Even the bread and the wine, which we used this morning in the service in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, if we see the bread and the wine as an end in itself, it becomes an idol.

It is a symbol, yes, but it is easy for the symbol to become an idol. It is easy for the church and the means of grace within the church to become no longer means but an end.

And when that happens, the church and its symbols become an idol. And so, Elijah called people back to the Word of God, just as we have to do today.

What is important, not that we come to church, but of supreme importance is that we hear what God has to say to us. God speaks to us today through his word.

These words are often metaphorical and pictorial. He speaks the language of the Bible, is on the whole not conceptual. It is pictorial. It is vivid picture language.

[21 : 40] It is the kind of language that people in all cultures can understand. But it is a word. He comes to us through the word of God.

And that is why at the heart of the service in our Reformed tradition, the reading and the preaching of the Word of God is emphasized. The public reading of Scripture is important because it is God's Word in a unique sense.

It is God's infallible Word. And one of the most important components of the services is the Word of God, the reading, the public reading of the Word of God.

In Latin America, in many Protestant churches, people stand when the Scriptures are read. And even here in the Western world, the Anglican Church, the Lutheran Church and the Catholic Church, the congregations stand when the Gospel passage is read.

The reading of Scripture is of great importance in the service because that is the primary means through which God speaks to us. It is not right for us to think of the reading of Scripture simply as a preliminary.

[22 : 54] It is much more central than that. In many ways it is more important than the sermon. Although, as I say in a moment, I think the sermon is of great importance.

Now, it is very easy for the public reading of Scripture to be marginalized. I have been in services in this country and perhaps even more in the United States where sometimes the Scripture is not right at all.

churches which are Protestant, churches which are strongly evangelical, and yet the Scriptures are not read. There is no public reading of it.

The sermon has supplanted the Scripture. Such things ought not to be. This happened in the, I think it was the 18th century in Scotland.

The public reading of Scripture in the churches, in the Church of Scotland, virtually disappeared. And in the 19th century, the General Assembly launched that big campaign to reintroduce the public reading of the Word of God.

[24 : 01] We didn't lose that as we seek to worship God today. Are we hearing God's Word? What goes through our mind when the Scriptures are being read?

Do we realize how important the reading of God's Word is? Are we listening to what God is saying in His Word to us?

But also important is the public proclamation of God's Word. The sermon in which the preacher expounds the Scriptures. We believe that through the preaching of God's Word, God addresses the people.

And that this is the climax of worship. When God speaks, having spoken through His Word, He speaks through the exposition of that Word.

Now often today when people think of worship, they think of singing. And sometimes in some churches, the singing can be longer than the reading and even the preaching of the Scriptures.

[25 : 14] But when you go back to the New Testament church, we find very little evidence of singing. Yes, they did sing, but the focus is on the teaching. Professor Howard Marshall, who is a retired professor of the University here in Aberdeen and a world renowned New Testament scholar, gave a lecture a year or two ago at the Scottish Evangelical Theology Society, on the worship of the New Testament church.

And he said that the worship of the New Testament church was mainly reading the Scriptures and teaching. He said that was the heart and soul of the service.

And if we move away from that, then we are losing our anchor in the church that God, that Jesus instituted the New Testament church.

And indeed also the Old Testament church, as we find it before his coming. But of course, God speaks not only through the reading of Scripture publicly, nor only through the public proclamation of God's word in the sermon.

God also speaks through the personal witness of his people. And we have got a responsibility to witness to God's word. word. And to say, yes, God has spoken through his word.

[26 : 35] And to tell people why we believe that word is important, why we believe that word is, how that word is spoken to us. We are to testify to the power of God's word in our lives.

So, the most dramatic growth that the church has seen in the last century took place in South Korea. Korea. And in South Korea, the churches became highly organized.

And it was the responsibility of every elder in an average congregation to ensure that the people under his spiritual jurisdiction would witness, would witness to at least one person every month about their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Christ. And for many years, the Bible Society in Korea produced a series of scripture leaflets, just small leaflets, in which the churches could overprint their name and address in the times of services.

And every member of the church in Korea would receive a packet of 20 or 25 of these every month. And they were expected as part of their membership of the church to give these to people who were not Christians.

[27 : 42] And not simply to give them and then to run away, but to witness to them. And to tell them why that word is important. Why that word counts. I remember during my first visit to Korea many years ago, the General Secretary of the Bible Society at that time, telling me that one day he was, he took a taxi in Seoul and he was paying the taxi driver and the taxi driver didn't know where he was and he was giving him his change.

He said, excuse me, sir. He said, I've got some good news for you. And he gave him one of these scripture leaflets. He also told me of a tycoon. An elder in one of the Presbyterian churches in Korea who, when he would be holding or attending a business conference in a five-star hotel, the lunch hour would go down into the lobby of the hotel and distribute these leaflets to some of his colleagues and his friends and share the good news with them.

And that is the secret. That's the key to the growth of the church, not only in Korea but throughout the world. It is where the church is able to mobilize its membership as witnesses to the word of God that the churches grow.

And perhaps the reason why the churches are not growing in our country is that we've lost that and we need to recover it. But finally, the challenge that Elijah brought to the people and he brings to us is not simply to hear the word of God, not simply to follow the Lord.

It is also to go out and to be his witnesses and to discover the power of prayer. This story is an illustration of the power of prayer.

[29 : 31] The apostles in the early church were called to the ministry of the word, but they were also called to the ministry of prayer. And these are the two key ministries of the word of God.

And all of us who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ are called to each of these ministries. Some of us may be called to be teachers of the word of God, to be preachers of the word of God, but all of us are called to be witnesses and all of us are called to a ministry of intercession.

James in his epistle commended Elijah as a man of prayer. And what we see here is not simply a demonstration of the power of God in this incident, but we also see a demonstration of the power of prayer.

And surely there's a challenge here for us to realize that it is as we enter, as we pray, that we enter into the counsel of God.

Prayer is powerful because it is offered to the Father Almighty in the name of Jesus, through the power of the Holy Spirit. And through prayer we have the privilege of entering into the inner counsels of God.

[30 : 42] God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. And from the details that have come down to us from the early, from the church services in the second century, we know that while unbelievers were welcomed in church services, the church did not pray while they were present.

Prayer was too holy for unbelievers to be present. Prayer was considered to be one of the high points of the service.

And the congregation prayed when the unbelievers had left. We need to recover today a sense of the power, the efficacy of prayer.

The prayer of a righteous person, says James, can achieve much. Because God answers prayer, God uses prayer. And it is through prayer that the apostles were able to turn the world upside down.

And so Elijah challenges us. He challenges us to follow the Lord. He challenges us to hear the word. And he challenges us to move the world through prayer. Because it is through prayer that we become, we have the privilege of becoming, of ruling the world with Christ.

[32 : 01] And making things, making things different. Making a change, making a difference. It is through prayer. Prayer is the ministry through which Christ rules the world.

And invites us to enter into that ministry with him as our great intercessor. And so he challenges us tonight. How long will you waver between two opinions?

Is there someone here tonight who is sitting on the fence? Is there someone here tonight who has been challenged? And the Lord has spoken to you concerning one or more of these things that we have drawn from this passage of scripture?

Now you may think that you can leave this church and shrug your shoulder, shrug your shoulder and leave this church tonight. The encounter that you've had tonight is not nearly as dramatic as the encounter the people of Israel had with Elijah Elijah.

Elijah on the summit of Mount Carmel. But our day of drama will come. There will be a day when not the prophet Elijah but the Lord God himself will ask us this question.

[33 : 16] Why have we wavered between two opinions? There's a day much more dramatic even than that day on Carmel when all of us shall stand before the judgment seat of Christ and give an account of how we've responded to the gospel, of how we've responded to the word of God.

And that's why it is so important today to heed what Elijah is saying, to get off the fence, to follow the Lord, to hear the word, to move the world through prayer.

Elijah is challenging us to commitment. He's challenging us not simply to tick the box, not simply to nod the head. He's challenging us to step forth.

He's challenging us to move. He's challenging us to follow the Lord. And I would urge those of you who have as yet not followed the Lord to get off the fence here tonight before you go out the door of this church.

Get off the fence and throw yourself upon the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ. Trust him as your Lord and Savior and follow him now and forever.

[34 : 36] And if, as a believer, you somehow or other got back onto the fence, the Lord is challenging you to get off that fence tonight, to be totally and utterly committed.

One of the men whom God used in the 18th century greatly in this country was a man called George Whitefield. He, with John Wesley, changed the social culture of our country through the gospel.

And one day George Whitefield wrote in his diary, I never feel better than when I'm on the full stretch for God. And what God is looking for tonight are men and women who are willing to say, I'm ready to go on the full stretch for God.

I'm ready to be totally committed. I'm ready to be utterly surrendered. I'm ready to place my life totally and unconditionally at your disposal, Lord.

May God grant that that may be our response tonight. And that we may say to this challenge that Elijah has brought to us down through the centuries, I, we will follow the Lord.

[35 : 52] Lord, let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, we come before you now to pray that you will help us to hear what you are saying to us. And help us, O Lord, to obey your word.

Help us to believe. Help us to become followers. Help us to get off the fence. Help us tonight to decide for Jesus. To decide for your word.

Lord, to decide for prayer. To decide for your glory. To decide for your kingdom. Grant, O Lord, that we tonight in the power of your spirit may make that commitment.

And may it be a commitment which will last for time and for eternity. In Jesus' name.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

[36 : 59] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.