

3. God's Word Forces us to face our True Loyalty

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[0 : 00] So, if we could have our Bibles open, please, at 1 Kings 18. The former football manager, Bill Shankly, once famously said, Football is not a matter of life or death, it's far more important than that.

And I ruefully thought about that yesterday afternoon as my team crashed to yet another disaster. And snatch defeat from the jaws of victory in the second half, as they so often do. But if you support Newcastle United, you do live the life of faith. Not much hope, but there's plenty of faith. But here we have, in 1 Kings 18, something which really is more important than life or death.

And that is, who is the true God? Which God do we believe in? Because the God we believe in is going to determine the issues of life or death for us.

And that's what's at the very heart of this chapter. If the Lord, if Yahweh, Israel's God, is God, then follow Him. But if Baal, then follow Him.

[1 : 20] Now we've reached a new stage in the story. 18 verse 1. After many days, the word of the Lord came to Elijah. There has been a long wait for the word of the Lord, and that's emphasized by the after many days.

Three years have passed without rain, but now Yahweh says, I will send rain upon the earth. You see how the chapter is structured around this idea of the word of the Lord sending rain.

In verse 1, I will send rain upon the earth, said Yahweh. And then in verse 45, in a little while the heavens grew black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain.

The rain comes plentifully when the Lord sends it. Now I'm going to spend most of the time this morning on verses 17 to 40.

Now you do want at the beginning to say a few words about verses 1 to 16, and then at the end a few words about the last episode. I want to say a word about this man, Obadiah.

[2 : 25] Verse 3, Ahab called Obadiah the steward who was over the household. This is not the prophet of the same name who lived much later. It's a common name in ancient Israel.

But you'll notice the point that the writer is making. Even at the heart of Ahab's palace, the Lord still has his people. He's not up front like Elijah.

He's not defending the walls of Zion the way Elijah does. But he is a faithful and committed servant to the Lord. Not all the Lord's servants come in the same shape, do they?

And this man is faithful where he has been placed. And in verse, the little detail in verse 3, he fed them, we are told, the prophets of the Lord with bread and water.

Exactly the word used in the previous chapter about the ravens and the widow who fed Elijah. Now, Obadiah is like those other people who get mentioned throughout Scripture.

[3 : 31] In the New Testament, in Philippians, we read about the saints in Caesar's household. The Christian people in the court of the emperor. And it's an important point to remember.

Wherever we are, we have to be the Lord's people there. And often it's particularly difficult to be the Lord's people in positions of great authority and responsibility in parliament, in areas where there is authority exercised over people.

Inevitably, Obadiah and Elijah are somewhat uneasy with each other. They're not the same kind of people. And Obadiah is rather nervous that his cover is going to be blown.

But I just want to make this point that Obadiah is faithful where he has been put, faithful where he has been placed. And I think there's a lesson to us.

Even if we're not sort of headline figures like Elijah, someone said, bloom where you are planted and be God's people where you are.

[4 : 35] But at the very heart of this story is who is the true God. In verse 21, it's first mentioned, if the Lord is God, follow him. And that's repeated several times.

24, 36, 37, and 39. So we're going to look at the story as it develops from 17 to 40 in three movements.

And the first one is, who is the true God? That's my first point. Who is the true God? Verses 17 to 21. Now, we saw in the last few weeks that Ahab and his wife Jezebel had imposed the worship of Baal on the kingdom.

They were militant about it. But now the time had come for the undeclared multitude to declare themselves. See, probably many of the people were not fanatical worshippers of Baal.

They lived in a kind of vague, sentimental muddle where they worshipped both Yahweh and Baal. They probably did not think through these issues clearly.

[5 : 45] It has to be said, an awful lot of people live in that kind of situation today. And have no discrimination whatever between the true faith and its various counterfeits.

Remember a dear old lady who was a genuine Christian. When she was visited by Jehovah's Witnesses, gave them a donation and said afterwards, I'm always happy to contribute to the work of the Lord.

Now, that kind of muddle is not untypical of many people. And it has to be said, it's particularly typical of churches where the word of God is not taught clearly.

People live in a vague muddle where Yahweh and Baal coexist. Remember the attractions of the worship of Baal, which I talked about a few weeks ago. We've got spirituality without ethics.

You can feel good about God, about the gods. You don't have to do anything about it. We've got pleasure without discipline, without any kind of inhibitions.

[6 : 47] And we've got sensationalism without substance. That marked Baal worship. It's a very heady mixture. And it's very popular. Elijah said, this is the deciding moment.

Verse 19. Now therefore send and gather all Israel, not literally every individual in Israel, but presumably representatives from all parts of the country, and gather the prophets of Baal and of the Asherah.

Remember Baal's consort, the fertility goddess. And gather them on Mount Carmel. Now that's significant because Carmel had a shrine to Baal, the god of wind and water, the god of indulgence and fertility.

In other words, to carry on the football metaphor, this is a home game for Baal. He's got all the advantages of home game. And he also has got the advantages of cheering spectators as well. Everything is being stacked up in his favor. So how is he going to show up against this? Because remember up to this point, we saw in chapters 16 and 17, that Baal had failed at every point.

[8 : 00] He had failed to provide for his followers. He had failed to send rain. But that was private. Now here is a public contest. If the Lord, if Yahweh is God, follow him.

But if Baal, then follow him. A clash of two world views. One dominated by fantasy and superstition. And one dominated by the word of God.

That's what's going to happen here. And there is a need to declare loyalties. Verse 21. How long will you go limping? How long will you hobble?

How long will you stagger? The old authorised version says, How long will you halt? And that's the old meaning of halt, meaning to limp. How long will you live in this world of muddle and confusion? How long will you treat the worship of Baal and the worship of Yahweh as if they were simply hobbies? Because that's what's happening.

[8 : 57] But it's not simply a hobby. It's not simply an interest. It is a matter of life, death, and eternity. Because notice exactly what Elijah says.

If Yahweh is God, follow him. But if Baal, then follow him. Notice the word follow. Be a disciple. Commit yourself to the God that you believe in.

Don't play with it. You see, there is a massive simplicity to Israel's faith. As a devout Jew tumbled out of bed in the morning, his first prayer would be, Hear, O Israel, Yahweh your God is one.

Now that's not just a theological point. That is going to dominate the whole day, isn't it? There's not one God for me at home and another God at work. There's not one God for my holidays, another God for my leisure activities.

There is one God and he is everywhere and in everything. I can never be away from him. That's the faith of the Bible. Where can I flee from your spirit, says David in Psalm 139.

[10:06] Even if I go to the uttermost parts of the universe, you are still with me and I'm still with you. So it's a life-changing choice. It's about loyalties.

It's about where our true loyalties lie. That's why I've given the title today, God's word forces us to face up to our true loyalties.

And there is the need to go public. Verse 21 again, follow him. Reminds us very much of what Paul says in Romans 10. If you believe in your heart and confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord. That's what Elijah is saying. It's not enough to believe in your heart. You must confess with your mouth. But you notice the people did not answer him a word.

Why didn't they answer? I think another little detail which is so important. And the ESB helpfully brings this out. Notice verse 21.

[11:08] How long we go limping. And then in verse 26, the priests of Baal limped around the altar that they made.

The author is deliberately using the same word in both verses. And why? Because he's showing that ultimately not to oppose Baal is to be on Baal's side.

These people, oh, they're not fanatics like the priests of Baal. They're not cutting themselves and raving and making idiots of themselves generally. Nevertheless, they're ultimately on Baal's side. Remember the words of Jesus. He who is not with me is against me. We can't be neutral. Now, in many areas of life, of course, we can. In secondary areas, we can.

We can, if you like, have the best of both worlds. But in this matter of life or death, there is no third way. There is no middle ground. There will be no middle ground on the last day.

[12:12] And there's no middle ground. Is it Yahweh or Baal? Is it Christ or the world? This is the choice that faces. Jesus calls us day by day.

His voice is saying, Christian, follow me. So that's the first movement. Really, verses 17 to 21. Who is the true God?

But the second one is, how do we know who the true God is? Now, when people are inquiring, when people are exploring, when people come to Christianity Explored, or when we meet people, and when we meet people in general, and we talk about the faith, this is a legitimate question. How do we know who the true God is? Now, Elijah is in no doubt. Verse 22, Then Elijah said to the people, I, even I only, am left a prophet of the Lord.

Now, that doesn't contradict verse 4. We are told that Obadiah hid the prophets of the Lord. The point is, these other prophets were in hiding. They were not making a public witness.

[13:19] Elijah is the only public voice. And he faces the mass ranks of Baalism, as the only solitary voice. And he is going to, he is saying, we must prove now, how we know who the true God is.

And look at verse 24. You call upon the name of your God, and I will call upon the name of Yahweh. And the God who answers by fire, he is God.

Now, this is a very strange verse. And this is one of the places where, once again, it's so important to listen to what the detail of what the verse says, because it doesn't say what we'd expect it to say. If I had been writing this chapter, I would have said, you call on the name, I will call on the name of Yahweh. You call on the name of your God, and the God who answers by water, he is the God.

That's been the problem, hasn't it? The God who sends rain. But you see the problem in that, if that had been what Elijah said, Baal's worshippers could have said, oh, the rain's come.

[14:26] Baal has actually sent us the rain at last. But fire in the Bible is the sign of the true God, the living God. He first appears at the gates of Eden, and the flaming sword guards the way back to the tree of life.

It rains down from heaven on, Sodom and Gomorrah. It appears again at the burning bush to Moses, and at Sinai. And one of the signs of the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, is tongues of fire. Elijah is saying, if Yahweh is a living God, as I believe he is, then he is truly going to reveal himself in a way that is unmistakable.

So how does he show that he is the true God? There's a stupendous story. It's a wonderfully told story, which is why I read the whole of it, because you need to get it.

The build-up of suspense, the details of verse 23, let two bulls in, cut it in pieces, I will prepare the other bull. Now that's deliberate storyteller's art.

[15:35] He's building up suspense. Imagine if you'd never heard this story before, and that's the case actually, most people in our country are. Most people don't know the Bible stories now, and

therefore, it's a tremendous way in, as it catches people's imagination, builds up suspense, the tension, you can just imagine the tension, it's almost palpable.

And then, and then the frantic behavior, and fanatical way of the priests of Baal, at noon Elijah, and notice the mockery of Elijah, cry aloud, for he is a God.

Shout. Maybe you'll hear him if we, maybe he's a bit deaf. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself.

Maybe he'd gone to the little boy's room. He is on a journey. Now, Yahweh, of course, even if he were on a journey, he would still be present. Or he is asleep.

Remember, he who keeps Israel, says the psalmist, neither slumbers nor sleeps. Baal is cut down to size. And notice the brilliance. Notice that the priests of Baal, you could imagine if this were a film, music would be playing louder and louder.

[16:52] All the effects of modern cinematography would be employed. And then this terrific anticlimax at the end of verse 29. No one answered.

No one paid attention. And why did no one answer? Because Baal didn't exist. No one answered. Because there was no one to answer.

You can shout Baal from now to all eternity. And he's not going to answer. Because he doesn't exist. He is not a God who can answer by fire, or by water, or by anything else.

Look back now at verse 24 to see the point of it. I'm going to read this verse again. And this time I'm going to miss out two words. Not because I think they shouldn't be there, but just to make the point.

Verse 24. Elijah said, You call on the name of your God, and I will call on the name of Yahweh. And the God who answers, He is God.

[17:54] You see the point? The God who answers. He doesn't always answer by fire. He's going to answer by fire. Now, to show He is truly Yahweh, the God of Israel, the one who was and is to come.

This is the living God, the God who listens, the God who speaks. And throughout the Old Testament, the prophets and the psalmist often attack idolatry, not so much because it is wicked, but because it's stupid.

Why make an idol which is less than yourself can't speak? Well, that's great, of course, because I can't tell you off. But it's not much use if you want help and advice.

Can't hear? Well, that's great if you're saying things you ought not to be saying. But if you're desperate and asking, oh, Baal, help me. It's not much help. Can't see, wonderful, if I'm up to no good.

But no help at all if I'm really wanting guidance. You see, idolatry is empty. It is futile. That's why one of the words used for idols in the Old Testament is Ecclesiastes word, the Hebrew word Hevel, which means a puff of wind, emptiness.

[19:00] And that's what Psalm 24 says. The one who ascends to the Lord is the one who does not lift up his soul to a puff of wind. The one who believes in the true God. So, who is the true God?

How do we know who He is? Verses 22 to 29. And now thirdly, what does the true God want from us? Verses 30 to 40.

Then Elijah said to all the people, come near to me. Elijah here does what the Lord wants him to do and what connects human power, sorry, human weakness with God's power.

First of all, verse 30, he repaired the altar of the Lord that had been thrown down. Just as he had dug trenches. Now we cannot bring the fire from heaven.

What we can do is to repair the altar. And the altar in Scripture, of course, stands for communication with God, doesn't it? Coming to God through the sacrifice He's provided, listening to His voice, receiving from Him.

[20:14] We can repair the altar. When the great revival broke out, associated with Wesley and Whitfield, for many decades before, faithful souls had repaired the altars in isolated places.

They had kept on praying to the Lord. They had kept on, they had kept the faith in the midst of barrenness and deadness. And when Wesley listened to the, in Aldersgate, to the exposition from Romans, which strangely warmed his heart, you know, like when the fire fell of the blessing of God, the altars had been repaired.

And we need to do that in our day. We need to repair the altars. We need to, we need to be ready. We need to be willing, prepared to receive the Lord.

And notice, He also, He also makes twelve, sorry, let me get the verse. Verse 31, He took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob.

It's interesting that throughout the Old Testament, the prophets never accept the division of God's people into northern, southern kingdoms. They all see God's people as one people.

[21 : 31] And when the prophets look to the future, when Ezekiel looks to the future, he sees Israel and Judah reunited as one people. And so here, this is the God of Israel, the God of Jacob, the God of the twelve tribes.

He repairs the altar as a symbol of the unity of God's people and their willingness to receive what God has to give. Then he prays, verse 34, verse 36, sorry, At the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near.

Now, there is a deliberate contrast between the raving and shouting and cavorting of the priests of Baal and the prayer of Elijah, O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, the faithful covenant God of the past, the God who had revealed himself to the patriarchs.

But he calls upon them in the present. Notice, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel and I am your servant. I have done all these things at your word.

Answer me, O Lord, answer me. These people may know that I am a great prophet. Of course not. These people may know that you are Yahweh, their God. He asks for prayer so that God's name will be honoured.

[22 : 46] God's name will be vindicated. Now, that's the kind of prayer. In some ways, it's one of the great prayers of the Old Testament, a model prayer, praising him for the past, for his faithfulness, but asking him to act in the present.

And God answers dramatically. Then the fire of the Lord fell. Now, I said last week that very often rationalists get to work on this and they tell us, I mean, they tell us that actually Elijah put Napa in the trenches rather than water or that somebody reflected the sun's light with a glass and so on. From all that rationalism, it's far more difficult to believe that this actually happened. And I said, this is a dramatic intervention and it had happened before in Leviticus 9 when Aaron and his sons are ordained and offer sacrifices, the fire of the Lord falls, showing that he is accepting the sacrifices. Then again, 2 Chronicles, this happens when David prays about the temple and when the temple is completed. And so here, the sacrifice is accepted.

And notice when it happens, at the time of the offering of the oblation, NIV helpfully says, at the time of the evening sacrifice. And surely this points forward to something else that happened at the time of the evening sacrifice.

[24 : 23] When Jesus died on the cross and the fire of God's judgment fell, the place where wrath and mercy met, where God both revealed his anger against sin and his acceptance of sinners who will come to him.

So we're pointing forwards, the Old Testament always does, to something bigger and greater. He repairs the altar, he prays, the fire falls. And then, oh dear, oh dear, the Old Testament goes off at a tangent again, doesn't it?

We've been having a great time, heart strangely warmed. And then, verse 40, Elijah brought them down to the book Keishan and slaughtered them there. The Old Testament full of gore and blood, a bloodthirsty God.

Aren't we so glad, says one of the commentators, that Jesus came. Well, I wonder if that commentator has really read the New Testament.

There is far more judgment in the New Testament than in the Old Testament. The reason we don't see that, of course, is that in the New Testament, judgment is always judgment in the world to come.

[25 : 35] Not exclusively. Remember the story of Ananias and Sapphira, which Willie preached on some weeks ago about how they were judged in this world. The letter to Corinthians talks about how some people were judged because of the behavior at the Lord's table.

But generally speaking, judgment in the New Testament is the wrath to come. And therefore, we don't feel it in the same way. And we don't feel it in the same way, frankly, because we don't take sin seriously.

We don't think apostasy and turning away from God's word is really a deadly thing at all. Quite rightly, when we hear of some dreadful, when we hear of some dreadful rape or murder or some pedophile, it rightly shocks us.

Why does it not shock us when God's word is rejected? When God's word is despised? When people, even in church, begin to advocate things that shouldn't even be discussed? Far less, far less advocated. The reason for that is we don't tremble at sin. We are not afraid of the word of God. We don't tremble at God's holiness.

[26 : 52] Remember, this is not personal vindictiveness. This is what Moses had commanded should be done in Deuteronomy 13 and here is in so much else. Elijah is following in the footsteps of Moses.

We live beyond the cross and the resurrection. It's not right for us to be violent in that sense against the enemies of God, but the principle remains we must...

See, if we don't actually hate sin, we'll keep on committing it, we'll keep on loving it, we'll keep on cherishing it. So, this is not spoiling the story, this is bringing the story to its grim climax.

But just a couple of footnotes before we finish on verses 41 to 46. Notice verse 42, Elijah went up to the top of Carly, bowed himself down there and put his face between his knees.

There's still suspense. Is God actually going to send Lorraine? Now, we might well think because God had sent the fire then he could be trusted to send the rain and that of course is true, but Elijah needed faith still.

[28 : 05] Remember the words of James, Elijah was a person just like us and we must never imagine that one spectacular intervention of God is going to mean that ever afterwards everything is going to be fine, we don't need to exercise faith.

That day will come but it won't come in this world. Elijah is still praying, Elijah still needs faith and that faith is rewarded by the great abundance of rain in verse 45.

And one further point, notice verse 46, the hand of the Lord was on Elijah gathered up his garment and ran before Ahab. He runs in front of Ahab's sharia, symbolically showing that the king is subject to the prophet, that the prophet is the word which must be listened to.

And the question, there's a question mark at the end of this chapter, will Ahab listen? Will Ahab be, will Ahab come to turn to Yahweh as a result of this?

And this is the question that faces us as well. Which God do we believe in? If Yahweh is God, says Elijah, then follow him.

[29 : 21] And if Baal, then follow him. Amen. Let's pray.