

1 Kings 18:16-45 (NIV)

¹⁶ So Obadiah went to meet Ahab and told him, and Ahab went to meet Elijah. ¹⁷ When he saw Elijah, he said to him, “Is that you, you troubler of Israel?”

¹⁸ “I have not made trouble for Israel,” Elijah replied. “But you and your father’s family have. You have abandoned the Lord’s commands and have followed the Baals. ¹⁹ Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel’s table.”

²⁰ So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. 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.

²² Then Elijah said to them, “I am the only one of the Lord’s prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets. ²³ Get two bulls for us. Let Baal’s prophets choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. 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.”

Then all the people said, “What you say is good.”

²⁵ Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, “Choose one of the bulls and prepare it first, since there are so many of you. Call on the name of your god, but do not light the fire.” ²⁶ So they took the bull given them and prepared it.

Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. “Baal, answer us!” they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made.

²⁷ At noon Elijah began to taunt them. “Shout louder!” he said. “Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.” ²⁸ So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. ²⁹ Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.

³⁰ Then Elijah said to all the people, “Come here to me.” They came to him, and he repaired the altar of the Lord, which had been torn down. ³¹ Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord had come, saying, “Your name shall be Israel.” ³² With the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord, and he dug a trench around it large enough to hold two seahs^[a] of

seed. ³³ He arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces and laid it on the wood. Then he said to them, "Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood."

³⁴ "Do it again," he said, and they did it again.

"Do it a third time," he ordered, and they did it the third time. ³⁵ The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench.

³⁶ At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: "Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. ³⁷ Answer me, Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again."

³⁸ Then the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench.

³⁹ When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, "The Lord—he is God! The Lord—he is God!"

⁴⁰ Then Elijah commanded them, "Seize the prophets of Baal. Don't let anyone get away!" They seized them, and Elijah had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and slaughtered there.

⁴¹ And Elijah said to Ahab, "Go, eat and drink, for there is the sound of a heavy rain." ⁴² So Ahab went off to eat and drink, but Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees.

⁴³ "Go and look toward the sea," he told his servant. And he went up and looked. "There is nothing there," he said.

Seven times Elijah said, "Go back."

⁴⁴ The seventh time the servant reported, "A cloud as small as a man's hand is rising from the sea."

So Elijah said, "Go and tell Ahab, 'Hitch up your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.'"

⁴⁵ Meanwhile, the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain started falling and Ahab rode off to Jezreel.

MOTHER'S LOVE

The eighteen-year-old had made her choice, and there was nothing her mother could do about it. The daughter was in love. Mom pleaded and prayed, but she couldn't prevent her from moving in with him. That didn't mean it was a good idea. Mom knew "He

doesn't love you like I do." This guy had no job, no car, and no manners. He was bad news! So mom did what a loving mom can do- she let her daughter experience the consequences, and it hurt. If you want to live with him, I can't stop you but you'll eat whatever food *he* provides. You want to stay at his house, I can't stop you but you'll see how he handles your nightmares. It hurt but mom stuck to her guns because she loved her daughter too much to bail her out.

It is no coincidence that preachers love to talk about moms, and not just on Mother's Day. It's The love of a mother is determined to do what's best for her children. It's a glimpse into the very heart of God, who is determined to do what's best for his children.

THE GOD DEBATE

That's why in our story today God gets fired up. It all started when the king of Israel decided to marry a no-good girl. King Ahab married Jezebel and they took idol worship to unprecedented heights. God's people were shacking up with Baal, the god of rain and reproduction. And God "He doesn't love you like I do." But he did not force his people to worship him. No, he let them experience the consequences. "You want to follow Baal? Ok, let's see how much rain Baal can produce." Not. A. Drop. God's prophet, Elijah, predicted there would be no dew and no rain for years. And that's what happened. King Ahab was not a fan. **"When he saw Elijah, he said to him, 'Is that you, you troubler of Israel?' 'I have not made trouble for Israel,' Elijah replied. 'But you and your father's family have. You have abandoned the Lord's commands and have followed the Baals.'" (1 Kings 18:17-18)**

THE GOD EXPERIMENT

So Elijah proposes a showdown. COMING TO MOUNT CARMEL, ONE DAY ONLY, BAAL VS. THE LORD, TWO GODS, ONE WINNER. BE THERE! Days later a huge crowd gathered. Elijah raised his voice. **"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. (1 Kings 18:21)** They avoid Elijah's gaze. Kick some dirt. Were they afraid of the king? Were they doubting because hundreds of religious experts followed Baal? I don't know. But I do know God got fired up.

The Lord has always insisted that he is the only God. Not Baal. Not the Lord plus Baal. Only the Lord is God. Isn't that what Jesus said too? **"I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6-7)** Obedience is not the way to God. Your family is not truly most important. Experiences are not what makes for a full life. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. Do you avoid Jesus' gaze? Kick some dirt. "You know, that's pretty closed minded, Jesus. Religious scholars say there are lots of ways to God." I don't know the doubts of your heart, but I know the

doubts of mine. And I know that God gets pretty fired up about this topic.

God used Elijah to settle this debate. He proposed a controlled experiment where everything is the same except for one independent variable. **“Get two bulls. Let Baal’s prophets choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the Lord. The God who answers by fire, he is God.”** (1 Kings 18:22-24)

THEY DON'T LOVE YOU

Baal’s prophets go first. They take the bull and get it all ready. “Baal, answer us! Baal, answer us!” They’re dancing around. “Baal, answer us!” 450 prophets shouting, “Baal, answer us!” Nothing. So Elijah does something very strange. He taunts them. Elijah’s goal is not that the prophets would feel sad. His goal is to highlight the infinite difference between Baal and the Lord. “Perhaps he can’t hear you.” But think of how different that is from the Lord, whose ears are attentive to our cries.¹ “Perhaps he is busy or traveling.”² But the Lord your God, he will be with you wherever you go. “Perhaps he is sleeping.” Not the Lord. The Lord who watches over Israel will never slumber nor sleep.³ Baal just doesn’t love you like the Lord does.

The trouble in Israel came from chasing a god who did not love them. So here’s a really personal question: how much trouble in your life comes from chasing a god who doesn’t love you? Maybe you want people to like you. You want their respect. You want them to think you’re funny, or good looking, or smart. You could devote a lifetime to that. You could even dance around like the prophets of Baal so others will like you or so you don’t step on their toes. Other people are a wonderful, but they are not God. They just don’t love you like the Lord does.

THEY'RE NOT REAL

But those prophets of Baal work harder. They slash themselves, desperate for their god’s attention, “Baal, answer us.” Nothing.

The Bible is actually very frank about why nothing happened. This is from the prophet Jeremiah. **“The customs of the peoples are worthless; they cut a tree out of the forest, and a craftsman shapes it with his chisel. They adorn it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so it will not totter. Like a scarecrow in a melon patch, their idols cannot speak; they must be carried because they cannot walk. Do not fear them; they can do no harm nor can they do any good.”** (Jeremiah 10:3-5) It’s

¹ Psalm 34:5 The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, and his ears are attentive to their cry;

² Joshua 1:9 The LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.

³ Psalm 121:3-4 He will not let your foot slip—he who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

not just that Baal doesn't love them enough, it's that Baal isn't real. It was a real statue, and their devotion was genuine, but Baal was a figment of their imagination. He can do no harm nor can he do any good.

I wonder how many hours I've wasted pinning my hopes on a figment of my imagination. Like if you think the good life comes after you get to the next stage — after graduation, after I'm out of debt, after I get a better job. How many times have you been disappointed? Or if you think the way to a full life is getting your body healthy, or getting more money, or being less busy. I wonder how many hours I've wasted chasing after gods that not only don't love me, but have proven over and over that they have no power to help.

Then words of Jesus smack you across the head like a wakeup call from a wish-dream nightmare. "All that stuff you're chasing, that's not the way. I'm the way. I'm the truth. I'm what life is all about."

Imagine a kid who goes to McDonalds with mom and dad. He loves the happy meal. He loves the nice workers. He loves the play place. So he announces: "Thanks for everything mom and dad. I'm going to stay here. These people are my new family." Would the parents be mad? Maybe a little, but also worried. McDonalds doesn't love you like we do. And what's more, they're not really your parents — that's just not true. For those same reasons, God gets pretty fired up when his children worship Baal, or money, or anything else. So God did a miracle.

THE TRUE GOD ANSWERS

"Come here." said Elijah. (1 Kings 18:30) He rebuilds an altar—but no fire. He digs a ditch around it—but no fire. The wood—but no fire. The bull—but no fire. Then water—the opposite of fire. At this point the other guys wailed to Baal for 6 hours. But Elijah simply prayed: (Time me, see how long this takes.) **"Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, Lord, are God and that you are turning their hearts back again."** (1 Kings 18:36-37) (20 seconds!)

And because the Lord is God, in an instant, three miracles happen. Number one: **Fire from the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench.** (1 Kings 18:37) Fire that burns water—that's a miracle! But it's nothing compared to miracle number two. **When all the people saw this they fell prostrate and cried, "The Lord—he is the true God! The Lord—he is the true God!"** (1 Kings 18:39) God took a crowd of stone-cold hearts stuck in groupthink and turned them 180 degrees, that's a miracle! And boy did those hearts turn! Everyone is chanting, "The Lord— He is God! The Lord— He is God!" when Elijah's voice rises

above the din: **“Seize the prophets of Baal. Don’t let anyone get away!” (1 Kings 18:40)** In the morning they were kicking dirt and avoiding Elijah’s gaze but now they are ready to do anything for the Lord. Even this command from Deuteronomy: **“If you hear it said... that wicked men have led the people astray saying, ‘Let us go and worship other gods’ (gods you have not known) then you must inquire. and investigate it thoroughly. And if it is true and it has been proved that this detestable thing has been done among you, you must certainly put to the sword all who live in that town.” (Deuteronomy 13:12-15)** The people did just that. The miracle of their heart was complete.

And only then came the miracle they had all been waiting for. The prophets of Baal were in charge of rain. But when their bodies lay in a heap, and only the prophet of the Lord was praying, a cloud appeared. The sky grew dark. And for the first time in 3 years, they were singing in the rain, **“The Lord—He is God! The Lord— He is God!” (1 Kings 18:39)**

WHY DID GOD DO THAT?

They needed to know that Baal didn’t make it rain, so that the next time there was a drought they knew who to pray to. You need to know that you are not the way. You are not the ultimate decider of truth. And you’re not what your life is all about. Jesus is. Because only Jesus can say this: **“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.” (John 14:1-3)**

A mom cannot force her daughter to break up with her deadbeat boyfriend. But that girl learned from experience who loved her best, and soon she was living in her father’s house with one of his many rooms. Friends, the Lord is God and he loves you best. He loves you enough to die, and he’s powerful enough to rise from the dead. So do not let your heart be troubled. Instead, believe in Jesus.

Amen.