

CHOOSE THIS DAY WHOM YOU WILL SERVE

SERIES: ELIJAH: GOD'S INSTRUMENT OF GRACE

by Ron Ritchie

The church of Jesus Christ is struggling with idolatry the same way the nation of Israel has struggled with it throughout their history up to the present moment. Idolatry is giving divine honor, reverence, admiration, and devotion to and ascribing divine power to a created thing rather than to the Creator God, with the hope of obtaining a meaningful and fruitful life. In light of this definition of idolatry, we may all be in more trouble than we realize.

We are now living in a time when many of us are caught up in what has been called the "McChurch" mentality, or thinking about going to church the same way we would think about going to a restaurant, as consumers. Polls tell us what the consumers are seeking. According to a *USA Today* survey, of the fifty-six percent of Americans who attend church, forty-five percent do so because, as they say, "It's good for you." Twenty-six percent cite peace of mind and spiritual well-being as the reason they go to church. Specific doctrines do not seem important. Most appear to be "looking for that inner and more subjective kind of payoff" from religion.

As one sociologist has observed, this survey merely reflects our current "culture of narcissism" (*The Body*, Charles Colson; *Religion in America*, George H. Gallup, Jr.), which is nothing more than the old idolatry of self that is captured in the statement, "What's in it for me?" For rather than being willing to bow our knee to *Yahweh* and choosing to love him with all our heart, soul, and might; we have placed ourselves as the other gods before him.

In 1 Kings 18:20-46 we will find Israel still trying to serve both *Yahweh* and Baal. But *Yahweh*, "He Who Is," is the only true and living God. And Jesus is the God-man, the fullest disclosure of the divine nature manifested in the flesh, the Redeemer and Savior of mankind. Paul would write to the Colossians about Jesus the Son of God: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For in Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities---all things have been created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together." (Colossians 1:15-17.) It is for this reason that God commanded his people first in Israel and then in the church, "You shall love the Lord your God (*Yahweh*) with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might....for only in him will you have life."

God states in the second commandment, "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:3). The creation of gods or objects of worship begins in the heart and gradually takes over people's thinking. The created objects of worship can be seen or unseen. Some people may select the visible objects of stones, trees, rivers, or animals; or the sun, moon, or stars (see Deuteronomy 4:19); the earth; or the current sports heroes, actors, or musical personalities. Others may select invisible gods and goddesses such as dead ancestors or even Satan himself. Idolatry can be observed all around us in the worship of the gods of intellectual ability, sexuality, wealth, power, position, and family among men and women questing for life. Their theme song can be heard almost every day on the radio and on their own lips: "I did it my way."

Idolatry is condemned in the Scriptures because it degrades both God and the men and women who are created in God's image. People try to capture the gods in tangible form, but in time they become that which they have been worshiping. This is clearly seen in the Canaanite religions as well as in our modern religions. God said through the prophet Hosea, "I found Israel like grapes in the wilderness...But they came to Baal-peor and devoted themselves to shame, and they became as detestable as that which they loved" (Hosea 9:10). Idolatry is also condemned because it is based on the doctrine of demons and leads all who participate in it into worshiping demons (see Deuteronomy 32:17; 1 Corinthians 10:20-21; 1 Timothy 4:1).

In ancient times in the Canaanite religion, El was the father of gods, Asherah his mistress, and Baal the chief male god and the head of the Canaanite pantheon. Baal was the god of life who replenished the earth with crops in the rainy season. Mot was the god of death who ruled in the dry season. Baal is depicted on the various stone images that have been found brandishing a club in one hand and a lightning bolt in the other. On his head he wears a helmet with horns, suggesting his association with the bull, a symbol of fertility. Baal was the great storm god who drove the clouds across the sky and let his voice be heard in the crash of thunder. In violent conflict he drove off Mot and brought rain and fertility to the land. Baal determined when the rain would fall: "Lo, it is the time of his rain; Baal sets the season, and gives forth his voice in the clouds. He flashes lightning to the earth." (Vgaritic51:V:68-71.) He was referred to as the "rider of the clouds through the heaven as though they were horses hitched to his chariot."

As we study 1 Kings 18:20-46 today, I hope that we will all be willing to take a serious look at our own lives and allow the Spirit of God to search our hearts to see if we are presently seeking to serve both the Lord Jesus and some modern-day idols.

The spiritual contest on Mount Carmel

1 Kings 18:20-38

So Ahab sent a message among all the sons of Israel, and brought the prophets together at Mount Carmel. And Elijah came near to all the people and said, "How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him." But the people did not answer him a word. Then Elijah said to the people, "I alone am left a prophet of the LORD, but Baal's prophets are 450 men. Now let them give us two oxen; and let them choose one ox for themselves and cut it up, and place it on the wood, but put no fire under it; and I will prepare the other ox, and lay it on the wood, and I will not put a fire under it. Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD, and the God who answers by fire, He is God." And all the people answered and said, "That is a good idea."

So Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose one ox for yourselves and prepare it first for you are many, and call on the name of your god, but put no fire under it." Then they took the ox which was given them and they prepared it and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon saying, "O Baal, answer us." But there was no voice and no one answered. And they leaped about the altar which they made. And it came about at noon, that Elijah mocked them and said, "Call out with a loud voice, for he is a god; either he is occupied or gone aside, or is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and needs to be awakened." So they cried with a loud voice and cut themselves according to their custom with swords and lances until the blood gushed out on them. And it came about when midday was past, that they raved until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice; but there was no voice, no one answered, and no one paid attention.

Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come near to me." So all the people came near to him. And he repaired the altar of the LORD which had been torn down. And Elijah took twelve stones according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD had come, saying, "Israel shall be your name." So with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD, and he made a trench around the altar, large enough to hold two measures of seed. Then he arranged the wood and cut the ox in pieces and laid it on the wood. And he said, "Fill four pitchers with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood." And he said, "Do it a second time," and they did it a second time. And he said, "Do it a third time," and they did it a third time. And the water flowed around the altar, and he also filled the trench with water. Then it came about at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that Elijah the prophet came near and said, "O LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, today let it be known that Thou art God in Israel, and that I am Thy servant, and that I have done all these things at Thy word. Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that Thou, O LORD, art God, and that Thou hast turned their heart back again." Then fire of the LORD fell, and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the

stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench.

The living God of Israel had through his prophet Elijah fulfilled his promise to withhold rain if his people gave their hearts over to idolatry (see Deuteronomy 28:23-24). This curse was designed by God to bring his people back into a relationship with him. He wanted them to return to their basic calling as a holy nation so that the surrounding nations would be blessed with salvation. After 3 1/2 years God again moved on the heart of Elijah, and he appeared for the second time before King Ahab, who immediately accused him of being the "troubler of Israel." Elijah responded, "I have not troubled Israel, but you and your father's house have, because you have forsaken the commandments of the LORD, and you have followed the Baals" (1 Kings 18:18). Before the Lord would release the rain from the heavens of brass, Elijah wanted to call Baal's bluff in the sight of the king, the vacillating Jewish people, and the prophets of Baal. So he told King Ahab, "Now then send and gather to me all Israel at Mount Carmel [Baal's stronghold], together with 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of the Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table" (1 Kings 18:19).

King Ahab therefore gathered the 850 prophets of Baal and Asherah and the Jewish people and brought them to Baal's stronghold at the top of Mount Carmel, some seventeen miles northwest of Jezreel. This mountain stood 1,732 feet above sea level overlooking the coast of Israel and Lebanon (where today one can see the modern port city of Haifa). As they looked west, all they could see was the beautiful Mediterranean Sea, where the storms began and in their normal season brought life to the earth in that region. This mountain had once had an altar where the Jews worshiped the one and only living God, but Jezebel had destroyed it and replaced it with an altar to Baal.

Elijah, the servant of the living God of Israel, stood before all the enemies of God and the vacillating Jewish community. It would normally be a very scary situation for any man or woman, but this prophet was trusting not in himself but in the God of Israel, who had placed his men and women in similar circumstances in the past. I am sure Elijah remembered how *Yahweh* had provided courage and protection to Moses as he stood before Pharaoh and was able to defeat not only the gods of Egypt but also Pharaoh's army. He remembered how God had given strength to Joshua to defeat the Canaanites in the land of promise. And he remembered many others too numerous to describe, among them Gideon, Samson, and David, in whose lives the Lord had powerfully acted.

Once everyone had arrived on the playing field, Elijah reminded them of their spiritual state by asking them, "How long will you hesitate [limp] between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him. You keep thinking that you can serve God and Baal at the same time." But the people answered him not a word. Jesus would teach his disciples on this same spiritual principle, "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon" (Matthew 6:24). In putting them on the spot in this way, Elijah was acting as God's instrument of grace, trying to get their attention so they could come back from this terrible position of vacillating between two gods.

So Elijah instructed the prophets of Baal to provide two bulls. One they would cut up and place on their altar to be sacrificed to Baal, and one he would sacrifice to the living God of Israel. But neither of them were to light a fire under their sacrifice. Elijah was thinking back to Leviticus 9, and as the high priest Aaron had done before him, he was setting up the sin offering before the people of Israel. When he placed the bull on the altar, every Jew in that audience would remember the Scripture that said, "Then fire came out from before the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the portions of the fat on the altar; and when all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces." (Leviticus 9:24.)

Elijah continued, "Then the prophets of Baal will call on their god for fire, and I will do the same with my God, and the God who answers with fire, He is God." And all the people answered and said, "That is a good idea." Remember, in the minds of the Baal worshipers Baal was a god who held a lightning bolt in one hand. This lightning bolt could start fires on the earth, and so the priests were depending on what they thought was a sure thing.

On the other hand, Elijah's God was also the God who had revealed himself by fire on many occasions in Israel's history. Fire was a symbol of judgment and purification as seen in the judgment of Sodom and

Gomorrah. It was also a symbol of God's presence and power which Moses witnessed at the burning bush and at the giving of the law. It was a symbol of guidance and protection in the pillar of fire by night and the cloud by day on the wilderness journey.

The Baal team was first on field. The prophets of Baal prepared their ox but did not set any fire under the wood, as Elijah had directed. Then they began their pagan rites, dancing in circles, taking off their clothes, and cutting their flesh with knives (pagan religious groups follow much the same rites in Syria even to this day). At the same time they kept calling out to their god, "O Baal, answer us and send fire from heaven," to prove to them and all the people once and for all that he was the only god they should worship. This dancing and calling out to their god went on all morning until high noon. But there was no fire. Finally Elijah egged them on by addressing some of the known activity of the Near Eastern gods: "He is a god; either he is occupied with some other group or project or he has gone aside to the rest room, or he is on a journey or asleep. So you may need to cry out louder to wake him up." So from noon to evening they continued their dancing, calling out to Baal, and cutting themselves. But in all that time they were rewarded with no fire.

This story reminds me of the many services in Christians circles that I have witnessed or read about in which false prophets convinced the people to believe that they could be totally healthy on this earth because God promised that if we approached him in faith he would heal us of all our diseases. And all they needed to do was pray harder, shout louder, and dance longer, and they would be healed---but if they were not healed in that service, it was because of their lack of faith.

Then the Lord's team of two, God himself and Elijah, stepped onto the playing field as the 850 prophets of Baal and Asherah, now physically and emotionally spent, limped off to the sidelines. Elijah then called out for the Jewish people to gather around him before the altar of the Lord that Jezebel had ordered torn down, and he rebuilt it in their sight without fear.

He took not ten stones, which would represent the ten northern tribes of Israel, but twelve stones to represent the united twelve tribes of Israel living in the promised land, serving together the one and only living God Jehovah. In so doing he was going back to the roots of their history and reminded them of God's heart for his people which would come out of the loins of Jacob and his twelve sons: "Israel shall be your name." They were divided politically, but they were not to be divided spiritually.

It was forbidden by Jezebel and Ahab for the Jews to build an altar for Yahweh, but this prophet in the courage of the one and only living God went right ahead. Then around the altar he dug a large trench that would hold some twenty-two quarts of precious water. He put the wood on the altar followed by the slain ox. Then in order to eliminate all doubt from the minds of King Ahab, the prophets of Baal, and the vacillating Jewish community, he did something the prophets of Baal did not do: He had the offering drenched with precious water three times, and then he filled the trench with water, so that in no way could anyone on earth light that fire.

At the time when the evening offering would be held (in the temple of Jerusalem located in the southern tribe of Judah), Elijah walked up to the soaked altar, and without spending a day dancing, screaming, or cutting himself, he simply prayed in a mere moment of time to the one and only living God, *Yahweh*, whom he loved and served. In a voice that all could hear he said, "O LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel [Jacob], you have been our faithful God since the beginning of our history [see Deuteronomy 29:12-13]. Today let it be known that you are God in Israel. Your people have been trying to worship both you and Baal, hoping for abundant life. They have been blinded by the lie that you cannot provide their daily needs. Would you please reveal yourself to the king, your people, and your enemies as the only living God who can offer life and life abundantly. And would you reveal yourself in a way that they can relate to from history, by fire. And let it be known that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their heart back again in repentance from their sin." It was a prayer full of grace, mercy, and tenderness for the salvation of God's people.

"Then fire of the LORD fell, and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench." This fire was so hot that it melted the stones! When it was finished

consuming, there was nothing left. James would later write of this moment, "The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much" (James 5:16). And when all the Jewish people saw it they were no longer limping between two opinions, no longer given to serving two masters, but "they fell on their faces; and they said, "The LORD, He is God; the LORD, He is God."

You will probably agree with me that most of us struggle with trusting in Jesus Christ to provide all the life and blessings he promised. Most of us struggle with the voices of the many gods that have come into our culture and are calling out to us to follow them because they can provide an abundant life and even more in this modern society. Many of us may be tempted to worship our Lord Jesus plus the god of _____ (you fill in the blank).

What are some of our modern-day gods? We begin to worship other gods when the belief creeps into our hearts that it is up to us alone to provide for ourselves and our families. The abundant life, true security, and blessings all come from the ability to hold a good job and having a solid financial base, physical health, a good house in the right neighborhood, and the right schools for our children. None of these are idols in themselves, but we can make them idols if we strive for them without first going before our Lord Jesus to find out if they are what he wants for our personal life and family. (Notice that none of the theologies of the other gods mentions, as God's word does, that he may allow us to lose our jobs, income, homes, families, health, and even life on earth. None mention the words of Jesus: "Take up [your] cross, and follow me" [Matthew 16:24].) We can experience life without those things, but we cannot experience life without our Lord.

Idolatry can come into the church of Jesus Christ when we ascribe divine power and honor to a certain theological system (such as my own seminary in Dallas), to a Christian counseling program, to some personality, to an organization like one of several "twelve-step" programs that now offer some hope for healing, or to such men as Dobson of *Focus on the Family*. These again are not idols in themselves, but we may take them into our hearts and create idols out of them hoping that they will give us the abundant life. Idolatry can come in among us when we ascribe what amounts to divine power and honor to the Republican or Democratic parties, or to Phil Donahue or Rush Limbaugh with the hope that they will save us and our nation.

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might...." and "You shall have no other gods before me." *Yahweh* is the one and only true and living God whom we should worship and to whom we should ascribe power and honor, because he is the only God who can give us life and life abundantly in his Son Jesus Christ.

God's judgment on the false prophets

1 Kings 18:39-40

And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, "The LORD, He is God; the LORD, He is God." Then Elijah said to them, "Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape." So they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon, and slew them there.

Elijah asked the people to seize the false prophets of Baal and Asherah, take them off of Mount Carmel, and slay them in the valley. All 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of the Asherah who ate at Jezebel's table were slain.

Why did Elijah order the death of the prophets of Baal, and why were the Jews so quick to obey his orders? Was this a form of revenge for the slaying of the prophets of God by Jezebel? No! To understand it we need a little history. God had told Abraham that he was going to give him the land of Canaan (see Genesis 17:8) but that he would not rid Canaan of the Amorites until they had sinned to a certain point against the witness of God. Then they would be wiped off the face of the earth as a judgment of God for their idolatry and its results (sexual diseases that infected every man, woman, child, and animal; see Genesis 15:13-17). God told Abraham that his judgment would not fall for some four hundred years until, as we now know, Joshua came, who was to be the sword of God against the Canaanite nations in the land of promise (see Joshua 3:10). Unfortunately, Israel never did fully destroy all within those nations, and by the time of Ahab and Jezebel one

could think the judgment of God was never going to take place.

Now let's look at a word from Deuteronomy 13:1-5. God would allow certain false prophets to come among his people to test them to see if they loved him. But in time, "...that prophet...shall be put to death, because he has counseled rebellion against the LORD your God...So you shall purge the evil from among you." So the sword of the Lord in the hand of one of his prophets against his enemies who were controlled by Satan and Satan's demons was the Lord's judgment executed in righteousness. And it fully demonstrated that he was the one and only living and true God, *Yahweh*.

How are we supposed to deal with false prophets in the church today? As Jesus promised, false prophets do arise (see Matthew 24:11). Paul tells the elders to be on guard for themselves and all the flock, for among them men will arise to speak perverse things to draw the disciples after them (see Acts 20:28-30). Paul then tells us in 2 Corinthians 11:4 and 11:14 that their message is about another Jesus, another gospel, and another spirit, and that they approach the church disguised as apostles of Christ. John tells us that their doctrine denies that Jesus came in the flesh (see 1 John 4:1-3). And Peter encourages us to be aware of who they are and expose them, but then allow God to deal with them; and the promise is that he will (see 2 Peter 2; see also Jude). It is not our responsibility to try to remove the tares from the wheat, to use Jesus' analogy (see Matthew 13:40).

On the other hand, we are to deal with the false gods and prophets in our own hearts as decisively as Elijah dealt with the prophets of Baal. We need to ask God to name them: the fear that God cannot give us life and life abundantly; the lie that we are to be in charge of our own lives; and the lie that only money, power, health, and position are what God has in mind for good Christians. And then we need to ask him to give us the power to choose to cut them out of our lives.

God's mercy extended to Israel

1 Kings 18:41-46

Now Elijah said to Ahab, "Go up, eat and drink; for there is the sound of the roar of a heavy shower." So Ahab went up to eat and drink. But Elijah went up to the top of Carmel; and he crouched down on the earth, and put his face between his knees. And he said to his servant, "Go up now, look toward the sea." So he went up and looked and said, "There is nothing." And he said, "Go back" seven times. And it came about at the seventh time, that he said, "Behold, a cloud as small as a man's hand is coming up from the sea." And he said, "Go up, say to Ahab, 'Prepare your chariot and go down, so that the heavy shower does not stop you.'" So it came about in a little while, that the sky grew black with clouds and wind, and there was a heavy shower. And Ahab rode and went to Jezreel. Then the hand of the LORD was on Elijah, and he girded up his loins and outran Ahab to Jezreel.

Elijah went over to King Ahab, who had just witnessed the amazing presence and power of the living God of Israel, and told him to eat and drink, for standing on that mountain overlooking the Mediterranean Sea they could very clearly hear a storm coming out of the west.

As Ahab went to eat and drink as well as think about his future, Elijah went up to the top of Mount Carmel and crouched down on the earth and put his face between his knees. He began to pray to the one and only living God. Each time he prayed he sent his servant to look for a rain cloud over the Mediterranean Sea. The servant had to go back seven times. But on the seventh time (the Biblical number for perfection or completion) a cloud as small as a man's hand appeared. Then Elijah told his servant to warn Ahab that he should get off the mountain before his chariot got caught in the rain and the mud. "The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much...and [Elijah] prayed...and the sky poured rain, and the earth produced its fruit." (James 5:16-18.) So the rains came, and Ahab did as he was told and headed east down the mountain into the valley of Jezreel, which would then place him on the main road running south some seventeen miles into his capital city Samaria. At the same time the Lord empowered Elijah to outrun the king to Jezreel in order to appear with him as a prophet of truth before Jezebel, who would be waiting for her husband.

You can't read this passage without thinking of the farewell address Joshua gave to the elders of Israel. He stood before them as a victorious general who had defeated the Canaanite nations in the strength of the Lord

and yet understood that the people of God would always struggle with the temptation to serve other gods. He offered them a challenge, a choice, and a personal testimony: "Now...fear the LORD and serve Him in sincerity and truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. And if it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served...or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD." (Joshua 24:14-15.) The choice he offered them was life or death.

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Ron Ritchie
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