

Choose you this day

Have you ever had two people come to you and tell you two different versions of the same story? It's confusing. Who is telling the truth, and who is making up a story? How can you tell the difference? I'd like to tell you a true story today about two different beliefs of what is true, and how they eventually found the answer.

If you have your Bible, turn in it to 1 Kings 18. The events of this story take place around 874 BC in the land of Israel. Israel had its share of bad kings and good kings, and this story takes place during the reign of a very wicked king. His name was Ahab, and he had a wicked wife named Jezebel. Ahab had caused Israel to turn away from God and to start worshipping idols, more than any other king before him. God was so displeased with the way that Ahab had perverted the nation that he promised to not send rain for three years. Israel has a very arid climate and so needs as much rain as it can get. God promised to withhold rain and dew from Israel in punishment for what they had done in serving other gods. The message that God was punishing Israel came by way of a prophet named Elijah, who we meet in chapter 17 of 1 Kings. Elijah, after giving the message that God was going to punish Israel with drought then ran for his life, and God sustained him with food and water. We pick up the story in verse 1.

1 Kings 18:1-2 say "And it came to pass after many days, that the word of the LORD came to Elijah in the third year, saying, 'Go, shew thyself unto Ahab; and I will send rain upon the earth.' And Elijah went to shew himself unto Ahab. And there was a sore famine in Samaria." God, after three years, was ready to give Israel rain again, and so sent Elijah to find King Ahab and tell him the message. If you read verses 3 through 16, you'll see they tell the story of how Elijah finds out where Ahab is, and how there is a man who works for Ahab who is a good man.

Verse 17 gives us the meeting between the man of God and the wicked King: "And it came to pass, when Ahab saw Elijah, that Ahab said unto him, Art thou he that troubleth Israel?" Ahab immediately blames Elijah for the trouble that had been in Israel. He takes no responsibility for his part in causing Israel to sin. He will not admit any wrongdoing. He refuses to "repent," or change his mind about his sin and the way he has been living. Instead, he blames God and the people who love him. This is the way many people deal with problems in their lives. When they reap the consequences for their sinful behavior, they blame God and others.

Elijah replies with an answer in verse 18 and offers a challenge: "And he [Elijah] answered, 'I have not troubled Israel; but thou, and thy father's house, in that ye have forsaken the commandments of the LORD, and thou hast followed Baalim. Now therefore send, and gather to me all Israel unto mount Carmel, and the prophets of Baal four hundred and fifty, and the prophets of the groves four hundred, which eat at Jezebel's table.'" Elijah puts the blame exactly where it belongs: at the feet of Ahab. He says, "ye have forsaken the commandments of the LORD." Elijah was not to blame for the tragedy that was in Israel. God was more than willing to bless Israel with rain, but Ahab would not turn from his wickedness and idolatry. Before God would send the blessings, there had to first be a turning from sin, and a recognition that God alone was the God of the universe.

Elijah then offers the challenge to all of the false prophets that were serving the false gods. There were 850 in total. Elijah tells Ahab to gather them all together on Mt. Carmel, but doesn't tell them why. Ahab has nothing to worry about, what with 850 prophets versus one, and so in verse 20 summons all the prophets to meet with Elijah. These were priests commissioned to worship the god Baal, and they were being funded by Ahab and his wicked wife Jezebel. They all eagerly arrive at Mt. Carmel, along with many people from Israel who were there to find out what Elijah would do.

Finally Elijah arrives and makes a speech. He stands and asks the people a question. It's a very important question, and one that I want you to think about. Verse 21 says, "And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, 'How long halt ye between two opinions? if the LORD be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him.'" Elijah stands and makes three important points:

1. They have been stalled between two opinions. The people had been serving God when it was convenient, and serving Baal when it was convenient. They were trying to practice their religion two ways, but there is a problem with this approach. Let me share some verses with you. James 1:8 says “A double minded man is unstable in all his ways.” God says that someone who is halted between two decisions is unstable. Someone who is trying to please God and trying to please another god is unstable. God will not have half of your worship. In Exodus 34:14, God says, “For thou shalt worship no other god: for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.” God says that He is the only God. No one else deserves the worship reserved for God. No one else should be the object of our affections. God alone is deserving of our worship.

Let me ask you a question before we move on: What has your attention? What do you worship? In order to answer that question, you may need a definition of worship. Webster’s dictionary defines worship in these ways: “To perform acts of adoration, to honor with extravagant love and extreme submission, to respect; to honor; to treat with civil reverence, to adore; to pay divine honors to; to reverence with supreme respect and veneration.” Worship is adoration. Anything you esteem as more worthy than God is an object you are worshipping. Chances are pretty good that you don’t have stone idols at your house that you bow to every day. By this definition, you may say that you are not worshipping a false god. But let me ask you a question: Are there things in your life that are more important to you than God? Your spouse? Your children? Money? Your house? Your car?

2. Elijah says that if God is the true God, then He alone deserves worship. This was a call for Israel to worship God alone, based on the fact that if He really truly is the only God, then to worship other gods would be foolish. This makes perfect sense. For example, you don’t drive an imaginary car; you drive a real car, because only a real car can get you to where you want to go. In the same way, only the true God deserves to be acknowledged and worshipped. Too many people spend their time and attention on things that are not worthy of them. The Bible says in 2 Peter 3:10-11: “But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up. Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness?” God says that this earth will some day burn up, so it is better to put your attention and worship on things that will last. Putting your attention on something that will someday be destroyed is foolish.

3. Elijah says that if Baal is the true god, then he deserves worship. Now, Elijah himself did not believe that Baal was god, but he says, “If Baal can prove that he is god, then you should worship him.” To those people who were trying to worship both God and Baal, Elijah says, in effect, “You don’t have that option. Either God is God, or Baal is god. Find out which is the real god, and then worship him alone.” Elijah is not afraid of the competition. Elijah is convinced of who God is, and that He alone is the true God. My invitation to you this morning is this: If what you worship is really god, put it to the test. See if it can do what gods do.

This is exactly what Elijah did. He put his God to the test, as well as the false god. When Elijah uttered his speech, the Bible says that the people answered him not a word. They had nothing to say, because they knew they had been halted between two opinions. So Elijah then offers his challenge. First he lays out how outnumbered he is, and how unfair this challenge will be. He says in verse 22 “Then said Elijah unto the people, ‘I, even I only, remain a prophet of the LORD; but Baal’s prophets are four hundred and fifty men.’” Elijah points out to the spectators that he is hopelessly outnumbered. It is one versus 450. But as we learned last week, God delights in making Himself look great through little things. Elijah then outlines the rules for the contest in verse 23:

“Let them therefore give us two bullocks; and let them choose one bullock for themselves, and cut it in pieces, and lay it on wood, and put no fire under: and I will dress the other bullock, and lay it on wood, and put no fire under: And call ye on the name of your gods, and I will call on the name of the LORD: and the God that

answereth by fire, let him be God. And all the people answered and said, It is well spoken. And Elijah said unto the prophets of Baal, Choose you one bullock for yourselves, and dress it first; for ye are many; and call on the name of your gods, but put no fire under.”

Elijah instructs the people to give both the prophets and him each a bull to sacrifice. They are to build an altar, and put the slain bull on top. This is meant to be a burnt offering, but here is the caveat: they are not allowed to light a fire underneath the sacrifice. Elijah proposes that the one who is really God will light the sacrifice for them. They are both to call upon their deities, and the true God will answer with fire. This was not a contest that could be rigged. It was simple: Only the true God could produce a miracle, which is exactly what was needed for the sacrifice to light on fire. Only one God would be left standing on that day. When Elijah offered these conditions, the people answered, “It is well spoken.” They said that they would be convinced, if the true God could show up and light the sacrifice on fire.

Elijah let the prophets of Baal go first, and they started to call upon Baal. Verse 26 says that they started in the morning, probably around 9:00, which was the time of the morning sacrifice, and said, “O Baal, hear us.” Can you imagine? For three hours, these false prophets screamed and cried out to their false god, Baal. I would like to point out the sincerity of these false prophets. They really believed that that fire was going to light by the power of their god. They really expected the sacrifice to suddenly start on fire. But the next few words tell what all of their crying accomplished: “But there was no voice, nor any that answered.” Baal did not answer his own prophets, because he could not. Baal is no god.

You see, it doesn’t matter how sincere you are. I meet people who say, “I think that in order to get to heaven, you have to be sincere,” or “You just have to believe.” The problem with that thinking is that there are people who are sincere, but they are sincerely wrong. For example, Hitler sincerely believed that it was right to exterminate other people, but he was sincerely wrong. Friend, it does not matter what you believe, or how sincerely you believe it. If what you believe doesn’t have any basis in reality, then you are believing a lie. If what you believe is based on something untrue, all the believing in the world cannot make it true. Continue reading to see how sincere these prophets were. Verse 26 says that “they leaped upon the altar which was made.” These men went from confident, to sincere, to desperate. They began to leap upon the altar, offering to their false god a human sacrifice. They were so desperate for Baal to act that they offered their own lives.

At this point, Elijah intervenes and mocks them. He says, “Cry aloud: for he is a god; either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth, and must be awaked.” Elijah sarcastically offers them suggestions of how they might contact their god. He recommends that they cry louder. He says that it is possible that Baal is talking to someone else, and cannot hear them. He suggests that perhaps Baal is relieving himself, or that he is on a long trip somewhere else. Elijah suggests that they cry louder in case Baal is sleeping and cannot awake. Elijah knows in his heart that Baal is no god, and that no amount of yelling and screaming would do any good. He points out the fact that was becoming increasingly more obvious to the false prophets and all the spectators: Baal was no god. He could not hear, and could not answer. They had placed their faith in something faulty.

As the situation grew more desperate, the Bible says in verse 28 this: “And they cried aloud, and cut themselves after their manner with knives and lancets, till the blood gushed out upon them.” The false prophets threw themselves onto the altar and started to cut themselves in order to show their devotion to Baal, but it did them no good. There was still no fire, because there was still no god. Verse 29 says this: “And it came to pass, when midday was past, and they prophesied until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that there was neither voice, nor any to answer, nor any that regarded.” Although they continued to scream until the evening sacrifice, which was about 3:00pm, there was no answer. The Bible says, “there was neither voice, nor any to answer, nor any that regarded.” The cries of those prophets for six hours were heard only by the people and Elijah.

Let me pause for a moment and ask you this question. Think carefully how you would answer: “How can you know for sure that when you die, you will be in heaven?” If I asked ten different people, I would most likely get ten different answers. Here are some of the most popular:

“I am a member of my church, and I attend regularly.”

“I give money to my church and charities.”

“I try to do good every day.”

“I’ve never done really bad things, like commit adultery or murder.”

“I don’t believe a loving God would send me anywhere but heaven.”

“I was baptized when I was little, so I will go to heaven.”

“I have a strong faith.”

These things may be true of you, but the question is this: Can these things really assure that you will go to heaven? Can you really trust any of them? This is a question you must ask yourself. You may think that there are many ways to heaven, but is that true? Those false prophets thought that they would be answered, but they were not. They had placed their faith in something that was untrustworthy. How strong is the thing in which you have placed your faith? You who say that your good works will get you to heaven: how good are your works? You who say that your baptism will get you to heaven: where does God say that that is how you will get there? You who are relying on your church attendance to get you to heaven: How strong is your church to get you to heaven? These are questions that deserve answers, no matter how sincere you are.

Finally, Elijah is ready for his turn in this contest. Verses 30-32 say: “And Elijah said unto all the people, Come near unto me. And all the people came near unto him. And he repaired the altar of the LORD that was broken down. And Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, unto whom the word of the LORD came, saying, Israel shall be thy name: And with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD: and he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two measures of seed.” Elijah builds the altar of God and puts his bull on top of the wood, but does not light the sacrifice on fire. The false prophets have had their turn, and now it is Elijah’s turn.

But the Bible records that Elijah did something very unusual. He dug a trench around the altar, and then the Bible says this: “And he put the wood in order, and cut the bullock in pieces, and laid him on the wood, and said, Fill four barrels with water, and pour it on the burnt sacrifice, and on the wood.” Elijah instructs the people to fill four barrels with water and pour it on top of his sacrifice and the wood. This would ensure that the sacrifice would not light. For those of you who have ever gone camping, you know how hard it can be to start a fire with dry wood, let alone wet wood. And as if that weren’t enough, Elijah instructs them to fill the four barrels a second time and again douse the sacrifice. Then, amazingly, Elijah tells them to fill the barrels one last time, and again they pour four barrels of water on top of the sacrifice and wood. The Bible says that by this time the water had soaked the sacrifice and the wood, and the water had filled the trench dug around the altar.

I would like to have seen the looks on the faces of those false prophets at this point. All four hundred and fifty of them had cried for six hours, throwing themselves on the altar, to no avail. Now Elijah was going to try the very same thing all by himself, with an altar soaked with water. But as they watched, Elijah approached the altar, looked toward heaven, and began to pray: “LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word. Hear me, O LORD, hear me, that this people may know that thou art the LORD God, and that thou hast turned their heart back again.” There is no crying, no pleading, and no throwing himself on the altar. Elijah made a simple request to God, and says that the reason he has done all of this is so “that this people may know that thou art the LORD God, and that thou hast turned their heart back again.” Elijah wants God to get the credit.

Does this seem too simple? A simple prayer of 63 words to a being with which Elijah is very familiar. The prophets may have been thinking: “It can’t be that simple. You have to show your god that you really mean it.” But God can see the heart, and He knows that there was absolutely nothing Elijah could have done. Again, let me ask you my question: “How can you know for sure that when you die, you will be in heaven?” The Bible

offers only one answer to this question: Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Let me share some verses with you.

Acts 4:12 says this: “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.” There is no other way to heaven but by Jesus Christ. Acts 16:31 says this: “And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.” You must believe on Jesus. But what must you believe about Him? Romans 10:9-10 says this: “That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.” The very last verse of the Gospel of John says this: “But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.”

The Bible makes it very clear: There is only one way to know that you are on your way to heaven. The only way that God says you can get to heaven is by belief in Jesus Christ. You must believe that Jesus died on the cross for your sins. Jesus, who lived a perfect life, died as a criminal, suffering the wrath of God, the wrath that you or I deserved. The Bible says that if you will repent of your sins and ask God for the forgiveness, you can be saved. No works, no rituals, no clean life. Life in heaven and forgiveness of sins is a gift of God. This gift can be received today, right where you are, by simply believing in Jesus. Believe that what He did, He did for you: in your place and on your behalf.

So what happened to Elijah? Verse 38 says “Then the fire of the LORD fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench.” The fire that fell from God was so hot and complete that it burned up the sacrifice, wood, and even the stones. All the water that had been sitting in the trench dried up. God came and proved that He alone was God. God did what Baal could not and did not do. That day God showed that He was the true God. When the people saw what had happened, the Bible says, “they fell on their faces: and they said, The LORD, he is the God; the LORD, he is the God.” The people were convinced, and were no longer interested in serving both God and Baal. They had been convinced that God was the only God, and thus the only God worth worshipping.

At that, Elijah stood and said, “Take the prophets of Baal; let not one of them escape.” The people took all the prophets and killed them. Then Elijah turned to Ahab and told him to prepare for rain. The end of this story says that Elijah went to the top of the mountain and prayed for God to send rain, and He did.

Before I end this radio broadcast, let me ask you one final question: “How long will you wait before you decide that God is telling the truth about the only way of salvation?” This is the very same question Elijah asked the people: “How long halt you between two opinions?” You say you believe that God never lies and always tells the truth, but you won’t believe what He says about salvation. You are a religious person, but have never accepted the free gift of salvation. You want it to be more complicated than a simple turning from sin and believing in Jesus. When will you believe what God has said? Will you accept His gift today? If you need some more information about this, please don’t hesitate to contact us. You can do so in the following ways:

You can stop by our church building, which is located at 909 West 8th St., by the softball diamonds. You can call us at 732-3321. Or you can e-mail us at church@fbcpr.org. That’s church at F B C P R dot O R G. If you would like a free copy of this program or a transcript, you may find it on our website tomorrow, which again is www.fbcpr.org. Please join us again next week for the Way of Truth Radio Broadcast, brought to you by the First Baptist Church of Park Rapids, Minnesota.