

turned back. They were convicted of their sin and converted. Only the Lord is God. That is what they had been taught from the beginning. That was their creed.

Deut 6:4 - 5 ⁴Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.

⁵You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

This is the heart of biblical religion: the demand for allegiance to one God and only one. Jesus pointed out that the command to love God allows no other allegiance:

Matt 6:24 ^{24c}No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

Queen Victoria of England also reigned as Empress of India. The Maharajah of Punjab, when a little boy, showed his allegiance, by sending her a magnificent diamond. It became one of the crown jewels and was safely kept in the Tower of London. When he became a man, he went to London to pay his respects to the Queen. The young man asked the Queen if he could see the diamond. The precious jewel was brought in and presented before the Indian prince. Then, taking the diamond and kneeling before the Queen, he said with deep emotion, "Madam, I gave you this jewel when I was too young to know what I was doing. I want to give it again, in the fullness of my strength, with all my heart, and affection, and gratitude, now and forever, fully realizing all that I do."

Allegiance is more than just words. Elijah commanded the people who had returned to the Lord to take the prophets of Baal and slay them. According to the law, their crimes against God and man required the death penalty. This is where NT supersedes OT. We are not required to show our allegiance to Christ alone by acts of brutality, but by acts of love. We show our allegiance to Christ by the way we live. In our lives we are meant to imitate Him. Jesus has taken the brutality on himself so that we can live in righteousness.

CONCLUSION

Elijah had asked, **How long will you go limping with two different opinions?** How long will you straddle the issue; sit on the fence. Is it Baal or God? Who will you worship and serve? It's make up your mind time. *Who is on the Lord's side?*

Master, Thou wilt keep us, by Thy grace divine,

Always on the Lord's side—Savior, always Thine!

1

GREAT BAALS OF FIRE

1 Kings 18:20-40

INTRODUCTION

In England in 627 Edwin, King of Northumbria, had wavered between two opinions. In spite of all the teaching and preaching of the missionary, Paulinus, the King found it difficult to decide between paganism and Christianity. One day he and his court listened again to the words of Paulinus. Many of his councilors were already sure in their own minds that their gods were worthless, but still the King held back. What if the old gods were real after all? Then Coifi, the pagan High Priest, sprang to his feet. 'O King, I have long ceased to believe in gods which cannot hear or answer prayer. I believe this man has a message for us, and that he can show us the way to heaven. Sire, give me a spear and a horse, and let me do my will.' Coifi rode to where stood a pagan temple, a rough green hedge circling a few wooden idols. Followed by his priests, he dashed up to the foremost idol and flung his spear into its ugly mass. Then he reined in his horse and stood motionless. He was waiting. If the gods were angry, would they not there and then strike him dead? Would not a flash of lightning wither him, or the very earth open and swallow him? But there was neither flash nor tremor. Then Coifi commanded his priests to set fire to the idol; and by the time the King and his retinue rode up to the scene, the temple was in flames—and there, unharmed, stood Coifi, his spear still in the foremost idol. Edwin was convinced. They rode back to York, and there Paulinus baptized him.

Just so did Elijah challenge the people of Israel who had turned from the LORD to worship Baal.

UNREAL AND UNHEARD

Elijah told King Ahab to come with the prophets of Baal and Asherah (Baal's consort) to Mount Carmel – a high promontory that juts out into the Mediterranean Sea. To them and the people who had come to see the contest Elijah issues his challenge.

1 Kin 18:21 "...; "How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him."

Joshua, in his final message to the people of Israel had challenged them to make the same choice. Then the people had responded by renewing their allegiance to the LORD. Now, the people of Israel were silent. Elijah proposed a test. It was to be done according to the Scriptures, in the way Aaron had established, by sacrifice. The 450 prophets of Baal were to choose two bulls, one for their offering and the other for Elijah. Each would build an altar, put the wood and the sacrifice in place, but set no fire to it. Then each would pray for his god to send fire to burn

up the sacrifice. The multitude agreed to this. The majority should go first. All day long the prophets of Baal prayed and called out to Baal to send down fire from heaven. There was wailing and ecstatic dancing as they worked themselves up into a frenzy beseeching Baal to hear them. It went on all morning.

1 Kin 18:27 ²⁷At noon Elijah mocked them, saying, “Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.”

Would a god be doing all these things and not hear his people’s prayers. “On a journey” is even a sarcastic euphemism for *gone to the bathroom!* The fact is, Baal is unreal and prayers go unheard. Baal was a fertility god. His worshippers expect to live a life of materialistic prosperity and pleasure. The LORD required the high spirituality and morality of his commandments. Jesus said that no-one can serve two masters. Who is it going to be? How many still have gods that are unreal. Power, wealth, sex, career bring no satisfaction: unreal gods who do not and cannot hear our prayers. There may not be an outright denial of God. The temptation is to hedge our bets. Just in case God cannot deliver we have an alternative. The story of Elijah shows us that the alternative is unreal and our prayers go unheard.

REAL AND RESPONSE

What gave the religion of Israel then and gives Christianity now an unequalled vitality is the conviction that the God of Israel is alive, real, and always available; able and willing to act. For us that is summed up in the words: **Christ is risen!**

Despite all the shouting, all the frenzied activity of the prophets of Baal nothing happened. In the late afternoon, Elijah told the people to gather around. He rebuilt an altar of the Lord, building it with twelve stones. He laid the wood and the sacrifice in place. He then dug a trench all round it and drenched everything with water. There was no earthly way the sacrifice could burn. It was the time of the oblation – the evening sacrifice. Way to the south in the temple in Jerusalem the regular sacrifice would be offered. It was the right time.

1 Kin 18:36 - 37 ³⁶... the prophet Elijah came near and said, “O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your bidding. ³⁷Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.”

Then the fire of the LORD fell! God not only answered, but answered in such a way that the contrast with Baal was unmistakable. The lightning fire consumed not only the wood and the sacrifice but even the stones and the soil, even though everything had been drenched in water. All the wailing and wild ritual of the prophets of Baal that had lasted for most of the day had been met only with silence. Elijah’s prayer took less than a minute, but produced spectacular and amazing results. What made the difference was the one being addressed. Baal was nothing, The Lord was everything. The Lord is completely committed to his people who, sadly, are not always as committed to him. In this he is totally different from Baal or any other so-called god whether ancient or modern. The gods of the nations, like Baal, were no better than earthly dictators who are capricious, interested only in themselves. Baal could never be counted on to act for the good of his devotees. They might go through prescribed rituals, use the right words but it was never more than *cultivating the gods* from which we get our word, *cult*. Elijah was not just being sarcastic, but showing that Baal could not be counted on. It is a fact. You cannot count on Baal for he does not exist. With the Lord it is quite different. He hears and answers our prayers, today just as much as he heard and answered Elijah. Our prayers may not be answered as quickly or as dramatically as Elijah’s. Jesus taught his disciples to pray and to persevere in prayer.

A farmer said how lightning struck an old shed and thus saved him the trouble of tearing it down, and rain washed off his car and saved him the trouble of doing it himself.. When asked what he was doing now, he replied, “Praying for an earthquake to shake the potatoes out of the ground.”

God answers prayer; sometimes, when hearts are weak,
He gives the very gifts believers seek.
But often faith must learn a deeper rest,
And trust God’s silence, when He does not speak;
For he whose name is Love will send the best.
Stars may burn out nor mountain walls endure,
But God is true; His promises are sure
To those who speak. (*M. G. Plantz*)

CONVICTED AND CONVERTED

When the people saw what happened they were left in no doubt. Baal was nothing. They reaffirmed their allegiance to the Lord. They fell on their faces and cried out: **The LORD indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God.** That shout is also the meaning of the name Elijah. They realized how they had turned away from God, but now they