

## Get Off The Fence!

1 Kings 18:21-24; Exodus 32:26

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God describes three types of people that were present there on Mt. Carmel in Israel. First, there were the idolatrous prophets of Baal and others that were completely sold out to serving Baal. Second, there was Elijah, the prophet of God, who was sold out to serving Jehovah, the one true living God. Third, there was a group of people who wavered in their minds back and forth between Baal and Jehovah.

One might think that those who wavered were in a safer position before God than those who were committed to serving Baal. However, the prophet of the Lord, Elijah, makes it clear how dangerous was the position of those who bounced back and forth from Baal to Jehovah and from Jehovah to Baal. In effect, Elijah declares, "Get off the fence. Stand on one side or the other. Declare who it is you will serve and follow with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength and then do it—Baal or Jehovah." Moses had earlier made the same challenge to Israel (Exodus 32:26). Likewise, so had Joshua (Joshua 24:15). Was not the voice of the Lord Jesus on this matter also decisive (Matthew 6:24; Matthew 12:30)?

Many tend to think that all is well because they are not against God ("I may not be fully committed to Jesus Christ and walk in loving obedience to His commandments, but I am not against Him"). Jesus like Elijah declares in effect, "Get off the fence. To not be for me is to be against me." There is no middle ground. God is not impressed with your apathy in matters that will determine where you spend eternity. God is not impressed with your procrastination in delaying such urgent matters of life and death. This is not a game. There is nothing more important. Who will you trust to save you? Who will be your Savior and Lord? Who will you follow all the days of your life? This was Elijah's appeal to Israel of long ago, and this is the Lord's appeal to you today.

Let us consider the challenge of Elijah to Israel in the following main points: (1) The Challenge Issued by Elijah (1 Kings 18:21); (2) The Challenge Accepted by the People (1 Kings 18:22-24).

### I. The Challenge Issued by Elijah (1 Kings 18:21).

A. The great day has now arrived in Israel in which the Lord will demonstrate that He alone is God, and there is none other. King Ahab, the 450 prophets of Baal, the rulers of the people, and perhaps many of the commoners were all there on one side. And then there was Elijah, the faithful prophet of the Lord, seemingly all alone, on the other side. There was probably never such a lop-sided assembly of people ever gathered. And yet Elijah stood for the Lord, even if he was the only one on that occasion that would do so. He knew he was not alone, for God, the King of all the earth was with Him. The larger group of people was actually the one that was in the minority. As the Apostle Paul declared in Romans 8:31, "If God be for us, who can be against us?" Dear ones, you who are united to Jesus Christ by faith alone are not victims (regardless of what you have or are going through). You are more than conquerors through Christ who loved you (Romans 8:37). See yourself as a victim and everything seems hopeless. Account yourself to be a conqueror in Christ and hope will shine in the darkness.

B. Elijah takes the initiative in this spiritual battle on Mt. Carmel issuing the challenge (1 Kings 18:21). Elijah does not address those who are committed to serving Baal, but rather addresses those who wavered back and forth between Jehovah and Baal.

#### 1. **Elijah's question:** "How long halt ye between two opinions?"

a. How long are ye going to shift back and forth in your thoughts and words as to

who is the living God? You are like a person whose hip joint is out of place on the left side, so he leans that way toward Baal. And then at another time you are like a person whose hip joint is out of place on the right side, so he leans that way toward Jehovah. This is not a good place to be in making important decisions (going back and forth in your mind over important matter), but especially it's not good in matters of faith, religion, and truth that relate to your obedience or disobedience to God's commandments.

b. Israel was a kingdom bound to God by covenant (at Mt. Sinai) and yet a rebellious kingdom that had been unfaithful to the Lord who saved and rescued her from Egyptian bondage. Israel had become a grossly unfaithful church. There should have been no need to put such a question to Israel. It should have been abundantly clear to all those assembled that Jehovah was their God and that they were His people. They were an unfaithful bride to their loving Husband. They were a rebellious son to their good Father. And yet the Lord condescends to put this question to them in order to show the absurdity of their rebellion and duplicity in wavering between Baal and Jehovah. God could have destroyed Israel, but He is longsuffering and that should lead us to repentance rather than making excuses for our sin (Romans 2:4).

c. How the Lord despises the non-committed life of one who is neither hot nor cold, but is lukewarm in following Jesus Christ, His gospel, and His commandments (Revelation 3:15-16). Jesus says that He would have a person cold rather than lukewarm. The cold person who knows he/she is not a Christian, who knows and lives in unrepentant sin, who makes no commitment to Jesus Christ is not pretending to be something he/she is not. However, the lukewarm person pretends to be hot around Christians, but lives at other times much like an unbeliever in language, movies, websites, marriage, music, and befriending the world rather than Christ (James 4:4). This lukewarmness is an apathy that comes from pride in being consumed with one's self over being consumed with Jesus Christ (Revelation 3:17).

(1) There are just too many more "important" things in the life of the lukewarm to which he/she is committed that prevents him/her from serving the Lord with all one's heart. The lukewarm person is the person who will compromise what is true because having the approval of others is more important than the approval of God. Dear ones, who is lord of your life? Is it Jesus or you? Jesus or your work? Jesus or your family? Jesus or your possessions? Jesus or your lusts?

(2) How long will you halt between two opinions? You cannot serve two masters. Humble yourself before the Lord. Come to Christ believing and confessing Him as alone Savior AND Lord. Make Him your supreme treasure (Matthew 6:21). Get off the fence. You cannot make your life about yourself Monday through Friday and then on the Lord's Day appear with God's people to go through the motions of worship. God does not want nor demand half of you or a part of you, He demands all of you—your devotion, loyalty, faithfulness, love, and obedience. Either He is Lord of all and of all of you, or He is Lord of nothing and no part of you. There is no neutrality.

(3) Does it mean that you are lukewarm because you don't have the same emotional high every day or because you struggle against temptations and sin in your life? No. Does it mean that you are lukewarm because you fall into sin or assert your own will or pleasure over Christ's? Not necessarily. The issue is what do you do with your struggles with sin and failures in sin? Are you complacent, apathetic, and indifferent? Or do you grieve over this offense against the Lord, turn in faith to Christ as your righteousness eyeing the mercy of God in Christ Jesus, and renew your love and obedience to Jesus Christ and His gospel and commandments? That is one who is hot for the Lord. Where there is a Christian who is growing in hating his sin and in loving the gospel and commandment of Jesus Christ, that is one who is hot for the Lord. That one who is hot and not lukewarm cries out, "Lord, take all of me, not just a part of me. Crush my pride. Thou art my life and reason for living."

2. **Elijah's Challenge:** "If the LORD be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him." Get off the fence. There was no doubt in Elijah's mind who was the one true living God. But he presents this challenge already knowing that as God's prophet what the Lord will do to demonstrate that He alone is God. The outcome was certain, and Elijah had already received God's Word. Elijah is challenging the people to

commit themselves to following Jehovah once the Lord shows forth His power and might to them.

3. **The People's Response:** "And the people answered him not a word." Why were they silent? They did not yet want to commit themselves wholly and entirely to Baal or to Jehovah. They yet wanted to stay where they thought they were safe—they were uncommitted—halting and wavering. This was not an innocent silence, but rather a guilty silence. Instead of being hot or cold, they would try to walk the fence of lukewarmness, compromise, safety, and comfort, rather than committing themselves entirely. This is not acceptable to the Lord.

## II. The Challenge Accepted by the People (1 Kings 18:22-24).

A. Elijah points out the odds and risks to him by speaking alone for Jehovah God—he was greatly outnumbered and overawed from a human perspective by the religious and political powers arrayed against him (1 Kings 18:22). From a human perspective, Elijah did not stand a chance. No one was willing to come to his side and stand with him from among the lukewarm. That is another indication of lukewarmness—when the truth of Jesus Christ is under attack—the lukewarm are mere bystanders and spectators. They are not willing to put their reputation or comforts on the line, nor to deny themselves, nor to take up their cross, and follow Christ. What are you willing to risk for Christ, the gospel, and His commandments? The reproach of family and friends? The ridicule of co-workers? The loss of a job? What is it for you to live (Philippians 1:21)?

B. Elijah now presents a most reasonable test to the people as to demonstrating whether Baal was God or whether Jehovah was God (1 Kings 18:23-24).

1. This was a trial by fire. Baal worshippers declared that Baal was the god of fire—who controlled the sun, the heat, the lightning, and the rain—who controlled all that which pertained to nature. Surely, if Baal was the god of fire, he would be able to light and consume the sacrifice offered to him. However, if Jehovah was the one true living God, the Creator of all that is seen and not seen and the Redeemer of Israel, then He would certainly bring fire/lightning from heaven to consume the sacrifice offered to Him.

2. The specific challenge was that "the God that answereth by fire, let him be God" (1 Kings 18:24). This implies that the god who does not is a false god, a lying delusion, a phony that has been used to mislead and deceive the people of Israel. At this point the people now having heard the terms of the contest, loudly proclaim, "It is well spoken" (literally, "the word is good"). The leaders and people consent to the challenge. Ahab and the prophets of Baal, have no choice but to accept the challenge if they are to save face and to avoid humiliation and embarrassment. Ahab and the prophets of Baal had to realize the terrible predicament they were in; for they knew it was Jehovah who had brought the drought in the first place (and if Baal had been able to bring rain, he would have already done so).

3. They outnumbered Elijah, but they had no reason to hope that Baal would or could send fire if he could not send rain. Elijah had every reason to hope that Jehovah who had stopped the rain could also send fire from heaven. And dear ones, you have every reason to hope in the Lord that He will be with you, uphold you, strengthen you, provide for you, forgive you, love you, sanctify you, and glorify you. Why? Because Jesus was powerfully and gloriously raised from the dead. If Jesus remained in the grave, all hope is gone. He was an imposter and a liar. If Jesus was raised from the dead, all that He said He was and all that He said He would provide are absolutely true.

C. Why settle this contest by fire rather than by rain? God will send the rain subsequently, but He must first send fire to consume the sacrifice for sin before He sends the blessing of rain upon the land.

1. Back in Leviticus 9:24, we read of the first instance of the Lord miraculously sending fire

to consume the sacrifice offered to Him. What is the significance of this? It signified that God had accepted the offering made as a payment for sin, guilt, and condemnation to all who believed. It signified that God's holy anger over sin was removed and that He was reconciled to His people who trusted Him.

2. This was also the significance of Elijah's sacrifice and God consuming it by fire. Before the blessing of rain, sin must be paid for by a substitutionary death. Then and only then will there be pardon and forgiveness from God.

3. This clearly points to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for the sins of all who will trust Him. Only through that sacrifice will there be forgiveness and peace with God. There is no other way to the Father than through the Son of God—Jesus Christ. God did not send literal fire from heaven when Jesus died as the sacrifice for sin, but did something even greater—He raised Jesus from the dead to demonstrate that our sins were truly forgiven, that He was reconciled to us who trust Him, and that all the promises made to us in Christ would be fulfilled and realized. The resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ was God's fire from heaven for all who look in faith to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

As I close, do not turn away from the question of Elijah: "How long halt ye between two opinions?" How long are you going to delay in coming to Jesus Christ? How long are you going to wait to surrender all to His lordship over you? You may be a child, or a teen, or a young or older adult. The question is the same. Delay not. Fall upon the mercy of God.

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