

**READ:** I Kings 18:17-40 (ESV)

When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, "Is it you, you troubler of Israel?" And he answered, "I have not troubled Israel, but you have, and your father's house, because you have abandoned the commandments of the LORD and followed the Baals. Now therefore send and gather all Israel to me at Mount Carmel, and the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table." So Ahab sent to all the people of Israel and gathered the prophets together at Mount Carmel.

And Elijah came near to all the people and said, "How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." And the people did not answer him a word. Then Elijah said to the people, "I, even I only, am left a prophet of the LORD, but Baal's prophets are 450 men. Let two bulls be given to us, and let them choose one bull for themselves and cut it in pieces and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. And I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood and put no fire to it. And you call upon the name of your god, and I will call upon the name of the LORD, and the God who answers by fire, he is God." And all the people answered, "It is well spoken."

Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many, and call upon the name of your god, but put no fire to it." And they took the bull that was given them, and they prepared it and called upon the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, "O Baal, answer us!" But there was no voice, and no one answered. And they limped around the altar that they had made. And at noon Elijah mocked them, saying, "Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened." And they cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them. And as midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention.

Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come near to me." And all the people came near to him. And he repaired the altar of the LORD that had been thrown down. Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD came, saying, "Israel shall be your 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 seahs of seed. And he put the wood in order and cut the bull in pieces and laid it on the wood. And he said, "Fill four jars 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 ran around the altar and filled the trench also with water. And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near and said, "O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and 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 hearts back." Then the 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. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, "The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God." And Elijah said to them, "Seize the prophets of Baal; let not one of them escape." And they seized them. And Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon and slaughtered them there.

ENTER THE STORY:

The nation of Israel was designed by God to be a theocracy, which is a system of government where Yahweh is King and Israel is his chosen people. But remember, it was designed to be more than just a government...it was a covenant

partnership, like a marriage – Yahweh, the groom and Israel, the bride. As we’ve already seen, in this covenant there were rules. God gave them ten commandments that would guide them to know how to live with him and worship him. The first commandment is *“You shall have no other gods before me,”* and the second has a similar idea... *“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God...”* (Ex. 20:3-5).

This seems pretty straight forward, but there was just one problem... Israel struggled to be faithful to Yahweh. They were tempted by everything. If it sparkled and shimmered and offered something that looked better, they chased after it and worshiped it with their whole heart, to the devastation of their groom.

The horrors of idolatry continued with King Solomon and his many foreign wives, and as a consequence, God divided the once united nation of Israel into two kingdoms. The northern kingdom kept the name Israel and the southern kingdom became known as Judah. Neither kingdom was truly faithful, but the sin of idolatry stained the entire history of the northern kingdom, which saw ALL nineteen kings fail to obey and follow God. Every single king led the nation of Israel further and further into idolatry and further and further away from the heart of Yahweh.

It is during the reign of the seventh king of the northern kingdom of Israel, King Ahab and his wife Jezebel, that we pick up in our story today with a prophet named Elijah doing battle with 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah. 850 prophets to two false gods, and Elijah is the ONLY prophet left for Yahweh...or so he thinks. We find out soon enough that there are other prophets God has preserved for himself, but Elijah doesn’t know that and he is out to prove to the people that Yahweh is the ONLY true God.

This leads to a contest between Baal and Yahweh. It’s not a fair fight, of course, because Baal isn’t real. This god is a figment of their imagination, a mutation from a culture that believes in gods with limited power. One god to help with fertility...one god to help with crops...one god to keep you healthy, and on and on it goes. And then there is Yahweh, who claims to do it all with ease, because he is omnipotent and omniscient...all powerful and all knowing.

Baal’s time to shine comes and goes with no response from their “god.” When Elijah’s time comes, however, he wants to leave no doubt who the real God is. He builds a twelve stone altar to represent the twelve tribes of Israel, and he has them pour twelve buckets of water on the wood until it is completely soaked.

He then prays and asks God to show up and reveal his presence and power...and God does just that. Holy fire from heaven rains down on the altar and consumes everything...the offering, the wood, the stones, the dust on the ground AND the water in the trench, because *OUR GOD IS A CONSUMING FIRE* (Hebrews 12:29).

And when the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, “The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God.” They were convinced, and they believed...at least for a while. Unfortunately, their faithfulness wouldn’t last forever. It wouldn’t be long before Israel would turn away from Yahweh again, and look to other gods to satisfy their deepest needs.

Our idols looks a little different today...but our hearts chase after them just the same.

As we sing in the song “Come Thou Fount,” we are all prone to wander and leave the God we love, so we must look to something better to satisfy our needs and hold us close. By God’s grace we have Jesus, who is the bread of life; *and said, “...whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.”* (John 6:35)

He alone can satisfy our deepest longings...so let’s continue feasting on his Word this season as we look forward to the celebration of the arrival of the Bread of Life!

PRAY: Heavenly Father, forgive us when our hearts wander away from you and fall in love with the things of this world. Thank you for showing yourself to us when we doubt you, Lord. Remind us this Christmas season of the ONLY gift worth waiting for! Amen.