

The Showdown

I Kings 18:20-40

The LORD enjoys being God. He is perfectly happy in Himself. He does not doubt His perfections, nor does He question His right to make all decisions. And the Lord cherishes the honor of His own Name. In fact, the living God created all things for the praise of His Name.

If we stumble on this truth about God and, we will have big trouble with much of scripture. **This theme of God's pursuit of His own glory runs all throughout the Bible from beginning to end.** If we struggle with God being jealous for His own honor then the story that is before us today **will disturb us rather than delight us.** Elijah's showdown with the prophets of Baal is essentially a story of God being jealous for His name and acting to preserve the worship of His own person among His own people.

PROTEST: How do we know that God cherishes His own name and treasures His own glory? Answer: He tells us that this is so. Consider just a few scriptures this morning:

You remember what God said regarding Pharoah during the days of Moses:

But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth. (Exo 9:16 ESV)

Remember the warning God gave to Israel before they were to enter the promised land.

Take care, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, . . . You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars and cut down their Asherim (for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God), (Exo 34:12-14 ESV)

Remember God's testimony to us through Isaiah:

"For my name's sake I defer my anger, for the sake of my praise I restrain it for you, . . . Behold, . . . I have tried you in the furnace of affliction. For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another. (Isa 48:9-11 ESV)

In the NT, God says that He works all things to the end that our whole life would be “for the praise of His glory”. (Ephesians 1)

Protest: *“This seems self-centered. Is it right for God to love His own glory?”*

Answer: Yes, it is right and good for God to love His glory. We would be left without His hope, without His love, without His peace, without forgiveness of sin if God did not pursue His own glory. God’s pursuit of His own glory keeps death and sin and darkness from having the last word over us.

Main Idea: The LORD alone is the one true and living God. He commands us to make a choice to only worship Him and not any other gods.

In this story God puts His glory display in five ways. **If you are taking notes, jot down five ways that God demonstrates His glory in I Kings 18:20-40.**

God Shows Us His Glory through the . . .

1. Confrontation.

*20 So Ahab sent to all the people of Israel and gathered the prophets together at Mount Carmel.
21 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.” (1 Kings 18:20–21 [ESV](#)).*

God could have ignored what was going on in Israel and let the people continue to worship Baal and Asherah. **What would have been the harm?**

Some sins seem more evil and harmful to us: murder, rape, incest, violent assault . . . **we more readily accept God’s righteous acts to remove them from our world. But the sin of idolatry often seems benign to us.** We do not see it as a cancer that will kill not only our soul, but all mankind as well.

God’s view of idolatry is much different from man’s. God understands that false gods are not benign deities who benefit the lives of their worshippers. **No, false gods are created by spiritual forces of evil. The motivation of these spiritual forces is to destroy people’s lives.**

In 1 Corinthians 10, the apostle Paul reflects on the idolatry committed by the Israelites in the OT and how God put 25,000 Israelites to death when they were seduced to worship Baal in Numbers 25.

Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were; . . . Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.” (1 Corinthians 10:6-7, 14 [ESV](#)).

What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?” (1 Corinthians 10:19–22 [ESV](#))

Truth: The worship of false gods is really the worship of demons.

If God left the Israelites to worship Baal, the people would have been without His hope, outside of His loving covenant, without His promises for life, and without His truth to guide them. They would have been a people forever stumbling about in darkness and death and slavery to demonic forces.

So in love and righteousness, the LORD calls Israel together to confront them for their idolatry and to show them His glory and His power.

Truth: God’s pursuit of His glory and God’s pursuit for the welfare of His own people are not in conflict. God’s glory IS our good!!

In love, God asks the question, *“How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.”*

This question is as relevant today as it was in the days of Elijah. Keep in mind that this is NOT a question given to the Sidonians. **This is a question given to the people of Israel . . . the LORD’s own covenant people.** So this morning, I do not ask this question of the world around me. I ask it of us . . . the church of Jesus. **How long will the people of God go limping between two opinions?**

Question: But Christians do not really worship idols today, do we?

Idols have never vanished from any place at any time in the history of the world. The false gods may take different shapes or names, but false worship is the most common kind of worship.

Late last year, the “Barna Group” published a chilling survey of EVANGELICALS in the United States, looking at how we base our WORLDVIEW. Here is what they

found—again—among evangelicals:

56% Believe God accepts all religions and that He changes with the times.

38% Believe Jesus was only a great teacher, but not God.

60% Believe the Holy Spirit is “a force” but not a personal being.

37% Believe that RELIGIOUS BELIEF is a matter of personal opinion, and not based on objective truth.

Friends, this describes idolatry in the church. I asked myself, what other forms of idolatry are pervasive in the church? Five thoughts came to mind:

--Literal idols. Paganism is on the rise in our culture and some in the church of Jesus. Syncretism is accepted by many where worshippers do not see a conflict with worshipping Jesus AND Allah or Hindu deities or Tribal gods or some statue of a saint.

--Promising Superstitions. When Christians believe in superstitions like horoscopes, seances, ouiji boards, fortune tellers, throwing salt over our shoulders or hundreds of other practices, we are believing that spiritual forces are governed by powers other than the true God. That is idolatry.

--Demonic honor. The sins of drugs and sexual perversion give honor to demons and place the person under the control of the evil one. False worship all through biblical history made these sins central to its nature. That is no accident. When Christians engage in sexual relationships outside of marriage, in pornography and in drug use . . . they are not merely doing something immoral. They are worshipping false gods and inviting demonic control into their lives.

--Distorted Jesus. The Jesus many worship is the opposite of the Jesus in the Gospels.

--Secular religion. Perhaps the most dominant false god. The prophets of secular religion abound in the blogs, in the media, in the arts, in the government. **Secular religion demands that we bow to the idol of Autonomous Self.** The prophets of Autonomous Self say you can create your own identity, you can be your own person, you are enough, you are powerful, you are worth sacrificing for, you are ultimate!

And believers often listen to these demonic voices and become seduced by them. For instance, believers attitude toward infants in the womb often betrays the false worship of Autonomous Self. In the OT, false gods demanded the sacrifice of children on their altars. Today, we might flinch at the thought of putting a baby on an altar and having a religious leader put a knife against it. **But the gods of Automous Self have convinced many inside that church that when a physician priest takes a knife to a baby in the womb, it is not that evil.**

How long? How long will you go limping between two opinions? If the LORD is God then worship Him? If your Autonomous Self is god, then worship that. But choose!!

Often we are not aware that we are limping. **We have limped so long between the LORD and some other god that we have grown accustomed to the conflict.**

Illustration: My knee. Did you hurt your knee? I was not even aware. New normal for me.

Application: "Little children, keep yourselves from idols." (1 John 5:21 [ESV](#))

2. Contest.

22 Then Elijah said to the people, "I, even I only, am left a prophet of the LORD, but Baal's prophets are 450 men. 23 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. 24 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."'" (1 Kings 18:22–24 [ESV](#))

Notice which side wins the vote. 450 Baal prophets to one. The people are yet undecided, but leaning toward Ahab and the 450.

Truth is not to be judged by the numbers of people who support it.

"If it's true, it's true even if no one believes it. If it's false, it's false, even if everyone believes it." Os Guinness

How do we know the truth? Jesus said to His Father, "Thy Word is truth!"

By human processes, Ahab should have been the one defining the terms of the contest. He is the King of Israel. Yet God establishes Elijah as the one who will define the details of this contest. Why? Because the details of the contest are important to God. Every part of this contest is a message from the LORD to the people.

Through Elijah, God chose for the contest to include two bulls to be sacrificed upon an altar. The LORD also chose for fire from heaven to be the means by which God's power would be known.

THESE TWO DETAILS ARE VERY SIGNIFICANT TO THE MESSAGE OF THE LORD:

- 1. God is using to sacrifice of the bull to point His people back to their need for His saving grace in their lives.**
- 2. God is using the fire that consumes the sacrifice to remind His people of His holiness and glory.**

Let us talk about these two messages:

1. God is using to sacrifice of the bull to point His people back to their need for His grace in their lives.

The drought that was ravaging the land for the past three years was God's right response to Israel's sin and idolatry. God has been judging the peoples' sin.

Did this mean that there was no hope for forgiveness or for reconciliation between the people and God? No, God's Law taught the people that God would accept a sacrifice for the sins of His people. **God's Word through Moses taught that reconciliation COULD be made between a holy God and sinful people on the ground of an atoning sacrifice.**

God had been very clear: Sin brings the penalty of death. **The death that sin brought into this world would either fall upon the sinners OR upon a substitute/sacrifice.** Make no mistake, **the bull in this story represents a sin offering.**

In the CONTEST, God displays His glory by offering grace and mercy to them through a sacrifice for sin. What a display of love for this people!

For us today, we have witnessed God give even a greater display of His love in Jesus Christ. The sacrifice on Mt. Carmel pointed to a better sacrifice in

the future on Mt. Calvary. God's Son would shed his own blood as a sacrifice for our sins.

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." (1 John 4:9–10 NIV)

Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God who shed His own blood to take away our sins. And He did this that there might be a people who glorify God and commune with Him forever and ever.

QUESTION: Have you received the benefit of His death for yourself? Have you been liberated from your allegiance to false gods to worship the true God?

God invites you to receive the sacrifice of His Son for the rescue of your own soul.

1. God is using to sacrifice of the bull to point His people back to their need for His grace in their lives.
2. **God is using the fire that consumes the sacrifice to remind His people of His holiness and glory.**

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." (1Ki 18:24 ESV)

God had used fire in the past as a symbol of His glory. You remember that He appeared first to Moses in a burning bush. (Exodus 3:3-6)

God used a pillar of fire at night to reveal His personal presence in guiding His people out of Egypt and into the promised land. At Mount Sinai where God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, He came down in fire to meet with the people. (Exodus 19:17-18)

Fire was the symbol of His glory and His presence in the midst of His people.

God chose this contest of fire to show that His glory had not faded or diminished. **He wanted the people to see that He is the God of eternal glory.** He is just as glorious and wonderful and powerful today as He was yesterday AND He will be just as glorious tomorrow as He is today.

In contrast, God wanted to demonstrate that false gods possess no glory. Baal was supposed to be the storm god who carried a lightning bolt in His hand. He

was supposed to have the ability to display his glory through fire from the sky. **God creates a contest in which the false glory of this false god is demonstrated for all to see.**

25 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." 26 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." (1 Kings 18:25–26 [ESV](#))

He lets the prophets of Baal go first. Now if Baal had any power whatsoever in the face of Yahweh, then this is an incredibly risky strategy. For if Baal can produce fire independently, then the contest is over before the LORD comes on stage. **But Elijah knows that Baal has no independent power at all. God is sovereign over false gods.**

27 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." 28 And they cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them. 29 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." (1 Kings 18:27–29 [ESV](#))

I believe that the prophets of Baal had seen Baal perform miracles in prior days. That is why they are so frenzied here.

False gods have demonic powers and the LORD often allows them use of these powers. BUT not here. God shut the demons down.

Applications:

1. **It is possible to be very sincere about your religious convictions and beliefs and yet be very wrong.** The prophets of Baal were sincere, but their sincerity did not benefit them at all. Please consider carefully WHICH God you choose to worship.
2. **It is possible to be very zealous in worship and yet dishonor God.** Zeal alone does not impress God. Learn to evaluate your passion for God by the truth of God.
3. **Construction.**

“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.” (1 Kings 18:30 [ESV](#))

Elijah ministers up close and personally with this people who had rebelled against God. He did not wish ill upon those who had wandered from God into gross sexual immorality and into idolatry. No, he gently and lovingly called these people close to him so that he could minister God’s mercy to them. What an example Elijah sets for us as we minister to family and friends in this dark world. We do not compromise truth, but neither are we hardened by bitterness. We keep our spirits soft toward sinners and wish to gently help them to find God’s mercy and grace.

After calling the people near to him, Elijah rebuilds the altar of the LORD that had been thrown down.

Before the tabernacle was erected in Israel, sacrifices could be offered at multiple sites. So the patriarchs built altars wherever they camped for any length of time so that they could worship God. The altars represented a people who were committed to walking with God and to worshipping Him. The altars speak of communion with God.

The broken altar of Elijah’s day was a sober witness to the rejection of God by the people. The very places that had once been places of commitment, places of faith, places of joy in God’s presence were now crumbling reminders of their neglect of God, of their spiritual adultery and of their wandering away from His presence.

Question: In what condition are the altars of your life? Are they still being used or have they been abandoned? Are they still sources of healing and hope or are they reminders of your neglect of your walk with God and symbols of your wandering from Him?

PROTEST: Pastor, you are speaking in symbols. Speak plainly. For many of you, you once had altars where you met with the Lord Jesus and you talked with Him and you consecrated yourself to Him and you worshipped Him and you enjoyed Him. These were places where God met you and you had communion with God. **That altar may have been** a commitment that you made in high school to serve God fully at a summer camp. **That altar may have been** a morning appointment that you kept with God for years. **That altar may have been a family discipline of opening the Word** as husband and wife with your children and praying together.

That altar may have been a commitment to evangelism that kept your faith sharp and alive. These altars were places that renewed your faith and that kept you making a daily commitment to live a God-centered, God-saturated life. But now as you look at those altars. The commitment you made to follow Jesus in your youth seems so distant. The morning appointment with God is only a memory. You cannot remember when you last opened the Bible with your wife to listen to God's voice. And you have not shared the Gospel with anyone for the past two years. **What are the conditions of the altars in your life that once were places of such joy and faith and hope?**

31 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," 32 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." (1 Kings 18:31–32 [ESV](#))

Remember that Israel is divided at this time. King Ahab is king over the 10 tribes that comprise the northern kingdom. But Elijah does not take 10 stones, he takes 12 stones. These 12 stones are a sign that God would gather Israel together again in unity. God's **glory is manifest in the unity of His people**. This is why disunity among God's people is so grievous.

4. Consuming Fire.

33 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." 34 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. 35 And the water ran around the altar and filled the trench also with water." (1 Kings 18:33–35 [ESV](#))

God loves to demonstrate that nothing is impossible with Him. Whether that impossibility is in the virgin conceiving and giving birth to a child or in the resurrection from the dead of our Savior or in the new birth of a believer. Nothing is too hard for God. Glory to God! May our faith increase so that we too will experience the power of God in our lives and in our church.

See how the LORD honors the bold faith of Elijah! Ask the LORD for such faith. Pray that God would grant such faith to the elders, the teachers, the leaders of Bethany!

*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. 37 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." (1 Kings 18:36–37 ESV).*

Notice the energy behind Elijah's praying. His was not a cold or lazy prayer. It was filled with passion and with power. "Answer me, O Lord, answer me!" He longed for his nation to turn away from their idols and to worship and serve the true and living **God. He longed for God to be God in Israel!** All His praying was fueled by his zeal for God.

"The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." (James 5:16 [KJV](#))

Truth: Our praying will be fervent when our hearts are aflame with passion for God's name.

38 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." (1 Kings 18:38 ESV).

The fire that fell from heaven was a display of His glory so that the people would know that He is not a God who trifles with sin.

But notice that in His wrath, God remembers mercy. In wrath, God could have made the fire to fall upon the people. He would have been just to so judge an idolatrous people. But no, the fire fell upon the altar. The doctrine of the substitutionary atonement is taught here in the description of the PLACE upon which the fire fell. The sacrifice received the full measure of God's fire/wrath against sin so that the people would not have to suffer for their own sin.

"And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, "The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God."" (1 Kings 18:39 [ESV](#))

In order to benefit from the sacrifice that God has provided for us, we must repent of our sin and believe in Jesus as Savior and as Lord.

QUESTION: Have you benefitted from the death of Jesus on the cross for sin? Have you personally repented of your sin and trusted in Jesus as Savior?

Confrontation, Contest, Construction, Consuming Fire.

5. Condemnation.

“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.”
(1 Kings 18:40 [ESV](#))

The prophets of Baal did not respond like the people of Israel to the fire that consumed the sacrifice. Their silence proclaimed their insistence on continuing to follow Baal. For too long these false prophets led the nation down a dark and debauched path. God the Judge issued the penalty of capital punishment for their sins. **Many become disturbed by God’s condemnation of the prophets of Baal.** But this action of God is just and right.

Truth: God will not allow evil to continue forever. He will put an end to evil once and for all. The prophets of Baal refused to humble themselves under the sovereign authority of God. They willfully tried to advance idolatry, sexual immorality, and even child sacrifice. Their day of judgment came early.

God displays His glory in their condemnation by revealing that He always has the last word and that He will not be mocked. Baal could not save them from His justice. For a time, it appears as though some are able to mock God with no repercussions whatsoever. But that is never true. God is patient and loving. He had been patient with these prophets of Baal for over three years and more. But there is a judgment day coming when His righteous hand will act in judgment. And when God acts as judge He does not give sin or evil any quarter. Human history is moving toward that awful day in which God utterly defeats evil and falsehood and reigns in righteousness and truth.

Conclusion:

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. But no one need to! God calls all men to turn from sin and turn toward Him so that we can live. Those who reject His mercy will receive His justice.

I leave you with the challenge that Elijah gave to the people over 2800 years ago. It is still the challenge that faces us today:

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." (1Ki 18:21 ESV)

The ultimate confrontation by God against idolatry is the cross of Jesus. The cross of Jesus is a symbol of God's redeeming love for this lost world. **And the cross is a symbol of God's passion for His own glory.** The cross of Jesus is God's message saying, "I will not surrender this world over to sin and idolatry. I will not make peace with idols. I will purchase people out of slavery to sin and to false worship. I will purchase a people for my NAME." You remember the song that is sung in heaven in Revelation

And they sang a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. (Rev 5:9 NIV)

That is the meaning of the cross: God purchased men for Himself and for His glory. God loves His own glory too much to surrender us to spiritual forces of evil.

Main Idea: The LORD alone is the one true and living God. He commands us to make a choice to only worship Him and not any other gods.

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- 1. Confrontation. 18:20-21**
- 2. Contest. 18:22-29**
- 3. Construction. 18:30-32**
- 4. Consuming Fire. 18:33-39**
- 5. Condemnation. 18:40**