

Sunday 2nd October

Will the Real God stand up!

1 Kings 18:1-40

Elijah and Obadiah

After a long time, in the third year, the word of the LORD came to Elijah: "Go and present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the land." ² So Elijah went to present himself to Ahab.

Now the famine was severe in Samaria, ³ and Ahab had summoned Obadiah, his palace administrator. (Obadiah was a devout believer in the LORD. ⁴ While Jezebel was killing off the LORD's prophets, Obadiah had taken a hundred prophets and hidden them in two caves, fifty in each, and had supplied them with food and water.) ⁵ Ahab had said to Obadiah, "Go through the land to all the springs and valleys. Maybe we can find some grass to keep the horses and mules alive so we will not have to kill any of our animals." ⁶ So they divided the land they were to cover, Ahab going in one direction and Obadiah in another.

⁷ As Obadiah was walking along, Elijah met him. Obadiah recognized him, bowed down to the ground, and said, "Is it really you, my lord Elijah?"

⁸ "Yes," he replied. "Go tell your master, 'Elijah is here.'"

⁹ "What have I done wrong," asked Obadiah, "that you are handing your servant over to Ahab to be put to death? ¹⁰ As surely as the LORD your God lives, there is not a nation or kingdom where my master has not sent someone to look for you. And whenever a nation or kingdom claimed you were not there, he made them swear they could not find you. ¹¹ But now you tell me to go to my master and say, 'Elijah is here.' ¹² I don't know where the Spirit of the LORD may carry you when I leave you. If I go and tell Ahab and he doesn't find you, he will kill me. Yet I your servant have worshiped the LORD since my youth. ¹³ Haven't you heard, my lord, what I did while Jezebel was killing the prophets of the LORD? I hid a hundred of the LORD's prophets in two caves, fifty in each, and supplied them with food and water. ¹⁴ And now you tell me to go to my master and say, 'Elijah is here.' He will kill me!"

¹⁵ Elijah said, "As the LORD Almighty lives, whom I serve, I will surely present myself to Ahab today."

Elijah on Mount Carmel

¹⁶ So Obadiah went to meet Ahab and told him, and Ahab went to meet Elijah. ¹⁷ When he saw Elijah, he said to him, "Is that you, you troubler of Israel?"

¹⁸ "I have not made trouble for Israel," Elijah replied. "But you and your father's family have. You have abandoned the LORD's commands and have followed the Baals. ¹⁹ Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table."

²⁰ So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. ²¹ Elijah went before the people and said, "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him."

But the people said nothing.

²² Then Elijah said to them, "I am the only one of the LORD's prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets. ²³ Get two bulls for us. Let Baal's prophets choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. ²⁴ Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD. The god who answers by fire—he is God."

Then all the people said, "What you say is good."

²⁵ Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose one of the bulls and prepare it first, since there are so many of you. Call on the name of your god, but do not light the fire." ²⁶ So they took the bull given them and prepared it.

Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. "Baal, answer us!" they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made.

²⁷ At noon Elijah began to taunt them. "Shout louder!" he said. "Surely, he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened." ²⁸ So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. ²⁹ Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.

³⁰ Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come here to me." They came to him, and he repaired the altar of the LORD, which had been torn down. ³¹ Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD had come, saying, "Your name shall be Israel." ³² With the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD, and he dug a trench around it large enough to hold two seahs of seed. ³³ He arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces and laid it on the wood. Then he said to them, "Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood."

³⁴ "Do it again," he said, and they did it again.

"Do it a third time," he ordered, and they did it the third time. ³⁵ The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench.

³⁶ At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: "LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. ³⁷ Answer me, LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again."

³⁸ Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench.

³⁹ When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, "The LORD—he is God! The LORD—he is God!"

⁴⁰ Then Elijah commanded them, "Seize the prophets of Baal. Don't let anyone get away!" They seized them, and Elijah had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and slaughtered there.

John 1:1-14

The Word Became Flesh

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. **2** He was with God in the beginning. **3** Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. **4** In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. **5** The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

6 There was a man sent from God whose name was John. **7** He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. **8** He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

9 The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. **10** He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. **11** He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. **12** Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— **13** children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Sermon: Will the Real God stand up!

[It would be great to have your Bibles opened at 1 Kings chapter 18 – let me pray before we begin]

Intro/Context (vv1-2)

Back in the year 2000, Heather and I had a holiday in Sri-Lanka.

Sri-Lanka has many different religions: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism.

For part of the time, we stayed in a city called Kandy.

*It just so happened that our stay in Kandy was during the **Buddhist Perahera Festival**.*

*The Perahera festival is one of the oldest and biggest Buddhist festivals. There is a massive procession along the streets of Kandy for 10 nights. Lots of dancers, musicians, magicians and many decorated elephants make up this procession **carrying the sacred tooth of Buddha** to a temple in the city.*

*Fancy all that fuss for **a tooth of Buddha!** And for a **false religion**.*

*The organisers of the festival even **consult an astrologer** to decide what dates the festival should be held – as they want to have fine weather and no rain.*

***Ironically** – on the day we were there – the heavens opened and it bucketed down the whole night!*

***How sad** that so many **people were following a false religion and worshipped a false god Buddha** and **consulted someone** who had as much control over the weather as we do!*

***It reminds me of today's story from 1 Kings 18** – where a **false religion, a false god and rain** are all involved.*

*We **pick up the story** – where there has been **no dew or rain** now for **three years** or so – since the prophet **Elijah** had **told** bad king **Ahab** back in chapter 17 verse 1 that there would be **no rain** – because **Ahab** and the people of **Israel** were **worshipping the false god Baal** and his **goddess partner Asherah**.*

During these 3 years – there was **bad press for the false god Baal** – he'd been **prayed to for rain** – but nothing had happened.

Now the **Real God of Israel** tells **Elijah** in 18:1 to **present himself** to King **Ahab** and God **promises** it will **rain again**.

But the **Real God** can't simply send rain – because the **people would say** to themselves **“ah Baal has recovered and has finally listened and sent us rain”**

So, the **Real God** has to get a bit **extreme** and publicly discredit the **false god Baal**.

Once the false god Baal has been discredited, **no one** in their right mind **would think** the **rain came from Baal!**

And so, in **vv3-40** – we have a **God Contest** – to see who the Real God is!

We'll look at **three points** this morning

[Slide 1-God Contest heading]

1. The Real God prepares and uses His servants – that's verses 3 to 20
2. The Real God confronts sin – that's verses 21 to 29
3. The Real God answers and acts – that's verses 30 to 40

The Real God prepares and uses His servants (vv3-20)

[Slide 1a-servants]

First then – **the Real God prepares and uses His servants**

We **pick up** the **story** in **verses 3 & 4** where we meet **Obadiah** – a **devout believer** in the Lord God – who is a **palace administrator for King Ahab**

Obadiah is **secretly protecting** the Lord God's **prophets** by **hiding 100** of them in **two caves** – whilst in comparison Ahab's wife, **Jezebel**, is **busy killing off** the Lord's **prophets!**

Jezebel wanted to **dethrone** the **Real God of Israel**, and make her false **Baal** the **chief deity** and the **official state religion**.

Meanwhile the **drought** is **so severe** in Samaria – that **Ahab commands Obadiah** to go through the land **looking for grass** for his horses and mules to be **fed and kept alive** - vv5-6.

Application: What a contrast - **Obadiah** is **building up treasure in Heaven** for the real God - whilst **Ahab and Jezebel** are **focused on the false god, Baal, and worldly things!** It begs the question - are we investing our time in - **Heavenly work** or worldly pursuits?
(pause)

It's no coincidence [but God ordained] that **Obadiah bumps into the prophet Elijah** in **verse 7** and **Elijah tells Obadiah** to go and **tell King Ahab** that *“Elijah is here!”* in verse 8.

Although Obadiah had shown great courage in secretly hiding the Lord's prophets – he's **not so happy** about the **idea of telling King Ahab that Elijah is back on the scene.** Obadiah knew that **King Ahab had searched everywhere for Elijah - to punish him** for causing the drought.

Obadiah was afraid that if he told Ahab that he met Elijah, and then Elijah disappeared again, Ahab would punish Obadiah (perhaps even kill him) for letting Elijah get away - vv9-14.

Elijah reassures Obadiah that he will go to King Ahab straight away (v15)!

So, **Obadiah went to Ahab** as **Elijah asked** – in v16 – and **Ahab went to meet Elijah.**

Then in v17-18 **Ahab and Elijah trade accusations.**

Ahab calls Elijah **the troubler of Israel.**

According to Ahab's theology and thinking, it made sense for him to blame Elijah. Ahab believed that Elijah had angered Baal and so Baal was withholding the rain until Elijah was caught and executed.

But according to Elijah -v18- Ahab and his family have brought their own trouble because they have abandoned the Lord's commands and followed Baal. Ahab should have turned to the Word of God in Deuteronomy 28:23-24, which promised that a drought would come to a disobedient Israel.

So, **Elijah issues a contest to Ahab** in v19

Elijah tells Ahab to summon people from all over Israel to come to Mount Carmel and bring the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah.

And it's not surprising that there are **so many false prophets** because King **Ahab** and **Jezebel** have **influenced people to worship Baal** and because **Jezebel has been killing all the true prophets of the Real God.**

It was crucial for Elijah to confront and eliminate these prophets of Baal before God sent rain to the land of Israel – so that everyone understood that the rain came from the real God, Yahweh - and not from Baal.

Application: What we see here is God preparing two of his servants Obadiah and Elijah who are very different. Obadiah works quietly in a behind-the-scenes fashion whereas Elijah is more public and confrontational in his ministry. Both are faithful servants; the Bible never tells us that there is only one kind of faithful servant (The Apostle Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 12:4-6 – people have different gifts – but the same spirit – and people have different kinds of service – but the same Lord – and different kinds of

works – but the **same God working in all**). The Bible doesn't expect us to be Elijah clones – God prepares us and uses our different gifts and character for His work.

(pause)

So, the first point then is – the ***Real God prepares and uses His servants***

The Real God confronts sin (vv21-29)

[Slide 1b-sin]

The second point is – ***the Real God confronts sin*** – verses 21 to 29.

Look at v21 – **Elijah challenges the people** to decide whether they will follow the Real God or the false god Baal. As Jesus reminds us in Matthew 6:24 – *no-one can serve two masters!* **The real God demands complete devotion to Him.** He does not allow people to sit on the fence – and He does not allow people to serve Him and someone else.

The **people said nothing** in response to Elijah's challenge! There was no objection and no repentance.

It's worth asking though – why people would even consider following Baal?

- Baal worship was **sanctioned by King Ahab and Queen Jezebel** - so **who's going to go against the King and Queen and survive?**
- Baal worship offered what every farmer needed – Baal was the storm and fertility god – **allegedly blessing** - both humans and the land – **blessings which gave fruitfulness** – **blessings that gave grain, oil and wine** – **Baal could allegedly heal the sick** – **produce offspring** – **grow crops and fill the cattle sheds.** And even if marriages were bad or uninteresting there was always sex with a shrine prostitute at a Baal shrine on offer! Who could ask for more?

It sounds like the temptations we face in the world today -doesn't it?

Application: Elijah's challenge is **not just an invitation to a god-contest** – where people decide who the real God is. His challenge is to **not only decide who the real God is - but to also FOLLOW Him.** For us it means – The real God is not just an idea we play with or believe in – the real God is a King - to whom we submit our whole life. In New Testament terms it means **having King Jesus not just as our Saviour but ALSO as Lord of our lives.**

With the challenge issued – Elijah sets up the contest in verses 22 to 24.

The **contest** is quite straight forward

The prophets of Baal are to take a bull, prepare it and place it on wood ready for a sacrifice but not to light a fire; and Elijah will do likewise. Then they are to call upon the name of their god {Baal} and Elijah is to call upon the name of the Lord God [YHWH]. The god who answers by fire – is the Real God!

Elijah allows the prophets of Baal to take the challenge first in verses 25 to 29.

They called upon the name of Baal from morning to noon. But there is **no response!** **Elijah taunts them to shout louder** and suggests perhaps Baal was deep in thought or busy [literally engaged in business – maybe a degrading insult meaning Baal is busy emptying his stomach]; or perhaps Baal is travelling; or even asleep. So, they shouted louder, slashed themselves with swords and spears. They continue from midday to evening; but still no response; no one answers nor pays attention to their calls.

This is **the sad result of worshipping an imaginary god of our own making.** We may dedicate great sincerity, sacrifice, and devotion to such gods, but it means nothing if there is no one there to answer.

Application: We might say to ourselves – thank goodness we're not like those babbling emotional Baal prophets! But we need to realize their thought process is “our god will

begin to do something if we get our passionate religious activity correct. I wonder if we sometimes think like these Baal prophets and say “God will surely work in our church if only we... spend more time in devotions... more time in prayer... belong to a growth group...support more missionaries... do more evangelism... visit more people... run kid’s programs... feed more homeless” [There’s nothing wrong with this Christian busyness] But we need to ask ourselves - is our Christian busyness designed to manipulate, impress or stir up God? We may not be a prophet of Baal – but maybe we think like one! Are we saying “if only we DO xyz – then God will do abc”

Jesus addresses this in the Sermon on the Mount – Matthew 6:7-9

Jesus says v7 – do not keep on babbling like the pagans (like the Baal prophets) – they pray that way – because Jesus says – **they think they will be heard because of their many words.** Jesus is not condemning long prayers or repeating prayers (He did that Himself in the Garden of Gethsemane) but He is condemning the thinking that says – we can manipulate God – and He is condemning the thinking that says - we have the power in prayer – not God!

Jesus warns – v8 - Do not be like them [like the Baal prophets], **for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.**

Then Jesus goes on to give an example of a prayer – that is nothing like the Baal prophets’ prayers - with the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13)

You see - Elijah did not have to mimic the Baal prophets’ antics and hype – His prayer was simple and to the point - as we’ll see in a minute.

What Elijah is doing - is showing that - the Real God confronts sin – in this case - the sin of idolatry and apostasy (abandoning proper religious beliefs) and warped thinking!

The Real God answers and acts (vv30-40)

[Slide 1c-answers & acts]

The third point is – ***the Real God answers and acts***

The Baal prophets **failed to stir their false god Baal into action**

So, Elijah steps up for his go in verses 30 to 35

Elijah called the people to him; He repaired the altar of the Lord, that had been previously torn down. He **took 12 stones**, representing 12 tribes of Israel, he built an altar to the Lord God of Israel; he dug a trench around the altar; he arranged wood, cut the bull into pieces and laid it on the wood. He **made the challenge more difficult by pouring water on the offering, on the wood, on the altar and filled up the trenches.**

Everyone knows **water won't burn!**

Elijah wanted to show that **nothing is impossible for the Lord God of Israel.**

In v36-37 - **Elijah prays simply** - unlike the Baal prophets – because **Elijah knows the Real God** – **Elijah knows He's God's servant** – and **he knows he's doing God's Work** – he knows it's all about God and His glory – **Elijah knows it's not about his power but about God's power.**

And of course – v38 – **God answers and acts** - The Real God sends fire to burn up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil and lick up all the water! **Just as Elijah had requested in his prayer.**

Application: **Nothing is too hard for the Real God** (cf. Genesis 18:14)

- Having the contest in Baal territory on Mount Carmel – is **no hindrance**
- **The number of Baal prophets – 450 – versus one prophet – Elijah – not a problem**
- Human activity is no inducement for God to act – as the Baal prophets found out

- Handicaps – like drenched wood and a trench full of water – **don't affect the outcome for the Real God**

We must not reduce the Real God to human terms!

(pause)

As God's divine fire swallowed up Elijah's sacrifice – it **showed that God accepted Elijah's sacrifice.**

We should be reminded of two other occasions **when divine fire blazed** - at the **inauguration of the tabernacle** (Lev 9:24) and the **inauguration of temple worship** (1 Chron 21:26; 2 Chron 7:1). These occasions **taught Israel about proper worship and the way back to God.**

And we're meant to see that here on Mount Carmel – **God's fire is not just proof He is the Real God** – but a demonstration of God's grace. It's an invitation to Israel to show there is a way back to the real God – if they only repent of the Baal worship and come back to Him.

Application: **God's invitation still exists for us today** – in the form of another **acceptable sacrifice on the altar of a sacrificial cross on another mount** – the mount of **Calvary (Golgotha)** where God's precious Son – JESUS - laid down His life – for the sins of **all who believe in Him to be forgiven.** But the invitation has to be accepted.

(pause)

Back to Mount Carmel - and of course - **God's action gets the appropriate response** – look at v39 – **the people fell prostrate and cried “*The Lord – He is God! The Lord – He is God!*”**

There's **one more action for God to make** – and it's in **v40**

Elijah commands the people to seize the Baal prophets and they are slaughtered in Kishon Valley.

How do we feel about verse 40?

If we're not careful we can have moral hysterics and say Elijah has undone all his great work.

If we think like that – we simply don't get God!

The problem is not Elijah or the Old Testament – the problem is us thinking like that.

We need to understand God is holy, holy, holy – He cannot abide apostasy. He warns in Deuteronomy 13 that any prophets who lead the people of Israel into the worship of a false god will forfeit their lives. Elijah is simply carrying out the Real God's specific instructions. The Baal prophets are culpable. Apostasy is a big deal to God – He uses major surgery not throat lozenges on cancer.

Conclusion (John 14:1, 14)

[Slide 2-Conclusion]

To finish up then - the Real God stood up that day at Mount Carmel – AND - the Real God has also come down to us!

You see according to our NT reading from John 1 – v1 says - *in the beginning was the Word – and the Word was with God – and the Word was God*

And according to v14 – *God's Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.*

And v14 goes on to say that - Jesus God's Son – is the Word – that came to this earth – and He's the Real God

Jesus is the Real God of 1 Kings 18

- Jesus prepares and uses His servants
- Jesus makes disturbing demands and confronts sin
- Jesus liberates us from our sinful recurring pagan thinking
- Jesus answers and acts
- Jesus is both severe and gracious

- **Jesus exposes our shoddy level of holiness**

And because - **Jesus is the Real God** – We must not only BELIEVE in Him – we must also commit to FOLLOWING HIM.

Let's pray

Heavenly Father, thank you that you are the One True God.

You are the Real God who prepares and uses your servants.

You are the Real God who confronts sin.

You are the Real God who answers and acts.

And you ultimately acted against sin by sending your Word in flesh – your precious Son – to be our Saviour and Lord of our lives.

Help us through your Spirit – to recommit this morning to serving and following Jesus.

In His name, we pray. AMEN.

Benediction (Romans 10:9)

If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. Amen.