

A DIVIDED PEOPLE

CORE PASSAGE: 1 KINGS 18:20-26,30-39

CONTEXT

Following the pattern of Jeroboam, virtually every king in the Northern Kingdom of Israel did what was evil in the Lord's eyes. The worst was Ahab, who set up a temple for the false god Baal in the capital city of Samaria and made an Asherah pole, leading Israel further into idolatry. The Lord sent Elijah to Ahab to prophesy about a three-year drought throughout Israel as a punishment against the wicked rule of Ahab and his father, Omri (1 Kings 17:1; 18:18). With no rain in the land and the famine affecting their food, the time had come for Elijah to present the question to the people of Israel: Who is the true God, Baal or the Lord?

KEY CONCEPT

The Lord alone is the true God and worthy of worship.

As you examine 1 Kings 18:20-26,30-39:

- Recognize that Elijah demanded that the people stop trying to worship both God and Baal.
- Dwell on the fact that a true, living God will act and respond to His people.



TIMELINE

The Kingdom Is Divided
(1 Kings 12)

Wicked Ahab Becomes King
in Israel (1 Kings 16)

SESSION STUDY:
**2: Elijah Challenges the Prophets
of Baal at Mount Carmel**

Both Rehoboam and Jeroboam Lead
Their Nations in Idolatry (1 Kings 12–14)

The Prophet Elijah Confronts
Ahab (1 Kings 17–21):

**3: Elijah Declares God's Judgment
for Naboth's Vineyard**

1: Elijah Prophesies a Famine

Daily Readings

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 1: 1 Kings 17:1-18 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 4: 1 Kings 19:1-21 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 2: 1 Kings 18:1-19 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 5: 1 Kings 20:1-43 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 3: 1 Kings 18:20-46 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 6: Psalm 97 |



Scan this QR code to access
this session's Scripture passages.

Notes

**Bonus Content**

Scan this QR code to discover more about Ahab, Jezebel, and the idolatry of their reign.

PEOPLE WILL FOLLOW THE LORD OR THEY WILL FOLLOW COUNTERFEIT GODS (1 KINGS 18:20-26).

Circle each use of the word “answer.” Underline any number or reference to quantities.

20 So Ahab summoned all the Israelites and gathered the prophets at Mount Carmel. **21** Then Elijah approached all the people and said, “How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him. But if Baal, follow him.” But the people didn’t answer him a word. **22** Then Elijah said to the people, “I am the only remaining prophet of the LORD, but Baal’s prophets are 450 men. **23** Let two bulls be given to us. They are to choose one bull for themselves, cut it in pieces, and place it on the wood but not light the fire. I will prepare the other bull and place it on the wood but not light the fire. **24** Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD. The God who answers with fire, he is God.” All the people answered, “That’s fine.” **25** Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, “Since you are so numerous, choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first. Then call on the name of your god but don’t light the fire.” **26** So they took the bull that he gave them, prepared it, and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, “Baal, answer us!” But there was no sound; no one answered. Then they danced around the altar they had made.

King Ahab had established Baal and Asherah worship in Israel, though that had come at the cost of no rain in the land for three years (1 Kings 16:30-33; 18:1). Ahab’s wife, Jezebel, had executed the Lord’s prophets (18:4). So it may have seemed to the Israelites as if Baal were more powerful than the Lord, and were it to rain, they might have attributed that to Baal. Therefore, Elijah issued a challenge to the Israelites that they should only follow the one true God. They could not serve both God and Baal; one would always have their devotion.

THEOLOGY CONNECTION

THE KINGDOM: The kingdom of God includes both His general sovereignty over the universe and His particular kingship over men who willfully acknowledge Him as King. Particularly, the kingdom is the realm of salvation into which men enter by trustful, childlike commitment to Jesus Christ.

The terms of Elijah's challenge allowed each deity to show their strength with an element both were believed to command: fire. Baal was the Canaanite god of lightning and fertility; so if Baal indeed were a god, then he would have no trouble setting a sacrifice ablaze with a bolt from the sky. The terms were acceptable to the people and the false prophets, and to sweeten the set up, Elijah let Baal's prophets pick their bull and go first.

LEADER NOTE: As a lightning deity, Baal often was depicted with lightning bolts, and according to lore, Baal built his house with fire.¹ The Lord appeared by fire in multiple places throughout Scripture (Ex. 3:1-4; 24:17; Ezek. 1:4; Acts 2:1-4). If followers of both deities had been praying for the drought to end, the resulting rain could be attributed to either group. But the challenge of calling down fire would have decided without a doubt whose God was most powerful and who ultimately was responsible for the rain.

How might you challenge the false gods of your culture in a way that people will listen?

The prophets of Baal called on their god until evening using prayer, dancing, and their most vigorous, bloody practices (1 Kings 18:26-29). But no fire descended, no lightning bolts flashed. No sound from the sky, only the voices of their prophets. No answer from their god, only the silence of nothingness.

The prophets looked foolish for their efforts, and Elijah mocked them as such (18:27), because those who follow false gods are foolish, just as it is foolish to think an idol crafted by a human being could control the weather or anything for that matter (Isa. 44:9-20). The modern idols we bow to in place of God are just as foolish. These may even be good gifts and important responsibilities from the Lord, but none of our idols can compare with the one true God—none of them can save.

LEADER NOTE: Being found to look foolish is embarrassing and puts up a person's defenses. Bringing someone to the truth of the gospel after helping them see the foolishness of their sin requires compassion, understanding, and patience. In Romans 2:4, Paul said, "God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance." God showcased His kindness to the Israelites by displaying Baal's lack of power in order to draw them to Himself. Yet we should be aware that Elijah dealt immediate death to the prophets of Baal for their part in leading God's people astray (1 Kings 18:40).

What are some modern-day idols that draw people away from the Lord?

THE TRUE GOD WILL ANSWER, ACT, AND REVEAL HIMSELF AS LORD (1 KINGS 18:30-39).

Highlight Elijah's simple prayer to the Lord.

30 Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come near me." So all the people approached him. Then he repaired the LORD's altar that had been torn down:

31 Elijah took twelve stones—according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD had come, saying, "Israel will be your name"—**32** and he built an altar with the stones in the name of the LORD. Then he made a trench around the altar large enough to hold about four gallons. **33** Next, he arranged the wood, cut up the bull, and placed it on the wood. He said, "Fill four water pots with water and pour it on the offering to be burned and on the wood." **34** Then he said, "A second time!" and they did it a second time. And then he said, "A third time!" and they did it a third time. **35** So the water ran all around the altar; he even filled the trench with water. **36** At the time for offering the evening sacrifice, the prophet Elijah approached the altar and said, "LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, today let it be known that you are God in Israel and I am your servant, and that at your word I have done all these things. **37** Answer me, LORD! Answer me so that this people will know that you, the LORD, are God and that you have turned their hearts back." **38** Then the LORD's fire fell and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and it licked up the water that was in the trench. **39** When all the people saw it, they fell facedown and said, "The LORD, he is God! The LORD, he is God!"

Even though God's people were divided into two nations, Elijah rebuilt an altar with twelve stones so all twelve tribes were represented in this sacrificial showdown. It may have been decades since the people in the north had seen an altar to the Lord with an appropriate sacrifice on it. This would have reminded the Israelites of God's faithfulness in the past as well as His covenant.

Elijah's next step was to douse the altar and sacrifice with water, possibly drawn from the nearby Mediterranean Sea on account of the famine in the land. By drenching the sacrifice, Elijah seemed to make this challenge more difficult for his God, yet he acted in faith according to God's word (v. 36). This set up God's glory to be displayed all the more in the presence of the people as the Lord would answer, act, and reveal Himself as the only true God.

LEADER NOTE: Elijah's past experiences with God built his trust in the Lord. After Elijah prophesied that there would be a drought in Israel, God sent him to camp by a wadi, a creek bed that is dry except during rainy seasons. He drank water from the wadi and was supplied with bread and meat by means of ravens until the wadi

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dried up (1 Kings 17:1-7). Then Elijah was sent to a widow and son in Zarephath, outside the promised land, where he and the family were provided for miraculously by a flour jar and an oil jug that never ran out. Elijah also raised the widow's son from the dead (17:8-24).

Should we try to make our circumstances more difficult to help point people's attention to the Lord? Why or why not?

Baal's prophets spent all day begging their god to answer them with fire, but all their efforts amounted to nothing. By contrast, Elijah's prayer to the Lord was an economy of words. And within seconds of Elijah's petition, God didn't just burn up the sacrificial animal, He incinerated the drenched altar and dried up the overflowing trench. God did the impossible at Elijah's prayer.

The true, living God will act and respond to His people. God proved Himself to be the one true God to the Israelites, and their response showed their recognition. The Lord turned their hearts back to fear Him and to know that He alone is God. Unfortunately, witnessing this event did not stir up a national revival as the rest of Israel's history shows.

LEADER NOTE: Jesus's disciples asked Him to teach them how to pray. This question led to Jesus teaching the Twelve what often is called the Lord's Prayer (Luke 11:1-4). Jesus also taught them to pray without giving up (Luke 11:5-10), to pray with faith in the Lord (Matt. 21:22; Mark 11:24), and to resist praying with many babbling words (Matt. 6:7-8), similar to what Baal's prophets did.

How has God answered your prayers, and how did you show your gratitude?

Notes

CHRIST CONNECTION

The Lord is the one true God, and "Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil. 2:11).

ARRIVAL

ENGAGE: Before the group arrives, label two opposite walls in the room with the following: “Agree” and “Disagree.” When enough of the group arrives, start asking the following questions and direct the participants to move to the wall that corresponds with their answer: “I like tomatoes”; “I like books more than movies”; “I like to drive”; “I like the mountains more than the beach”; “I like to travel”; “I like going to the dentist.”

TRANSITION: Questions like these are rather low-stakes, and our opinions, while personal, most likely aren’t controversial. But some opinions can disturb others, and even more serious, some opinions can have life or death consequences.

CONTEXT

SUMMARIZE: Wise Solomon came to the foolish opinion that worshipping the Lord alone wasn’t necessary, so he followed the hearts of his many wives and began to worship idols, which led to God’s disciplinary split of the kingdom. Things didn’t improve with the next kings of Judah and Israel, as Rehoboam and Jeroboam, and others after them, did what was evil in the Lord’s sight and continued to prop up idol worship in their kingdoms. A couple of good kings in Judah reversed this course for a time, but in Israel, things only got worse as Omri and then his son, Ahab, did more evil than all those who had come before them, instituting Baal worship in the land. In their opinion, the Lord wasn’t worth their time. But the Lord revealed the truth to Ahab by the word and actions of the prophet Elijah, who foretold a famine in the land that even Baal, the god of storms and lightning, could do nothing about.

RECAP

ASK: “After three years of famine, what decision did Elijah lay before the people of Israel?” (*whom to follow, Baal or the Lord; 1 Kings 18:21*) “Why might the famine have caused the people to consider their options? What role did water play in the showdown that Elijah proposed?” (*Elijah doused his sacrifice with water to make it clear who was God; vv. 33-35*)

TRANSITION: Elijah, the prophet of the Lord, faced off with 450 prophets of Baal in a battle for the soul of their kingdom. For decades the people had been straddling the fence on who was the true God, but Elijah forced their hand. No more wavering opinions allowed; they now had to decide for one or the other.



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Key Concept: The Lord alone is the true God and worthy of worship.

GROUP ACTIVITY

Notes

CHART: Direct your group to page 40 in their Personal Study Guide (PSG), where they will find “Pros and Cons.” Recreate this table on a board in your room so you can record the group’s responses as they interact with Scripture.

Pros and Cons	
Using 1 Kings 18:20-26,30-39, consider how the Israelites might have evaluated the pros and cons of worshiping the Lord or Baal.	
WORSHIP OF BAAL	
PROS	CONS
WORSHIP OF THE LORD	
PROS	CONS

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud 1 Kings 18:20-26.

ANALYZE: Encouraging the group to put themselves in the position of the Israelites on Mount Carmel, invite them to identify potential pros and cons from this passage for worshiping Baal or the Lord. Record these on the board and in the PSG. To prompt some answers, ask the following questions: “What might we make of the size of the two teams in this face off?” (*450 prophets of Baal vs. 1 prophet of the Lord might give a pro of cultural acceptance and even political acceptance by Ahab and Jezebel to the worship of Baal, while loneliness or rejection might seem to be cons of worshiping the Lord. Life with Baal and death with the Lord might be potential outcomes, given Jezebel’s persecution of the Lord’s prophets [vv. 4,13].*) “How might Baal’s responsibilities as a god have fit in the pro column?” (*Baal was responsible for storms and fertility, so he seemed to have a direct line to some vital aspects of life for the Israelites.*) “How might the people have evaluated Baal and the Lord in light of the ongoing famine?” (*Baal’s power seemed limited, whereas the Lord’s power seemed superior.*) “What might the people conclude from Baal’s lack of response to his prophets?” (*Baal was not always available or possibly powerless.*)

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud 1 Kings 18:30-39.

ANALYZE: Instruct the group to identify potential pros and cons out of this passage. Ask the following if prompts are needed: "What might Elijah's attention to Israel's tribes and heritage communicate about the worship of the Lord?" (*The people had a history of covenants, promises, fulfillments, and deliverance with the Lord that they would not have had with Baal.*) "How might the people have viewed worship according to God's law, given Elijah's prayer for their hearts to be turned back?" (*The law might have seemed restrictive to the people, whereas the worship of Baal allowed them to fulfill their heart's sinful desires.*) "What are the pros from the Lord's fire from the sky?" (*The Lord is God. The Lord is powerful. The Lord answers His people. The Lord vindicates His servants.*)

SAY: In their rebellion, the Israelites had wavered in their opinions regarding the Lord and Baal. At times it seemed the worship of the Lord was not worth their effort and that the worship of Baal would get them what they wanted. But sin always distorts our perception of who God is and of what He knows is best.

DEBRIEF

What are some idols that draw us away from God? How can we keep God's good gifts in perspective so that the Lord alone is the God we worship?

SUMMARIZE

As sinful human beings, we have a tendency to idolize things on earth rather than worship our Creator. This means we can even prioritize God's good gifts, such as family, over Him. Perhaps we could come up with some pros and cons for all of our idols, but the most significant con is that none of our idols can save. Only the Lord, who is Jesus, saves from sin, so only He is worthy of our worship.

HEAD, HEART, HANDS

Walk the group through the Head, Heart, Hands section in the PSG (p. 41). If running short on time, specifically highlight the **Head** section in this week's study, inviting volunteers to share their responses to the question in this section.



HEAD: The Israelites' opinions about the Lord and Baal led them to a false understanding of their world and their worship. What we think about God matters greatly for how we see the world He created and how we live in it.

How are you forming your understanding of who God is and who is God?



HEART: Because of sin, our hearts are deceitful (Jer. 17:9), always turning us away from God. So we ought to pray as Elijah did, both for ourselves and for others, that the Lord would constantly turn our hearts back to Him.

How are you wavering in your opinions regarding the Lord and potential idols?



HANDS: Elijah obeyed the Lord despite some significant difficulties.

Alone, he confronted the king who slaughtered true prophets. Alone, he challenged 450 false prophets who had the king's support. But in truth, Elijah was not alone—the Lord was with him—so he obeyed the Lord, and his faith was rewarded.

What opportunities might you have this week to obey the Lord, whether alone or with fellow believers?

NEXT STEPS

Challenge the group to consider these actions as responses to this session.

- Read John 10:30; Romans 14:11; Philippians 2:9-11 to see how the ultimate bowing before God as the people did on Mount Carmel involves bowing before Jesus, God in flesh.
- Pray for God to show you how you can encourage members of your family to recognize Jesus's lordship in everything and above every other thing in their lives.
- Determine that you, like Elijah, will remain faithful to God's message even when others oppose you.

Invite volunteers to share prayer needs for this week. Encourage them to record these in the space on page 41 in their PSG so they can pray for others throughout the week.

PRAYER REQUESTS AND PRAISES

PRAYING SCRIPTURE

CLOSE: Pray through Psalm 97:7-12 that idols will be cast down in the lives of your group and the people they encounter in the coming week and that the Lord Jesus Christ would be exalted through their actions and words.

References

1. Victor Harold Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, and John H. Walton, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 1 Ki 18:23–24.