

1 Kings 18

2 May, 2021

Title: How long will you sit on the fence?**Life is full of choices!**

What will I have for breakfast, how will I do my hair today, when will I do my homework, what clothes will I wear today, what will I do with my spare time, what will I cook for dinner, how will I order my tasks at work?

How do you make up your mind?

How do you decide what to do?

We usually weigh up the options. But often there is lots of good choices. Sometimes, we just sit on the fence.

We can't make up our mind or haven't really committed the time and effort to come to a well thought-out conclusion.

Sometimes the things that actually deserve our attention just get pushed back, "I'll get to it another day" we say.

And one of those questions I think many Australians keep avoiding and rarely confront is God.

Is he important in life?

Should I believe in him?

Maybe I'll just deal with it when I'm older. Then I can think about what happens when I die and sort it out then.

At times we are complacent with the important things, and too often we sit on the fence.

What about me, I believe in God, so I'm all sorted.

But what about my faithfulness to God? I, myself, find it is very easy to be torn between the things of this world and things that draw me closer to God.

I sit on the fence. Sometimes I want things my way and sometimes I want things God's way.

And it is this question I want you to **ask yourself**.

How long am I going to sit on the fence?

How long am I going to sit on the fence?

I hope to flesh this question out as we go through 1 Kings 18 with 3 sections:

Firstly, Faith amidst judgement (1-19)

Secondly, How long will Israel sit on the fence? (20-40)

And thirdly, A Godly example (41-46)

Please keep your bibles open to follow along with me.

Point 1: Faith amidst judgement

Last week in chapter 17 verse 1, Elijah went to Ahab and told him that there wasn't going to be anymore rain. Not even dew would fall on the land except by the word of Elijah. And then God sends him out from Ahab's presence.

Getting out of there is probably the safest thing to do when you have just promised the king that there is going to be a drought. A drought that isn't going to end until you say the word.

Now in chapter 18 verse 1 (3 years later), God tells Elijah to see Ahab and when he does, God will send rain. That sounds risky, but simple. If Elijah is obedient and goes to Ahab, then God will send rain.

To help us understand what is going on for the Northern kingdom of Israel at this time, we start at verse 2. It says "Now the famine was severe in Samaria".

The drought was so severe that Ahab (the King) and Obadiah (his trusted palace administrator), had to go out and look for grass and water.

You know that there is a severe water shortage when the king himself and his right-hand man go out to look for it! They divide the land and go in opposite directions.

A small sidenote: There's a few different Obadiah's in the bible, and this probably isn't the minor prophet Obadiah, who appears a few centuries later.

On his journey, Obadiah doesn't find water, but runs into the person who will provide water. Elijah!

Elijah says, Go tell Ahab I'm here! But Obadiah fears for his life: verse 9 "How have I sinned, that you would give your servant into the hand of Ahab, to kill me?". In verse 10 he begins to recount the hunt that has been on for Elijah and how Ahab has had every kingdom and nation searched and taken oaths that he was not there.

Obadiah knows the lengths Ahab has gone to, to try and find Elijah, and now he's expected to just say, here he is?!?! But on top of that, Obadiah fears that Elijah will be swept away by the Spirit of the Lord in verse 12, and he'll be left with the consequences.

I want to make a brief point here.

Obadiah seems like he is the opposite of Elijah. Verse 3 says he still greatly fears God, but where is that fear?

Obadiah is the one working for Ahab! He isn't bold enough to confront Ahab to his face, because he knows too well the kind of evil man he is.

But this is where his allegiance can be seen. Obadiah's faith in the Lord dictates his actions. He submits to the king, but he knows ultimately that his true king is the Lord God.

Therefore, in verse 4 while Jezebel (Ahab's wife) is going about killing the prophets, his faith leads him to hide the prophets of the Lord in caves and to feed them and give them water! He doesn't practice a bold and public ministry like Elijah, but in quietness and shrewdness, behind the scenes, he acts to save the prophets. And that is at his own personal risk.

Obadiah doesn't sit on the fence asking the question: should I save my life or save the lives of the prophets; he acts decisively on his complete trust and reliance on God. So don't go on thinking that if you're a true Christian you will become a missionary or a pastor. Sometimes remaining faithful to God in your life will not mean giving up your job, but thoughtfully using

the means God has given you in your circumstances. It is in everyday decisions God seeks our trust and faithfulness.

Not everyone needs to be a big public hero of faith.

Back to the main story.

Elijah listens to Obadiah and promises that he won't disappear but will show himself to Ahab on that same day.

So when Ahab sees Elijah's face, what does he say?

Ah, finally, you've come to give us some rain?

No, he blames Elijah, verse 17 "Is it you, you troubler of Israel?"

It's like he saying, I've searched everywhere for you, and now when the land is perishing from drought you decide to show your face???

You've caused this!!!

Elijah isn't shy. He corrects Ahab and tells him what the real problem is and who's caused it. He says : "I have not trouble Israel, but YOU have, and your father's house, because you have abandoned the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals."

Now we start to see a bit of light being shed on the reason behind the drought.

Israel has been unfaithful to the commandments of the Lord, and they haven't been helped by their nation's leadership either.

There has been a long line of unfaithful kings for the 10 tribes of the Northern kingdom of Israel. And Ahab is no exception.

A supporter of idol worship, he is married to Jezebel who is bent on worshipping everything but the true and living God. She has imported Baal (the god of rain and storms) and Baal's wife Asherah who had 400 prophets of her own.

Things are in bad shape for Israel, and they are receiving the fruit of their works through divine judgement. But, they have been warned.

Besides having many prophets like Elijah calling Israel back to faithfulness, before that in Deuteronomy 11:16(-17) Moses says "Be careful, or you will be enticed to turn away and worship other gods and bow down to them. Then the Lord's anger will burn against you, and he will shut up the heavens so that it will not rain and the ground will yield no produce, and you will soon perish from the good land the Lord is giving you."

So, there's a big problem, and Elijah has come to straighten things out.

In verse 19 he says to Ahab lets gather all Israel and the 850 prophets of Baal and Asherah and meet on Mt Carmel.

So they did. Which brings us to **point 2**: **How long will Israel sit on the fence?**

Verse 21 “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.”

Elijah probes at the problem, they’re sitting on the fence. They want a bit of both. They want some Baal worship, but also a dabble of God and can’t make up their minds. It says they limp between the two opinions. They are not walking upright, but stumbling. And they did not answer, not even a word. No conviction, no response.

That all sounds fair enough, but hang on, it kind of sounds a bit like us too!

As I said earlier, we often sit on the fence with our commitments in life. We want the things of this world that look so appealing, but often forget to deal with our commitment or lack of commitment to God. We struggle to give up the pleasures and sin that draw us away from God.

For Israel, Elijah throws it down. He sets the challenge; he starts the contest:

Elijah says “I’m the only prophet of the Lord left, but Baal has 450! Let’s take two bulls, prepare them on two altars and put no fire to them. And you’ll call upon your god and I’ll call upon “the name of the Lord, and the God who answers by fire, he is God”.

This time, Elijah doesn’t get silence in response, they say “It is well spoken”, or the NIV “What you say is good”.

So the fight is on: Will the true and living God please stand up!

The phrase “Would the real Slim Shady please stand up” probably sounds familiar to you.

Well it’s origin is actually from the 1950s TV show “To Tell the Truth”.

Three contestants would all pretend to be the same person (let’s say John Smith), and one of them would actually be John Smith, while the others, fakes. A panel would ask all three contestants questions to try to determine which of the three was really John Smith. The audience then got to vote, then the panel votes and the big reveal is when the host would say “Will the real John Smith please stand up”! and all was set straight.

That is the kind of challenge Elijah has set. Let’s find out who the real God is, and then there will be no question about it. No sitting on the fence, no erring between two gods. One God, true and living.

Instead of distancing yourselves from this contest, bring yourself into it. This challenge is important for you too, for all of us, not just Christians.

Now, you may already know what happens next in the account of the events that day. So As I make my way through them, I thought I might make a scoreboard to keep track of how it looks like these opponents are weighing up against each other. It will also help US, as we see

afresh why we can't ignore or divide our conviction and devotion between God and the world.

Contestant #1 Baal

We've already started the scoreboard, 450 prophets versus 1. And dry wood for Baal.

Verse 20 says they're on mount Carmel, a mountain that was probably a high place used for idol worship, so home ground advantage for Baal.

Verse 25: Elijah says to the prophets of Baal "Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, you are many, and call upon the name of your god, but put no fire to it." So Baal's team get to go first and have first pick from the bulls.

All is going well, they take the bull and prepare it.

In verse 26, the prophets call "upon the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, "O Baal, answer us!"

Hang on, half of the day just went past as they were calling on Baal to light the sacrifice.

But it says "there was no voice, and no one answered. And they limped around the altar that they had made."

Notice here the same word. Limp. Maybe this is pointing out that Baal worship doesn't help, it makes you stumble!

Now it is midday, and Elijah mocks them!

There isn't many appropriate times to mock people, but in this circumstance, Elijah has picked his time as he helps Israel understand some of the futility that is going on in front of them.

Elijah mocks by suggesting "Cry aloud, for he is a god. (in other words, he will respond to you if he is a real god, right?)

"Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened."

Elijah taunts them as he suggests things that humans do. **We** think about things, we visit the loo, we travel, we rest. Baal doesn't sound very reliable.

Well, this egged them on: verse 28 "they cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them. And midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation".

Let's look at the scoreboard.

What type of prayer or petition was made to Baal: Long, loud and desperate.

What about their religious zeal? I think they deserve 11 out of 10 for their commitment! What an amazing spectacle!

A whole crowd of people is gathered to watch the showdown and to this point they have not been disappointed. What a performance they've just witnessed, seeing complete commitment right to the end!

May I point out that it seems a bit more than commitment. Things are getting a bit crazy! Verse 29 says they raved on, or in the NIV “frantically prophesied”. It has turned into a full-on frenzy around the altar.

But what does the passage say happens?

“but there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention.”

After all that energy, a full day of calling out, silence comes and its now around 6 o'clock!

It is time for:

Contestant #2 God

God's turn.

Following in verse 30, Elijah says to all the people “Come near to me.” It's like he's saying, come and watch very closely so you can see what happens and that I'm not cheating.

So far, it looks like the odds are stacked heavily against God.

“And he repaired the altar of the Lord that had been thrown 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 came, saying, “Israel shall be your name,” ³² and with the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord.”

This is the time when the 12 tribes of Israel are divided, but Elijah still re-constructs the altar in a way that is pleasing to God, representing the united 12 tribes and in the name of the Lord.

“And he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two seahs of seed. 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 water¹ 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.”

It is needless to say that this sacrifice is in no state to suddenly become alight, even if lightning hit it! This further emphasises to the people of Israel and the other prophets that are watching closely that this is no magical trick that Elijah is trying to pull off. It is sopping wet!

Verse ³⁶ “And at the time of the offering of the oblation, (that is, the proper time for the evening sacrifice) 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 The water possibly came from the Mediterranean Sea, which isn't too far away. The narrative doesn't give much detail on this point, but assuming that people still had at least some water to drink, maybe wells and streams still had *some* water.

Let's come back to the scoreboard and tally things up:

Alter preparation: built in the name of the Lord and soaking wet.

Location: where the altar had been thrown down and broken.

He gets second pick of a bull.

It is the God of the universe.

His prayer was short.

It was quiet, but confident and God-centred.

As for religious zeal, Elijah was humble. Preparing the altar and offering, and calling on God in a very simple way, without all the desperate shouting.

If it wasn't for the lack of fire, at this point Baal's victory would appear certain!

But Elijah knows that he doesn't need to loudly seek God's attention or wake him up. He intentionally prays for two things: that Israel would know that God is alive and real, and secondly for God to turn their hearts back; granting faith and repentance.

This is my prayer for everyone, and I hope that its yours too: that we would know God is real and active, and that our hearts would be turned to him in faith and repentance.

It is at this point, we've seen all the preparations, the contest is on and we're about to find out. We can say:

"Will the real God please stand up!"

And look at verse 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."

I think we have our definitive winner of the contest, no doubt about it. It seems God didn't just stand up, he's flipped the table.

Elijah's God is the true and living God. He has proved himself not just to the Israel, but to us as well.

Going on from verse 39 "And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, "The Lord, he is God; the Lord, he is God." ⁴⁰ 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."

Wow!!

Let's unpack some of that.

From a quick observation, it seems like the whole bull on an altar is just part of the contest to see whose God will answer with fire. But as noted earlier, in verse 29 & 36 it says it is the time for the evening sacrifice and the text calls it a burnt offering in verse 38.

This isn't any old time that Elijah happens to be preparing the bull. And the fact that it is a bull indicates it is a sin offering (Leviticus). So this is an offering that Elijah is making on behalf of the people of Israel for their sin.

And when the fire of the Lord comes down to consume it all, God is receiving it as acceptable. God is a jealous and zealous God, who seeks Israel's heart as he answers the second part of Elijah's prayer: To turn their hearts back.

And that is exactly how the people respond as they fall on the ground prostrate. This is true repentance and worship as they confess that The Lord, he is God!

This contest is important for us, but the sacrifice was not for us.

Elijah presented a sacrifice to atone for Israel's sins. But it only temporarily did the job, they had to sacrifice again and again.

But, we have Jesus, God's own son who willingly died for our sins. His sacrifice is a once-for-all time and all people sacrifice! And just like Elijah's sacrifice, God accepts the sacrifice that Jesus made on our behalf. So when we turn in faith and repentance, we have right relationship with God through Jesus.

Christ is far better than what we see in the OT. We get a new heart, Better promises, and the perfect work of Jesus on cross.

And what about Elijah's command to seize the prophets and then slaughter them? Doesn't that sound like a bit of an overreaction?

Looking in Deuteronomy 13 it says: "If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, ² and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, 'Let us go after other gods,' which you have not known, 'and let us serve them'"

⁵ "But **that** prophet or **that** dreamer of dreams shall be put to death... So you shall purge the evil from your midst."

Therefore, Elijah's command is nothing short of dealing with the apostasy the way it should have been dealt with many years earlier.

Coming back to 1 Kings 18, we've had the Carmel Contest, God has defeated Baal, but it still hasn't rained... well maybe its rained fire, but not water.

Which brings us to **point 3: A Godly priority**

I'll continue reading from verse 41:

⁴¹ And Elijah said to Ahab, "Go up, eat and drink, for there is a sound of the rushing of rain." ⁴² So Ahab went up to eat and to drink. And Elijah went up to the top of Mount Carmel. And he bowed himself down on the earth and put his face between his knees. ⁴³ And he said to his servant, "Go up now, look toward the sea." And he went up and looked and said, "There is nothing." And he said, "Go again," seven times. ⁴⁴ And at the seventh time he said, "Behold, a little cloud like a man's hand is rising from the sea." And he said, "Go up, say to Ahab, 'Prepare your chariot and go down, lest the rain stop you.'" ⁴⁵ And in a little while the heavens grew black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain.

And Ahab rode and went to Jezreel. ⁴⁶ And the hand of the Lord was on Elijah, and he gathered up his garment and ran before Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel.

So, what is going on here? Didn't God promise he would send rain in verse 1? Wouldn't Ahab be giving Elijah the eyes like "You've proved your point, now where's my rain?" But he tells him to go up, eat and drink.

Then we find Elijah back on mount Carmel, bending over with his face to the ground between his knees praying.

He's praying for rain of course. But why?

Why does he need to pray for rain if God promised it would come?

When he prayed earlier that day for fire, it came immediately, but here Elijah prays and tells his servant to go look toward the sea. And he reports that there is nothing.

Elijah's priority is for God's will to be done as promised, so he keeps praying and sends his servant out 7 times in total. It is only on the seventh time the servant reports a tiny cloud rising from the sea.

He prayed with patience and perseverance.

Even when God promises something to us, it is godly and right to pray that his promises will be done. Just as Neil said a few weeks ago when we looked at the Lord's prayer. Praying "Your kingdom come, Your will be done" is asking God to do things that he has promised already to do.

We don't know when our prayers will be answers. But we must keep on praying, knowing that God hears and knows the perfect timing to answer.

So, when we pray, we don't have to shout or rouse him from sleep so he listens.

Psalm 121 says ³"He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.

⁴ Behold, he who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep."

Application/Conclusion:

So how can we put tonight's passage into action? We live in the 21st century, what's the application?

We don't worship idols, we don't offer sacrifices and we don't slaughter false prophets.

No, we don't do these exact things, but we do have idols in this modern age, they just look a bit different.

Try to think of something you might have made an idol that divides your loyalty to God:

Are you holding back from God to do something else?

Could it be social media,
Sport,

Entertainment,
Fitness,

What do you consider when you make everyday decisions?

Your own contentment?

Success?

Happiness?

Like in the 1950s TV show, "To Tell the Truth", don't be fooled by the fake things of the world that are so tempting to commit our time and devotion to. The real God has stood up and revealed himself to us. So why stumble along with the idols of today? Or teeter on the fence, giving God only part of our commitment?

But, what about the slaughter. Are we to harm false prophets and heretics? No, we wait for Christ's return, the final judgement, where all will be settled.

Today is a day of opportunity. Every day God waits, he is having mercy on everyone.

So what's hindering you from turning to God, or growing in your relationship with him? It isn't a communication problem that's for sure. He always hears us when we talk to him and we can always look to his word where he speaks to us.

Hebrews 12 says: "let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith."

Don't go another day wondering what will happen when I die.

Don't push aside questions like "Who is God?", "What's my purpose?"

Don't ignore sin because it feels deceptively fulfilling, putting it off to deal with another day.

Don't say, I'm too tired to pray, or I don't have time to read the bible.

In the words of tonight's passage, don't go on limping around, sitting on the fence. Get off the fence.

As we celebrate the Lord's supper tonight, if you are a Christian, celebrate the victory that Jesus' blood has won for you. Remember with reverence and thankfulness that the sacrifice of Jesus' own life was for you.

And if you're not yet a Christian, consider how Jesus' sacrifice on the cross can change your life forever.