

SERIES gods at war
 SERMON **Fight Over Pleasure (1 Kings 18)¹**
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1. MOOSE WANTS A MUFFIN...

For whatever reason, since she was about 3 years old, our daughter loves moose. So along with a stuffed animal and a few other things along the way, it seemed fitting to get her a twist on a familiar book. The familiar one is, *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*.... The twist is, *If You Give a Moose a Muffin*.... Essentially the same storyline, just different characters. Now, if you're not up on your children's book reading, the story begins with a small gesture of kindness from a little boy: he gives a moose a muffin. But that opens the door to a steady flow of further expectations from the moose. All operating under the idea: "Well, if you'll do that, then how about this—because I can't enjoy that without this..."

And when what's offered and resupplied runs out, there's the moose's expectation: "Well, you need to make more for me." And then that turns into its own little sideshow of self-interested wants and enjoyments of other things. All of which not only move farther away from the earlier desire but also operate with the same idea: "Well, if you give me that, then I must have this—because that won't work without this..." And the cycle continues, which leads to the question on the back of the book: "Will it ever end?" As the story progresses, and seeing where things lead, the answer is: no, it won't. Because moose eventually sees something that reminds him of the taste of muffins, and he remembers that he wants more of them. And so, he turns to the maker and giver of muffins and expects what he craves.

While this might be a fun little story for kids, there are some underlying truths within it about human nature—illustrated by a moose. Because why not. What begins as a good act of kindness becomes an opportunity for exploitation. If the giver gave once, then the giver ought to give more—and not just more of the same, but more of what the recipient wants to go along with it. Thus, the pursuit of more is not really about enjoying and being grateful for the good that's freely been done. It's now about requiring more to be done to satisfy the wants and expectations of the recipient. And in so doing, not only is what's given not truly appreciated for what it is (*and intended to be*), but the giver is also devalued and turned into a mere tool to create and bring about satisfaction for another.

This morning, we continue in our series, "gods at war," which focuses on addressing those areas of life that either stand in the way of our commitment to the one true God or are things we've established as replacements of God in our lives. They are the things to which we give our time, energy, devotion, service, and worship. The things we place on the throne of our lives instead of God. The biblical term here is, idolatry. And last week, we laid out the big-picture of what idolatry is and how it must be understood and treated by those who claim to be God's people. A people created, called, and expected to be blameless and holy before God, and who live lives that are identifiably other-than what's easily found in the world and readily embraced as good and pleasing. This week, we give our attention to an expression of this overall struggle in spiritual warfare: the battle against the "gods of pleasure."

We know that God has given us so much in this life that was meant for good. A goodness that we are able to experience and enjoy—especially when such things are defined by His design and intention,

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations will follow the New English Translation (NET).

which also carried with it the promise of such things being a blessing to our lives. But somewhere along the way, we discover that what He gives for His intended good for us can be used for other purposes. Ways that are outside of His design but when reworked according to ours, they produce personally satisfying results. And when we've consumed those things, we begin to wonder: what else will God give me? Maybe even thinking: "God wants me to be happy, so He has to do _____, or He has to give me _____." Or if we're full of hutzpah: "I'll pray for this, but only so that I can use it for that"—with the "that" having nothing to do with God, the goodness of the gift, or His designs for it.

This is part of the reason why this particular spiritual battle is so difficult—either to acknowledge or accept. The vast majority of things that wind up becoming "gods of pleasure" in our lives were not inherently bad to begin with. In fact, there was an innate goodness to them. But they became otherwise when we corrupted their nature and good purpose and transformed them into the gods to whom we give our time, energy, devotion, worship, and life in the pursuit of what we desire. (*Not really sure how that's relevant for today, but there it is*). To address this struggle and to know what God calls us to do, we'll need to focus on two big-picture-like details. The first considers the underlying cause—i.e., what leads us to doing such things? And the second focuses on the common result found in Scripture—especially among God's people. Then, from there, we'll explore an OT episode that not only illustrates this but also gives us wisdom to think and live in ways that please God instead of self.

—PRAY—

2. GO BACK TO THE BEGINNING

For the first big-picture-like detail, we need to step back in time a bit. Okay, quite a bit. To the Garden of Eden. After God created Adam and Eve as His image-bearers and designed them for each other, He provided everything they needed to sustain and enjoy life. This means: His creation and provision declare His nature and character: He is the truly good Creator and gracious Lord of life. It also means: everything was made good by God and its goodness was meant for Adam and Eve's good—in the truly pleasing, meaningful, and enduring way that God intended. And because of the innocence in their hearts in the sight of God, every good-given thing was rightly desired, used, experienced, and enjoyed according to its holy and perfect design.

And in such a life, Adam and Eve were aware of God's abiding presence with them—the greatest Creator in communion with the greatest creation. (*That's heaven on earth, to be sure*). They know Him to be Yahweh Elohim (יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים): the only One, true, and eternally existing God over all things. And in such a life, there was constant cause worship and give thanks to God for all of His blessing in and for life. And in that worship and thanksgiving, there was a humble recognition of their identity in relation to God and their complete reliance upon Him for all things. They knew: God is God and they are not, and the whole of their lives is to be faithfully devoted to Him alone, and faithfully obedient to His will for creation and life. But then Gen 3 happens.

Satan comes to Adam and Eve in the form of a serpent. Please don't miss that detail. Satan doesn't approach them as Satan. He conceals his identity and approaches as one of God's creations—one that's familiar to Adam and Eve. But there's more to Satan's misuse of God's creation that we cannot miss. We know God provided everything Adam and Eve needed for life, and gave them free reign to use His provisions to sustain and enjoy life according to His design. But we also know that God said: there is one tree—and only one—that's off limits. In fact, it's the only tree that's tied to a command.

All of the others: they're free to enjoy if they like. Their choice. But this one tree, they're told: **"You must never eat from this one, for in the day you do you will surely die"** (see Gen 2.17).

That's Satan's entry-point. He doesn't draw Adam and Eve's attention to all of the good things God's provided for them to have and enjoy. He'd wouldn't have a leg to stand on if he did that. Instead, he draws their attention away from all the God-given good, and focuses their sights on the one thing that's off limits. The one thing they can't have or enjoy. Thus, what God said they couldn't have, is the very thing Satan says they deserve. *(A tactic that has not changed. And neither has the one that comes next)*. Now, Satan knows: to get them to enjoy what's been forbidden, he can't simply say: **"You have to try this fruit. It will change your life forever!"**, and they'll just treat it like every other tree in Garden. One available option among many. Satan knows: to get them to enjoy what's been forbidden, he has to create a rift in the trust and loyalty they have with the One who declared the tree forbidden.

And that's what he does next: Satan craftily gets Adam and Eve to question—if not doubt—the authenticity (*and authority*) of God's Word. Hence the question, **"Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the Garden'?"** (Gen 3.1, ESV). He twists what God said just enough to draw them into where he wants to take the discussion. But also notice the specific shift he made in reference to God. Satan refers to Him generically as Elohim (אֱלֹהִים), which is other than how they've known Him. So along with getting them to redefine their view of God's Word, Satan wants them to redefine their view of God. And it works: **"The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat of the fruit from the trees of the orchard; but concerning the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the orchard, God [אֱלֹהִים] said, 'You must not eat from it, and you must not touch it, or else you will die'"** (Gen 3.2–3).

In this moment, while Eve held to God's Word, she began to compromise on God's identity. And Satan knows: if someone will compromise on God's identity (*especially His nature and character*), it won't be long before they unhitch themselves from His Word and redefine as good what He's called forbidden. Then, using this small concession: **"The serpent said to the woman, 'Surely you will not die, for God [אֱלֹהִים] knows that when you eat from it your eyes will open and you be like God, [אֱלֹהִים] knowing good and evil'"** (Gen 3.4–5). This is no longer simply a twisting of God's Word just enough. This is a flat-out denial of what God clearly said, while at the same time inserting a new meaning and application—one that appeals to personal self-interests. And don't lose sight of the one who's offering the new meaning of God's Word. It's one who doesn't care about following or preserving God's Word. *(To adapt what's been said before: those who want to change Scripture are those who are unchanged by it).*²

Now, don't miss what's happened. By intentionally ignoring all the good things God has done and all the good provisions He's made available; Satan takes the one thing that God says Adam and Eve cannot have and turns it into an opportunity to construct an entire image and narrative of God. One that presents God as unfair and afraid that His greatest creation will become just like Him, which would threaten His identity and role as the greatest Creator, and He's not going to let that happen. That's why He told them the tree was forbidden. So, in all of this, Satan has led them to doubt the nature, character, purpose, and Word of God by offering them a view of God that's not pleasant or worthy to accept. And in offering that view, Satan gives them opportunity to exchange it for the one that allows them to become like God themselves. An exchange where they can better their identity and they can become the definers of what is right, good, moral, and true. Nothing is off limits to them.

² The original comes from Leonard Ravenhill: "The only people who want to change the Gospel are those who are unchanged by it."

And the crafty denigration of God’s character and subtle deconstruction of His Word yields the intended response: “When the woman saw that the tree produced fruit that was good for food, was attractive [or “pleasing”] to the eye, and desirable for making one wise, she took some of its fruit and ate it. She also gave some of it to her husband who was with her, and he ate it” (Gen 3.6). Here’s what needs to be understood at this point. The temptation to do what God forbids will always come from what is not God. The temptation to do what God forbids will always be a corruption and defilement of what God originally gave as good and holy. As we see in 1 Jn 2: “all that is in the world (the desire of the flesh and the desire of the eyes and the arrogance produced by material possessions) is not from the Father, but is from the world” (1 Jn 2.16). And giving in to the temptation to do what God forbids will always be in defiance of what God says and expects of those who are His image-bearers.

Thus, and to expand upon what an old pastor-theologian once said:³ while the source of temptation is the father of sin, being tempted is itself not a sin; it becomes sinful when we surrender to temptation and allow it to change who we are and meant to be. That’s what happened to Adam and Eve. This one tree—among all the countless others—was always present in the Garden and always accessible. We don’t know if it was a massive, beautiful tree that enhanced the serenity of the existing perfect landscape, or if it was something more subtle yet still a sight to behold in its own way. But what we can know is that because of their faithful loyalty to God and His Word, Adam and Eve had no desire—they were never tempted—to partake of that tree. They respected God as God and Lord over all things, and they respected His summons for them to respect the presence of the tree but not desire its fruit.

But when the father of lies comes to them in the guise of one of God’s familiar creations, plants seeds of doubt in their minds and hearts, and redefines the nature and purpose of what God’s created as well as their own identity as God’s greatest creation; the temptation to see God’s design as open for reinterpretation and new applications for human enjoyment was all too attractive. And it’s here that the bumper-sticker, “Beauty is skin-deep, but ugly goes right down to the bone” is dead on the money. Or if you prefer a more biblical version, this fulfills what James says (*capturing all of what we’ve seen so far*): “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself tempts no one. [i.e., God will never lead us to do or live in ways that He rejects or defines as sinful] But each one is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desires. [that’s where Satan works most] Then when desire conceives, it gives birth to sin, and when sin is full grown, it gives birth to death. Do not be led astray, my dear brothers and sisters” (James 1.13–16).

How is one not led astray? By remaining faithful to God alone and faithfully upholding His Word in the face of all attempts to undermine His identity and truth. An allegiance that knows where to go when opposition and especially temptation approach. James says: “So submit to God. But resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you” (James 4.7–8a). A faithful choice that must be made every day for the whole of life. A constancy of faith that’s necessary because of the constancy of temptation in our world to turn away from God and turn toward something else. A state of being that’s intensified since the Garden, where the consequences of evil and sin have introduced a vast number of corruptions to God’s good creation that are offered as pleasing and enjoyable for life. But despite the sheer number (*along with God’s clear prohibitions against such things*), the approach remains the same to bring about the same result: rebellion against God and His Word.

³ See J. Stalker, *Studies in the Person of Christ* (AMG, 1995)—especially the observation: “We must remember that it is no sin to be tempted, it is only a sin to yield to temptation” (33). The emphasis on yielding is the crucial detail; thus proving the sin to be intentional, not accidental.

A rebellion that often begins because one is unprepared for and lured away by the subtle approach and smooth claims that are opposed to God and His Word—i.e., **His Word might be sacred, but it's not scientific; it might be something to appreciate, but it's not factual; it might have inspirational stories, but they're not necessarily true.**⁴ And the rebellion is easily accomplished when one accepts such claims

⁴ This is an ever-so-slight reworking of something Andy Stanley recently presented to his congregation, in his introductory sermon to a series called, "Starting Point." The context for the above quote is this: "Adults often need a brand new starting point for faith. So what we're going to do in this series—what we're going to do for the next few weeks—is we're going to hit the restart button. We're going to hit the restart button and ask the question, 'What if we didn't know anything; where would we start? What if we never heard any of those stories; where would we start? What if we never read the Bible; where would we start? What if we've never gone to church; where would we start?' Where would we start if we were starting all over as adults as it relates to faith—and specifically as it relates to the Christian faith. So we're going to hit the restart button. And we're going to all start over, all together. And we're going to learn some new things, and we're to hear some challenging things. You're going to hear some things that you've heard before. But my hope is that for many of you—where there's been a gap, where you want to believe, you want to be able to reconcile the real world, your adult world with your faith—that you'll find that they are easily reconcilable. But we're going to have to approach this a little bit differently than perhaps you approached it as a child. Because starting off with faith as a child is very different than starting off with faith as an adult. Now, here's part of the problem. [Stanley, at this point, grabs a Bible from behind the big-screen TV to use as a "prop" (for lack of a better term)] Part of the problem in Christianity is that when we grew up, we were taught the Bible. And that in and of itself is not a problem, but in some ways the way we were taught the Bible is problematic. Because if you grew up in a home like I did or a culture like I did or a Christian tradition like I did, I heard that this was the Word of God. And I've always believed that. I've heard that it was infallible. And I've always believed that. I heard that it was inherent—that there were no mistakes. And I believed that. I heard that it was all inspired from Genesis to maps. That's the way the pastor used to say it—I mean what a pastor who used to come to our church—'From Genesis to maps'; from the table of ind—you know—the table of contents all the way to the maps; that the whole thing is inspired. And as a child you say, 'Yes, sir' and 'Yes, ma'am'. And you know, Adam and Eve and Jesus and Moses and Jesus is coming back; it's all equal. It's all on equal terms. But unfortunately, because the Bible was presented to us as a book (which it is not), because it was all presented as one holistic thing (which it is not), because we never even understood where this came from; it was a house-of-cards. So all someone had to do was come along and pull away a couple of the pieces—a couple of the foundational pieces—and suddenly the whole thing comes tumbling down. And so we went off to College and we discovered that even though it was sacred, it wasn't scientific. And even though, you know, it was something to appreciate, it wasn't necessarily something that was factual. And even though there were stories in here that were inspirational, they weren't necessarily true. And then we experienced life, and there began to be more and more distance, and more and more daylight between what we experienced and what we grew up believing. Even if you grew up in a home where this book—the Bible—was so revered; perhaps you never saw anyone read it. A book you never placed anything on on the coffee table, but you never learned to read it yourself. And you went to a church where somebody opened it up week after week, and you knew that what they were saying was important, but you didn't really understand it. And then you went into an environment that didn't respect it, and suddenly—along with your childhood faith, that starting point that seemed so relevant way back then—suddenly it all went away. [Stanley, at this point, puts the Bible back behind the big-screen TV] See, here's what I think, and here's where we're going for the next few weeks and here's where I'm going to challenge you a bit, and here's where there may be some misunderstanding, and here's where you may be tempted to send me an email—so just hang on. 'The Bible says' (in quotes), 'the Bible says' is not an adequate starting point or returning point for many adults. For many adults, it's not enough for me to say to you, 'Okay, now I'm going to restart your faith. Now, the Bible says...', you're going to go, 'Okay, I already did that. I already did 'the Bible says'; I grew up with 'the Bible says' and I know what the Bible says, but let me tell you about my job. Let me tell you about my divorce. Let me tell you about my children. Let me tell you about my unanswered prayer. And, if we're going to try to restart my faith by starting with, 'the Bible says, the Bible teaches,' **not interested.**" So what I've come to believe, and what we've come to believe, [i.e., the leadership at North Point] and the reason we're doing this series is that: 'the Bible says,' for many adults, is not an adequate place to start your faith. It was adequate when you were a child. But it doesn't work as an adult. [why he tries (but fails) to stifle a cheeky smirk at this point is beyond me] But here is the good news, and here is the reassuring news, and here's where we're going to go for a few minutes today as we begin—as we start—this series called, 'Starting Point.' 'the Bible says' was never intended to be the starting point for the Christian faith. [there are loads of problems with that brazen assertion, but we'll have to leave those to one side for now] 'The Bible says, the Bible teaches' was never intended to be the starting point. That wasn't the starting point when Christianity started." Then after stating his hope for the series and for those listening—especially that a child-like faith(!) would awaken within them—Stanley declares: "Now, here's the thing. The New Testament—where we get everything we know about Christianity, Jesus, the apostle Paul, all of that—the New Testament wasn't put together for about 350 years after the events of Jesus' life." That is provably false, and has been for centuries—despite what Dan Brown and others critics like him believe and say. A known and accepted collection of writings that constitute the New Testament is mentioned c. 170 AD in the Muratorian Fragment ([found here](#)), which speaks of that collection in an established manner—i.e., this is the collection that's been known and passed down. (It even includes a listing of some books that others effectively wanted to be held as canonical but ought not to be, for good reasons—chief of which being, they were composed under a false name or false pretenses). An earlier listing appears c. 144 AD in the writings of Marcion, though he only lists the eleven texts that agree with his (heretical) theology. The implication being: Marcion pulls from a larger (more or less) established list of authoritative texts that were foundational for Christianity—i.e., what we call the New Testament. And then Stanley continues: "In other words, and in fact the phrase, 'New Testament'—you know, there's the Bible's Old Testament and New Testament—the phrase, 'New Testament' doesn't even show up until about 250 AD." That, too, is provably false, and it creates problems for the previous claim—i.e., how can there be a reference to the New Testament c. 250 AD when, as you assert, the New Testament wasn't put together until c. 350 AD? That problem aside: Tertullian, writing c. 200 AD., speaks of the New Testament as having replaced "the old Law"—see *An Answer to the Jews*, 6. Clement of Alexandria, writing c. 180 AD, refers explicitly to the presence and relevance of "the Old and the New Testament"—see *Stromata* 1.5. Irenaeus, also writing c. 180 AD, not only recognizes the distinction between the Old Testament and the New but also stresses the reality that much of what the apostles (in the New) declared, taught, and expected of faithful followers of Christ (especially as it relates to moral issues) depended on the truths and precepts revealed in the Old—see *Against Heresies*, 4.14.2. That stressed reality of

as right, good, and true and then gives into the temptation of making small compromises; neglecting God and His Word—along with its enduring relevance for life; and surrendering the self to all of the promises for instant gratification and greatness declared in the new interpretations. Things that allow people to undesign God’s good design for their own ungood pleasures. An allowance given and embraced because the deception has been received as truth—that humanity can be the measure of all things; the definer of what exists and what does not; the determiner of what is true and what is not.

And when you give that moose that muffin, the list of whatever else is desired easily gets out of control and the denigration of the Giver becomes acceptable behavior. A way of being that seeks to place the self and the pleasures to be enjoyed by the self at the center of all things. An approach to life that’s encouraged (*if not legitimized*) in our world with the seemingly benign advice: “**Do whatever makes you happy. If it feels good, do it.**” But as we know from Scripture—and not just the Garden episode: such a mentality and lifestyle are never applauded or blessed by God, and the summons for God’s people is never about pursuing personal-happiness; it’s always about faithfully striving to fulfill God’s will for life. And only those who remain faithful to Him and His Word alone, and who enjoy the life (*and provisions for life*) that He’s given in the holy way He designed and intended, will be praised and blessed by God. Thus, the people must make a choice about who God is, His Word, and His will for life.

3. FROM LEADERS TO KINGS

That brings to where we left off last week, which is also the second big-picture-like detail. At the close of the book of Joshua, and echoed in Jdgs 2, we read this: “**Israel worshiped the Lord [=Yahweh, יהוה] throughout Joshua’s lifetime and as long as the elderly men who outlived him remained alive. These men had experienced firsthand everything the Lord [יהוה] had done for Israel**” (Josh 24.31; cf. Jdgs 2.7). On the surface, this sounds good. They did what they promised. But the rest of the story shows this promise to be conditioned upon the presence of a leader who was loyal and faithful to God and His Word. And while a conditional faith is bad enough, there is a deeper problem within this. The faith-commitment was not owned by the people. It was simply borrowed from their leader(s). And a borrowed faith is not something people are prone to protect or keep, either when troubles arise or something seemingly better comes along.

Jesus makes the similar point in Jn 10, when He says: “**The hired hand, who is not a shepherd and does not own sheep, sees the wolf coming and abandons the sheep and runs away. So the wolf attacks the sheep and scatters them. Because he is a hired hand and is not concerned about the sheep, he runs away**” (Jn 10.12–13). Not only was the paycheck (*or the perks*) more important, but so was the

dependence is the very thing that Stanley rejected in an earlier sermon (back in early 2018) when he called for the unhitching of the Old from the New, because (as Stanley believes) the leaders in the New did not base their morality or moral judgments on the teaching of the Old Testament. That belief can easily be proven unwarranted and false through an honest study of the text; but that’s a different discussion for a different day. Justin Martyr, writing c. 150 AD, uses the phrase, “new testament” to represent not just Jesus Christ but also the gospel He declares and embodies as the “new covenant” vis-à-vis the “old covenant” declared in the Law and prophets until the time of John the baptizer—see *Dialogue with Trypho* 50 (cf. *Dialogue* 11, where Justin shows Christ to be the true fulfillment of Jeremiah’s new covenant prophecy). That “new covenant” reality is what the New Testament declares, and Justin knows and defends that. And while its authenticity is doubted among scholars, the (so-called) “longer recension” of Ignatius, writing c. 95 AD, says: “For as the false prophets and the false apostles drew [to themselves] one and the same wicked, deceitful, and seducing spirit; so also did the prophets and the apostles receive from God, through Jesus Christ, one and the same Holy Spirit, who is good, and sovereign, and true, and the Author of [saving] knowledge. For there is one God of the Old and New Testament, ‘one Mediator between God and men, . . .’” (*Epistle to the Philadelphians* 5). Thus, at the very least, Stanley is wrong in his 250 years claim by 100 years. Now, since I need to end this footnote soon (because critiquing the rest of what Stanley says in his “Starting Point” sermon would require quite a few more pages), here’s what needs to be understood: not only are these kinds of claims—especially this casting of doubts on the timing and formation of things—the ones favored and used by those who have already rejected Scripture as God’s infallible, inerrant, and inspired Word and truth; but also, all of this argumentation is a “soft form” of Christian deconstruction. It’s the same tactic used in the Garden for the same purpose.

preservation of the self. This stands in contrast to Jesus, who says: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (Jn 10.11). And He willingly does so not just because that’s His deep level of loyalty, but also because the sheep belong to Him and He will do whatever it takes to protect that which is His. Imagine what would happen in the world if people owned and treated their faith-commitment like that. Where, instead of a superficial or borrowed allegiance that’s conditioned upon fair-weather, they have their own deep, unwavering loyalty to God in Christ and are prepared to stand against anything and everything that threatens to take it away or destroy it.

Or let’s make this personal: how many of us are able to say, “That’s me—that’s my depth and rootedness of faith”? But how often do we hear stories where the opposite is the case? Where people are more like “hired hands”—only looking for the benefits and what pleases the self, and who easily bolt from the faith when things get hard, challenging, and require self-sacrifice or even the readiness to resist the shame, mockery, opposition, or temptations of the world. A bolting that easily happens not just because self-preservation is more important but also because what’s left behind (*i.e.*, *faith in God*) never belonged to or was owned by the person. And that represents something of a 400+ year cycle that pervades the time of Judges. Where, in the absence of a leader, and by a series of compromises and neglect of God’s Word, “each person did what he considered to be right” (cf. 17.6). But this individual pursuit was not just individually done; it became a communally adopted approach for life.

One that leads them away from the life God designed and intended and into the life they desired and preferred to make for themselves. One that not only reflected the ways of the sinful and broken world around them, but also embraced such things as something good and to be enjoyed. Thus, we find the summary claim: “The Israelites did evil before the Lord [יְהוָה] by worshiping the Baals. They abandoned the Lord God [יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים] of their ancestors who brought them out of the land of Egypt. They followed other gods—the gods of the nations who lived around them. They worship them and made the Lord [יְהוָה] angry. They abandoned the Lord [יְהוָה] and worshiped Baal and the Ashtoreths” (Jdgs 2.11–13). Notice the phrase, “before the Lord,” or to follow the Hebrew: “in the sight of the Lord.” This means, contrary to what they might believe: God’s not oblivious to their actions or to the state of their hearts. He sees and knows their desire for self-rule apart from Him and His Word. And not only does that truth remain unchanged, it also leads us to something else that cannot be missed.

What they see as right, good, and true in their own eyes is evil in the eyes of God (cf. Isa 5.20a). And the evil they’ve done is that they’ve given to multiple false gods what only is to be given to the one true God: their worship, service, lives, and allegiance. In particular, they’ve given such things to the idols that commonly represent the god of power and goddess of (sexual) pleasure. (*Not sure how the appeal to power or [sexual] pleasure would have any relevance to or culture today; but it was definitely a thing back then*). More disturbing, the people who choose to live in this rebellious and spiritually harlotrous way likely believe they can still receive God’s blessing or that He will continue to accept them as His own. That’s the utter absurdity of the rationale of a faithless heart. Or as Scripture says: hearts that have become darkened, depraved, hardened, and calloused by evil and sin—greedily seeking to be filled with all that is impure or unclean. A state of being that God will never accept.

The question then becomes: how or why did they get into such cycles of faithfulness and rebellion? Was it simply a change in the generations? Inauthentic confessions of faith? Conditioned upon the presence of a faithful leader (*or judge*)? Or was there something else? And the honest answer is: yes. So, what’s the something else? Great question. And the answer has relevance for what we find in the NT and for

our lives as God’s people today. There seems to be a failure to understand (*or appreciate*) the truth that: God doesn’t cleanse sinfulness from the world around us so that it’s easy to live a righteous life before Him—free from struggles and temptations. Rather, God cleanses the sinfulness within us so that we can do the harder and more necessary task of living His righteousness in the midst of a sinful world—one that is full of struggles and temptations, especially those that seek to lure us away from God, His truth, and the righteous way of life He designed and provides for those who belong to Him.

So when that failure exists within the hearts of God’s people, and when their faith-commitment is inauthentically declared, conditionally held, and not personally owned: there’s no real desire to stand faithfully for God and His Word. It’s easy to ditch the borrowed faith when troubles arise, conditions are no longer pleasing or comfortable, or when something seemingly better comes along. And that’s the 400+ year cycle we see in the time of the Judges. And things don’t improve when we enter the time of Samuel, the prophet and beyond (i.e., the next 1000+ years). It is here that the people demand to have a king of their own—just like all the other nations. This not only slaps Samuel’s God-appointed role as the faithful guide for God’s people, but it also constitutes a spiritual mutiny against God Himself—the one who promised and proved Himself to be their only true King. But none of that matters. What matters is what they want, and what they want is influence by what others have.

And even after being told how a king like all the others will reign over God’s people, and after being encouraged to reconsider what they think they want above all else,⁵ we read this heartbreaking choice: **“But the people refused [רצוּ, find distasteful] to heed Samuel’s warning. Instead, they said, ‘No! There will be a king over us! We will be like all the other nations. Our king will judge us and lead us and fight our battles’”** (1 Sam 8.19–20). In case we missed it, this is God’s people saying: **“The king we want will replace the God we have as king.”**⁶ This is a choice made not simply because of what they hope their king will do, but primarily because of what they desire to do without God as king and lord over their lives. So while they see themselves as the center of all things, they desire a king who reflects that view of self and who will lead others to it. It takes a lot of stacked-up little compromises, a long-standing regiment of neglect, and entrenched habit of cognitive dissonance to reach that level of rebellion.

When we leap forward roughly 100 years and enter the days of the divided kingdom—following the united monarchy under Saul, David, and Solomon—we discover that the choice to replace God as king and lord of His people has escalated to replacing God as God of His people. In 1 Kgs 12, Jeroboam, who is ruling over the northern kingdom of Israel becomes afraid of his people. He fears they will decide to return to Jerusalem (*in the southern kingdom of Judah*) and worship God in the Temple. And when they do, they will change their loyalty, assassinate him, and move to live under the reign of Rehoboam. (*This is the scenario he’s created in his own head*). So he meets with his advisors and they agree on a course of action. He constructs two golden calves—an idol that sometimes refers to Baal but also refers to the

⁵ In 1 Sam 8.10–18, we see Samuel (*effectively says*): You want a human king and lord over you, just like the other nations have, fine; but he’s going to be a reflection of the world around you as well as the worst that is within you—especially in your desire to please yourselves. He will take your sons and force them to serve in his army—he’ll even put them on the front lines to protect/shield himself. He’ll have others do his work for him—especially those who work the fields to fill his bellow and those who will make weapons of war for him. He’ll take your daughters and make them serve in his house. He’ll take your property and give it to his own servants; He’ll demand 10% of your produce and then give it to his official and servants loyal to him. He’ll even demand 10% of your flocks (for his own use). Oh, and you’ll be his servant; but not like those he already has. For you, it will be more like slavery.

⁶ This affirms (or better: fulfills) the truth that God revealed to Samuel earlier: **“it is not you that they have rejected, [רצוּ, despised] but it is Me that they have rejected [רצוּ] as their king. Just as they have done from the day I brought them up from Egypt until this very day, they have rejected [רצוּ] Me and served other gods”** (1 Sam 8.7–8).

Egyptian god, Apis—the god of power, creation, and fertility, and he’s also understood to be the god who embodies the values and wisdom of Egypt.... Hang on to that.

He then tells the people: *“It is too much trouble for you to go up to Jerusalem. [i.e., why bother with the travel, the traffic, the crowds, the cost] Look, Israel! Here are your gods who brought you up from the land of Egypt”* (1 Kgs 12.28). He not only wants to retain control over the people and sustain his own powerbase—and does so by appealing to people’s comforts—but he also wants to exercise influence over their worship. Notice: he doesn’t offer the option of worship Yahweh at some temple in the northern kingdom. He tells them that they should worship an entirely different god (*one whose idol he just created with his own hands from material found in God’s creation*). But to do this, he has to play on their ignorance—presenting the different god as the one who freed them from Egypt, who happens to be an Egyptian god, but the people seem to not realize that problem.

And I say that because they believe Jeroboam and they give their allegiance to him and this other god—one that they’ve been led to believe is the true God who rescued them from Egypt. They’ve accepted the lie as truth. And similar to what happens in the time of the Judges, this experience with a wicked king over those who are meant to be God’s people—those who are meant to worship Him alone—becomes something of a pattern. As told in 1 Kgs 15–16, it’s king after king in Israel who are described in the same ways: *“He did even in the sight of the Lord [יְהוָה]. He followed in his father’s footsteps and encouraged Israel to sin”* (1 Kgs 15.26, 34). A way of leading that does not merit God’s favor but rightly receives His anger. And then, near the end of 1 Kgs 16, where we’re introduced to King Ahab, the son of Omri—the one who, as it says in v.25, *“did more evil in the sight of the Lord [יְהוָה] than all who were before him.”* And his reign of evil last 12 years.

Then we read, beginning with v.28: *“Omri passed away and was buried in Samaria. His son Ahab replaced him as king. In the thirty-eighth year of Asa’s reign over Judah, [so, c.875 BC] Omri’s son Ahab became king over Israel. Ahab son of Omri rule over Israel for 22 years in Samaria. Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the sight of the Lord [יְהוָה] than all who were before him. As if following in the sinful footsteps of Jeroboam son of Nebat were not bad enough, he married Jezebel the daughter of King Ethbaal of the Sidonians.⁷ [this is the woman who orchestrated the execution of God’s prophets] Then he worshiped and bowed to Baal. He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal he had built in Samaria. Ahab also made an Asherah pole; he did more to anger the Lord God of Israel than all the kings of Israel who were before him”* (1 Kgs 16.28–33). This becomes close to the epitome of rebellion caused by a deeply compromised, darkened, duplicitous, and idolatrous heart.

4. FIGHT OVER PLEASURE

That brings us to an illustration of the much larger struggle with the gods and idols of pleasure, along with how this text gives us the wisdom to think and live in ways that please God instead of the self. Ways that faithfully win the fight over the “foreign gods” in our lives because they are faithfully obedient to God and His Word and faithfully reliant upon His provisions. We begin in 1 Kgs 17, where God tells Elijah (*the prophet*) to tell King Ahab that God will withhold dew and rain upon the northern kingdom for years to come. This is God withholding His blessing. And if someone were to ask: *“Why?”* we could refer them back to the end of 1 Kgs 16. There we saw King Ahab—the leader of those meant

⁷ Also known as Ithbaal I, born c. 915 BC and reigned from 879 until his death in 847/6 BC. One ancient source describes Ithbaal as having been a priest of the goddess, Astarte (goddess of war, hunting, healing, beauty, and [sexual] love).

to be God's people—champions the worship of Baal (*the god of weather, rain, seasons*) and Asherah (*the consort of Baal and the goddess of fertility; sometimes hailed as the queen of heaven*). He's not simply put up a few idols in a special room in his house so as to enjoy his own personal spiritual journey. He's created a temple and monumental statues for all to see and worship in public ways. He's creating a national affirmation of idolatry.

Please don't miss what's happening with this removal of blessing, signified in the curse upon the land: to the one who faithfully exalts the god of weather and rain and the goddess of fertility, Elijah says: Yahweh will cause a drought in the land, which will devastate the crops. This is a declaration of divine judgment as well as a truth that undercuts the foundation of false beliefs in foreign gods. Now, before we go any farther with this, let's pause and consider how this might apply to us. While we don't construct physical temples or build physical idols of "foreign gods"—at least not in the same way (*though some might say people do*); we easily give ourselves—our time, energy, devotion, allegiance, and even worship—to things in life that have become more worthy than God. A willingness that developed over a series of small steps or maybe a massive leap.

Either way, it represents a decided move away from where we were met to be—and that is in faithful, abiding communion God. And when that happens—because we've given our heart, faith, and life to something other than God—we cannot be surprised if God withholds His blessing from us. Or when it gets bad enough that God is replaced by what we prefer (*what pleases us*), we cannot be surprised if God allows us to be taken away into the life that is not of Him (*or His design*) but is of our own making. This is essentially what Paul is driving at in Rom 1, where he says: "God gave them over in the desires of their hearts to impurity to dishonor their bodies among the themselves" (Rom 1.24). Why does God do this? Why doesn't He just forgive them? The answer to the second question is: He would, but they don't want Him involved in their lives and they don't want His forgiveness. They're living a life they feel doesn't need to be forgiven. And that view of self brings us to the answer for the first question.

Paul goes on to explain: because while the people "knew God [*i.e., they knew He exists*] they did not glorify Him as God or give Him thanks" (Rom 1.21). Instead, they "exchanged the glory of the immortal God for an image resembling mortal human beings or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles" (Rom 1.23); thus, they "exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshiped and served the creation rather than the Creator" (Rom 1.25). And all of that being the result of their inward condition—*i.e., it was because "they became futile [ματαιόω = empty] in their thoughts and their senseless [ἀσύνετος = unintelligent, stupid] hearts were darkened"* (Rom 1.21). Thus, the giving them over to the delusion they created and prefer is not only a form of God's righteous punishment but also a declaration that such a delusional mentality and God-rejecting lifestyle will never be accepted or blessed by God.

But lest all of that sound like bad news (*which it is for those who choose that life and do not change*), we cannot miss the underlying extending of the good news to those who turn away from God. Even in the midst of such rejection of God, God graciously offers the opportunity for a changed life. One brought about through true repentance—*i.e., putting to death the old self and casting off the "foreign gods" to whom the self gave its full allegiance—and then the reception of the radically new and transformed life found in and sustained by God alone. That's the promise of the gospel, and that promise is extended and made available throughout history. Thus, the decision to turn away from God does not have to be the end of the story. Like the story of the prodigal son: there is always the choice*

to “come home” to God. And in that coming home, the old broken life is left behind and the new, restored life is graciously given. But for all of that to happen, there must be a decisive choice.

And the summons to that choice is what happens next. After God reveals to Elijah how He will provide for him during the drought (*thus, illustrating the point that the faithful are not removed from the trials and tribulations experienced by the faithless, but are sustained by God through it [cf. Jn 17.14–19 (esp. v.15); 16.33]*), and after God uses Elijah to provide for a struggling widow (*thus, illustrating the point that faithfully ministering to those in need is not conditional*); in 1 Kgs 18, we see that three years have passed, and God now tells Elijah to go see King Ahab once again. And the first thing out of Ahab’s mouth amounts to a personal attack—i.e., he blames Elijah for bringing “disaster on Israel.” To which Elijah immediately says, “**I have not brought disaster on Israel. But you and your father’s dynasty have, by abandoning the Lord’s commandments and following the Baals**” (1 Kgs 18.18).

Now that he’s got Ahab’s attention, Elijah gets down to business: he tells Ahab to “**assemble all Israel before me at Mount Carmel, as well as the 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah whom Jezebel supports**” (1 Kgs 18.19). He’s calling for what amounts to a contest to openly prove the truth that was already revealed three years ago—i.e., the foreign gods and goddesses now over Israel are nothing and powerless when compared to Yahweh, the one true God over all of creation. Once everyone is there, the text reads: “**Elijah approached all the people and said, ‘How long are you going to be paralyzed by indecision? If the Lord [יְהוָה] is the true God, then follow Him, but if Baal is, follow him.’ But the people did not say a word**” (1 Kgs 18.21). This should remind us of last week, with the call to make a definitive choice between only two choices: either God or something else.

But notice the troubling phrase: “**But the people did not say a word.**” It’s often pointed out that they didn’t say anything because they didn’t want to choose—especially in an either-or way. They wanted it both ways: God plus what they already had. Or if we wanted to make this clearer: they wanted to keep what they had been doing, because it worked for them. They saw no problem with claiming allegiance to both God and other gods. For them, the rationale might be: “**Nobody’s getting hurt by that kind of commitment. Truth be told, the only ones getting hurt are those who claim allegiance to God and His Word; so why would we want to be a part of that? Besides, the king has successfully led the kingdom of God’s people while holding dual faith-commitments and worship. Why force us to make a choice that will only make life more difficult?**” A mentality of futility the needs to be restored and filled with God’s true meaning, and a darkened heart that needs the hope of God’s true life-giving light. For only then will they know why it can only be God and nothing else. For apart from Him, there is nothing else.

And so, Elijah gives them the opportunity to see why the choice is easy. A competition—of sorts—is set up between him and 450 prophets of Baal. They are each to build an altar, make an animal sacrifice upon it, but not set fire to it. Each, in turn, will then call upon their God to send fire upon the altar to consume the sacrifice in flames. The God that answers is the one true God. Everyone present agreed to the plan and said it was a fair test. Elijah lets the prophets of Baal go first—even allowing them to choose the best bull. And then it started. The chants, the gesturing, the monotonous music, the crying out to Baal...for hours on end. But nothing from Baal. Then after a little sarcastic encouragement from Elijah (*even suggesting that Baal might be on the can*), they went for it even more. Louder yells, cutting themselves with swords and spears—hoping Baal would take notice of their deep devotion to him—and they worked themselves up into chaotic mess...for hours on end. But nothing from Baal.

While people don't behave in these exact ways today (*though we can't rule that out*), there are some basic parallels—namely, the time, blood, sweat, and tears that often go into their devotion to the gods they honor and serve above all else. One pastor put it this way: for the gods of pleasure, many have sacrificed family, marriage, career, finances, reputation, future, and even their relationship with God for these gods. They've freely bled for them. Some have expended themselves and bled for food, entertainment, name-your-addiction, and bad relationships. And after all that sacrifice and displays of commitment, and after all of that pouring out of oneself in the hope of finding lasting fulfillment and true meaning from the gods of pleasure...and doing this for who knows how long...there's nothing. Once all of the superficial feelings, moments of elation, pleasurable experience, and/or thrills from the excitement of doing whatever is done with those gods wear off, the void within still remains.

And truly empty gods or idols cannot fill the emptiness that many so desperately try to hide and even forget. There has to be a better way. And just like what was proven on Mt Carmel, there has to be a better way than the one that just proven to be a failure. And that's where Elijah goes next. But notice what he does, which is both intentional and seemingly crazy. Beginning in v.30: he calls the people to him and he doesn't build a new altar. Instead: **“He repaired the altar of the Lord [יְהוָה] that had been torn down...[using] twelve stones, corresponding to the number of tribes that descended from Jacob, to whom the Lord's message had come, 'Israel will be your name' ”** (1 Kgs 18.30–31). Don't miss what this does. It's a return to true worship of the one true God, a return to true identity as the true people of God, and a return to the true blessing from God—one that redefined everything about them.

No longer are they Jacob who deceived for self-interested reasons to get a momentary reward or pleasure. They are Israel who remained steadfast with the God who fights for them, for their good and His eternal glory. Everything that they destroyed—the name, the identity, and the worship—so that they could make way for what they wanted, Elijah rebuilds so that they can know what they truly need and the One who truly provides without fail. But that's not all Elijah does. And this is the seemingly crazy part. He digs a trench around the rebuilt altar and floods the whole thing with gallons and gallons of water. He's just made what should be a relatively easy task an impossible one. To which the people thought, **“And he thinks we're out of our minds.”** But Elijah is not only in his right mind, he's also in his right heart, and he humbly submits everything to the one true God who easily does the impossible.

Notice, in vv.36–37, that Elijah doesn't put on a grand show or inflict harm upon himself. He simply prays: **“O Lord God [יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים] of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, prove today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, O Lord, are the true God and that you are winning back their allegiance.”** While Elijah wants it to be known that he has not acted out of self-interest but faithful obedience, his primary concern is that God and His glory are revealed, known, and exalted, and that people are restored to God alone. And he doesn't have to wait long. In vv.38–39, we read: **“Then fire from the Lord [יְהוָה] fell from the sky. It consumed the offering, the wood, the stones, and the dirt, and licked up the water in the trench. When all the people saw this, they threw themselves down with the faces to the ground and said, 'The Lord [יְהוָה] is the true God! The Lord [יְהוָה] is the true God!'”**

And along with this faithful confession, repentance, and decisive break with their past idolatry, v.45 says: **“Meanwhile, the sky was covered with dark clouds, the wind blew, and there was a heavy rainstorm.”** God's blessing and provision are returning because the people have returned to Him.

[connect and close]