

ONE LEG OR THE OTHER
I KINGS, CHAPTER 18
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There was a terrible drought in Israel. The parched, scorched land cried out for rain. Animals were dying from the lack of water and food. There was tension in the land, dissension due primarily to a religious conflict; a conflict between the worshippers of Baal and the worshippers of the Lord. The Hebrew word is Yahweh, not Jehovah which appears in the King James Version. The conflict between Baal and Yahweh was not new. Ever since the exodus from Egypt when they settled in Canaan, there had been a conflict. The local people were worshippers of Baal and were successful in converting many of the Israelites to the worship of Baal.

When Ahab became king, the conflict intensified. As I mentioned last week, King Ahab had married Jezebel, the daughter of the king of Phoenicia, in an attempt to improve diplomatic relations. Jezebel's goal was to subvert Israel, beginning with its religion. A temple was built to worship the goddess Asherah, and prophets were imported. Jezebel persecuted the prophets of Yahweh, the Lord, and killed many of them.

Eventually, only one prophet remained in Israel who was faithful to the Lord, Elijah by name. King Ahab had an APB (All Points Bulletin) put out on him, and even tried to extradite him from neighboring kingdoms when Elijah hid out there. Ahab called Elijah "the worst troublemaker of Israel," an enemy of the people.

The situation grew desperate. Elijah knew something had to be done. How his stomach must have churned when he saw the ivory-decorated elaborate palace. The rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer. How he must have wept when he saw the prophets of Baal freely enter the palace while the prophets of the Lord were executed. How angry he must have become when he saw the temple erected to Asherah right in the midst of the capital. He saw his country being defeated by a cunning queen. He saw the religion of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob being undermined. He knew something must be done and that he--only one person, but he was one person and he was called by God--was the one to do something. What could he do? What would you have done?

Elijah firmly believed that God was acting in the situation. Elijah believed that the drought was the hand of God who was unhappy with his people. He believed that the morality of a people has an affect on the weather, and as faith, morality, and concern for the poor wither, so the land withers. Elijah blamed the drought on the king's betrayal, the indecisiveness of the people and the increasing influence and dominance of Baal worship. Elijah believed the time had come to take a stand, to confront the situation head-on. He took a risk. His plan was a daring risk of faith.

Elijah sent a message to King Ahab in which he challenged the prophets of Baal to a duel. He told Ahab to assemble the people on top of Mount Carmel and to prepare a sacrifice. "Let the prophets pray to Baal; Elijah will pray to the Lord and the God who answers by lighting the fire under the sacrifice will henceforth be worshipped as the true God." Who could resist such a carnival! What a day! A huge crowd gathered to watch 450 prophets of Baal battle one prophet for the Lord, an even match!

Elijah challenged the King and the crowd, "How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; if Baal is God,

follow him." The Jerusalem Bible translation is more graphic, "How long do you mean to hobble, first on one leg, then on the other?" One leg or the other. Make up your minds. If the Lord is God, follow him; if Baal is God, follow him. You can't follow both. Jesus put it this way in Matthew 6:24, "No one can serve two masters; for either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other."

Elijah called the attempt to serve two masters the hobbling stance, the fence-straddling stance. Coming from Minnesota where the fences are made of barbed wire, I do not recommend fence-straddling as a pleasant experience! Elijah believed that fence-straddling was the downfall of Israel. The people were wishy-washy. They were indecisive. They danced for both gods. They couldn't make up their minds. As a result, they profaned the worship of God. Their ethics were a mess. Ethically, there was quite a difference between the Ten Commandments of Yahweh, and the temple prostitution of the fertility religion, Baal. Their loyalties were watered down. They disregarded the plight of the poor, the widows and orphans. There was no center, no hub for their nation, no unity, no common identity, no united purpose and commitment.

Hobbling, first on one leg and then on the other, is still a popular stance today. Many people are not sure of their priorities, their morality or their ethics. Too many find themselves pulled in several directions. Many find themselves harried with little time for God, family or friends. On the other hand, there are folks with too little to do. They feel lonely, isolated, with little sense of direction. They are shy, feel depressed, not needed or wanted. They also have no hub, no center, no focus for their lives.

The result of the hobbling stance--first, one leg, then the other--according to Elijah, is drought. The drought on the land was the result of a spiritual drought. They dried up. The reservoirs were dry. When you hobble and can't choose one leg or the other, when you try to live without priorities and a central commitment, you can quickly dry up. Your energy is sapped. Fatigue, burnout and stress conquer you. The body gets sick. Someone has said, "Too many of us have just enough religion to be miserable." Just enough religion to feel guilty, but not enough religion to experience forgiveness, joy and power.

Elijah challenged the people to give up the hobbling stance. "If the Lord is God, follow him; if Baal is God, follow him." Make up your mind, one leg or the other. Jesus gave the same challenge to the people of his day, except, as in our day, Baal was not the chief opponent of God. As in our day, the Lord's chief rival was money. Jesus said in Matthew 6:24, "No one can serve two masters...You cannot serve God and money."

Who is your God? Are you hobbling, fence-straddling, vacillating on one leg or the other? Are you experiencing a drought in your life? Is Jesus your Lord or is it someone or something else? Are you interested in finding out? I have a test to help you determine who or what is your god.

A father overheard his three boys discussing what they would like to inherit from him so they could always be sure to remember their father. The oldest son wanted his Dad's watch. The middle son wanted his Dad's ring. The youngest son said, "I want Dad's checks." They laughed at him, but if they

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were intent on remembering their father, of capturing the essence of their father's life, then the canceled checks were the best inheritance. Analyze your canceled checks to see how you spend your money. In your canceled checks is the story of your life, probably the only autobiography most of us will write. What do your canceled checks tell about you? Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there is your heart also." He was right. We may talk poetically and romantically with our mouth about our priorities, commitments and loyalties; but where and how we spend our money tells the real tale.

As Christians we believe that the God revealed to us through Jesus Christ is God, the true God. We believe Jesus is the best picture God ever took. If Baal is God, follow him. If money, materialism, is God, follow him. But, if Jesus Christ is God, follow him. How?

First, accept your salvation as a gift from God who loves you. Accept God's love of you; bask in it, relax in it; accept yourself as a gift from God.

Second, put Christ in first place in your life. Give Christ the highest priority. In your checkbook, put Christ first. The biblical ideal is the tithe, 10%. God has made you wealthy so that you may financially support his work. Giving 10% to God's work is your way of fulfilling your responsibility as well as a joyful expression of Christ's place in your life. Put Christ's values in first place. When you make moral and ethical decisions, ask, "What would Christ have me do?" What would Christ have our nation do? Apply Christ's values to your personal life and to society as well. Put Christ first in your vocation, asking, "What is God's will for me? What would Christ have me be and do?"

Third, worship regularly--weekly in corporate worship and daily in individual worship. Pray the prayer of total commitment: "O God, take me, mold me, use me, fill me with the Holy Spirit." Open yourself to the Spirit, not to any spirit, but the Holy Spirit in the name of Jesus. Be open to the Spirit. God in his time will answer, end the drought in your life, and send the rain, the refreshing, renewing rain upon your life. We used to sing in my youth, "Showers of blessing! Mercy drops round us are falling, but for the showers we plead."

Back to the story. One man stood for the Lord on the top of Mount Carmel one hot day in the midst of a severe drought. One man for the Lord, 450 prophets for Baal, and who knows how many hobblers watched. The majority--moral or not--is not necessarily right. One man for the Lord. The largest churches are not necessarily on the Lord's side. One man stood for the Lord that day. The Baal prophets were first. They laid the fire wood, slaughtered a bull, placed it on the wood, and began praying to Baal. All morning they prayed, but no fire. They danced themselves into a frenzy, but no fire. Elijah teased them. He couldn't resist. He hollered, "Pray louder. Perhaps your god is napping. Maybe he went away on a trip. Perhaps he went to the bathroom!" Yes, that comment is in the Bible! I Kings 18:27.

Then it was Elijah's turn. He rebuilt the altar, laid out the wood, and poured water on the wood to make the fire building even more difficult. Then he prayed, "Lord God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, this day let it be known that you are God and that I am your servant. Answer me, Lord, that this

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DOUGLAS NORRIS
FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA

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people may know that you are God and let their hearts be turned back to you." The Lord answered the prayer with a raging fire. It burned up the sacrifice and the wood, dried up the water and even scorched the earth. The people gasped, threw themselves on the ground in prayer and exclaimed, "Yahweh is God! The Lord is God!"

Then Elijah told the King to eat, while he retired to wait. He told his servant, "Go and look toward the sea." The servant went and returned, saying, "I don't see a thing." Seven times Elijah sent the servant to look, and the seventh time, the servant said, "I saw a little cloud coming." Elijah told him, "Hurry, tell the king to get in his chariot and go home before the rain comes." Elijah was ecstatic. In sheer abandonment, freedom and joy, with a burst of new energy, filled with the Spirit, he ran down the mountain, in front of Ahab's chariot, all the way home with the rain coming down in torrents. Running in the rain!

In sheer abandonment, will you declare that Christ is your Lord? With a total commitment to Christ, will you quit hobbling from one leg to the other, and let the Spirit renew you, fill you, invigorate you. Let the rain come on our church! Let the Spirit fill our church with love, joy and power. Brothers and sisters, if Jesus is God, then follow him!