

# The God Who Answers with Fire

**THEOLOGICAL THEME:** False gods demand strenuous effort and sacrifice, but the true God is known by His grace and power.

As a kid, my husband loved to fish. I once asked him what happens when two fishing lines get entangled. He told me that even though the two lines eventually could be disentangled, it sometimes took so much effort that it was better to just cut the line, tie on a new hook, and start over. He also told me that even one line could get tangled up with itself.

Sometimes our lives are like fishing lines—easily entangled in a myriad of false ideas and worthless activities, leading us to exertion that demands our time and effort. And too often our struggle against falsehood can consume us and take us deeper into the entanglement.



## Voices from Church History

“An idol of the mind is as offensive to God as an idol of the hand.”<sup>1</sup>

—A. W. Tozer (1897-1963)



What are some false ideas or worthless activities that can “entangle” the Christian?

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What are the signs that we are exerting energy and effort on pointless things?

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In this session we see how the prophet Elijah demonstrated the stark contrast between the demand placed on our lives by pursuing false idols and the resources God provides for us to pursue our relationship with Him. In the end, one pursuit leaves us bled out and used up; the other pursuit builds us back up and ministers to us so we can minister to others.

## 1. The God who answers with fire is deserving of our loyalty (1 Kings 18:17-24).

As a young Christian, when I first read the story of the contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal, I thought, *The Israelites must have been shallow to have fallen so easily into worship of Baal, a pagan god! Modern Christians, who have thousands of years of Jewish and Christian writings at their fingertips, are so much better educated and informed. We'd never fall into such a trap!* Now I realize that people today are not that different from people thousands of years ago, especially when it comes to human disloyalty to God.

<sup>17</sup> *When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, "Is it you, you troubler of Israel?"*  
<sup>18</sup> *And he answered, "I have not troubled Israel, but you have, and your father's house, because you have abandoned the commandments of the LORD and followed the Baals. <sup>19</sup> Now therefore send and gather all Israel to me at Mount Carmel, and the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table."*  
<sup>20</sup> *So Ahab sent to all the people of Israel and gathered the prophets together at Mount Carmel. <sup>21</sup> And 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. <sup>22</sup> Then Elijah said to the people, "I, even I only, am left a prophet of the LORD, but Baal's prophets are 450 men. <sup>23</sup> Let two bulls be given to us, and let them choose one bull for themselves and cut it in pieces and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. And I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood and put no fire to it. <sup>24</sup> And you call upon the name of your god, and I will call upon the name of the LORD, and the God who answers by fire, he is God." And all the people answered, "It is well spoken."*

How long will you go limping between two different opinions?" Elijah asked. The Israelites, the people who should have adamantly opposed giving their loyalty to false gods, gave no answer. Their lack of response revealed their unfaithful hearts and minds. Beginning with King Solomon's allowance of foreign religious and cultural influences and all the way down to the kingship of Ahab, the Israelite people had gradually strayed from the worship of God.

Under King Ahab, the spiritual drought was so dire that his pagan consort, Queen Jezebel, actively and openly persecuted the prophets of God. The persecution of God’s prophets came from the governing house of the Northern Kingdom of Israel! It is no wonder that God allowed the land to suffer a physical drought reflective of Israel’s great spiritual disloyalty (1 Kings 17:1).



What are some of the things that attract a person’s loyalty in our current culture, thus compromising their loyalty to God?

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Why is it difficult for people in our society to be loyal to God?

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The people had strayed so far from the worship of the true God that King Ahab actually blamed Elijah as the troubler or destroyer of their nation! Elijah, in unwavering loyalty to God, would not bow down to but openly opposed the worship of the pagan storm/fertility god Baal. And so, Elijah was blamed for attracting Baal’s wrath. Ahab—the leader of the nation that was explicitly told to have “no other gods”—had gone so far astray that he could no longer recognize the problem of “having another god.”

Even today, people may blame Christians for any number of problems in society. But just as we see with Elijah, the real problem is our society’s spiritual disloyalty, which ultimately leads to spiritual drought and destruction. We constantly look for peace and love and grace of our own design and in our own power. Yet no matter how strong our belief, we cannot hope to find an answer in the worship of things of our own design. Only the true God, full of grace and power, provides the answer we seek.

Elijah stated in his challenge that the true God is the One who answers. Here we find an important reason why God deserves our loyalty in worship, even when our society adamantly opposes us. God not only demonstrated His ultimate power but also His ultimate grace by providing Israel a chance to turn back to Him. Yahweh is deserving of loyalty as the true God of grace and power.



Based on Elijah's challenge for how the true God would be known, what can we learn about God and His plan?

## 2. The God who answers with fire is different from false gods (1 Kings 18:25-29).

lph, Berlin / Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dres  
Elke Estel / Hans-Peter Klut. / Art Resource, NY



*<sup>25</sup> Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, “Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many, and call upon the name of your god, but put no fire to it.”<sup>26</sup> And they took the bull that was given them, and they prepared it and called upon the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, “O Baal, answer us!” But there was no voice, and no one answered. And they limped around the altar that they had made.*

*<sup>27</sup> And at noon Elijah mocked them, saying, “Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either*

*he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.”<sup>28</sup> And they cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them.<sup>29</sup> And as midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention.*

Notice the effort put forth by the prophets of Baal to provoke their god to action: shouting, cutting themselves with spears and knives until covered in blood, dancing, and raving, crying out, “Baal, answer us!” Note how much time and effort the false god took from the human worshipers.

False idols use up our time and energy and deplete us, often demanding much of our physical and spiritual resources. The true God is the One who builds us back up and ministers to us so that we have the potential to be effective witnesses to the power and grace of God. “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). God invests in us so that we can invest in others.

## Voices from the Church

“False gods push us to mutilate ourselves because we desperately want to win their approval. But only one God was ever mutilated for us—Jesus Christ.”<sup>2</sup>

—J. D. Greear

 What are some “false gods” in our day that consume our time and effort (in reference to both Christians and non-Christians)?

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 How and why do these idols take so much of our time and effort?

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The prophets of Baal brought ritual, tradition, ceremony, and religion into the call to Baal. Elijah brought *trust* when calling upon Yahweh. The prophets of Baal demonstrated their belief that the people must be *for* their god. However, Elijah showed that the God of glory is *for us*. What a vast difference between the two views! God wants us to be free to live in relationship with Him, free from the mindset that we must bleed out our lives in servitude to false gods, traditions, rituals, idols, and the worship of created things. It is the true God who gives humans true life.

 How can Christians strike a balance between devoting time and effort to things of this world that are practical responsibilities (work, caretaking, parenting), things that are for pleasure, and things that are purposeful toward building relationship with God?

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### 3. The God who answers with fire is destined to receive glory (1 Kings 18:30-39).

*<sup>30</sup> Then Elijah said to all the people, “Come near to me.” And all the people came near to him. And he repaired the altar of the LORD that had been thrown down.*

*<sup>31</sup> 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,”<sup>32</sup> and with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD. And he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two seahs of seed.<sup>33</sup> 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 water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood.”<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup> And the water ran around the altar and filled the trench also with water.*

Elijah began by repairing the dilapidated altar to the Lord. In this place where humans had once glorified God, an altar to a false god had supplanted the altar of the living Lord. Doesn't this passage reveal a great truth in the lives of God's followers? When we neglect to give God our trust and neglect glorifying Him, we erect other "altars" on which we sacrifice our lives.



Why is it that we establish other altars when we neglect our relationship with God?

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What do these altars communicate about who or what we are devoted to?

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In the contest between Elijah and prophets of Baal, Elijah left no room for those prophets to continue misleading the people of God. He had so much water poured over the sacrifice that there was no way for the sacrifice to burn naturally. He left no excuse to exchange truth for a falsehood; no physical evidence for God's glory to be denied.



*<sup>36</sup> And at the time of the offering of the oblation, 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. <sup>37</sup> 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.”<sup>38</sup> 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. <sup>39</sup> And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, “The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God.”*

With no flashy dancing, no wailing or shouting, no self-mutilation, no extravagant religious routines or exertion, Elijah called upon God to show Himself as the true God. Elijah’s prayer was for God to receive the honor and glory of this redemptive act. The people, upon seeing God’s swift and powerful response, fell to the ground in repentance proclaiming that Yahweh is God.

No matter where we are in life, one thing is clear from this passage—God is for us. In this battle between truth and falsehood, we see that the falsehood enslaves us and bleeds out our lives. However, the truth frees us and gives back to us life itself. The prophets of Baal cut themselves and bled to gain the attention of their god. The true God of the universe, however, bled and died for His creation (Rom. 5:6-8).

## 99 Essential Christian Doctrines

### 13. God Is Transcendent

God’s transcendence refers to the fact that He is distinct from and independent of His created world. He is transcendent over us in regards to His greatness and power as well as His goodness and purity. The implication of this doctrine is that God is inherently superior to humanity; His thoughts and ways are higher than ours (Isa. 55:8-9). When God saves us, He restores us so we can fulfill our human purpose; this does not mean that we become God or that distinctions between God and humanity are obliterated. Understanding God’s transcendence evokes awe and wonder at His goodness and power.



How would you explain the difference between sacrificing your life to a false god and allowing God's sacrifice to give you life?

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## Conclusion

It is no easy task to untangle ourselves from the deceptive falsehoods we encounter daily. Sometimes we are already so bled out that we feel as though we have nothing left to offer. So let's ask God to reveal to us where we have sacrificed ourselves to the things of the world (or perhaps even just one area), and offer those things up to God, trusting in Him to redeem us even now.

And let's go one step further, asking the Lord to show us how these things have possibly kept us from God's mission of turning others' hearts back to Him. May we find the redemptive power of God just as alive and full of grace as did the Israelites that day on Mount Carmel.

### Voices from the Church

"Elijah didn't pray so that people would think he was a great prophet or talk about his power. He didn't pray in order for his church to grow. He asked God to answer him so the people would know that the Lord was Yahweh, the Lord God."<sup>3</sup>

—Michael Catt

**CHRIST CONNECTION:** The prophets of Baal danced and slashed themselves before the altar, thinking they must bleed in order to express their devotion. But the true God is different than false gods like Baal. He expressed His devotion to us by sending His Son—Jesus Christ—who bled and died for us so that we could receive His grace through faith.





# HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

**MISSIONAL APPLICATION:** God calls us not to hesitate or be hindered by idolatry but to join in His mission of turning people's hearts back to Him.

1. What are some idols of mind, heart, and hands that we may need to confess and lay aside in order to be more loyal to our God?

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2. What are some ways we can engage in community activities in a manner that is constructive and missional, not wasteful and idolatrous?

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3. Write a prayer asking God to provide opportunities for sharing the gospel and to open people's hearts so that He may be glorified in and through us.

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