

1 Kings 18:16-45
Challenge Answered: The Lord, He Is God!

I'm just going to apologize right up front. Yes, I know we live near Detroit and some of you are going to be angry with me...but despite how much he's loathed in these parts, I'm going to tell a Michael Jordan story. So, sorry in advance.

A new ESPN documentary is in the process of being televised which covers the career of Jordan and the rise of his team through the 80s and 90s. One part of one of the episodes focuses on the '92 Summer Olympics in Barcelona, Spain. What was unique about those Olympics was that it was the first time professional athletes were allowed to compete in the games. And so the United States for the first time was able to field a basketball team comprised of professional NBA players. And thus the Dream Team was formed. A collection of 11 future Hall of Famers and one college kid who was considered to be one of the greatest college basketball players of all time.

Now Michael Jordan was coming off back to back championships and was a two time league MVP about to win his third. It wasn't like he should have had to prove himself. But in that kind of setting, with all that talent and ego, no one was going to give him a coronation or concede that he was the lead alpha. That is until then the greatest basketball game ever played happened...at least that's what the players who participated called it. It happened in a practice. They were playing a practice game amongst themselves before the competition started. Let's just say, things started to get heated. Pretty soon 11 future Hall of Famers and the best college player were talking trash and playing as hard as they absolutely could. That's when the challenge happened. Magic Johnson, one of the greatest point guards to ever play, was opposite Jordan. Magic's team was winning by about 8 points. Rather foolishly he would later acknowledge, that's when he walked over to Jordan and taunted him. "*If you don't turn into Air Jordan here pretty soon, we're going to blow you out.*" Perhaps what happened next was all too predictably. Jordan went on a tear. He ripped though the lane. He fired up shot after shot. In a matter of minutes he ripped off 10 straight points single handedly against the greatest competition ever assembled on a basketball court. And his team never looked back.

If you want to foolishly challenge one of the all-time greats, don't be surprised when it gets answered...emphatically.

That's a lesson the Israelites had to learn. You see, at the time of the prophet Elijah they had been busy offering up their own challenge of sorts. A much more foolish and much more dangerous one. They had been challenging the

LORD God himself. They had been challenging him with their lives and their actions. They had been challenging the LORD that they didn't believe he was the one, true God...that he wasn't all he claimed to be...that they were better served following the false gods, Baal and Asherah. You see, Elijah's famous challenge to King Ahab and the prophets of Baal and Asherah before us here in 1 Kings 18 was really the end of the answer the LORD had given to the challenge the Israelites had been making to him so arrogantly.

And well, if you want to make such a foolish challenge, don't be surprised when it gets answered...emphatically. But more on that in second.

Perhaps we should talk about what might seem unthinkable. How in the world could the Israelites fall so hard into Baal worship? I mean look at firm a foothold it had established. 450 prophets of Baal, 400 prophets of Asherah. One prophet of the LORD. How did that happen? Well, the "how" happened when King Ahab made a foreigner named Jezebel his queen. Scripture tells us that she brought Baal worship with her and instilled it as the national religion. But still, why did the Israelites not reject it? Well, the "why" is that it was easier and more alluring than following the LORD. Baal didn't have a long list of rules to follow. Baal didn't restrict your diet or your commerce or your worship. In fact when it came to Baal worship all that really mattered were the crops. Getting your food. Baal and Asherah were male and female fertility gods. But not just human fertility...all life. They made your crops grow. Baal in particular did that by controlling the seasonal rains that were so important in that part of the world to have anything grow in the soil. They were gods of the stuff of day to day life. They were the gods who dealt with the important issue of getting food on the table...but not much else. You could do whatever you wanted. Oh and the way you got Baal and Asherah's attention...well there's no surprise that would draw people in either. You see, if you wanted Baal and Asherah to bring fertility to your fields, you engaged in the human act of reproduction to get their attention. That was what it meant to "worship" Baal. Go and find yourself a shrine prostitute and sleep with him or her. Maybe not so hard to figure out why so many were drawn into that pagan heathenism.

That's still the way Satan and the world seek to lead us away from God, isn't it? With ease and allure. It's an alluring temptation to set God's Word and his commands aside...and instead to follow the desires of our sinful flesh...to seek after pleasure in ways God tells us are actually harmful. It's a temptation of ease to value as more important than God what preoccupies our day to day existence...the busyness...the problems to be solved...the tasks to be completed...it's a temptation of ease to consider them more important and more worth our time and effort than him. It's a temptation of both ease and allure to put our trust in ourselves...to be convinced that we have all the answers and don't particularly need God.

But how shortsighted that all is! Because what none of that can do is give you anything beyond the few days you have on this earth...that can only come through a relationship with the one true God.

When sin and Satan challenge the LORD, we shouldn't be surprised when he responds.

To Israel, the answer began with a drought and a famine. That's why Ahab had called Elijah **the one who brings trouble on Israel**. Because 3 years earlier Elijah had announced a drought and famine...a direct answer from God to those who would turn to Baal and Asherah for their rain and their crops. It was a call to repent.

God is still answering those who challenge him with calls to repent.

In a world where relationships increasingly happen on human terms instead of God's terms...where marriage is treated so flippantly...where children are often considered a nuisance rather than a blessing...should it surprise us that disease, divorce, and dysfunction run rampant through our relationships and marriages? A call to repent.

In a world where we've imagined ourselves gods and trust our own ingenuity to conquer any problem...should it surprise us that the Lord has allowed a pandemic to bring us to our knees...to remind us we don't have the kind of absolute control we imagine? A call to repent.

Friends, if we've been swept up in these or any other sinful plot that challenges the LORD for supremacy in our lives... in any way that dishonors him and puts him anywhere but at the very top when it comes to what we fear, love, and trust...then we too need to heed the call to repent.

Well, when the famine and the drought didn't have the intended effect. God answered their challenge more directly. He sent Elijah to gather the false prophets of Baal and Asherah onto Mt Carmel for a showdown to answer the question once and for all... *who is God...Baal or the LORD?*

In the end, Elijah didn't really have to do much, did he? I mean, sure, there were the extra theatrics of pouring the water and soaking the sacrifice...making the consumption of it even more spectacular (if that was needed considering that fire literally fell from heaven!). But compared to the prophets of Baal, who howled and wailed and danced all morning and all afternoon to no effect, it didn't take much on the part of Elijah. Just a simple prayer. **O LORD, the 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 by**

your word. Answer me, LORD! Answer me so that this people will know that you, O LORD, are God and that you are turning their hearts back to you.

And with that fire rained down from heaven. Challenge answered. The people were in awe. They heeded that call to repent, their hearts were turned back, and they confessed, **The LORD, he is God. The LORD, he is God.** And when the false prophets were taken care of, God also answered the prayer of his prophet and opened the skies to provide desperately needed rain for the earth.

Friends, the LORD still answers the challenges of this world and our heart with a package delivered directly from heaven. Though it does not come in fire as it did on that day. It came in the lowliness of human flesh. It came in the form of God's own Son born into our world.

Jesus this morning reminded us that he is **the way and the truth and the life.** **No one comes to the Father except through him.** All those alluring temptations can never give us anything beyond today or tomorrow. If we want more, it only comes through Jesus. And he's the one who finishes his call to repent and return to him with something even more spectacular than fire falling from the sky. He offers himself in our place. He gives us the work of his own hands as our own. He dies the death we owed for our sinfully foolish challenges to the LORD. He powerfully proclaims HE is GOD as he breaks free from death's icy grip to end its power over us. He gives us a free salvation to believe in and cling to...so that we too through him might stand before the LORD and confess him as the God of all ...who freely forgives through his Son...who rules our hearts and our lives.

Let's stop wasting our time challenging the LORD. We know how ends. Instead let us rejoice that he has answered us from heaven with the gift of his Son...who is the only way to God. And let us live our lives in dedicated service to him, our Savior and our God. Amen