

Don't Waver! Stand Firm in the LORD, our Strength!

1 Kings 18:16-46 June 17, 2018 Pastor Robert Hein

Dear Friends in Christ,

The contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal makes for compelling drama. Hollywood directors just love stories like this. On the one side, you've got the good guy – Elijah, the faithful prophet of the Lord, taking on the bad guys, King Ahab and his 450 prophets of Baal.

It would be hard to find villains more vile or despicable than wicked King Ahab and his even more evil wife Queen Jezebel. Keep in mind, that all the kings of the northern kingdom of Israel were bad; one worse than the other. But Ahab tops the list for badness. We read in 1 Kings 17:30, "**Ahab did more evil in the eyes of the LORD than any of those before him.**" He served Baal and even built a temple in honor of this false god. Ahab also made an Asherah pole and did more to arouse the anger of the Lord than did all the kings of Israel before him. Now that is saying a lot.

Not only did Ahab and Jezebel worship Baal, they also ruthlessly persecuted God's people, even killing off many of the faithful prophets of the Lord. Making an Asherah pole means that they mixed together prostitution and sexual immorality with their disgusting worship rituals. They were about as ungodly and anti-Christian as you could get.

On the other side, you have got the good guy, the prophet Elijah, standing all alone against overwhelming odds; 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah, backed by the king against this one lone prophet of the Lord. And Ahab was intent on killing Elijah as well. So now you have this dramatic showdown at Mt. Carmel. Elijah issues a challenge to Ahab and his false prophets. Each will call on their god to send down fire from heaven to burn up their offering.

So you have the good guy, and there are the bad guys, all engaged in this fierce contest. But today I want you to focus for a moment on the guys in the middle, the wishy washy people of Israel. Elijah went before the people and said, "**How long will you**

waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.” But the people said nothing.

Do you know the difference between this board and this reed? This board will stand straight and tall in the wind, but this reed will bend in whatever direction the wind blows. Sadly, the people of Israel acted just like this wishy washy reed. They did not remain faithful to the Lord and his Word, but compromised their faith and caved into to peer pressure to adopt the sinful disgusting habits of the people around them.

They had no backbone, Think of it. These were God’s chosen people, delivered from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. They had God’s prophets to encourage them and God’s Word to guide them, but when Ahab and Jezebel promoted Baal worship as the national religion, they fell in line along with everyone else. Perhaps they were afraid of being persecuted if they refused to worship Baal. Perhaps they were afraid of the consequences of letting their Christian light shine. But when Elijah asked them, whose side they were on, they said nothing.

Enough about those people back then however. What about you and me today? Whose side are you on today? Who do you put first in your life with your words and by your actions? There are plenty of Christians around the world being persecuted because they boldly proclaim themselves to be disciples of Jesus Christ in the face of fierce peer pressure. Many of you have heard the story of Joshi, our mission contact in Nepal. He grew up in a high Brahman caste. He enjoyed many perks and privileges as a practicing Hindu. But over time he became disillusioned with Hinduism. When a Christian shared the Gospel with him, the Holy Spirit brought him to saving faith in Christ. So he stopped participating in the Hindu religious festivals with his family. When his brother asked him why, he proclaimed himself to be a Christian. That bold profession of faith cost him a great deal. That very night Joshi was kicked out of his home with only the clothes on his back. He lost his family and his inheritance. He was all alone in a hostile Hindu world, and yet, he remained faithful to Christ, because he regarded Jesus to be his most priceless treasure. Our world missionaries can tell you many more compelling stories of Christian faith, of people who stand strong, firm, and steadfast in the face of fierce persecution.

Remember these brave persecuted Christians every day in your prayers!

Here in America, the persecution may be more subtle, but it can be just as destructive. How many Christian young people, grounded in the truths of God's Word at their Confirmation, crumble and compromise their Christian faith and values when they enter college? How many exchange the Biblical account of Creation with the man made theory of evolution? How many forget that the only God pleasing practice of sexual relations is between a husband and wife in marriage, and choose instead to live together and engage in sexual immorality? How many forget that marriage is the union of one man and one woman for life and choose instead to support homosexual relationships as a perfectly acceptable alternate lifestyle?

In the recent issue of Forward in Christ, President Schroeder shared some shocking statistics. These were answers to survey questions addressed to a group of ELCA Lutherans. Only 31% said that Biblical teaching is the source of guidance for what is right and wrong. The rest identified common sense, philosophy, or science, or stated that they simply didn't know. 15% said they did not believe in heaven; 41 % said they didn't believe in hell. 73% spoke in favor of homosexuality; 65% supported same-sex marriage. When asked about the origin of life, 78% expressed belief in Evolution.

I hope and pray that the answers of WELS Christians would be vastly different than the answers offered by these ELCA Lutherans. But we all know of people in our own families and our own church body who grew up confessing the truth, and over time have compromised and crumbled and fallen for the lies of the devil and the philosophies of this sinful world. And let none of us ever smugly think that we could never do such a thing. Remember the devil is very tricky and he will always throw new alluring temptations at us every day. This sinful world in which we live is also powerfully pulling us the wrong way, away from God into false belief, despair and other great and shameful sins. The Apostle Peter, who knew firsthand the pain of crumbling under peer pressure, warns us, **“Be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of the lawless and fall from your secure position. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ!”** 2 Peter 3:17-18 Similarly, the Apostle Paul urges, **“If you think**

you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall." 1 Corinthians 10:12

I have often said that the number one danger lifelong WELS Christians face is an attitude of apathy and complacency. We think we don't need the strength God offers us in his Word. Worship becomes a "take it or leave it" proposition. We lose our hunger for the Lord's Supper. We have no time for devotions or prayer. And the devil smiles, because he knows now he has an easy target. How does that hymn verse put it, "**Rise, my soul, to watch and pray; From your sleep awaken! Be not by the evil day Unawares o'ertaken. For the foe, well we know, is a harvest reaping, While the saints are sleeping.**" CW 472 v.1

So how can you and I be like solid boards rather than wishy washy reeds? The strength we need is found in God's Word and sacraments. Don't simply rest on your Confirmation knowledge. Keep growing! Keep worshiping your Lord with joy regularly! Cherish the blessings of the Lord's Supper every chance you get. Study God's Word every day, and make the most of the opportunities we offer for group Bible study. Maybe it's time to take a refresher Bible Information Class this Fall. The answers are there. Power for Christian living is available to you. You just have to take hold of it and make it your own. Parents, I can't emphasize enough to you the importance of establishing faithful worship habits for your children when they are young, even in the summer. The lessons you impress upon them now will help them stay closely connected to Jesus their whole life through. The Apostle Paul put it this way, "**Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.**"

Romans 12:2

Sadly however, the people of Israel were conformists; they bent anyway the wind blew. So they needed some convincing. Elijah allowed the 450 prophets of Baal to go first. Those false prophets cried out to their false god for hours and hours, but nothing happened. They danced around and around, and slashed themselves with swords and spears, but nothing happened. They screamed and shouted with all their might all day long, but there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.

Why? Because there is no such thing as Baal or Asherah. There is no Buddha or Allah or the 300 million gods of Hinduism either. These are merely the delusions of people's minds. There is only one true God, the Lord Almighty. Everything else people worship as god is nothing more than an idol, a worthless piece of wood or stone. They can't hear. They can't help. They can't save. Remember that when you hear religious groups today claim that they are many different paths to heaven out there through many different gods. There is only one true God – the triune God of the Bible, and there is only one way to heaven – through faith in Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul assures us, **“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven, given to mankind, by which we must be saved.”** Acts 4:12

Keep in mind however, that false gods don't always have to be images like this, carved of wood or stone. Martin Luther once said that an idol is anyone or anything that you put first in your life in place of God. An idol is anything you put your trust in, anything you value more than God, anything you hold dearer in your heart than him. So, even good things can become idols when we fear, love and trust in them more than we fear, love and trust in God.

Do you want a few examples of good things that can become bad things when we make them our idols? How about sports? Many of us our loyal sports fans and we love to watch our kids participate in sports. But when does this good thing become a bad thing, an idol which we value more than the Lord? Well, when parents and children have no time for worship and Holy Communion because of ball games and tournaments, then they are guilty of treasuring an idol more than they treasure God and his Word.

How about money? Money is a blessing from God to be managed faithfully to God's glory and for the benefit of others. But if we are not careful, money can also become an idol, something that we rely on and live for more than anything else, even the Lord.

You see, you can use money and invest money and enjoy the things money buys. But don't ever trust in money or rely on money or try to find contentment in money and the things money can buy. You see, money is a very selfish master. It always takes but never gives. It also demands, but never satisfies. In the end it enslaves and pulls people

away from God. Remember, what Jesus once said, “You cannot love both God and money.” I thought this C.S. Lewis quote made a good point – **“All that we call human history--money, poverty, ambition, war, prostitution, classes, empires, slavery--is the long terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy.”**

Yes, let’s face it. The false gods those prophets of Baal called upon were worthless and impotent, and the false gods we rely on today are no better at all.

After those 450 prophets of Baal gave it their best shot, to no avail, Elijah took his turn. First, he wanted to increase the odds against him. He built a trench around his altar and ordered the wood, the sacrifice and the trench to be doused with water, not once, but three times. I tell you, no one could accuse Elijah of lighting his fire by spontaneous combustion.

Then Elijah humbly but confidently prayed. He said, **“Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, Lord, answer me, so these people will know you Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.”** I Kings 18:36-37

Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones, and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench. When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, “The LORD – he is God! The LORD – he is God! And so the Lord called his wayward people back to him.

Here the Lord clearly demonstrated that he is the one true God, the Lord of heaven and earth. Christian friends, you and I are still privileged to call upon this God of free and faithful love today as well. He is the God who hears. He is the God who helps. He is the God who saves. In contrast to false gods who take and enslave and corrupt, he is a God who gives and empowers and sets us free.

Don’t adopt the wishy washy attitude of those fickle Israelites. Cast down every idol in your heart, reject every false teaching, avoid every wrong path, and put your trust solely in our God of free and faithful love, for truly he is the LORD, our Strength. Amen