



A number of recent studies have noted the explosion of choices we all face each day. The average American supermarket carries over 49,000 items, more than five times the number in 1975. One superstore stocks 91 different shampoos, 93 varieties of toothpaste, and 115 household cleaners. Tropicana turns out more than 20 varieties of orange juice. Netflix asks us to choose from over 100,000 DVD's and Amazon offers over 24 million book titles. Want a latte? Choose between tall, short, skinny, decaf, flavored, iced, spiced, and frappe. Jeans come flared, bootlegged, skinny, cropped, straight, low-rise, bleach-rinsed, dark-washed or distressed. Moisturizers can either nourish, lift, smooth, revitalize, condition, firm, refresh or rejuvenate. Teenagers can choose to surf, chat, tweet, zap or poke in ways that their parents can barely fathom. Moving pictures and music can be viewed, recorded, downloaded or streamed on all manner of screens or devices.

While some of these choices have improved our lives, too many choices cause problems. In her book, *Choice*, Renata Salecl asks, "How is it that...this increase in choice, through which we can supposedly customize our lives and make them perfect, leads not to more satisfaction but rather to greater anxiety, and greater feelings of inadequacy and guilt?" And in his book, *The Paradox of Choice* Barry Schwartz claims we've reached the point where "choice no longer liberates, but debilitates. It might even be said to tyrannize."

This proliferation of choices reaches into the spiritual realm as well. We can choose atheism, agnosticism or faith. We can choose traditional religion or new spirituality. Even within the Christian tradition, there are so many choices. According to the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, there are approximately 41,000 Christian denominations and organizations in the world. Take your choice.

Three thousand years ago on a pedestal called Mt. Carmel things weren't quite so complicated. If you were to visit there today you'd see a statue of the bearded prophet Elijah with a large knife held high over his head. It was there on Mt. Carmel Elijah presented God's people with a clear choice. He said, "*How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him*" (1 Kings 18:21).

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's start from the beginning. Three years earlier God sent the prophet Elijah to King Ahab to announce there'd be no rain or dew on the land except by his word. Then God told Elijah to hide in the wilderness by a little brook where he'd be fed by ravens during the drought. Later God sent him to Zarephath where a widow would provide for him. For three years, while the earth dried up, Elijah had to trust God completely for food and drink. Meanwhile, King Ahab scoured Israel and surrounding nations looking for Elijah, and his wife

Jezebel started killing off the remaining prophets of God. Finally after three years, God told Elijah to "*go present yourself to Ahab and I will send rain on the land*" (18:1).

Elijah Challenges Ahab

The encounter between Elijah and Ahab must have been quite a sight. Like two rival coaches meeting in the middle of the field, only the game wasn't over but just getting ready to begin. Look what happened in v. 17.

When he saw Elijah, he said to him, "Is that you, you troubler of Israel?"

Ahab is the classic blame shifter. He blames Elijah for all the trouble the nation Israel had endured the last three years—three years without a drop of rain; every stream was dried up; carcasses and skeletons of animals were strewn across the dry land; children starving. Ahab points the finger at Elijah, but Elijah shoots right back.

"I have not made trouble for Israel," Elijah replied. "But you and your father's family have. You have abandoned the Lord's commands and have followed the Baals (v. 18).

Elijah doesn't flinch! "This isn't about me, it's about you and your family. You've abandoned the Lord." Elijah hadn't taken any sensitivity training. He doesn't back down one inch!

He then tells Ahab to call a meeting.

"Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table" (v. 19).

It's like, "Okay, let's get this thing settled once and for all. Summon all the people of Israel. Gather all your prophets of Baal. You can even throw in the prophets of Asherah who eat at the Queen's table. Meet me at Mt. Carmel." No doubt it took a few days to pull that off. I imagine those days were a lot like the week before the Super Bowl—lots of hype! Oddsmakers had the prophets of Baal and Asherah a heavy favorite. How could you not? It was 850 to 1!

So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel (v. 20).

Elijah Challenges the People of Israel

Everyone is gathered at Mt. Carmel to witness the showdown between Elijah and the prophets of Baal. Elijah begins by addressing the people who'd gathered.

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 (v. 21).

He has a fascinating way of putting this. The Hebrew word for “opinion” speaks of branches or forks in a tree limb or a road. The word *waver* means “to limp, to halt, to hop, to dance, or to leap.” So the question literally is something like this: “How long will you keep dancing on one foot and then on the other while trying to straddle a widening branch? You can’t take both forks of a road at the same time. You can’t choose both ways. Choose your God. If it’s the Lord, follow him. If it’s Baal, follow him. You have to choose.”

Do you know what a mugwump is? In 1884 there was a group of Republicans who were called that because they bolted from the Republican Party by supporting Democratic candidate Grover Cleveland in the presidential election. The idea was they had their “mugs” (faces) on one side of the fence and their “wumps” (rear ends) on the other. That’s what Elijah says these people were like. They were straddling the fence, and their silence shows their indecision. The easiest thing to do in the moment of decision is stay uncommitted; to linger in the neutral zone. But Elijah plows ahead and continues to unfold his plan.

Then Elijah said to them, “I am the only one of the Lord’s prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets. Get two bulls for us. Let Baal’s prophets choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the Lord. The god who answers by fire—he is God.”

Then all the people said, “What you say is good” (verses 22–24).

His plan is fair and simple. He’s already given the prophets of Baal home field advantage. Mt. Carmel was strewn with idol shrines. He even lets them choose their bull and prepare it. They had to like their chances. Baal was worshipped as the god of the sun. If anyone could start a fire, he could. They like this. But Elijah was also well aware that Yahweh is the real God of fire. His fire burned in the bush from which he called Moses. His fire led the people of Israel by night in the wilderness. And just as Elijah believed would happen here, several times in Israel’s history fire had come from the presence of the Lord to consume a sacrifice on the altar. This was always a sign of his acceptance and approval of the sacrifice.

The rules are agreed upon. Everyone is happy with this arrangement. Let the games begin!

Elijah Challenges the Prophets of Baal

Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, “Choose one of the bulls and prepare it first, since there are so many of you. Call on the name of your god, but do

not light the fire.” So they took the bull given them and prepared it.

Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. “Baal, answer us!” they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made (verses 25–26).

They followed Elijah’s plan, but when they called upon Baal, nothing happened. All morning long they shouted, “Baal, answer us!” They even danced, but the writer says, *“there was no response; no one answered.”*

If you were ever tempted to laugh out loud while reading the Bible, you have permission as we read what happens next.

At noon Elijah began to taunt them. “Shout louder!” he said. “Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.” So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention (verses 27–29).

For three more hours, these prophets cried out louder and louder to Baal. They worked themselves up into a demonic frenzy, cutting themselves with spears and knives until the blood flowed freely. Meanwhile, I can imagine Elijah watching all of this as he leaned against a tree with his arms crossed, a smirk on his face, chewing a piece of straw! He then decided to have a little fun and offer some free advice on how they might get Baal to finally respond. Maybe they should shout louder because he might be meditating or off running an errand or taking a nap. He even uses a phrase here suggesting Baal might be tied up in the men’s room! I’m sure Elijah’s taunting got them even more fired up, but again the writer says, *“there was no response, no one answered...”* This time he adds, *“...no one paid attention.”*

Elijah Proves that Yahweh is God

Now it’s Elijah’s turn. This would be his moment of truth. More important, this was God’s moment of proof. He has them come near so they can see there are no tricks up his sleeve. Elijah does three things. First, he builds an altar and prepares the sacrifice.

Then Elijah said to all the people, “Come here to me.” They came to him, and he repaired the altar of the Lord, which had been torn down. Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord had come, saying, “Your name shall be Israel.” With the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord, and he dug a trench around it large enough to hold two seahs of seed. He arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces and laid it on the wood (verses 30–33a).

The altar of the Lord had been torn down. A sign of the times, no doubt! So Elijah rebuilds it with twelve stones. This was a statement. Even though the nation had been divided for 58 years, they were one in God's eyes. Just like Jacob had called his twelve sons and their families, *"Get rid of the foreign gods you have with you..."* (Gen. 35:2), Elijah was calling Israel as one nation back to God.

The second thing he does is drench the whole thing in water.

Then he said to them, "Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood."

"Do it again," he said, and they did it again.

"Do it a third time," he ordered, and they did it the third time. The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench (verses 33b–35).

Water was scarce, but Carmel was close to the Mediterranean Sea, so they made three trips and lugged a total of twelve large barrels of water up the mount and poured it on the sacrifice. There was enough water left over that it filled the trench around the altar. It's like Elijah gives the Lord a handicap. Wet stuff doesn't burn. He's making things hard for God, if that's possible. When the fire comes down, he wants there to be no other explanation than it was an act of the true God.

The last thing he does is pray.

At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: "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 that you, Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again" (verses 36–37).

Do you know what I love about this prayer? Its simplicity. No prolonged pleading or screaming. No frenzied gyrations around the altar. No need to spend half the day blabbering and bleeding to get God's attention. Just a simple prayer of faith. "Answer me, Lord, answer me, so that these people will know that you, Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again." Elijah trusted that in all that happened the last three years, God was graciously working to bring his people back to him.

The contrast between Elijah's prayer and the prophets of Baal is stark and the response was immediate.

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!" (verses 38–39).

God answers Elijah's prayer. Not only does the fire consume the sacrifice but the people fall on their faces and repeatedly cry out, *"The Lord, he is God!"* Meanwhile the prophets of Baal are standing there with mouths wide open. Elijah had a plan for them, too.

Then Elijah commanded them, "Seize the prophets of Baal. Don't let anyone get away!" They seized them, and Elijah had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and slaughtered there (v. 40).

That seems more than a little extreme to us, but there was a malignancy in Israel. What would you think of a physician who found a mass of rapidly growing malignant cells in your body and said, "I think we should remove a few of those cells. Let's just do some minor surgery."? No way! A good doctor will do whatever it takes to get rid of it all. That's not extreme; that's wise. The prophets of Baal were violent and immoral. They promoted temple prostitution and child sacrifice. Furthermore, in Deuteronomy 13 God said false prophets should be executed. Elijah did what had to be done.

We Must Finally and Fully Choose Who We Will Follow

As I said when I started out, this story is about choices. It's about one crucial question we must all answer and one crucial choice we must all make. *"How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him. If Baal (or something else) is God, follow him."* Jesus said no one can serve two masters. Why? Because ultimately you'll be loyal to one and not the other. It was decision time on Mt. Carmel. The time comes in all of our lives when we must choose, and then it comes a thousand times after. Yogi Berra, the great New York Yankees catcher, expressed wisdom when he said, "If you come to a fork in the road, take it." You simply can't take both forks. Why do we waver? Why do we hesitate? Why do we sit silently on our thumbs and do nothing?

I read a story about a young man who went to a store to find just the right card for his girlfriend. He told the clerk he wanted something special that would express deep sentiment. She quickly selected a card and said, "This is our most popular card." He opened it up. The message read, "To the only girl I ever loved." He said, "Give me six of these." He needed to decide. We need to decide. What keeps us from making the clear choices and commitments about who we'll follow?

I can think of a number of things. Sometimes we act as if mere intentions are enough. Jesus once said, *"If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them"* (John 13:17). It's not enough to know the right thing to do, or even intend to do it. The blessing only comes as you act. I see it in Elijah's words, "If the Lord is God, follow him." In other words, your belief ought to move you to behavior. You go to the doctor and you've gained a few pounds since your last visit. He asks, "Are you staying active? Are you watching your diet?" You say, "Well, not really, but I intended to." He's not going to give you a pat on the back for your good intentions. You forget to do something for your wife on Valentine's Day. She's more than a little bit hurt. You say, "Well, I intended to buy you some flowers and a card, but I got too busy and I forgot." That doesn't get you out of hot water. Confucius said, "To know what is right and not to do it is the worst cowardice." Mere intentions are not enough. A life is built on the foundation of right commitments that lead us to act.

Another reason we waver is we put things off; we procrastinate. There will be a better time, not here, not now. *Mañana*. It must feel just right or we won't do it. I can't tell you how many people I talk to who say, "I believe in God. I'm a Christian. But it's just too much for us to get to church. There's too much going on. Things will be different in a few years though." This thinking is built on a fallacy. We've convinced ourselves there's plenty of time, but is there? In the book of James we read this startling sentence: ***"What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes"*** (James 4:14). I'm not trying to scare anybody, but the reality is we should live each day as if it would be our last, because it could be. Augustine said, "God has promised forgiveness to our repentance. But he's not promised tomorrow to our procrastination." Don't delay. Choose to follow God today.

Some of us waver because we're in denial. You see this the most when a person is caught up in the throes of alcoholism, drug addiction or pornography. These people tend to minimize the problem of their using. They claim the ability to stop at any time. "It's not that big of a deal. I'm not hurting anyone. Everyone has their faults. No one is perfect. What right do you have to judge me?" It's all about denial. Denial keeps us from dealing with the reality that everyone around us sees. Denial keeps us from choosing.

Still another reason we waver is we simply believe we must go along to get along. There were 850 prophets of Baal and just one Elijah. How could all those prophets be wrong? Those prophets even had the powers of state on their side. Who would dare oppose the king and queen? So if the royal decree went out, "Tear down the altars of Yahweh in your backyard and build an altar to Baal," well, so be it. Avoid swimming upstream. Avoid conflict. Here on the Peninsula, Evangelical Christians make up just 3% of the population. We have an entire culture that's drifted so far away from God that to follow him fully means your beliefs and lifestyle will inevitably collide with the majority. If your goal is to never make waves, to be liked by everyone, to just blend in, you won't be following the true God. Elijah teaches us that with God one is a majority. Stay true to him and he'll come through for you.

There's one more reason we waver: somehow we really believe we can have it all. We don't have to choose. We can enjoy all the goodies of this world and still have God: sex, friendships, education, success, money, fame, marriage, travel, leisure, fitness, grandchildren, retirement. It's true, not one of those things is inherently bad, so why do I have to choose? Because as John Calvin said the human heart is a factory of idols. These things do bring us a measure of satisfaction, but there's something in all of us that wants to make them more than what they were meant to be. It's usually when one of those things is taken away from us that we see the idolatry in our hearts. But with that there's an opportunity. Go back for a moment to Elijah's prayer: ***"so that these people will know that you, Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again."*** God loves us so much

he's constantly at work to turn our hearts back to him. When your idol fails you, God is whispering, sometimes even shouting, "Here I am. Choose me! I'll never fail you."

In those moments we choose afresh who we'll follow. This is the crux of the matter. We must fully and finally choose. Our English word *neutral* comes from two roots, meaning "not either." No one can serve two masters. A choice must be made. It's never easy to choose. So many voices are calling for our attention.

You have a chance to make a big sale, but to get it, your integrity has to be adjusted. One voice says, "Everyone does it. There's no other way. It's a dog eat dog world." The other says, "Do the right thing and trust that God will take care of you." You have to make a choice.

You're dating someone. The attraction is strong. The question is raised: "Where are you in your faith?" It's clear, wherever they are, it's not where **you** are. Your heart is saying, "It's okay. I can lead them to believe like I do. He's such a good guy." The world says, "Don't be so narrow. Chances like this only come once in a lifetime." God says, "Wait on me. I'll meet all of your needs."

We must choose. We can't waver forever between two opinions. Remember the character of Treebeard in *The Lord of the Rings*? He was a leader among the race of Ents, the shepherds of the forest. They're described as creatures who are very slow to decide on a course of action. They're eager to avoid committing themselves in the contest against the Dark Lord. "I'm not altogether on anybody's side," Treebeard explains, "because nobody is altogether on my side."

But that's really not true. There's some very good news in this story for those of us who think that and who at times have made the wrong choice. The miraculous fire shows God accepted Elijah's sacrifice. This is a hint there's a way back to God for them and for all of us. How? By means of the altar. Mt. Carmel proves not only the Lord is the true God, but that the Lord is gracious and compassionate. After the fire came the rain. That fire is both proof and invitation. You see, Mt. Carmel anticipates another mountain, a mountain outside Jerusalem. It was there Jesus was crucified as a substitute to save his people. That sacrifice was acceptable to God. At Carmel, in the third year, Yahweh sends rain that renews the land; and in Jerusalem, on the third day, he raises Jesus from the dead. At Carmel, the judgement of God is followed by rain; and at Jerusalem, the One who dies on the cross later pours out the Spirit like showers from heaven. He does all this to demonstrate he's the Lord and there's no other. He's on your side, but you must choose. The most important choice we'll make is what we do with **him**.

Wherever we are in our journey, whatever we believe, eventually we'll come face to face with Jesus. As C.S. Lewis warned, "That will not be the time for choosing. It will be the time when we discover which side we really have chosen, whether we realized it or not."

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