

# God, the One & Only

1 Kings 17

## Is the One and Only God Your One & Only?

OK... one of these 20's is real, the other is fake. Can you tell them apart?

One of the responsibilities of the US Secret Service is to safeguard our currency against counterfeiting. Do you know how they are trained to recognize counterfeit bills? I had always thought that you'd have to examine one example after another of counterfeit bills to see how they were different. But the actual training apparently, is that the agents study real money – the genuine article so closely, that when a counterfeit is put in front of them, they immediately recognize that it is fake... not the real thing.

So which is real? Who votes for the top one? The bottom one? Who, besides me, has no earthly idea?!

With money it's hard! It's hard to tell if it's real or it's not. If it has value or it's worthless...

What about with God?

Do you know God so well that you can spot a counterfeit a mile away?

## Is the One and Only God Your One & Only?

Here's why this is important: our culture offers so many alternatives to following Jesus. I'm not just talking about other gods or religions, I'm mostly talking about our cultural idols... the things our culture deems worthy of worship. If you were to judge the gods of America by our architecture, what would you see? Huge stadiums and arenas built for sporting events, entire city skylines dominated by skyscrapers owned by banks, corporations, and insurance companies. Enormous monuments, gold-domed and pillared buildings that house our government. Huge campuses with beautiful buildings, almost small cities in themselves, where we educate future generations. Gee... I wonder what our cultural gods are? The problem is, we who love God and seek to follow Christ, often get seduced into following these other gods too. And that's a problem.

If we read the Bible (which is a very good thing to do by the way), there is a theme that runs through it that is quite **counter-cultural**. That theme begins in Genesis and runs all the way through Revelation. That theme was **entrusted to the patriarchs** of Israel, **proclaimed by the prophets** and came to its fullest expression in Jesus our resurrected King.



That theme is that **God is the One True God**. There is no other God but the Lord, the One who revealed Himself to Moses as YHWH, “I AM WHO I AM”. The One who Jesus claimed to be in the flesh. God is the One True God. How well do we know Him? Do we know the One True God so well that we can spot a counterfeit? **Is the One and Only God Your One & Only?**

In this new series, we’re going to listen to God’s voice through the story of Elijah the prophet. As a prophet, Elijah had a special connection to God. He was the mouthpiece of the Lord, speaking words of truth to the Israelites. Sometimes the truth was comforting, sometimes it was confrontational. Being a prophet was not a comfy job: God’s prophets were often rejected, mistreated, and exiled. They were met with resistance, ridicule, and skepticism. And Elijah was no exception. And yet God spoke through him and made himself known. As we read this story together and see how God interacts with kings, widows, and prophets, we’ll see both the power and enormity of God, as well as His patience, love, and care.

We’ll start back in 1 Kings 16. The books of 1 Kings chronicles a tumultuous time in Israel’s history... it had split into two kingdoms, the northern one named Israel, the southern one, Judah. And these kingdoms were ruled by a series of kings, some good, some bad, some ugly. In this passage we meet one of the bad ones: King Ahab.



*“Ahab son of Omri began to rule over Israel in the thirty-eighth year of King Asa’s reign in Judah. He reigned in Samaria twenty-two years.<sup>30</sup> But Ahab son of Omri did what was evil in the Lord’s sight, even more than any of the kings before him.<sup>31</sup> And as though it were not enough to follow the sinful example of Jeroboam, he married Jezebel, the daughter of King Ethbaal of the Sidonians, and **he began to bow down in worship of Baal.**<sup>32</sup> First Ahab built a temple and an altar for Baal in Samaria.<sup>33</sup> Then he set up an Asherah pole. He did more to provoke the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than any of the other kings of Israel before him.<sup>34</sup> It was during his reign that Hiel, a man from Bethel, rebuilt Jericho. When he laid its foundations, it cost him the life of his oldest son, Abiram. And when he completed it and set up its gates, it cost him the life of his youngest son, Segub. This all happened according to the message from the Lord concerning Jericho spoken by Joshua son of Nun.”*

In order to seal an alliance with the neighboring kingdom of Phoenicia (also known as Sidon), Ahab married their princess, a woman named Jezebel. Unfortunately, along with her fine jewelry, costumes, and entourage, Jezebel also brought her religion and

her god, a god named Ba'al. It didn't take long for King Ahab to be seduced into worshipping Ba'al instead of YHWH the One True God.

But let's be clear... King Ahab didn't just **tolerate** the worship of Ba'al by his wife and her servants... he encouraged it among the Israelites. He even built new temples and holy places to Ba'al and led God's people astray into a weird mixture of truth and fiction, the true God mixed with false gods. This is called **syncretism**, the mixing of two separate belief systems... and it happens all the time... even now.

Now on the surface, it doesn't sound so evil, does it? Just choosing a different religion... switching to a different god. But here's the scoop on Ba'al.... Ba'al means "owner" or "lord", and he was the main god of the Canaanites. He was called the "lord of heaven & earth," "Rider of the Clouds," "Lord of the Earth," and "Lord of Rain and Dew," and last but not least, the "God of Fertility" both of the soil and of women.

But what could be so bad... so evil about worshipping Ba'al? Worshipping Ba'al involved not only singing his praises, dancing and bowing before him. Ba'al demanded more: he wanted blood. The worship of Ba'al involved slashing yourself, spilling your own blood in an effort to appease him and get his attention. It involved having sex with temple prostitutes in an effort to unite oneself with him and invoke the magic of fertility on your farmland. Most troubling of all, the worship of Ba'al involved human sacrifice, and in particular, child sacrifice. That last little line of 1 K 16:34 says that "Hiel of Bethel built Jericho. He laid its foundation at the cost of Abiram his firstborn, and set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son Segub." Translation: He sacrificed his oldest boy as an offering to invoke the blessing of Ba'al on his construction project, and then when it was ready to open, he sacrificed his youngest boy to invoke divine blessing on the new city.

It is unclear how Ba'al worship evolved or where it came from originally. But what is crystal clear is that this was not true worship and this was not a true god. Every facet of Ba'al worship was bent on the destruction of the image of God in human beings: self-mutilation, sexual promiscuity, child sacrifice. Ba'al was at best an invention of human imagination and at worst a demon of hell. Worship of Ba'al was destructive and toxic to human life, and King Ahab was foolishly leading God's people directly towards their own corruption.

Time for an intervention. Enter the prophet.



His name was **Elijah**. Which means **“The Lord is God!”** Interesting that his very name proclaims his main message: The Lord is the One True God! His very name invokes the question: **Is the One and Only God Your One & Only?** Well, is He, Ahab???

*“Now Elijah, who was from Tishbe in Gilead, told King Ahab, “As surely as the Lord, the God of Israel, lives—the God I serve—there will be no dew or rain during the next few years until I give the word!”*

Elijah was no politician. He didn’t go around shaking hands or kissing babies. He didn’t have a campaign fund... or a staff... He wasn’t smooth or subtle. And he didn’t make promises he knew he couldn’t keep.

The one thing Elijah had was his message: **“As surely as the Lord, the God of Israel lives... the God I serve... there will be no dew or rain during the next few years until I give the word!”**

An **unpopular message delivered bluntly**. That’s always a good way to make friends! That’s like someone coming up to me and saying, “Hey, you’re fat – you need to go on a diet!” So the message might be true, but the delivery needs work!

Elijah didn’t care about delivery. He wasn’t concerned about making friends. Israel was being led astray to its own destruction and the One True God had a message to be delivered to her leaders. Elijah shot straight with no hesitation.

His message is terse but full of implications:

Part 1) **“As surely as the Lord, the God of Israel lives...”** This was a direct confrontation... right in Ahab’s face. “Hey Ahab – remember YHWH, the One True God? The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? The God who brought your people out of Egypt and into the Promised Land? The One True God of Israel? The God whom you abandoned so easily? Yeah that God. He’s alive... and He is not happy.

Part 2) **“...there will be no dew or rain during the next few years until I give the word!”** This was a slap in the face of Ba’al, the god of Fertility, the god of Dew and of Rain! In the exact same way that the 10 plagues on Egypt exposed the falseness and nonexistence of the gods of Egypt back in the day, this challenge was intended to expose the falseness and nonexistence of Ba’al.

So essentially, Elijah’s message to Ahab was, “You are a terrible leader, and your god is fake.” Subtle. Ahab must have been squirming... Jezebel must have been fuming!

You’ve got to admire Elijah’s courage here. Remember... he was facing Ahab... King of Israel and his Queen Jezebel. It was quite properly in their power to shoot the messenger if they didn’t like the message.

We don't really know why they didn't except that Elijah was under the Lord's protection at that point, and God told him to go away from that place and that He would take care of his needs.

*"Then the Lord said to Elijah, <sup>3</sup> 'Go to the east and hide by Kerith Brook, near where it enters the Jordan River. <sup>4</sup> Drink from the brook and eat what the ravens bring you, for I have commanded them to bring you food.'"*

*<sup>5</sup> So Elijah did as the Lord told him and camped beside Kerith Brook, east of the Jordan. <sup>6</sup> The ravens brought him bread and meat each morning and evening, and he drank from the brook. <sup>7</sup> But after a while the brook dried up, for there was no rainfall anywhere in the land."*

And here we see the personal side of God. Not only is He the mighty Creator, Sustainer and Defender, but He is also the Good Shepherd who provides for the safety and sustenance of His people. Elijah was a marked man... but God shielded him and took care of him in miraculous ways... even got him a Blue Apron subscription!

His name meant "God is the Lord!" He was a servant of the One True God. And his message was pure and simple: There is only one true God. You know, this is still an unpopular message, that there is only One True God. It is perceived as intolerant, non-inclusive, narrow.

It's important to note that Elijah's message is not one that is broadcast to the world at large. He didn't go preaching the One True God in the streets of Sidon or Canaan or Egypt: "Hey! You guys are all following false gods! We have the only true God!" That wasn't his job.

Elijah's message was to rescue God's people so that God's people could be His witnesses to the watching world. If he was unsuccessful, the message of God through Israel would be corrupted and eventually silenced.

What would Elijah's message be to the Christian Church today? To us?

### **Is the One and Only God Your One & Only?**

One thing for sure is that he would continue to proclaim the One True God, and Jesus Christ as the One True Savior. Here is how the apostle John put it at the end of one of his letters to the early church; listen carefully:

*"We know that we are children of God and that the world around us is under the control of the evil one.*

*<sup>20</sup> And we know that the Son of God has come, and he has given us understanding so that we can know the true God. And now we live in fellowship with the true God because we live in fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ. He is the only true God, and he is eternal life.*

*<sup>21</sup> Dear children, keep away from anything that might take God's place in your hearts."*

Gee, sounds a bit like Elijah doesn't it... a bit more wordy, but the message is the same.  
**Is the One and Only God Your One & Only?**

Let's unpack it a little: This is what we **know**, he says:

- 1) **We are Children of God!** That's us... we who call ourselves Christians, followers of Christ. You heard the message last week at Easter! We have been bought by the precious blood of Jesus Christ, we have been brought back from exile far away into a special family relationship with God. He is our Father in heaven, we are His children. As Children, we represent our Father wherever we go... to the store... to the office... to school... wherever we go, we are the Children of God. Loved! Marked! Called to help people find their way back to God. We are the Children of God! This we know... and it's fantastic! However...
- 2) **The world is under the control of the evil one.** We know this too. We see his talon marks everywhere:
  - a. When human beings created in the image of God give orders to use chemical weapons on other human beings created in the image of God... and when human beings created in the image of God obey those orders and snuff out in a most gruesome way, the lives of men, women, & children.
  - b. When a human being created in the image of God straps explosives to his body in the name of the god he worships, and annihilates himself and other human beings.
  - c. When human beings created in the image of God enslave other human beings created in the image of God and use them to make money through sex.
  - d. When human beings created in the image of God are so desperate to escape the pressures of existence that they abuse drugs or alcohol and find themselves addicted and their lives destroyed.
  - e. We could go on and on... the world is a train wreck because the evil one is intent on destroying the image of God. That's what he does. "The enemy comes to steal, kill and destroy," Jesus said... "I have come so that they could have life!"
- 3) We also know this: **that Jesus the Son of God came here...** to us... to be with us... to suffer the weaknesses and depravity of the human condition with us... to walk a mile or 10,000 in our moccasins. **We know that** Jesus, God in the flesh, endured every temptation that we regularly succumb to, yet never sinned. **We know that** Jesus, the perfect Lamb of God, suffered and died at the hands of cruel human beings ... so that the image of God could be restored in them. **We know that** Jesus, the One True God, rose from the dead, conquered death, and rules the universe from His heavenly throne... moving all history towards that day when every human knee will bow and every human tongue confess that Jesus is Lord... when humanity is recreated into the image of God, and all creation is made new. **We know that** Jesus wins!



This is the message we have been entrusted to proclaim! Jesus is Life! Jesus is Peace! Jesus is the Truth... not just one truth among many options... The Truth. That is the message the Church has been given to spread wherever we are scattered. That's why the last line of John's letter is so terribly important:

- 4) ***“Dear children, keep away from anything that might take God's place in your hearts.”*** The literal translation says, “Dear children, keep yourselves from **idols**.” Idols... like Ba'al...like in the days of Elijah... just like Israel being seduced by false gods. Keep yourself from anything that might take God's place in your hearts! Why? Because when false gods worm their way into our hearts, our witness for Christ is all but extinguished. “Helping people find their way back to God” will be only a nice phrase we print on stuff.

So what about today? What about us? Are there counterfeit gods in our culture who are trying to seduce us away from the One True God? What do you think?

**Is the One and Only God Your One & Only?**

Here's the thing: When you follow a false god you get entrapped, your life gets sucked dry rather than life being given to you. It's like a carrot on a stick... such great promises, but they never come true. When you follow a false god the demands are unreasonable and the life you get is enslavement.

Remember Hiel... the builder who followed Ba'al's directives and literally sacrificed his children on the altar of his accomplishments! Can you imagine?

How many families and children have been sacrificed on the altar of **accomplishments and success**?

How many believers have sold their souls in pursuit of **wealth and financial security**?

How many citizens of heaven have believed that one **political party**, or one system of **government**, or one **candidate** is the hope of the world?

How many followers of Christ have been seduced into believing the myth that **personal comfort and pleasure** are the highest values of life?

***“Dear children, keep away from anything that might take God's place in your hearts.”*** To the extent that any of these things, or any other created thing begins to take God's place in our hearts, we too are idolaters. We have mixed the worship of the One True God with other things and it has killed our witness to the world.

**Is the One and Only God Your One & Only?**

**I am an idolater.** I have, at times, sacrificed my family on the altars of education and success...

**I am an idolater.** I have often elevated my own personal comfort and convenience over my responsibility to love and serve others.

**I am an idolater.** I have let guilty pleasures taint the purity of my love for God.

“Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love.

Here's my heart, Lord, take and seal it... seal it for Thy courts above."

God knew this would be our main issue.

After He had led His people to freedom through the Red Sea and the destruction of their enemies, God met with Moses and gave to him stone tablets engraved with the covenant that He was making with His people. The first article was this:

*"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me."*

Here we are, just having celebrated the resurrection, when Jesus led His people to freedom from sin and destroyed the enemy of death, and we still need to guard ourselves from idols.

The Israelites never abandoned the worship of Yahweh, you know. They simply added the worship of Ba'al to their worship of Yahweh. They had one God for crises and another god for everyday life. Ouch. Honestly, is that the way I live my life? I cry out to God when life is hard and the spit hits the fan, but when everything is smooth, I'm actually following something else?

*"Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.*

*<sup>24</sup>Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting life."*

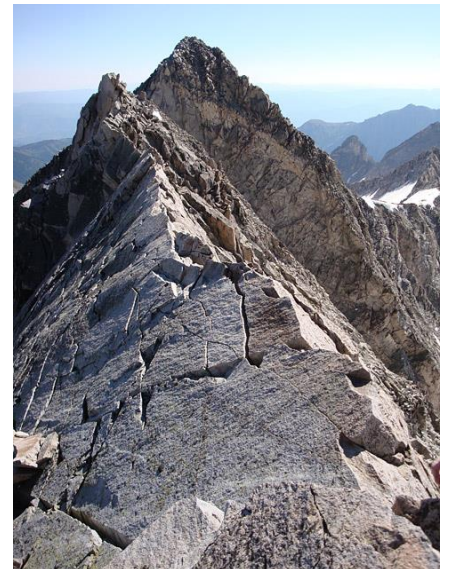
**Is the One and Only God Your One & Only?**

Mt. Katahdin is one of my favorite mountains. It is in the middle of the great state of Maine, and is the northern terminus of the Appalachian Trail. One of the trails on Mt. Katahdin is called the Knife Edge.

The Knife Edge is a 1 mile stretch of trail near the summit that is, well, a knife edge! As you can see in the picture, a long fall and almost certain death awaits the incautious person who does not stick to the narrow trail.

Now I suppose you could go up there and say, "Gee, that's really restrictive, I am more inclusive and tolerant of other ways." In which case, I say to you, Good luck!

Or you could keep your eyes on the trail and do everything in your power to stay on it!



*Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me."*



The trail through life is narrower than we think. It's easy to fall off on either side. But if we keep our eyes on Jesus and do everything in our power to follow Him only, He will be our guide and guard our every step.

### **Is the One and Only God Your One & Only?**

So what are your take-aways from this? Here are a couple of suggestions:

1) Be encouraged! If you follow Jesus, you have chosen Life! You follow the real deal. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life and He has opened heaven for you!

2) Be vigilant. Do a personal inventory: how have the gods of our culture your life and worship?

3) Be intentional. Get to know God and His Son Jesus deeply. There's no shortcut to this – it's a personal relationship, and it requires time. Time in prayer and the Word, talking with God and listening to Him... being in His presence.

***“Dear children, keep away from anything that might take God's place in your hearts.”***

### **Is the One and Only God Your One & Only?**

Let's pray...

*“Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.*

*<sup>24</sup>Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting life.”*