

# THE BIG MATCH

May 29 2016

1 Kings 18:16-40

Children love asking questions.  
And a famous type of question is the '*who would win?*' question.

Who would win between a snake and a fox?  
Who would win between a basking shark and a hammerhead shark?  
Who would win between a lion and a tiger?

And we give them our reply (assuming we have any clue to the answers).  
Probably some of the time we will know and other times we just have to guess.

Knowing who would win in a fight between a cow and pig doesn't seem like something to change our life.

But in today's reading we get an answer to the most important question of all!  
Is there a God and is there more than one?  
Which God is the best?  
Which God is the most powerful? Which would win in a fight?

Today we hear about the Big Match – the big fight between two Gods.

And it's a pretty astonishing story.

The prophet Elijah bravely confronts the King of his country, King Ahab, who (along with his wife Queen Jezebel) has turned his back on Israel's God.

Elijah announces that he will take on the prophets of Baal and of Asherah to decide which God should be worshipped.  
Trouble is there is only one of Elijah but 850 prophets on the other side so it's not exactly a balanced fight!  
Fortunately for Elijah the contest ends up being between the God of Israel and God of Baal, so it means instead of 850 against 1 its only 450 against 1!  
The bookies would give Leicester City better odds for winning the English Championship than Elijah winning *this* competition!

Here's what happens in the story.  
They build two altars each with a slaughtered bull, and piled high with wood. Then they have to pray and call on their god to send fire to light the sacrifice.  
There are no Swan Vestas in sight. No matches, no lighters, no sticks to rub together. The fire must be started by God!

And so the prophets of Baal go first and they pray and dance and jump around the altar.  
But nothing seems to work.  
Elijah finds their efforts quite amusing.  
*"Maybe your god is asleep. Maybe your god is away on holiday"*  
and he even says  
*"Maybe he's taking a dump!"*

Well nothing they can do seems to work and now its Elijah's turn.  
In a moment of remarkable confidence he then gets people to cover his altar with water three times so that the wood is soaking wet.  
Then he calls on God and asks God to show that God is real and to be worshipped.  
And God sends a bolt of fire – and the bull, the wood the stones and the water are all burnt up.

We've got a winner!

One of the big things that Christians today need to get their heads round is how we think of the Bible.

It's not God's Word magically dropped from the sky, though God can and does speak through it.

It's an ancient record of what people believed about God. Sometimes they got it right – other times they were wide of the mark.

Sometimes what we read gives us important information and facts to copy and sometimes what we read is showing us things to avoid.

Imagine you were writing a book about how to run an office.

You could call it **Ten Top Tips For Running Your Office** and come up with ten handy hints.

Or you could call it **Ten Ways To Close your Office** and suggest mistakes to avoid at all costs.

One would be positive info; the other negative info – but people could learn good things from both.

Things to do – and things not to do....

The Bible is like that. There are positive and negative stories in here but we can always learn from the stories – even if they seem strange.

Let me go way out on a limb here and suggest that this story is one of these pretty strange ones....!

What do you think of this tale? Is it appealing or appalling?

I think it's appealing to us because we want the God of Elijah to come out on top.

I think it's appealing to us because everyone likes an underdog. When you have 450 people on one side and only 1 person on the other side, we want to gravitate towards that poor soul.

But there's a lot in here that is pretty appalling too.

Take the end of the tale.... When the God of Israel comes out on top, and turns out to have power which the false gods of Baal lack, what happens to these prophets?

Elijah orders their execution! There are 450 of them and they are all taken down to the river and slaughtered.

So is that a good model for us and for our interfaith relations?

If we encounter people who aren't believers in our God, or who follow another god – we should just kill them?

Of course this is fine if you believe (as many people did back then) that God takes delight in massacres and killing people, and it's even fine for Christians today who believe that

God's basic attitude to people who aren't Christians is hatred, and that God is planning eternal torture for them once their life on earth is over.

But Jesus came to show us that all that stuff is not true.

Jesus came to speak of a God who is love, who does not plan genocide and murders – a far cry from the warlike tribal angry God of the oldest scriptures.

The primitive people of Israel did get many of their beliefs about God right – but the bit about God ordering massacres and ethnic cleansing was well wide of the mark, and the opposite of what God was really like.

But of course, this bit at the end about the massacre of the prophets is just a kind of footnote put in.

The point of this story is that the real God is pitched against some false gods, and the real God wins, and the dramatic scenes that day ensure that everyone will now believe and follow that God.

Yet isn't that just the kind of thing that we know from elsewhere in the scriptures that God would not want to do – engage in some kind of battle with rivals? Doesn't the Bible say that we shouldn't put God to the test?

And this brings us to the heart of the message.

We might just be tempted to think if only God would do stuff like this more often than people would believe and trust in God.

Far more people would follow God if there were just more signs like this one.

In the film *Love and Death* Woody Allen and Diane Keaton are discussing the possibility of the existence of God.

Woody Allen says, *"If only God would give me a sign – like putting thousands of dollars in a Swiss bank account in my name.."*

And yet it's not true.

Let's check the results of the great contest.

When the altar burst into flame the Bible tells us that the people of Israel shouted out *"The Lord is God; the Lord alone is God!"*

How great – they were now convinced about their God!

Except that by just the next chapter their faith was nowhere to be seen.

King Ahab and his wife Jezebel still opposed Elijah and she ordered his death and put out a contract on him.

Despite the amazing events of the day, Elijah now had to run for his life, and he got no support from his fellow countrymen and women. They just kept their heads down and opted to do whatever the king wanted.

Proof of Gods power was not enough for them to really trust in God.

This amazing moment – this so-called *'settle the issue once and for all about the true God'* actually failed. It did not produce lasting results

And what this old story stands to tell us Christians today is this – that surprisingly enough, signs and wonders and dramatic events do not necessarily lead people to faith – not in any deep and lasting way.

I guess there's always an alternative explanation.  
So-called proof can always be explained away if you want it to be.

Lee Strobel, was an award-winning journalist with the Chicago Tribune. And he was also, quite openly, an unbeliever. In fact, when it came to matters of faith, he identified himself as an atheist. In one of his books, he tells of the time when his newborn daughter was rushed into intensive care because of a mysterious illness that threatened her life. The doctors weren't certain what was going on, but it was clearly serious. Strobel says that even though he was an atheist, he was so desperate that he prayed anyway, imploring God — if God existed — to heal his daughter. A short time later, his daughter, to everyone's surprise, did recover, totally and completely. The doctors couldn't believe it! They were left scratching their heads.

So was Strobel convinced that God was real? Not at all.  
He thought, *"What a coincidence! She must have had some bacteria or virus that spontaneously disappeared."* He remained in his atheism.

*You see, you can always take any seemingly miraculous thing and debunk it if you are so inclined. You can explain it as an elaborate hoax, a coincidence, the ravings of a confused person, superstition, group hysteria, a lie, a hallucination, or something else.*  
(from Ministry Matters May 29 2016 author unknown)

The postscript to this tale is that journalist Lee Strobel did later become a Christian. He makes his living now writing books on faith. But his decision to trust God, and follow Christ came about through other events – not related to the dramatic healing of his wee girl.

Growing up I knew a girl who I will call Sheila. She hung around some of the same crowd, and she was part of church youth groups. She was a very committed Christian for a few years until she drifted away and we heard that she was no longer involved in any church and no longer believed.

Later on she got married to a man who had very particular views – he was a pagan. They had a pagan wedding ceremony outside in the hills one summer, and I think none of her former Christian friends were invited. A few years passed until something terrible happened to Sheila. Doctors discovered cancer in her quite by chance and it was too late do anything about it. They told her she needed to go home and put her affairs in order. She would not live long. I guess at this stage she was about 40 years old.

You can imagine how she was feeling. Then one of her old friends from church days visited her and suggested she might go with her to the Healing Rooms, which is a Christian ministry of prayer. Those who worked there would pray for her.

Well she had little interest in that, and no real belief that it could work, but realising that her days were up - what did she have to lose?

So along she went with her old pal to the Healing Rooms, told them her story and they prayed for her.

A few days later she had an appointment at the hospital and the doctors were picking themselves off the floor.

There was no cancer. It had disappeared. She had been miraculously cured.  
And that's the story.

The cancer just left her. The medics could not explain it.  
She was perfectly well again.

Would you be surprised to hear me say that Sheila is a person of faith again?

Of course you wouldn't be.

So let me surprise you with this then.

The truth is that she **isn't** a believer. She is a pagan.

She does not believe in God.

She knows she was miraculously healed, and I guess she's very happy about that, but she puts it down to luck, coincidence, or mystery.

She is not willing to credit God for what has happened in her life.

The thing about the gospel is that we **choose** to believe (or not).

We choose whether we follow.

Jesus called on people to follow him.

And ever since people say well I *might* follow Jesus but first I have to know everything.

First I have to have no doubts.

First I have to know exactly what I believe - and be convinced of it in every way.

Until I get rid of every question and every doubt then I can't follow.

That's not how faith works.

Do you think the first smelly and illiterate fishermen sitting by their boats mending their nets knew everything they needed to know when Jesus called them to follow?

Do you think that the tax collector Matthew sitting at his table in the middle of his working day was just waiting for Jesus to come and say to him '*Drop everything and come with me?*'

Everywhere Jesus went he called on people to follow.

And left them free to make their own decision.

It was up to them.

It's up to you and it's up to me.

But amazing events like burning altars and bushes, tongues of fire, healings and other miracles do not in themselves make our decision for us.

And what about Boris – Woody Allen's character in *Love and Death*?

Do you think that if God **did** put money in a Swiss bank account for him he would believe in God?

Well he *might* – or he might decide that there's obviously been some bank glitch or computer mistake that has caused this particular 'miracle'.

Whether we decide to follow Christ and trust in God remains our own decision.

Life is always about the unknown.

We cannot know what's going to happen to us tomorrow - never mind next week or next year.

There is uncertainty and mystery ahead of us whether we are people of faith or people of no faith.

But we can decide to take Jesus at his word and start living his way, by walking one step at a time.

Jesus once said, *"What I teach is not my own teaching but it comes from God who sent me. Whoever is willing to do what God wants will know whether what I teach comes from God or whether I'm speaking on my own."*

(John 7:16-17)

In other words, it's by embracing faith in God and doing what you see as God's will that you can gain a sense of the reality of Christ.

Try trusting first and taking that first step - and then you will be convinced.

Here's the best thing I can leave you with today...

Choose to believe in God and to follow Christ.

What follows from that is the peace of knowing God's presence and the inner conviction that you are on the right path.