

My God vs. Your God

1. Warm-up Question: Sunday's sermon began with a video of an artist sketching pictures of God guided by little children. Think back to how you, as a child, were taught to think about God. If you had drawn a picture of God as a child, what would God look like? And what symbols would you have included in the picture to represent God's chief characteristics?
2. In recent weeks, we've been following along with the same epic Old Testament stories our children have been studying in Sunday School. A few weeks ago, we saw how the nation of Israel divided in two – north versus south. Soon thereafter an evil king name Ahab rose to power in the north and slaughtered the priests of Yahweh, the God of Israel, replacing them with priests of a foreign god named Baal (pronounced "Bail"). In response, God raised up a prophet, Elijah, to call the people back. Soon Elijah and Ahab found themselves in a tense standoff on Mount Carmel. Read I Kings 18:17-40. *Note: Every time you see the word LORD, the underlying Hebrew word is "Yahweh." Read it that way, so you see the contrast.*
3. First let's deal with how the story ends, so that doesn't become an impediment to our study of the rest of the story. Notice that the text nowhere says God told Elijah to kill the priests of Baal. That seems to have been Elijah's own idea. He was a creature of his time when the prevailing ethic was "an eye for an eye." But then along came Jesus. Read Matthew 5:38-45. Do you think Jesus would approve of what Elijah did? What would have been a better response? How should we, as followers of Jesus, respond to people of different faiths?
4. Now let's turn our attention to the positive aspects of our Bible story. Jeff suggested the story is mean to challenge us to examine our own personal understanding of God. To see how the story tees up that question, it helps to know a bit about how ancient people thought of Baal and how they thought of Yahweh. Take a look at the picture and description of Baal on p. 3, then tackle the questions below.
 - a. Why do you think so many people were drawn to the worship of Baal? If you'd been alive back then, do you think you would have felt a tug toward Baal? Why or why not?
 - b. Jeff described Baal as a god designed by humans for humans to give us what we want – prosperity. Do we see a similar religious phenomenon in our culture today? If so, how is it expressed? Why is it so appealing to people?
 - c. Is it wrong to want God to prosper us?
5. The Israelite understanding of Yahweh contrasts sharply with Baal. The most famous description of Yahweh is found in Exodus 3, where Moses encounters God at the burning bush and asks to know God's proper name. In the ancient world, people believed that if you knew a god's name, you could gain a measure of control over that god by invoking the name to curse people and bless people (and yourself). If you

publicly invoked the god's name and he didn't come through, he would be shamed. Thus, knowing the name gave you leverage. By asking God's name, Moses was seeking control. Instead God responded by saying, "I AM WHO I AM." Exodus 3:14. The term Yahweh is derived from this. It comes from the root form of the Hebrew verb that means "to be." In essence, Yahweh was saying to Moses, "All you need to know is that I am the One who exists and is beyond your control." Then Yahweh goes on to call Moses to do what he didn't want to do, i.e., go back to Egypt.

- a. In what ways does the Yahweh understanding of God differ from the Baal understanding?
 - b. Why do you think so many Israelites were reluctant to fully embrace Yahweh? If you had been alive back then, do you think you would have been reluctant?
 - c. It's always tempting to want to turn God into someone whose purpose is to serve us and to affirm our preferences, opinions, and prejudices. Jeff told how the church tradition in which he was raised turned God into a defender of Southern culture as it existed in the 1930s. What are some concrete examples of ways we might be tempted to do the same thing in our lives today, i.e., to create God in our image instead of letting God mold us into God's image?
 - d. Anne Lamott says, "You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out God hates all the same people you do." Who are the people you're most tempted to despise? Do you think God despises them too?
 - e. Patrick Morley says, "The turning point in our lives is when we stop seeking the God we want and start seeking the God who is." What do you think he means? Do you agree?
 - f. The Bible does teach us that God wants good things for us. (Matthew 7:7-11.) But the Bible also teaches that God often calls us to act in ways contrary to our self-interest and preconceived prejudices. (Matthew 10:37-39.) So how do we strike the right balance in our understanding of God?
6. On Mount Carmel, Elijah said to the Israelites, "How long will you go limping with two different opinions [about God]? If Yahweh is God, follow Yahweh. But if Baal, then follow him." I Kings 18:21. Jeff suggested a test that can help us assess whether we are seeking to serve God or seeking a God who serves us. He said: "Here's the test. How often does your faith called you to do something contrary to your self-interest or personal prejudices? If the answer is often, you're probably on the right track. If the answer is seldom, that should be a warning sign that calls for self-examination." Let's apply that test.
- a. Tell us about a time recently when your faith called you to do something (large or small) contrary to your self-interest.
 - b. Let's circle back to where we began: How might someone who sees God as Yahweh draw, depict, or describe God?



In this classic ancient depiction, Baal is shown as a man who holds a thunderbolt in one hand (God of the rain who makes crops grow); with a weapon in the other hand (to give victory in battle); and on his head, a helmet with bulls horns (because bulls were the ultimate symbol of virility and fertility). It was not uncommon for worshipers of Baal to build poles in the shape of the male penis as a tribute to their god.

In short, Baal was a fertility god. In ancient agricultural cultures, fertility equaled prosperity. If your wife, animals, and crops were fertile, you would prosper and have a good life. In essence, Baal was a prosperity god and prosperity religion.