

The Valley of Indecision

A sermon delivered Sunday Morning, April 10, 2016
at Oak Grove Baptist Church, Paducah, Ky.
by S. Michael Durham
© 2016 Real Truth Matters

I Kings 18:21

And Elijah came to all the people, and said, "How long will you falter between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him." But the people answered him not a word.

In Joel 3:14 the Bible says, "Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision." But for Elijah's multitude they were in the valley of indecision and the prophet was calling for action.

Do you know anyone who is indecisive? Trying to get them to make a decision is, well, trying. A person who obviously had problems making decisions wrote, "I used to think I was indecisive, but now I'm not so sure."

Are you an indecisive person? Are you afraid you're going to make the wrong decision? This is usually the primal reason for indecisiveness. You are fearful that if you choose one thing that something better will come up and you will be stuck with your decision and that immobilizes us. They have actually attached a name to this phobia and it has become a social media acronym—FOMO—fear of missing out. That's why people text when they drive, interrupt one call to take another, or check Twitter and Facebook while on a date. The fear of missing out on something or someone more interesting, exciting, or better than what we're currently doing is leading to more indecisiveness. "I don't want to decide because something better might come up."

The people of Israel were afraid they would miss out spiritually unless they covered all their deity bases. They tried to serve Jehovah and Baal.

There are three groups of people today when it comes to the matters of religion. There are those who have decidedly chosen to follow Christ in all matters. There are those who have equally decided to not follow Jesus. I'm not necessarily talking about the atheist or the agnostic, although it would be included in this group, it could be someone very religious but they've chosen a different type of religion but they've chosen a different type of religion following a different god. But there is a third group who is in the most unpleasant valley of indecision, trying to have Jesus and everything else. These are the most miserable of all persons. They cannot enjoy the full pleasures of sin nor enjoy the immense pleasure of Jesus. They are trapped in this valley of indecision. Halted, as if lamed, they cannot seem to progress in any direction. Have I described you my halting friend? You want to make a decision but you're afraid to do so.

I. Unreasonable Motives For Being in the Valley of Indecision

I want to eliminate the reasons for being in the valley today.

A. The Unbeliever.

Again, I don't mean the atheist or the agnostic. I am speaking about the person who does believe in God, who does believe there was and is Jesus Christ who died on the cross and rose again, but yet, for whatever reason, they have not committed their lives in faith to follow Him.

Note, it was not an unreligious crowd that Elijah was addressing but just the opposite. These were very religious, in fact, they couldn't make up their mind as to which God they wanted to serve. That's how religious they were, they couldn't figure out which one they wanted to serve devotedly.

The power of indecision in serving the Lord God in the life of an unbeliever is:

1. Not because serving God is unreasonable. It is not unreasonable to love a perfect God. It makes perfect sense to love the Lord your God, who not only made you but has showered you with blessing after blessing after blessing. He doesn't only care for you, He loves you, and in some degree He has sheltered you in the midst of even your storm, even though you haven't followed Him or His Son.

It is not unreasonable to find sin sinful and repent. When one sees sin as it is—exceedingly sinful—makes all the sense in the world to repent. It's not unreasonable to see the hideousness and the vileness of what it really is, to see it as God sees it and to turn from it. That's not unreasonable. That's not keeping you from serving the Lord.

The rewards for serving God are not unreasonable. His rewards are wonderful. The rewards God is going to give to all those who love and serve Him and follow Him in obedience, you will discover once you receive them that whatever the price, it was far too small for what you're gaining. It's not because the rewards are too unreasonable because they are out of this world.

2. It is not because you do not know you should serve the Lord. That's why you're here today. I doubt anybody is here today that doesn't know in the back of their mind, on the subconscious level, that they ought to obey God, they ought to serve Him. That is why there is an attempt at religion at all, why there is an attempt at a belief system that includes a deity and a system of morality.

3. It is not because you lack time to serve the Lord. You've found time to sin. You've found time to disobey and reject His leadership. Certainly there is time to obey. The same amount of time afforded to you as to anyone else.

4. It is not the lack of importance. You're not serving God today because it's not important enough. How long shall the impenitent suffer? Eternity. Surely this makes it a matter of the most important urgency. Today, now is the acceptable time. Today is the day of salvation.

5. It is not because God has not offered it to you. For thousands of years, God has extended the invitation to millions. In the Bible that invitation is repeated over and over in different forms and varieties.

In Isaiah, He extended the invitation like this,

Everyone who thirsts, Come to the waters; And you who have no money, Come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk Without money and without price. (Isaiah 55:1)

To buy wine and milk without price is a metaphor for salvation. “Come! Be saved! Today.”

Jesus said,

Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. (Matthew 11:28)

Why, even the closing words of the Bible in Revelation 22 says this,

And the Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let him who hears say, “Come!” And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely. (Revelation 22:17)

There it is. God has extended to everyone in this room the invitation to come to Him for salvation. Salvation, once again, needs to be restated often in this time; it is not about getting your sins forgiven and the penalty removed. No, it is much more. It’s about coming into a vital, vibrant relationship. Jesus is salvation. This is to know Him.

I will offer one more unreasonable motive for why you’re not serving God.

6. It is not that you intend to die lost. I don’t think anyone in this room has said, “I will die without hope and I will burn forever.” I really don’t think you have chosen this with clear deliberation and forethought. Rather it is my intuition that you mean to make it right between you and God before you leave this world and go to the world of the departed.

What then is the reason for you being in the valley of indecision, sitting on the fence, wanting to be right with God, sins forgiven, and an assurance of eternal life? Before I answer that, let me deal with the unreasonable motives for a true believer who is also on the fence, halting between absolute and partial surrender.

B. In the Life of a Believer.

It’s sad that I must take a few moments and deal with this, but there are Christians who can be faltering, halting between absolute surrender and partial surrender to God.

The Christian’s indecisiveness is not whether to follow Jesus or the world. No, they have already decided to follow the Christ. They halt between a completely surrendered life or mostly sur-

rendered life. Dear Christian brother or sister, why do you seem to halt between half-hearted service and fervent, passionate service to God?

The power of indecision in the believer to serve the Lord with all his or her might is not:

1. Is not because it is unreasonable to do so. Of all people, you know the reasonableness of offering God your everything. You remember, surely, where God found you. Do you remember the heap of sorrow and misery you suffered when God found you? You have every reason and then some to dedicate the rest of your days to the Lord and His service. You know it's reasonable. There's no question to you.

2. Not because the reward is not enough. You've had a glimpse. You've tasted and seen that the Lord is good. The reward is not pearly gates and giant mansions and golden crowns, although they're included, it's Jesus! You know what it is to talk and commune with the Prince of Peace, who settles your own soul and mind and conscience with a peace that passes all understanding. You know what it's like to have His sympathy in the moment of your sorrow and lift your spirits when no one could do so. You know what it's like for Him, by the sheer power of His word, to expel and dispel all darkness. Remember what it was like trapped in that dungeon of which we sang earlier?

*Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray—
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.*

You know that reward and the rewards yet to come. Why, I'm speaking to future kings and queens. I need to be careful how I deal with you. Karen and I were talking about this Monday as we were talking about our daughter Victoria. I said, "Do we realize that we are serving a future queen of heaven?" We named her appropriately, didn't we? Queen Victoria. She rules here and she's going to rule over there too. But it's true. The Bible says we shall rule and reign with Him. You better be careful how you treat your brother and sister—you're talking to royalty.

3. Not because souls are not perishing. They're all around us. There are people still yet enslaved in their dungeons all around us. It's not because there is no one to share the Gospel with, it's not because there is no one to be on mission for—they're all around us! We have more work than we can do.

4. Not because of a lack of power. It's certainly not that because He has given us His Spirit. God has given every one of His children His Spirit. There is within you, by this same grace we have discussed already in this hour, the desire and the power to do God's good pleasure. He's done this in the new heart and regeneration.

II. The Motive For Being in the Valley of Indecision

What is the reason for vacillating between full hearted passionate dedication for God and just coasting? I want to answer that. I want to start, as I have done already, with the sinner and then we'll move to the believer.

A. For the Sinner.

When I use the term “unbeliever,” let me be very clear. I don't mean that you don't believe there is a God or that you don't believe in Jesus. But normally what I mean is that you do not trust Jesus. I want to be very clear. I mean you are not trusting Jesus explicitly. What does it mean to trust Jesus explicitly? It means to trust Jesus in everything. That's what a true believer is. It's not just a person who believes Jesus will forgive them of their sins, that's only a minuscule part of what you believe God for. You trust God with all of you and everything about you.

If you trust God for *this* part but you don't trust Him for *this* part, well, can you say you are a believer? So when I refer to someone as a sinner or an unbeliever, I'm referring to someone who doesn't want to trust Jesus explicitly.

The power of indecision in serving and worshipping the Lord God is for one reason only, the real reason you do not trust and serve the Lord is because you do not want to. That's it. Since we're being honest, let's be plain. It is not a lack of power in the senses that you cannot change your mind nor you cannot believe that God is trustworthy, but according to the Scriptures—this is God's diagnosis—your heart is so wicked and exceedingly sinful that you do not want to serve the Lord. I don't say this from a position of superiority. I say this from a position of experience because this is where I was. This is exactly the condition of my heart, my desires, before God saved me. I didn't want to serve Him His way. I wanted to serve Him my way. That was my problem. That was my reason and motive for not getting off the fence and really serving the Lord. I say it's your problem too.

The human soul is so corrupt and wicked that it hates God and wants nothing to do with Him. Right now you're saying to yourself, “But I don't hate God! I know he can't be talking about me because I do not hate the Lord. I have some soft and warm feelings about Him. I have some affection for Him. He loves me, the Bible says it's so, why would I hate Him?” Friends, the Bible judges love not by words or even feelings, but upon actions.

What's a wife going to say when her husband says to her on Valentine's Day, “I love you,” but he never says it any other day of the year? What's she going to think? What's she going to think when on all the other days of the year he ignores her, he even scoffs her, mocks her, emotionally and verbally abuses her? What is she going to believe when he says, “Oh, by the way, it's Valentine's Day, I love you”? She will discredit what he says and not believe him. Why? Because actions do speak louder than words.

The Bible says that you do not like or love God, you hate Him. The Bible does tell us that man is unable and without power to change his heart but it also tells us why he is without power to do so. It is because the sinner's will is so enamored and enslaved to your sin and own devices—it does not desire to choose Christ; for whatever the will ultimately desires is what it will choose. You cannot choose something you don't want to do. That's impossible. You say, "I've done plenty of things I didn't want to do." No, you chose to do it because you wanted something even less.

For example, I've used this illustration much over the years, someone comes up to you, sticks a gun in your back and says, "Your money or your life." Do you really want to give him your money? Not at all. But you want something even less: to die. You will choose to give him your money because you want to live. You did what you wanted most. You wanted to live. That was the choice.

My friend, this is what the Bible describes. We think of sin just by what we do or don't do, keeping commandments or breaking commandments, the Bible is so much smarter than that. God knows us inside and out. He made us. He knows psychology and sociology; He knows all the "ologies." He's the best theologian, by the way. It's all about Him. He knows exactly how He made you. The Bible says your heart, before the miracle, which we'll talk about in a few minutes, is bound up in its own desires and therefore only chooses what it wants to choose. And it always wants to choose according to selfish desires, not according to godly desires. This is simple.

Jesus says,

No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day. (John 6:44)

The Bible says it's impossible for you to choose contrary to your desires. What God must do is draw you and give you a new set of desires.

Jesus, one day talking to religious people, said something profound. He did not say, "You don't come to Me because you don't have the ability." He said, "You don't come to Me because you don't want to come and therefore you don't have the ability." Listen to what He said,

But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life. (John 5:40)

You cannot do what you don't want to do. It's a moral impossibility. Therefore you don't want God or love God except on your terms, only for His help, His blessings, His intervention in your life to the degree you allow Him to intervene. Other than that, you don't want Him and you can't want Him because that's not the way your desires are wired.

Let me see if I can help you understand by way of illustration.

Suppose you were to have someone show you a large den of venomous snakes where it appears every square inch of the floor was moving because there were so many snakes. And then, next,

you were shown a cage of hungry wild lions, and next a huge furnace of fire, and finally a stack of money totaling one billion dollars. Then, your escort told you could have all the money in the pile if only you first walked through the den of snakes, cage of lions, and furnace of fire. The only path to the money was through those three obstacles. What would you say? If sane I would suppose you would say, "Absolutely not!"

Why? Because your hatred and fear of the three obstacles are so strong that no matter how much you desire the money you love your personal safety and well being more. I mean, stop and think about it. What could you do with a billion dollars? You wouldn't just be able to take care of your life for the rest of your days, you could take care of your family for generations if it's managed properly. What a boon to foreign missions this would be! We could hire about 10,000 Florins with a billion dollars. It'd be huge! Don't you think you would try to think of a strategy to do that? What would be the answer? No. There's no way I could walk through all of that and walk out, secure the prize, and live to enjoy it. The truth is, you know you can't survive and you love your personal safety more than attempting the challenge.

The Lord God has made you a promise that if you will come to Him in loving submission to Him, He will in turn give you the present joy of relationship with Him now and the eternal pleasures of His kingdom after life here on earth. What is your choice? For those who are not truly Christians but know you should be, your reaction is about the same as it would be to running through a den of poisonous snakes, ravaging wild lions, and a fiery furnace. It's exactly the same. You don't think so, I know. You can argue with me, but keep listening; I have an argument to return. I know you don't think this is where you are today. You have these wonderful feelings about God. You think good about God, but, deep down, what does the heart choose about God? What are you choosing to do with your life? Is it lived every moment with a passion to glorify Him, even though sometimes we fail? When we fail, is there a grief and sorrow that is godly, the Bible calls it, which causes you to want to turn back to Him and once again live every moment for His glory? Or will you only glorify God if it's good for you? God says that's a heart that is evil. You love God as much as you would try to pet a wild lion or take a bath in a fiery furnace.

Now in our hypothetical situation, it isn't right nor fair to God to represent Him as I have; yet to the unbeliever, in his or her heart of hearts, there is really little difference. You will never choose to love God no more than you would choose to love snakes, lions, and fire. You see God as you do those things that would keep you from gaining your prize, which is your happiness. The lions, the snakes, the fire will keep you from the prize. Here's the catch. You see Jesus as the one who is keeping you from having all the pleasure of sin. Tell me if I'm lying—you think if you surrendered your life to Jesus right now you would have to live a life of misery. You think you would not be happy anymore. You would have to do things you don't like doing. You'd have to stop things you do like doing. That's the definition of misery. Jesus is an obstacle to your happiness, in your mind, that's why I say the Bible says you don't love Him, you don't like Him, you despise Him. You don't see Jesus as true happiness. You don't see Him as He really is: eternal pleasure, starting now. Rather, in your mind, to serve Jesus would be a life relegated to misery.

Now remember, I'm not talking about the person who has written Jesus off and has no desire for religion. I'm talking about and to the person who knows out and out rejection of God is a one-way ticket to hell. You know and believe the outcome. Sin is more attractive to you and offers you more pleasure, but you know there is a payday someday and, therefore, you cannot enjoy your sin half as much knowing what awaits you. You despise God for it. This is how the religious, but not yet a true Christian, who is in this valley of indecision feels about God.

Now let's change this analogy somewhat by giving you some means of defense. Let say you are offered a canister of gasoline and a lighter in which to douse the snakes and set them on fire and kills every one of them. Then you are given a tranquilizer gun to render the massive lions immobile so they can't harm you or bite you. Finally, you're given a fireman's water hose to quench the flames of the furnace. Now would you go through to get your prize? Of course you would. By altering the obstacles you are now able to enter without harm.

Here we see exactly what many religious people in the valley of indecision do. They try to alter the Biblical revelation of who God is into something of a rather tamed God who poses no threat to having all the pleasures of sin and still gain the prize of heaven. Such is what the Israelites had done. They in their minds had reduced the God of Israel to something more domesticated while they continued to worship the sensual deity of Baal. Baal worship was a big party, with wine and free sex as a part of the worship. The church of Baal is always crowded. It always is.

But the early church of Jesus Christ was very intolerant and criticized as such. Nowadays, that's a bad word. If you want to get on the bad side of a modern churchgoer tell him or her that God hates their sin and He isn't pleased with them. Their argument in reply is that we've got to be broad-minded and not so narrow. We've become so broad that we've become sadly shallow.

Have you ever heard of a couple named Ananias and Sapphira. If you haven't, let me tell you about them. They decided they would lie in church and God struck them dead. They thought God was more tolerant than He really is. They deemed grace cheap and honesty costly and they priced their souls right out of the God's economy.

You can't have God and His enemies. You have to choose. This is the struggle. There is no other way. If God is who He says He is then God is worthy of all of my love, all of my affection, all of my life. You can't sleep with God and sleep with His enemies. You can't compromise and serve God and Baal. Once you've made the decision *not* to make a decision, you're God's enemy. In effect, there is no indecision, is there? The moment you say, "I'm not going to decide for Jesus but not today. Not now," you just decided. You decided you would remain an enemy of God. That will not work in the end.

B. For the Christian.

Let's go back to our allegory, our hypothetical situation, and let's change it in order to illustrate the Christians divided loyalties. In this case the obstacle course does not represent God but it

represents the world. Just the opposite. The venomous snakes, wild lions and burning furnace represent, and I might add quite fairly, the pleasures of this present world. Neither is there any other way in which to finally arrive at heaven, which the one billion dollars represents, without going through the world. In our story your guide tells you that the snakes, lions, and fire are not real but an illusion. He then hands you a special kind of glasses that makes the poisonous snakes look like small cuddly puppies, the cage of wild lions look like little cute kittens, and the blazing furnace looks like an ice cream factory with mounds of vanilla ice cream with loads of chocolate syrup. That's what you see when you put your glasses on. Now my dear Christian friend do you think you would, if seeing cuddly puppies, cute kittens, and mountains of delectable ice cream, not stop along the way to heaven and squeeze a puppy, pet a kitten, and eat some ice cream? Don't you think you would? Absolutely. AND YOU DO! That's the point.

You see no danger in these things. You don't see them as they really are; for in truth, it was the glasses that created the illusion of puppies, kittens, and ice cream. And so you enjoy them and see no danger in this world and you are enjoying it. Listen to James in chapter four and verse four, writing to Christians, "Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God." Would a man or woman commit adultery with someone he hates? Of course not. That's the problem. We still have an affection for the world. There is something inside of me that creates an illusion that the things of the world are not as deadly as they really are.

Who do you suppose gave you the glasses that changed the appearance of the snakes, lions, and fire? Some would answer Satan and no doubt he does, but James gives us a different nuance and let's us see that something within us exists that gives Satan the ability to deceive us. Look at verse fourteen and fifteen of the first chapter of James, "But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death." It is your own flesh. Within you, there lies the culprit.

What then is the answer for the sinner who knows the truth about God and the Christian who vacillates between two opinions? How does one choose one or the other, serving and loving God and serving the flesh by loving the world?

This question leads us to our third heading and it won't take us long.

III. The Fire of God Annihilates Indecision

The "Fire of God" annihilates the power of indecision. After our text, two verses later, the story unfolds. Elijah, the messenger of God, issues a contest between the 450 prophets of Baal and God. The contest that Elijah gave the false prophets of Baal was that each would build an altar, one for Baal and one for God, Jehovah. Elijah's challenge was this, "Let's take a bull, you kill yours and I'll kill mine. Let's get some wood and offer them up as sacrifices. The catch will be that we will not bring any fire to the sacrifice. You pray to Baal and I'll pray to the God of Israel and whichever god brings fire from heaven and ignites the sacrifice is the true god.

So they commenced. They got the bull, brought the wood, and started praying. The people prayed to Baal. They prayed and they prayed and they prayed, then they prayed some more. After a while, Elijah taunted them, “Hey, pray a little louder, maybe your god is on a vacation.” They started cutting themselves. Cutting isn’t a good thing. It goes back to evil idolatry in the Old Testament. They started cutting themselves thinking the god of Baal would hear. Nothing happened. Nothing at all.

I love what verse 29 says,

And when midday was past, they prophesied until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice. But there was no voice; no one answered, no one paid attention.

Why didn’t anyone pay attention? Because there was no god to pay attention.

Then Elijah built his altar. He killed the bull and put it up on the wood and then he instructed some helpers to get some barrels—we’re not talking pitchers but barrels—full of water and pour it over the sacrifice, the wood, everything. He didn’t tell them to do it once, he told them to do it three times. Gallons upon gallons of water so that everything was saturated and waterlogged. Then Elijah began to pray in verse 36.

And it came to pass, at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that Elijah the prophet came near and said, “LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that You are God in Israel and I am Your servant, and that I have done all these things at Your word. 37 “Hear me, O LORD, hear me, that this people may know that You are the LORD God, and that You have turned their hearts back to You again.” 38 Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood and the stones and the dust, and it licked up the water that was in the trench. 39 Now when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, “The LORD, He is God! The LORD, He is God!” (1 Kings 18:36-39)

It was the fire from heaven that got them off the fence, out of the valley of indecision, and into a decision for God.

I conclude wanting to address what you’re thinking. How many of you are thinking right now, “If God would show up in a way such as that, maybe not with the fire, we could do without the fire, but just some kind of sign like that, I’d give Him my life”? Who wouldn’t? I know you think that. But you wouldn’t. You know, this revival of Elijah’s didn’t last but a few days and they went right back to worshipping Baal. What’s the point of the story then?

The fire, and that whole event, was orchestrated by God to say that nothing works except the fire of God. The fire of God represents the Holy Spirit. Fire coming down on an altar doesn’t change any hearts, but the fire of God coming on your heart, changes your heart. That, my friend, is your only hope. The only thing that will move you off the fence and into the valley of decision is God’s Spirit coming upon you. God breathed on a clay statue and the Bible says he became a living soul named Adam. It was the breath of God, the Spirit of God that did that.

It's my hope right now that you will call out to the Lord Jesus and say, "Lord, breathe on me, change my heart and its desires that I will really want You." That's the point. It's not about you leaving here and promising God you're going to live a different life. It will only last a few days, weeks at best. Tell God what you really need—you need fire from heaven to burn up the corruption and the evil desires in your heart and replace them with holy desires. "Give me a new heart!"

For the saint of God, the answer is the same. If you want to move into full and complete surrender and dedication to God you cannot do it by making promises no more than the sinner can. You can fill these altars and weep for hours, I would love for you to do that, I would love to see that happen, but the praying itself is not the key. The key is a heart open to the Spirit of the living God saying, "Breathe on me! Breathe on me, oh breath of God! Revive this heart and these embers that have grown cold. Touch me again, God!"

We can pray and we can have dedications, you know, Southern Baptists and Baptists as a whole have dedicated ourselves until, well, we're the most dedicated people in the world. Every Sunday altar calls are given to "rededicate your life," "rededicate your purpose," "rededicate your futures to God." How long does that last? Until the next Sunday when you have to do it all over again.

We need fresh fire! We need a move of God Himself. We need something supernatural, church, and only God can supply it. But He cannot supply it unless you want it. "How much must I want it, pastor?" You must want the Spirit's power and energy in you more than you want anything else. In fact, you want to live that way more than you want to live the way you're now living. When you want Him to that degree, it will happen. It's the fire that renders indecision gone, burnt up, finished. God, may Your fire fall. Amen.