

Betting on sports and other types of competitions was a \$120 billion industry in the US last year. Get this, over half of those who placed bets wagered between \$50-500 per month?

Now, even if you aren't a betting person. And even if you know absolutely nothing about betting, or what people mean when they talk about the "odds," you would still know that 850-to-1 odds are not very good. That would be in the "impossible" category.

Today's OT lesson has us watching a championship match that from all appearances should be an absolute mismatch. In **This Showdown on Mt. Carmel** the odds are 850-to-1. The 850 are the combined forces of the prophets of the false gods Baal (450) and Asherah (400). The one is Elijah. The lonely prophet of the true God.

The background of a Bible story can be helpful, especially if it's the OT. Today's lesson is one of those. Because of King Ahab's worship of Baal, the Lord stopped the rain in Israel for the past three-and-a-half years which led to severe drought and famine. This was the Lord's way of proving to the people of Israel that Baal is no god at all, since supposedly Baal sends rain and makes the crops grow.

As our lesson begins, the Lord sends Elijah to Ahab. You'd think 42 months of no rain might change the king's attitude. It didn't. He remained defiant and called Elijah: "**Israel's troublemaker.**"

Have you ever pulled an Ahab and thought that a faithful messenger of God was a troublemaker? We all have. When parents discipline their children for misbehaving, they're considered "*mean.*" When a grandparent dares to tell their grandson that it's not God-pleasing to live with his girlfriend before marriage, that's called "*interfering.*" Whenever someone points out sin in our lives, our reaction is: "*Who do they think they are, telling me how to live my life?*" Like Ahab, we get angry and become defiant.

Don't be an Ahab and blame faithful messengers of God for your troubles. Don't get mad at them when they tell you what you are doing is not in line with God's will. Instead, thank them that they cared enough to point out the danger your soul was in. Be grateful they helped get you back on the right path.

Even though Ahab blamed Elijah for his problems, and continued his stance against the Lord, God in his goodness would send the rain. This was an act of God's grace. This was Ahab and Israel receiving the opposite of what they deserved.

How good and gracious is God to us? Do we deserve the places we call home, along with the things and skills and families and friends we have? No. Like Ahab, we don't appreciate God and the things he gives us and yet, in his grace we get the opposite of what we deserve every day.

The Lord wanted to make a dramatic statement with the rain. That way it would be crystal clear to the King of Israel and the people of Israel that Baal had nothing to do with it. How would God do this? That's **The Showdown on Mt. Carmel.**

This would demonstrate whether God or Baal is the true God. Elijah, God's prophet would compete against the 850 prophets of Baal and Asherah. They would meet on Mt. Carmel. The rules of the competition were: each would prepare a bull for sacrifice. Each would place the bull on the wood. Neither would light the sacrifice. The God who answers the prayers of their prophet(s) with fire would be declared the winner and receive recognition as the true God.

Years ago, Ahab allowed his wife, Queen Jezebel, to bring Baal, her god with her to Israel. This gave the people of Israel a choice. Many had hedged their bets on both gods, hoping one or the other would come through for them. Elijah throws down this challenge: "*You either love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, or you don't. You can't love both.*" At first the people said nothing. But upon further review they agreed: "**What you say is good.**"

The prophets of Baal had to be thinking this would be an easy win. This was their home turf. They outnumbered their opponent 850-to-1. The images of Baal made out of wood and stone looked like a bull. And not only was Baal the god of rain, he was also the god of fire.

For three straight hours the prophets prayed and prayed that Baal would do what many had given him credit for doing, just not in the past three-and-a-half years. At the end of 3 hours, this is the report: **There was no response, no one answered.** Elijah couldn't help himself. He told them to pray louder and longer and got a little sarcastic: *maybe you're god is traveling, too busy, deep in thought or sleeping.* They began to dance around the altar and cut themselves hoping this would catch the attention of their god. At the end of an even longer prayer session, this is the report: **There was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.** 9 hours and nothing to show for it. Of course there's no answer. Baal is an idol.

The kind of worship the prophets of Baal offered their god is the same worship that takes place in every religion except for Christianity. Every other religion teaches that you must do something ... long prayers, loud chants, good deeds ... to attract God's attention.

We can't do anything that attracts God's attention. Well, at least not the kind of attention we want from him. Our sins do attract God's anger. What sets Christianity apart, is that Christianity tells us how God is working to get our attention. He was trying to get Ahab's attention and his people's attention through the drought so they would see that he was in charge of the rain, not Baal.

We know wood and stone objects can't answer, see, smell, hear or feel. We may not have images of wood, stone or metal, but we can still have divided loyalties. Martin Luther wrote: *"Anything in which we place our trust and hope becomes a god to us."* There are many things in the world today that tempt us to do just that. Money might make some of our dreams come true. Being a workaholic may allow us to get the career we crave. The other gods in our lives always demand something from us. They come at a price.

When it became obvious in **The Showdown on Mt. Carmel**, that the prophets of Baal had failed to get their god's attention, Elijah took his turn. After rebuilding a broken-down altar and arranging the firewood and the bull on the altar, Elijah then ordered that jar after jar of water be poured over everything on the altar. There was so much water, it filled the trench around the base of the altar. This was Elijah's way of showing what's about to happen is all God's doing. Elijah steps forward and prays: **"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."**

As soon as Elijah's prayer ascended heavenward fire from heaven consumed the bull and wood on the altar, the stones of the altar, the soil around the altar, and the water that filled the altar trench!

There was no doubt about the true God, and the people agreed: **"The LORD—he is God! The LORD—he is God."** This was the second miracle God worked that day. Hearts that weren't committed to him before the fire were now on fire as they confessed their faith in the true God. Soon after, God sent the rain as promised.

Let's talk about another event on another mountain God used to get our attention. We heard how the prophets of Baal cut themselves to get their god's attention. God the Father shed his Son's blood, to get your attention on Mt. Calvary. Jesus' death on the cross was the payment necessary to forgive your sins and his resurrection from the grave finished what was necessary for God to let us into heaven.

Very few days go by when we don't have a spiritual struggle or battle on our hands. They may not be as dramatic as **The Showdown on Mt. Carmel**, but they are just as real. And the victory we have in Jesus is just as real. For when we stand with the Lord, we will always stand victorious against every enemy of the Lord, every time!