

## **Worship**

# **Conformity, Compromise, and Crisis in Worship**

Lesson #8 for August 20, 2011

Scriptures: Genesis 6:5; Jeremiah 17:9; Deuteronomy 12:8; 13:18; 1 Kings 11:1-13; 18; Malachi 3:16-4:6.

1. What is evil? How does evil impact our worship? What do conformity, compromise, and crisis have to do with worship? As we look at society, in general, which direction is it headed? If we see the world becoming more and more corrupt and pervaded with evil entertainment and evil behavior, can we remain uncorrupted?
2. In Old Testament times, the biggest spiritual problem for the Israelites seemed to be Baal worship. What do we know about Baal worship? Read Hosea 4:11-14. Baal was a Canaanite storm-fertility cult god that was believed to be responsible for the fertility of animals and crops. Baal was a god that looked like a person standing with a spear in one hand and a club in the other.
3. Some scholars suggest that the Canaanites believed that the mythical Baal died every year when the rains stopped and then came back to life again when the rains started again the next rainy season. The word *Baal* means “lord,” “possessor,” or “husband.” Baal was a Semitic god.

The Canaanites believed that Baals dwelt in holy trees, springs, mountain summits, rocks, etc., and spoke of each of these local gods as the Baal, i.e., “lord,” of that particular locality. (*Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary* article on Baal)

4. In Canaanite mythology, Baal had a virgin sister Anath who was thought to be the ferocious goddess of bloodshed and war. Baal’s mortal enemy was Mot the god of drought and scorching heat. Thus, the Canaanites believed that Mot would kill Baal each year at the end of the rainy season. Then, Baal’s so-called virgin sister-goddess Anath would carry Baal’s dead body to the mountain of the gods where he would be raised back to life again at the beginning of the next rainy season. The claim was that Baal promoted fertility of crops, animals, and, no doubt, humans too. Thus, if one did not want to starve, especially in drought years, he needed to worship Baal. Israel seemed to be irresistibly attracted by those gods of the nations around them. (Numbers 25) Do we do anything like that? If we worship God, do we also carry a rabbit’s foot for luck? Is it wrong to carry insurance if you believe God can and will protect you? Auto insurance? Homeowner’s insurance? Health insurance? Life insurance?
5. Closely associated with Baal was Ashtoreth, a Semitic fertility goddess worshiped throughout much of the Ancient Near East.

She was the patron goddess of sexual love, maternity, and fertility. Images dedicated to her show her as a nude woman with the sex features grossly accentuated. Many figurines of the goddess have been found in Palestinian excavations, suggesting that they must have been carried by many people, presumably women, as charms or amulets. Prostitution as a religious rite was widely practiced in the service of this goddess. (*Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary* article on Ashtoreth)

She is the same goddess that was known in Akkadian (Iraq) as Ishtar. This is the goddess

whose name has come into English as Esther and Easter. Why do we think of bunnies and Easter eggs on that weekend. Those are fertility cult symbols.

6. Another female goddess Asherah was also a counterpart for Baal. She was regarded as the goddess of vegetation.
7. The high places or groves were often dedicated to Asherah, but Baal was worshiped there as well. Beginning with the experience at Baal-Peor (Numbers 25) just before they entered the land of Canaan, the Hebrew people seemed to be irresistibly attracted to those fertility cult gods. It was the most attractive form of entertainment available. There were both male and female prostitutes in those temples. There was music and dancing and plenty of alcohol.
8. But, how much different are we today? It is possible to bring the grossest immorality into our homes through the Internet or television. The Bible tells us about Lucifer and Adam and Eve—all of whom began their existence in a perfect environment and all of whom fell into sin. This far from the tree of life, what are our chances of resisting the tide of evil? Read Deuteronomy 12:8. This is one of several verses suggesting that the ancient Israelites often did whatever they felt like doing. Compare Judges 17:6; 21:25. Isn't that what Lucifer did in heaven? He wanted to do things his own way—his own selfish way. Could we be truly happy doing things God's way?
9. Is it unreasonable for God to expect us to strictly obey His commands? Are we tempted to worship other gods in our day? Consider the following words from Ellen White:

Multitudes have a wrong conception of God and His attributes, and are as truly serving a false god as were the worshipers of Baal. *Review and Herald*, November 6, 1913 par 1; *Prophets and Kings* 177

If you are worshiping exactly the same God that you were worshiping one year ago, you are worshiping a static god—an idol! Each one of us worships the “god” that he has come to picture in his own mind.

10. Do we need to challenge ourselves and others with Elijah's challenge: “How much longer will it take you to make up your minds? If the Lord is God, worship him; but if Baal is God, worship him!” (1 Kings 18:21, *GNB*)
11. Solomon is an example of someone who started out with a marvelous connection with God and had almost every advantage one could possibly imagine. With all of his wisdom, couldn't he see where things were going? But, it seems that wives and money spoiled him, and his downward course is proverbial.
12. Why do people sin? Where do those evil whims come from? It is pretty clear that Solomon's downfall took years. There was a gradual, slight change in attitudes; and eventually, we read the words of 1 Kings 11:1-13. Solomon actually came to the place where he sacrificed his own children to Molech. (1 Kings 11:7)
13. Satan is an absolute master at the art of compromise. He will find every possible excuse to make sin seem okay. None of us needs to be convinced that we are all sinners. (1 Kings 8:46; 2 Chronicles 6:36; Ecclesiastes 7:20; Psalms 143:2; Proverbs 20:9; Romans 3:19-23) But, so often we seem to believe there is nothing we can do about it. Is there? When we come to worship God, are we truly sincere? Is our worship of God confined to the church service and the Sabbath school class? What happens during the rest of the week? What is it that God really wants? (Micah 6:6-8)

14. Look at the story of Jeroboam in 1 Kings 11-13. Jeroboam was threatened by the possibility that some of his people might continue to worship in Jerusalem. So, he selfishly constructed temples in his territory in Bethel and Dan with golden bull calves representing the fertility gods. In many ways this new worship resembled the worship of *Yahweh*. Read 1 Kings 12:25-33. Notice the ways in which this new worship violated God's commands. They:

1. Offered sacrifices and ordained non-Levite priests (vss. 31-33).
2. Made calves of gold to worship (vs. 28).
3. Made Bethel a place of worship (vs. 29).
4. Made Dan a place of worship (vs. 29).
5. Instituted a rival feast to the Feast of Tabernacles (vs. 32).
6. Built shrines on high places (vs. 31).

*(Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide, for Tuesday, August 16)*

15. It is obvious to everyone who thinks about it that counterfeit money is most dangerous when it closely resembles the true. Jeroboam wanted his false worship to be as much like what happened in Jerusalem as possible. He even claimed that the golden bull calves were the gods that had brought them out of Egypt! (1 Kings 12:28) Where did he get that idea? (Exodus 32:4)
16. Human beings, in fact, all created beings are incredibly skilled at deceiving themselves. Think of the case of Lucifer-Satan. Even though he knows the full history of the great controversy and understands all that Christ accomplished by His life and death on this earth, he is still planning to try to conquer the New Jerusalem and get access to the tree of life at the end of the millennium! (Jeremiah 17:9)
17. How often do we—like Jeroboam—believe that we can make our own rules?
18. Look once again at the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal. (1 Kings 17-19) What can we learn about the worship of Baal from the behavior of those prophets on the top of Mount Carmel? They were leaping, crying, prophesying—probably accompanied by music—cutting themselves, and spilling their own blood as part of their worship. No doubt, there was a great deal of emotion. Didn't those prophets of Baal believe in what they were doing? Didn't they have a passion for their faith and their god, even a zeal that suggested the sincerity of their beliefs? Can we fault them?
19. Are there any Christian groups worshiping like that in our day? Of course, we want to avoid dull, monotonous, funeral-like church services. But, we also should certainly avoid Baal-like services. Look at the quiet and dignified way in which Elijah approached the worship of *Yahweh*. (1 Kings 18:30-39) How do we worship God today? Is it dignified, respectful, and impressive to everyone looking on? What happens if a visitor comes to your church? Are they attracted by what they see?
20. The people were impressed by that show of miracle and power. There must have been a period of revival following the experience on Mount Carmel. Unfortunately, it apparently did not last very long. But, Elijah went down in Israelite history and in Christian history as a mighty warrior for God.
21. Read Malachi 3:16-4:6. What is your understanding of the Elijah message? Elijah's message was a message of decision. You must make a choice! John the Baptist appeared, and Jesus referred to him as an Elijah in Matthew 17:11-13. Will there be

another Elijah in our day? What would happen if someone stood up as Elijah did and challenged the way Christians worship? Would it/will it happen on the Internet? Or, on television? Or, both? Could the modern Elijah be not just an individual but a whole group of people?

22. Are we correctly understanding and representing the character of God? Or, as *Prophets and Kings* suggests, are we no better than the ancient worshipers of Baal?
23. From Elijah's experience during those days of discouragement and apparent defeat there are many lessons to be drawn, lessons invaluable to the servants of God in this age, marked as it is by general departure from right. **The apostasy prevailing today is similar to that which in the prophet's day overspread Israel. In the exaltation of the human above the divine, in the praise of popular leaders, in the worship of mammon, and in the placing of the teachings of science above the truths of revelation, multitudes today are following after Baal.** Doubt and unbelief are exercising their baleful influence over mind and heart, and many are substituting for the oracles of God the theories of men. It is publicly taught that we have reached a time when human reason should be exalted above the teachings of the Word. The law of God, the divine standard of righteousness, is declared to be of no effect. The enemy of all truth [171] is working with deceptive power to cause men and women to place human institutions where God should be, and to forget that which was ordained for the happiness and salvation of mankind.—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 170.2.
24. God has many thousands who have not bowed the knee to Baal, many who long to understand more fully in regard to Christ and the law, many who are hoping against hope that Jesus will come soon to end the reign of sin and death. And there are many who have been worshiping Baal ignorantly, but with whom the Spirit of God is still striving.—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 171.1.
25. How well are we doing in preventing our young people from worshiping at the altar of the "god of entertainment." Do we worship Hollywood? Can our church services, Sabbath schools, and young people's meetings compete with Hollywood's entertainment? Baal worship was highly entertaining in addition to being visually explicit and highly addictive. (Hosea 4:11-14) God Himself was not able to pull Israel away from that evil.
26. No doubt, many of the Israelites believed that they could participate in the Baal-Ashtoreth services and still worship *Yahweh* at His services. What does that tell us about compromise?
27. Can we as parents and church leaders find ways to challenge our young people to a better understanding of the Bible and its stories so they will be able to avoid our modern "Baal worship"? We need to teach our young people to study the Bible in useful and interesting ways.

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Last Modified: July 8, 2011

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