

Conformity, Compromise, and Crisis in Worship



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 6:5, Jer. 17:5, Deut. 12:8, 13:18, 1 Kings 11:1–13, 1 Kings 18, Mal. 3:16–4:6.*

Memory Text: “But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil” (*Hebrews 5:14, NKJV*).

In 1954, novelist William Golding wrote *The Lord of the Flies*, a fictional account of a group of English children stranded on a deserted island after a plane crash. Golding used this story as a modern parable about the inherent evil in human beings. What made the narrative so powerful was that he used children, supposedly the essence of innocence, to make his point about just how corrupt, evil, egotistical, and violent humanity is at heart.

Christians, of course, would say, So tell us something we don't know. Human evil and sinfulness are part and parcel of the Christian message. The Bible is unambiguous on that point. But while the idea that evil is bad is quite uncontroversial, what is not so uncontroversial is the question, “What is evil?” Not everyone agrees on that.

This week, as we continue to look at the question of worship, we are going to look at a certain kind of evil that has brought devastating consequences to God's people and to humanity in general. We can view what this evil did to ancient Israel, but we need to ask the important question about just how susceptible we are to it ourselves.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 20.*

In Different Eyes

Read the following texts. What is the one point that they all have in common? Why is it so important for us to always keep this in mind? *Gen. 6:5, Jer. 17:5, John 2:25, Rom. 3:9–12*. What kind of things exist in your culture that could cause you to forget this fundamental truth?

All through Scripture, we are warned: the human heart is deceitful; people are corrupt; do not look to others; no one is immune from evil. With the exception, of course, of Jesus, who never sinned, few characters whom the Bible pays much attention to are pictured as morally unscathed.

One does not need Scripture, either, to see just how corrupt humanity is. History, newspapers, the daily news, indeed, even our homes, and at times our own hearts should suffice to show us the morally decrepit state of humanity. What should be scary for us to remember is that if a perfect being, as Lucifer originally was, could choose evil, even in the perfect environment of heaven; if other perfect beings, as Adam and Eve were, could choose evil, even in the perfect environment of Eden—then what about ourselves? We are born with corrupt and fallen natures, and we carry those natures with us in a fallen and corrupted environment. No wonder evil comes so easily, so naturally, to us. It is wired in our genes.

We have to be careful, however, in our understanding of what evil is. Some things are so manifestly evil, so manifestly bad, that anyone—whether a believer in God or not—would deem them as evil. Evil, however, can be much more subtle. Things that the world or our culture and our society might view as fine, as normal, as just the way things are, could be precisely what the Bible condemns as wrong, sinful, even evil.

Contrast Deuteronomy 12:8 with Deuteronomy 13:18. What crucial difference is being made here? Why is this difference so important for us to understand?

What are some things your own society does not condemn that are clearly condemned by the Bible? More important, how much has society impacted you and the church in regard to these issues? That is, what things clearly condemned in Scripture might the church take too lightly, directly as a result of the influence of society? Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.

The Art (and Evil) of Compromise

Politics, it has been said, is the art of compromise. The word *art* in this instance is very important, for compromise can be a very subtle, nuanced action on the part of the person doing it. A good politician is someone who can get the people to concede points, to compromise positions, and often not even realize that they are doing just that. In this context, then, there is no doubt that Satan is the best politician around.

All through the Bible, we find examples of this evil—the evil of compromise. Not that every compromise is evil, of course not. In a certain sense, life itself is a kind of compromise. Instead, compromise becomes another manifestation of human evil and corruption when those who should know better fall away from the truth that God has given them.

For example . . .

Read 1 Kings 11:1–13. What happened here? How did this happen? What was it about Solomon that made his actions here so bad? How did this apostasy impact worship, faith, and the whole religious system of Israel? Also, and most important, what lessons can we draw for ourselves today from this episode and the whole question of compromise?

Perhaps the most revealing phrase in this block of texts is the statement that it was “when Solomon was old, that his wives turned away his heart after other gods” (*1 Kings 11:4*). In other words, it did not happen overnight. The faithful, dedicated, and godly man revealed in the Bible did not suddenly, out of nowhere, turn away from the Lord. Instead, the change happened bit by bit, over time; a little compromise here, a little there, each step taking him further and further from where he should have been until he was doing something that the Solomon of his earlier years no doubt would have been horrified to see.

Look, too, at what his compromises did to worship in Israel. They had a negative impact that would last for generations and beyond.

Every now and then you hear stories about people who left the Seventh-day Adventist Church years ago, severed ties with it completely, and then came back, only to be shocked by some of the changes that they saw in areas such as theology, standards, and worship. Though that might not be bad in every case, it might very well be bad in some. How can we know the difference?

Counterfeit Worship

In 1 Kings 11, Ahijah came to Jeroboam, Solomon's servant, with a message that he would become king over ten of the tribes of Israel (vss. 26–31). But the prophet made it clear to Jeroboam that his success would depend on his faithfulness to God's commandments (vss. 37, 38).

Unfortunately, Jeroboam listened only to what he wanted to hear and he forgot the conditions of success. He was all too ready to lead in the revolt (1 Kings 12:16–20), and almost immediately he took steps to prevent his subjects from returning to Jerusalem to worship.

Read 1 Kings 12:25–27. What does this tell us about the power and influence worship can have on the human mind?

Look at the account of Jeroboam's setting up a counterfeit religion that would eventually separate Israel from the worship of the true God in Jerusalem (1 Kings 12:25–33). Notice how this new worship resembled the worship of the true God and at the same time contradicted most of the clear counsel of Yahweh:

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).

Counterfeit money cannot deceive unless it looks like the real thing. In the same way, Jeroboam knew that his false worship must have many of the same elements of worship that the people were accustomed to, though he eventually declared, pointing to the golden calves, “ ‘Here are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt!’ ” (vs. 28, *NKJV*).

It is so easy from our perspective today to look back and wonder, *How could they have fallen into such blatant apostasy?* On the other hand, humans have an incredible capacity to deceive themselves (it is all part of our fallen and corrupted nature), and we deceive ourselves if we think we are not just as vulnerable as they were back then. Look at yourself, your lifestyle, your mode of worship. What might you be doing that is, in principle, not a whole lot different from what happened here? How willing are you to make changes, if need be?

Elijah and the Prophets of Baal

Things went from bad to worse in the north, especially when it came to the question of worship under the reign of Ahab and Jezebel. It is against this background (*see 1 Kings 17–19*) that we come to the famous story of the confrontation between Elijah and the prophets of Baal. Here, we can see just how far compromise had taken them.

Read 1 Kings 18. Notice the difference in “worship styles” between Elijah and these false prophets. What lessons might we take away that could be relevant for ourselves today and the whole question of worship?

It must have been quite a scene: these prophets of Baal wailing, leaping, crying (who knows what kind of music might have accompanied their ritual), prophesying, even cutting themselves and spilling their own blood as part of their worship of Baal. These were certainly hyped-up people, full of zeal and passion for their faith and their god, a zeal and passion that testified to the sincerity of their beliefs.

Today, too, some Christian worship services could remind one at times of something like this: a lot of emotion, a lot of hype, and a lot of noise. Though we want to avoid worship services that remind people of funerals, we also do not want worship services that remind them of priests of Baal at Mount Carmel either. Some seem to think the more sounds they make, the louder the music, the more emotional excitement generated, the better the worship service. Yet, that is not what worship is about.

Perhaps one of the most important lessons from this account is that all worship must be focused on the true Lord, on the Creator. True worship needs to be grounded in the Word of God, pointing the worshiper to the Lord and His activity in history. In contrast to all the bedlam of the priests of Baal, Elijah prayed a simple prayer, “ ‘Hear me, O Lord, hear me, that this people may know that thou art the Lord God’ ” (*vs. 37*). This was no Elijah show. It was about worshiping the true God in contrast to any and all false ones, regardless of the form they take.

Our worship services should always present worshipers with the question that Elijah asked Israel: “ ‘How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him’ ” (*vs. 21, NIV*). Our worship experience should force us to look inside our hearts and see where our true love and devotion are: on the Lord or on anything else.

The Elijah Message

“Then shall ye return, and discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serveth God and him that serveth him not” (Mal. 3:18).

For all the drama, Elijah’s confrontation with the 150 prophets on Mount Carmel boiled down to one question for the people gathered there with them: “How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him” (*1 Kings 18:21, NIV*). However specific the context was, it really asks a question that each individual must answer for herself or himself: Do we worship and follow the true God or not? We might be able to “waver between two opinions” for only so long, but sooner or later we all come down on one side or another.

At the end of time, when the great controversy is over, all humanity will have been forever divided into one of two classes: “between him that serveth God and him that serveth him not” (*Mal. 3:18*). As Jesus so bluntly and clearly said it: “ ‘He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth’ ” (*Luke 11:23*). How much plainer could He be?

With the story of Elijah on Mount Carmel in the background, read **Malachi 3:16–4:6**. What is the Lord telling us here? How do we understand this “Elijah message” in the context of last-day events and the whole question of worship? See *Rev. 14:7–12*.

Just as John the Baptist, whom Jesus referred to as “Elijah” (*Matt. 17:11–13*), had a message of reformation, repentance, and obedience, Malachi makes it clear (*Mal. 4:1, 5*) that “Elijah” will again come just before the end of sin and evil. The book of Revelation proclaims to the last generation a message of warning, a call to obedience, and a call to worship the Creator God. As with Elijah on Carmel, people will in a very dramatic way have to make the most important choice of their lives, a choice that is filled with truly eternal consequences. The good news is that even before these final events unfold we can make daily choices that will greatly prepare us to be on the Lord’s side when the climactic battle between good and evil unfolds among the nations.

Think about the daily choices you’ve made (perhaps in the past few days), even on the smallest of things (see *Luke 16:10*). Judging by those choices (and the compromises that might be manifest in those choices), which of the two sides are you choosing? Dwell on the implications of your answer.

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “Jeroboam,” pp. 99–108; “National Apostasy,” pp. 114–116; “Elijah the Tishbite,” pp. 119–128; “The Voice of Stern Rebuke,” pp. 139–142; “Carmel,” pp. 143–154, in *Prophets and Kings*.

“The apostasy prevailing today is similar to that which in the prophet’s day overspread Israel.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 170.

“God has many thousands [in this age] who have not bowed the knee to Baal . . . [and] many who have been worshiping Baal ignorantly, but with whom the Spirit of God is still striving.”—p. 171.

A. W. Tozer, a well-known preacher of the twentieth century (he died in 1963), often preached against the worship of the “god of entertainment,” suggesting that no matter how hard they try, churches cannot compete with the world’s idea of entertainment. It is the cross of Jesus Christ, says Tozer, not entertainment, that will win souls to Christ. See A. W. Tozer, *Tozer On Worship and Entertainment*, compiled by James L. Snyder (Camp Hill, Penn.: Wing Spread Publishers, 1997), pp. 108, 109.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In class, discuss your answer to Sunday’s question. How much has your society impacted the church’s views on the moral issues of the day?
- 2 The descriptions of Baal worship hint that it was highly entertaining, which could help explain its popularity. How can we restore the sense of awe and reverence for God in our worship rather than encouraging expectations of being entertained?
- 3 How has the Seventh-day Adventist Church changed in the past twenty years? In your opinion, in what ways has it changed for the better, and in what ways not? If time should last, what do you think the Seventh-day Adventist Church will be like in twenty years? Try to imagine what your local church’s worship service will be like.
- 4 Think about how drastically the nation of Israel fell into apostasy. Again, none of this happened overnight. The devil, if nothing else, is patient. How can we protect ourselves individually, and the church as a whole, from slowly but surely going the same way as Israel?

The Sermon That Changed a Family

Maria, ten, lives in Quito, Ecuador. When she was seven years old, her mother started attending the Seventh-day Adventist Church and took Maria and her brother with her. Maria loved church!

In South America, Adventist children are encouraged to preach, and one day a woman asked Maria to preach in church. Maria had seen other children preach and agreed to try.

Maria worked hard to memorize the short sermon the woman gave her. She practiced it while standing in front of a mirror and then for her mother. On Sabbath she was nervous, but she felt ready.

Before church Maria and her mother asked God to use Maria's words to lead people to Jesus. Maria had no idea that God had something special in store for her.

Maria's father, who wasn't a Christian and didn't go to church, sometimes accused her mother of going to church to meet someone. On this Sabbath he decided to check to be sure that his wife really was in church. He stepped into the church just as Maria stood to preach.

Maria was startled when she saw her father walk in. She prayed silently that God would speak to him through her words. As she began to speak, she felt God guiding her words.

At the end of her sermon, Maria invited those who wanted to follow Jesus to come to the altar. Thirty people came forward, including her father. With tears in his eyes, he whispered to Maria, "Thank you so much. Please pray that God will change my heart and my mind."

As Maria prayed for those who had come forward, she was praying especially for her father. After church, the family returned home together and had a wonderful Sabbath.

Maria saw changes in her father. He gave up smoking and drinking, and sometimes he went to church with the family. But he loved soccer and didn't want to miss a chance to play in order to go to church. Then one day he hurt his foot and couldn't play. He told Maria, "I guess my sore foot is God's way of telling me to go to church."

Father began attending church every Sabbath. A few months later, he asked to be baptized. Her mother hadn't been baptized yet either, so Maria's parents were baptized together. The next week Maria and her brother were baptized.

"I'm so glad that God used me to bring my family together to worship," Maria says. "We must all do whatever God asks us to share His love with others. You never know who may come to Jesus because of something you say or do."