

**The two forces within us contesting
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greatest influence over us**



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It is something we all acknowledge to be true that **there are two forces within us contesting for our support and affirmation and which are focused on having the greatest influence over us.** We are aware of these two forces at work in our lives every day. One force which seeks to draw us one way and another force which strives to draw us in the opposite direction.

If, for example, rainy weather spoils an outdoor event you had planned and were greatly looking forward to, you can either graciously accept the situation and make the best of it, or you can complain bitterly, tell yourself how unfair life is, and curse your “luck” (whatever luck is).



And to another example: if some kindness or self-sacrifice is mistakenly attributed to you, there is one force, or one part of you, which tells you to stay silent and to enjoy the adulation, while the other force is urging you to be honest and to make it clear that ,No, it wasn't you who said or did this things which is being applauded.



As we read in the Word, In ancient Israel, especially – but not only - in the time of the prophets, there were two forces powerfully at work amongst the people. **One was the call to obedience to God and the other was the call to disobedience and self-gratification.** In fact, we can go right back to the story of the Garden of Eden. There were two forces, or influences at work, **one was the voice of God and the other the voice of the serpent who contested what God had said.** And so it went on.



We know that Moses at times despaired about the people he had been called upon by God to lead out of slavery in Egypt to a better life in the Promised Land. At what was one of his most discouraging and darkest times he prayed to God, "Why have you afflicted your servant? And why have I not found favour in Your sight, that you have laid all the burden of these people on me?.....If you treat me like this, please kill me here and now – if I have found favour in your sight – and do not let me see my wretchedness." (Numbers 11:11 & 15)

And then there was Joshua, who succeeded him as leader, faced with the same ambivalence and calling on the people to "choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. " And he went on to declare, "But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." (Joshua 24:15).

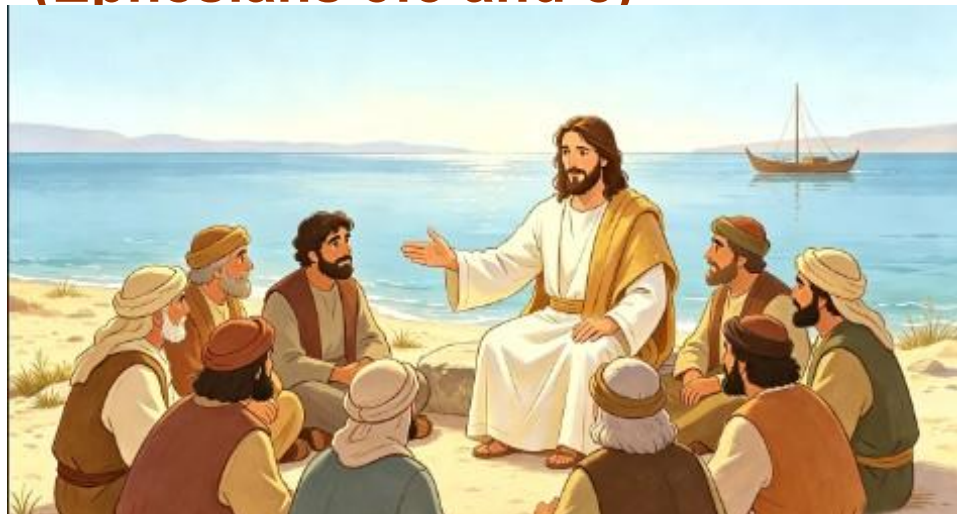


Later, and in the time of the prophet Elijah, the forces against God (Jehovah) amongst the people of ancient Israel centred around a widely followed and widely worshipped “god”, called Baal, whose influence was considerable throughout the gentile nations of that time. Baal was looked upon by gentiles (pagans) as the god of fertility, weather, seasons, warfare and sailors. And not only was there widespread fear to offend him, but he was believed to be totally permissive about sexual morality. This being so, we can see why the ancient people of Israel were lured into worshiping him. Baal was a total fake. But people, even to this day, **believe in fakes if they are convinced they can bring them wealth and sensual happiness.**



In the Writings, or Heavenly Doctrines, we read about Baal, that this false god signifies “the adulteration of good” and the things of the natural (old) man which are loved.” (Apocalypse Explained” 655:7 and 730:40)

As for what are the things of the natural or “old” man, the apostle Paul made it clear when he taught that we must “put to death your members which are on the earth, fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry”. And he continued, “you must put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth, and lying.” (Ephesians 3:5 and 8)



It was Elijah's great mission to challenge the influence of this false god, Baal, among the people. And it was hugely challenging for him to do so. The king of Israel at the time, Ahab, had married a pagan princess who became Queen Jezebel, and she, now in a powerful position to do so, vigorously promoted the worship of this false god. Her husband, the king, quickly acceded to her wishes and built a temple for this false god, setting up a huge wooden image of it before which the people were pressured to worship. (Kings 16:33)



A close-up photograph of a person's hand, wearing a light-colored suit sleeve, resting on a dark, thick book, likely a Bible, which is placed on a wooden surface. The background is a solid brown color.

And so began, in deadly earnest, the struggle between these two opposite influences on the people, one appealing to people's love of self and self gratification and the other appealing to the worship of the one God, Jehovah, and a life according to His Commandments. Being in natural, external, states, as so many of the people were, it is not too difficult for us to imagine the attraction to the worship of the god, Baal, who condoned licentiousness and self-serving behaviour. And this is not too different to how it is today, and how it is with our very own unregenerate states. A pastor of the New Church, whom I knew well before he crossed over into the spiritual world, once commented that **what appeals to the natural our "old" man in us is always going to be popular.**

Mercifully the appeal of self-gratification and worldliness is not the only influence impacting on us, attractive as it is. **There is another powerful influence**

This is beautifully and reassuringly highlighted and brought home to us in the following teaching of the Writings: “Out of Divine love, or mercy, the Lord wills to have everyone near to Himself, so that they do not stand outside, that is, in the first heaven. His will is that they should dwell in the third heaven, and if possible not merely with Him but abiding in Him. Such is the nature of Divine or the Lord’s love.” (“Arcana Caelestia” 1799)

Again, “The Lord wishes to draw everyone everywhere all the way to Himself and by doing so to bless us in every way with glory and happiness.” (Arcana Caelestia 6645:2).

And from “True Christian Religion” we read:

“There is in fact a sphere continuously radiated by the Lord, which raises all to heaven; this fills the whole of both the spiritual and natural worlds. It is like a strong current in the ocean, which invisibly draws a ship along.” (paragraph 652:3)



This last sentence is worth repeating: “It is like a strong current in the ocean, which invisibly draws a ship along”. But **we need to row our little boat to exactly where that current is strongest** if we are going to be caught up in its strength and energy.

How important it is to remember such teaching when the influences which oppose such assurances seem to be stronger. They are not, but they can often seem to be. It can seem easier to give in to what is self-satisfying; to what is judgemental and contemptuous of others; to want our opinion about things to prevail and to be dismissive of the opinions of others; to justify our unpleasantness or thoughtless and hurtful comments; and to focus on accumulating material goods, forgetting what our Lord taught, that our life does not consist in the abundance of things we possess.” (Luke 12:15)



We are involved continuously in the contest between these two influences. And it is why we were born into this world first, and not directly into heaven where we would have been robots if that had happened, **to give us endless opportunities to choose between them.** Such is the teaching we are given, “People are born into in this world for the purpose that they may be introduced through the services they render here into the things of heaven.” (“Arcana Caelestia” 5006:4).

We are introduced to such things here, we see wonderful examples of such things in the lives of others, we are inspired by the thought of them from our reading the Word and being taught about them; but we are also aware of **the resistance within ourselves to actually putting “the things of heaven” into practice in our daily lives.** This is the dilemma we are in. Two forces, two influences, tugging at us from



As it was all these centuries ago in ancient Israel, so it is - emphatically - today.

What Elijah could see is that **the people were wanting the best of both worlds**. Have you ever identified in yourself that you want the best of both worlds? For example: You want your own way and yet you know the Lord's way is better. You want what a worldly life can bring you but at the same time you don't want to totally disconnect from God. You put yourself first even though the Lord calls on us to put usefulness and service to others first. Do you, as Elijah described his people as doing, "limp (or hobble) between two opinions"? (1 Kings 18:21). "But the people answer him not a word". They tried not to commit themselves. They were too devoted to wanting the best of both worlds.



And so he called them to witness a great contest, between the false god, Baal, and the Lord. He called on them to come to him on Mount Carmel, a name which means “a place of spaciousness”, “a garden”, and “a fruitful place”. In the spiritual meaning this highlights the gift the Lord gives us of freewill.

Freewill gives us the space to make choices. Freewill holds within it the possibility of growth (a garden) and fruitfulness. Every now and again we all need reminding that we do have freewill; that we can make even difficult choices; even choices that we may not like making and have to compel ourselves to make. Who hasn't justified their lazy or poor behaviour, telling themselves - or others - “I was born like that”, or, “It's just who I am”, or , “I can't help it”.

Yes, sometimes we need to be reminded that we emphatically do have freewill. Sometimes we need to be reminded that it is taking the easy way out; the natural, unregenerate way to fall back on such excuses and justifications.



So, what did Elijah do?

He invited the followers of Baal to build a fire, in preparation to make a sacrifice. Subsequently, but not at the same time, he would make another fire on which he would make a sacrifice. “Then Elijah said to the people, ‘I alone am left a prophets of the Lord; but Baal’s prophets are four hundred and fifty men. Therefore let us give two bulls; and let them choose one bull for themselves, cut it in pieces, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire under it; and I will prepare the other bull, and lay it on the wood, and put no fire under it. Then you call on the name of your gods, and I will call on the name of the Lord, and the God who answers by fire, he is God.’ so all the people answered and said, ‘It is well spoken’.”
(1 Kings 18:22-24).



What follows is unforgettable, how the followers of Baal danced and jumped around and even cut themselves in their effort to summon their false god from whom there was no response, not even though this went on all day. Then, at the time of the evening sacrifice Elijah built an altar of twelve stones, laid the sacrifice on it, dug a trench around it , requested that both the altar and the trench around it be drenched twice with water, prayed, and “ 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.”

(1 Kings 18:38)



The ambivalence in people's minds could not have been more spectacularly answered and settled as to who the real God is. "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 18:39)

The sacrifice of our old selves is what is meant by the sacrifice of the bull. To this needs to be added **our heart-felt affirmation of the Lord and of all that He teaches and urges on us** and this is meant by the altar of stones. But still more is required. The altar and the sacrifice need to be covered over by our recalling **the central significance of the ten Commandments**, meant by pouring the water on the sacrifice and in the trench.

Together with prayer, this is what will - impressively and without doubt - invite rich and lasting blessing from the Lord



And sometimes, because of our recalcitrance, this needs to be demonstrated to us. The prodigal son, who we read about in the Gospel of Luke Chapter 15, comes to mind. As we know, he thought that a worldly and self-indulgent life would bring him happiness and wealth. But then, as he fed the pigs, and was so hungry he would have eaten what he was giving the pigs to eat, he came to his senses. “Came to his senses”, in New Testament Greek, means **“came back into his right mind”**. He had been “insane”, now he recovered his sanity. And so he sacrificed the carnal life he had been living, realizing that the rules at his father’s house needed to be obeyed, after all, if he was to find happiness and spiritual fulfillment.



Just as Elijah's role was to wake his people up from the spiritual sleep they had been in and to demonstrate to them that the Lord is the true God, so, too, and from time to time, **we need to be awakened from our spiritual sleep and reminded that there is another, better, more noble, more fulfilling way of life.** It is a life we can choose to follow and it holds the promise of the Lord's blessing flowing down from Him into it. Who of us doesn't wish for this? Who of us doesn't wish for this for the world we live in? It is true, we can't change the world, but we can choose to change ourselves and by so doing contribute to making the world around us a better place.

Let's just pause a moment and remember how such reminders can come to us. As we saw just a minute or two ago, these reminders can come through seeing the example of others, from reading the Word and from being taught from the Word. It can come from an unwanted, unhappy experience or a



These reminders can also come from angels stimulating, and bringing back into our mind, something special said to us when we were a child or even when we are adult, but have temporarily forgotten. Maybe it can come from seeing something magnificent in creation around us causing us to be moved at the thought of our littleness and that Someone bigger than ourselves must be behind and within it all.

Such a feeling is captured by the writer of Psalm 8: “When I consider Your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained, What is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that you visit him?” (verses 3 & 4)



On first hearing this it may not seem right to put God to the test, as Elijah did. **But we are invited to do so**, in our doubting, unsure, ambivalent, sceptical times, especially. “Test me now in this”, says the Lord of hosts, and see if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you such a blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it.” (Malachi 3:20)

Yes, we can put God to the test and witness for ourselves, and rejoice in, what He shows us and does for us, filling our life with His life of Love and Wisdom.

“Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt sacrifice.”

AMEN



Readings :

1. Joshua 1: verses 1-9

2. Luke Chapter 9; verses 23 to 26 and
John Chapter 17: 24 to 26

3. From “Heaven and Hell” paragraph 546

“Enlightened people can see that good and evil are two opposite things, as opposite as heaven and hell, and that everything good is from heaven and everything evil is from hell. Further, since the Lord’s divine nature constitutes heaven, nothing flows into us from the Lord but what is good, and nothing from hell but what is evil. **So the Lord is constantly leading us out of evil and toward good**, while hell is constantly leading us into evil. Unless we were in between, we would have neither thought or intention, much less any freedom of choice. We have all these gifts because of the balance between good and evil.”



THE END

