September 13, 2026
1 Kings 17

An article was recently published by *Bulwark* entitled “The Decline and Fall of Christianity in America.” The title is self-explanatory, but what fascinated me about the article is that it says several times that “religion is becoming obsolete." Less and less people are attending churches. Does that mean that, however, that people are less *religious*? Actually, no. The statistics show that, yes, Americans are less inclined to go to church, but they are still deeply, profoundly, hopelessly *religious*- but the religions look a little different, and the worship is a bit more subtle… sometimes. Sure, less people go to church, but they faithfully listen to astrological reports, visit psychics and mediums, and hang on every word of their chosen spiritual coach, professor, expert, or whoever can give them the tools necessary for empowering themselves, harnessing the correct energies, manifesting desired results from the universe, and so on. Sometimes, it doesn’t even have to be *that* spiritual. The new religions that give purpose, inner peace, identity, higher meaning can be anything- money, success, beauty, pleasure, experiences, travelling, even country music. Consider the following:

When Hank brings the sermon and Cash leads the choir. It gets my cold, cold heart burnin' hotter than a ring of fire. When this wonderful world gets heavy and I need to find my escape I just keep the wheels rollin', radio scrollin', 'til my sins wash away. Can I get a hallelujah? Can I get an amen? Feels like the Holy Ghost runnin' through ya. When I play the Highway FM I find my soul revival. Singin' every single verse. ***Yeah, I guess that's my church***

I know a lot of you listen to Country, so you know this song. You can’t accuse me of exaggerating- she said it! Country music is not just something she likes. It’s her *religion!* So no. We are not becoming less religious. What a crazy time to live! Maybe, but it’s not unique. We might call our spiritual climate “Pluralism,”- there’s a plurality of spiritual claims, religious ideas, teachings about God, meaning, humanity, all competing for your belief, time, energy, and money. Well, this was also true in Israel in the 800’s BC. Up to this point, most people at least gave lip service to the God of Israel, and if they worshiped other gods, they probably kept it secret. But now, King Ahab had married a Sidonian princess named Jezebel, and she institutionalized the Canaanite god Baal and had hundreds of Baal prophets and priests throughout Israel on the government payroll teaching everyone that if they wanted to make sure they would have rain, crops, prosperity, they needed to worship Baal, not the Lord, the old, outdated God of their fathers. So, people in this time had to deal with competing spiritual claims. Do we follow the Lord, or Baal? How does God respond when his people are being led astray? He sends a prophet named Elijah, and God forces Elijah, a widow, all of Israel, and us, to ask a question. The question is not “Do you have a god?” The question is: **Does Your God Live?** Is he real, is he a living God, or a figment of your imagination? And we see in this chapter that the living God, **1. He’s not Tame, 2. But He is Good.**

1. He’s Not Tame. We don’t hear much about Elijah’s background. It’s almost like he comes out of nowhere and he announces that there will be neither dew nor rain until he says so. Why does God do that? Because Baal is a storm god associated with rain, crops, fertility, wealth, and was

the one responsible for sending rain, according to his priests. So, what is God going to do to prove that that's not the case- he's turning the water off. No rain- to prove that Baal is nothing but an idol. And you must understand: this would *devastate* Israel. There are not many natural rivers or springs in Israel, and they heavily depend on the rainy seasons to make their grain, barley, olives, and grape vines grow. If they didn't get enough rain, they would starve. This was a devastating mercy- God is going to teach them a brutal lesson: there is only one God, and it's not Baal. But this isn't just affecting the people who are going after idols, but the believers, including Elijah! Well, God is going to take care of him. How? Not in the way that he would expect. He has to go out in the desert, probably to protect him from all the people that assumed that the drought was his fault. And he drinks from a brook in the desert. Ravens, unclean animals that Elijah would normally never want to touch, are going to bring just enough food per day. It's not comfortable. Elijah would have never chosen this, until the brook dried up and he found out where God was sending him next… Zeraphath. Zeraphath is up north near Tyre and Sidon- which is the heart of Baal country. Those people are pagans! It's their pagan idolatry that got Israel into this mess in the first place! Also, he has to go to a woman, a widow- someone who is absolutely impoverished. Couldn't God have sent Elijah to a wealthy family in Israel? Perhaps, and Elijah would have desired and expected that, but it is not God's habit to do things the way we would expect or prefer. And when he gets there- notice that she's gathering sticks. She's *really* poor. So poor that she plans on eating one final meal and letting herself and her little boy die. They are *starving*. And then this weirdo shows up and asks for bread, and then has the nerve to say, "Before you eat, give me some bread first, and you'll see that the flour and oil won't run out." I think she and anyone else would say, "No, God can prove it to me first, then I'll trust him." But God doesn't do things our way. He doesn't take orders from us, we take our orders from him. He's not a *tame* God. He challenges us, he offends us, he demands things from us that make no sense at the time. That's part of the way we can tell he's a *living* God- not an idol.

You think the ancient Israelites were silly for crafting a statue of Baal according to preference, casting it in gold, carrying it with them to different places, and then bowing down to it and praying that it will protect and bless them. You'd be right, but we do the same thing. Consider this quote: *"Today's (generation) reject authority, institution, creed, and moral universalism. They value intuition, personal feeling, and experiences. They demand to rewrite their own scripts about how the universe, and human beings, operate…They want to choose—and, more often than not, purchase—the spiritual path that feels more authentic, more meaningful, to them."* When you say, "I don't believe in a god who would say *this*, or not allow me to have *this*, or allow me to suffer *this*," You aren't just rejecting an institution. You may identify as a Christian, but if you are taking your ethics from the culture, your personal habits, your beliefs, and forming your own religion, you aren't simply crafting your own spiritual journey, you're crafting your own god. We have a word for that- an idol. If your God never calls you to repent for your pride, never tells you that you're sexually sinning, never contradicts your culture, never makes you uncomfortable, never asks you to put aside your severely human reasoning, I have news for you: you don't have

a living God. You have an idol. A deified version of yourself. It's not real. And more sadly, it's not really *good.*

2. But He is *Good*. Elijah likely didn't enjoy sitting in the brook, watching his water source slowly shrink into nothing, but God sustained him the whole way. Elijah likely did not agree with the command to go and lodge with one of the poorest widows in Zeraphath and her son, pagan unbelievers, and depend on *them*. And the widow would certainly not choose to have this crazy man show up, request bread, and have to live off of a little flour and oil every day. But God sustained them. God took care of his people. He didn't let them starve. God kept his promise, and they likely ended up better than all of their neighbors. Sure, it wasn't comfortable or easy or luxurious, but the Lord never abandoned them. He never let them starve. He proved to them, both Elijah and the widow, that he was a God who could be trusted and obeyed, even when not fully understood. But then her little boy got sick. And it wasn't quick. It was a slow, excruciating sickness, and this widow who was likely still grieving her husband had to watch her little boy's chest rise a little slower, a little less, until it finally stopped moving. He must have been little, she had him in her arms. Can you feel her exhausted, angry sorrow when she says, "Why did you come here, man of God? Why did you come here if he was going to die anyway? Why not let us starve to death?" But notice what she doesn't do. She *doesn't* accuse God of wrongdoing. In fact, she assumes that she deserved it. "It was because of my sins, wasn't it? It's because I worshiped idols my entire life! It's because I sinned, because I have disobeyed God that he is punishing me. Is this why? Just another reminder from God of how sinful I am? Is he that kind of God?"

Elijah takes the boy up to his room, lays him down, looks up to God and asks, "*Are you?* Are you that kind of God? Did you really do this?" The woman isn't the only one confused. So is Elijah. And he does something that confuses most of the Old Testament scholars. Elijah lies on the boy, as if he's a buffer between him and God, and he spreads out his hands and asks the Lord to restore the boy's life. The prayer makes plenty of sense, but why does he lie on top of him and spread out his hands. Well, if I went up to one of you and spread out my hands to you, what am I doing to you? I'm making myself vulnerable. You can either give me a hug, or you can punch me in the stomach, you can take my wallet- I'm completely vulnerable. Elijah is doing this to God, and I think the best explanation is that he's saying, "Lord, take me instead. If you are going to punish this woman for her sins, don't take her boy. Take me." And God raises the boy and the boy goes back into his mother's arms.

But what about her question? Did God take away her son as a punishment for her sins? She admits that if he were to do so, he'd have every right. And when Elijah asks to be taken instead, it begs the question: if God is going to be completely just, and we are all rebellious idolaters who have rejected God for our own safe, self-made idols, how can I be sure God won't punish me? Because someone came and spread his arms and said, "Father, punish me instead." Jesus Christ,

the Son of God would come centuries later, and he would spread his hands and be crushed in our place for our sins, so that we would be embraced in the Father's arms.

I know that many of you are faced with a lot of spiritual voices every day, all calling you into different directions, offering different benefits, promising satisfaction, happiness, even Heaven itself. I know the culture's promise, that if you choose for yourself a religion, a heaven, a meaning, a god, that you'll finally feel like your authentic self and be empowered, loved, joyful, and at peace. But here is what they will not and cannot offer: a God who knows everything wrong with you, who has seen the deepest, darkest, most secret evils you've harbored in your heart, your most selfish, most destructive choices, and even when he would have been justified in punishing you, chose to reject and punish his own son so that you could be his forever. Who chose you, claims you, cherishes and accepts you. No, he's not a tame God. He will challenge you. He will call you to do and experience things that don't make sense. But is any god truly good like this one? The point? Trust in him. That's what faith is- what we see in this woman: "Now I know that what this God says is true." We all believe in a god. But faith is believing God, trusting him, and knowing that in all things, he lives, reigns, loves. Don't settle for a lesser god. Amen.