

The Discipleship Project-Summer 2017
Series 1: The Oneness of God

A series by Gerald McLean.

Series Big Idea: The Lord our God is one.

Lesson 1.4: Idolatry

Lesson Big Idea: Because we understand the Bible unequivocally proclaims there is one God, our lives should reflect our devotion to that one God.

FOUNDATION

Scripture Focus: Exodus 20:3 (PPT)

Often during Jesus' earthly ministry, the religious elite would try to trip Him up, hoping He would incriminate Himself through the words He used. They questioned Him about everything from paying taxes to the reality of a resurrection from the dead. In one such discussion, the Sadducees came with an elaborate question about the marriage and remarriage of a widow, designed to trick Jesus. Unfortunately for them, Jesus exposed their lack of spiritual understanding and quickly shut them down.

One of the teachers of religious law was standing there listening to the debate. He was very pleased with how Jesus had responded to the circus of Sadducees, so he asked Jesus which one of the commandments He felt was the most important? To this Jesus replied, "The first of all the commandments is: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:29–31, NKJV).

The teacher of religious law wholeheartedly agreed. He affirmed Jesus' response and before all the people vocally agreed with the teachings of Jesus.

Realizing how much the man understood, Jesus said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God" (Mark 12:34, NKJV). And after that, no one dared to ask Jesus any more questions.

- **Why do you think Jesus told the teacher he was not far from the kingdom of God?**
- **Why do you think Jesus named those two commandments as the greatest?**

FRAME

Once Moses made a decision to live for God, he never looked back. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the writer of the Book of Hebrews made these character-revealing statements about Moses. “By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter; choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompense of the reward. By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king: for he endured, as seeing him who is invisible” (Hebrews 11:24–27, KJV). **(PPT)**

The unregenerate are often motivated to come to Christ when they have so messed up their lives that they turn to Jesus as a last resort. Not so with Moses. He had everything going for him. Moses was surrounded by the opulence of living in a palace. Servants came at his bidding. He ate the finest foods, wore the finest clothing, was afforded the best education, and could enjoy the worldly entertainments of Egypt. As the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, fame, wealth, and honor were his birthright.

Moses had everything most people desire in life, and yet he chose to give it all up to pursue God. Amazing! He denied his birthright as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, chose to suffer with the people of God rather than live in a palace, and forsook all that Egypt had to offer.

From the time of his conversion, Moses was devoted to knowing God and obeying God. **(PPT) (PDG)** Moses had no earthly ambitions. Everything else in his life was secondary to his pursuit of God. Moses’ life reflected his devotion to the one true God of Israel.

- **Why did Moses refuse to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter?**

Today’s psychologists and leadership gurus often extol the virtues of having a sound support system. When the prophet **Elijah faced down the 450 prophets of Baal** and the 400 false prophets of the groves (I Kings 18:17–39), he had none. In the defense of his God, Elijah stood against the forces of evil by himself. He exuded a fearless confidence in the one true God of Israel as he challenged the pagans and their god to a contest.

Baal was the chief god of a pantheon of Canaanite gods and goddesses and was recognized as both the agriculture or fertility god and the storm and rain god (Merrill F. Unger, *Unger’s Bible Dictionary*). Elijah’s challenge to the false prophets was designed to expose the impotence of Baal and his cohort gods and goddesses and to highlight the supremacy of the “I AM THAT I AM” (Exodus 3:14, KJV), the self-existent one, the God of Israel. In accordance with Deuteronomy 6:4, by his challenge, Elijah was making an indisputable proclamation that there is only one God, and Baal was not that God.

Elijah proposed that the prophets of Baal erect an altar and he would do likewise. **(PPT) (PDG)** They would then offer a sacrifice, depending upon their respective gods, or God, to consume the offering by fire. Whichever deity answered by fire would

be declared the indisputable winner.

The prophets of Baal accepted the challenge, but without success. Their long-winded prayers went unanswered. When their prayers proved fruitless, they resorted to self-mutilation, cutting their bodies with knives and lancets until their blood gushed upon them. (See I Kings 18:28.) Elijah taunted them. He suggested that their god was sleeping or traveling or was just too preoccupied to hear their cries.

Elijah addressed the crowd when they first gathered. “How long halt ye between two opinions? if the Lord be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him” (I Kings 18:21, KJV). **(PPT)** The moment of truth had come. At the time of the evening sacrifice, after soaking his sacrifice with twelve barrels of water, Elijah uttered a simple prayer.

“Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word. Hear me, O Lord, hear me, that this people may know that thou art the Lord God, and that thou hast turned their heart back again. Then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces: and they said, The Lord, he is the God; the Lord, he is the God” (I Kings 18:36–39, KJV).

It was a powerful prayer—short and sweet, sublime and profound—displaying Elijah’s total devotion to the only God that could answer by fire. So impactful was the prayer and the subsequent answer to that prayer, even those pagans present had to concede that Elijah’s God *was* God.

By man’s accounting methods, the odds did not favor Elijah. Not many would enter into a contest that pitted 850 prophets against one. But Elijah’s one God was more than equal to the task. **Elijah provided the sacrifice; God provided the fire. (PPT) (PDG)** What a message of hope to those who are devoted to the one true God! Since God is no respecter of persons (Acts 10:34), if you are willing to provide the sacrifice, God will provide the fire!

- **Why was Elijah so indignant with the prophets of Baal?**

Now venturing into the New Testament, it must be remembered that the twelve apostles were one-God-believing Jews. They were raised on the spiritual manna of Deuteronomy 6:4: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord” (KJV). For them to worship, or even acknowledge a God other than the God of Deuteronomy 6:4, was to be guilty of blasphemy.

In the New Testament, **the apostle Thomas was a devoted follower of Christ, but he was a cautious man (PPT) (PDG)**, a man who faced the realities of life. He was well aware of Christ’s many enemies and did not believe Jesus or any of His inner circle of disciples would escape death. When Jesus wanted to proceed on to Bethany after the death of Lazarus, Thomas felt certain that Jesus would die there. Thomas conveyed his fears to the other disciples when he said, “Let us also go, that we may die with him” (John 11:16, KJV). Thomas was prepared to die with Christ, such was his devotion, but the hour had not yet come.

The events of Christ's passion began to unfold at the Last Supper. (See John 13.) During this Passover feast, Jesus announced that His betrayer was in their midst, and that His own death was imminent. The atmosphere was somber and heavy. Jesus was just hours away from the crucifixion. Thomas seemed to sense the finality of the situation and proceeded to ask Jesus, "Lord, we know not whither thou goest; and how can we know the way?" (John 14:5, KJV). His question was filled with doubt and uncertainty.

- **Have you dealt with doubt and uncertainty while living for the Lord? Explain.**

Thomas would follow in the footsteps of Christ and witness Christ's agony as He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, observing how Jesus travailed with such intensity "his sweat as it were great drops of blood" (Luke 22:44, KJV). Then came the betrayal, the false charges, the sham trials, the mocking, the beard plucking, the beating, and the scourging. Cruelly forced upon the head of Jesus, a crown of thorns caused still more blood to flow.

Thomas must have wondered if the brutality of it all would ever end. Then came the horrific crucifixion and the piercing of Christ's side. Jesus was dead. The life had fled His body.

At one of Christ's first post-resurrection appearances, Thomas was absent. On hearing about Christ's appearance, Thomas doubted, saying, "Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe" (John 20:25, KJV). (PPT) He knew what he had seen and could not possibly imagine that the lifeless body of Jesus could be resurrected.

- **Why do you think Thomas may have been the only one absent during Jesus' first appearance to the disciples?**

A merciful Jesus appeared to Thomas and the rest of the disciples eight days later. At the sight of Jesus, a dumbfounded Thomas proceeded to utter one of the most dramatic one-God statements recorded in the Bible, "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28, KJV). (PPT)

Thomas had a breathtaking revelation of the mighty God in Christ. (PPT) (PDG) For perhaps the first time, Thomas had more than an intellectual understanding that Jesus was God. Now, he had a spiritual awakening. When he cried out, "My Lord and my God," he was saying my Savior and my Creator, my master, and my Elohim. The one-God-believing Thomas no longer doubted that Jesus was the God of the Old Testament manifest in flesh. (See I Timothy 3:16.)

Thomas overcame his doubts to devotedly serve his risen Savior. Tradition has it that Thomas died the death of a martyr while preaching the gospel in the Far East (Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Dictionary*).

- **What revelation did Thomas receive when he saw the resurrected Christ, and how did it change his life?**

Like Thomas, Saul of Tarsus had a similar revelation of the mighty God in Christ. As he traveled to Damascus to persecute those who worshiped and exalted Jesus as the one true God, he was struck from his horse and fell to the ground. Looking up into the sky, he asked, “Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks” (Acts 9:5, KJV). **(PPT)**

Saul persecuted Christians with vehemence because he wholeheartedly rejected the notion that Jesus was the visible manifestation of the God of the Old Testament. But, when he got his wake-up call on the road to Damascus, he heard directly from God: “I am Jesus!” Saul, you are persecuting the very God you claim to serve. You are persecuting the God of Deuteronomy 6:4.

Saul was a one-God-believing Jew. God could have responded to Saul’s inquiry as to the name of the Lord with any of God’s names and titles as revealed in the Old Testament. God could have said, “I am Jehovah,” or “I am El-Shaddai,” or “I AM THAT I AM,” but He didn’t. God purposely revealed to Saul that His name was Jesus. When the apostle Paul stopped kicking “against the pricks,” he received the revelation of the mighty God in Christ.

Saul immediately reversed his position on the Godhead and became an ardent believer in Jesus. He spent the rest of his life proclaiming that Jesus is indeed God. (See Titus 2:13; Colossians 2:9–10; I Timothy 3:16.)

No one can question Paul’s devotion to Christ. II Corinthians 11:22–29 serves up a litany of the apostle Paul’s trials and tribulations for the sake of the gospel. He was whipped, beaten with rods, stoned, and left for dead. He suffered shipwreck and was accosted by thieves. He experienced weariness, pain, hunger, thirst, and cold. Despite all this, once he made his calling and election sure, the apostle Paul was unflappably devoted to Jesus Christ.

- **What revelation did Saul of Tarsus receive on the road to Damascus, and how did it change his life?**

FINISH

Daniel and the three Hebrew children, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, were devoted to God under the most difficult of circumstances. As exiles in Babylon, they were ruled by pagans. Nothing in the Babylonian culture reflected a belief in the one God of Israel. The law of Moses was neither practiced nor recognized by the Babylonians. They were outsiders in a hostile and idolatrous environment in which carnality and licentious living was the norm.

The Babylonians endeavored to eliminate anything that would remind these men of their faith in Jehovah. By attempting to change their diet, the Babylonians hoped the young men would abandon the law of Moses. By trying to force them to bow to an idol, they tried to negate their belief in only one God. By making a decree that forbade them to pray to Jehovah, they tried to destroy their spiritual lifeline with God.

Even their names were changed in an attempt to get them to forget their God. The Babylonians purposely changed Daniel's name, which meant "Judge of Jehovah," to Belteshazzar, which meant "Bel protect his life." Bel was one of the many false gods of the Babylonians. Hananiah's name, meaning "the Lord is gracious," was changed to Shadrach, or "moon god." Mishael, meaning "who is like our God," was changed to Meshach, meaning "bow to Baal." Azariah, meaning "the Lord is my keeper," became known as Abednego or "servant of Nebo," another one of the false gods of the Babylonians. But these remarkable men refused to submit to their Babylonian names, and chose rather to live up to their Hebrew names! Even in exile, they would not forget the God of their fathers.

Did the lives of the three Hebrew children reflect their devotion to the one true God? Daniel 3:26–29 answers this question with an unquestionable affirmative. "Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the mouth of the burning fiery furnace, and spake, and said, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, ye servants of the most high God, come forth, and come hither. Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, came forth of the midst of the fire. And the princes, governors, and captains, and the king's counsellors, being gathered together, saw these men, upon whose bodies the fire had no power, nor was an hair of their head singed, neither were their coats changed, nor the smell of fire had passed on them. Then Nebuchadnezzar spake, and said, Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, who hath sent his angel, and delivered his servants that trusted in him, and have changed the king's word, and yielded their bodies, that they might not serve nor worship any god, except their own God. Therefore I make a decree, That every people, nation, and language, which speak any thing amiss against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, shall be cut in pieces, and their houses shall be made a dunghill: because there is no other God that can deliver after this sort" (KJV).

Did Daniel's life reflect his belief in one God? After Daniel's miraculous deliverance from the lion's den, Darius, the King of the Medes and Persians, proclaimed, "I make a decree, That in every dominion of my kingdom men tremble and fear before the God of Daniel: for he is the living God, and stedfast for ever, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed, and his dominion shall be even unto the end. He delivereth and rescueth, and he worketh signs and wonders in heaven and in earth, who hath delivered Daniel from the power of the lions" (Daniel 6:26–27, KJV).

Two pagan kings recognized the mighty God of Israel because of the unwavering faith of four Hebrew men who lived their lives for the glory of that one God. Can we do any less?

- **Explain how you are able to live for God in this ungodly world in the midst of an ungodly generation.**
- **How does your life reflect your devotion to God at home, at school, on the job, and in your community?**