

Lessons from the life of Elijah

11. The challenge on Carmel (1 Kgs. 18:23-28)

Stephen Whitehouse

The people having assembled to Mount Carmel in response to the call of Elijah, the prophet prepares his challenge. Two bullocks are got ready, and the prophets of Baal are challenged to bring fire from Baal to consume their offering. Despite the ever-increasing frenzy of their pleas, no answer comes.

THE THRONGING CROWD on Carmel now listened attentively to Elijah while he addressed them about the meticulous preparations to be made. Throughout, the holy prophet of God stood confident in the sure knowledge that "The angel of the LORD encampeth round about them that fear Him, and delivereth them" (Ps. 34:7).

"Let them therefore give us two bullocks"

Elijah specified the sacrificial requirements to the people: "Let them [the prophets of Baal] therefore give us two bullocks", one for the prophets of Baal to offer and one for Elijah (1 Kgs. 18:23). Under the Law a bullock was designated as the national sin offering, to make atonement for the sins of the children of Israel (Lev. 4:13-21). So the roles had been selected; the false prophets would perform the role of mediator on behalf of Baal, and Elijah would act as intercessor between the people and the God of Israel.

Elijah commanded the prophets of Baal concerning their bullock to "cut it in pieces, and lay it on wood" (1 Kgs. 18:23). These instructions relate to the various preparations to be made for the burnt offering as laid down in the Law of Moses (Lev. 1:6-8). But under the Law, what did the burnt offering symbolise? For the individual offerer it spoke of total dedication to God, for all was consumed upon the altar, nothing remained (9:24). This was appropriately referred to as the "whole burnt offering" (Ps. 51:19) and is what God desired of His people.

In the ritual of the burnt offering "the parts, the head, and the fat" were all placed "upon the wood that is on the fire which is upon the altar" (Lev. 1:8). All this had a direct spiritual application: "thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all

thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might" (Deut. 6:5).

Here on Carmel, then, united in one offering, was a sin and a burnt offering, to establish atonement and rekindle a new-found dedication in the practice and worship of the God of Israel. The lesson we draw for ourselves is that the only way to serve our God is "with all [our] heart, and with all [our] understanding, and with all [our] soul, and with all [our] strength" (Mk. 12:33). Our offering of service needs to be a "whole burnt offering", which is our "reasonable service" (Rom. 12:1).

"I will call on the name of the LORD"

Elijah continued by saying that the prophets of Baal should call upon the name of their gods, but he would "call on the name of the LORD" (1 Kgs. 18:24). What was Elijah attempting to achieve by making such a statement? Was he taking the children of Israel's minds back to Seth and his son Enos, to a time when "men [began] to call upon the name of the LORD" (Gen. 4:26), the first use of this phrase?

Significantly, the margin here suggests, "to call themselves by the name of the LORD [Yahweh]", though there are a number of opposing interpretations to this.¹ However, if this rendering is adopted it means that the antediluvians invoked God in a most excellent way. Elijah was thus reminding them of when the children of God separated themselves from the surrounding apostasy and corruption, when spiritual families took on the Divine characteristics of the Father by calling themselves by His Name.

So here on Carmel stood the sons and daughters of God, a people who were once known by the Name. But now they were no longer recognised as such. They had long disowned their spiritual identity and heritage, their uniqueness in relation to all surrounding nations. Thus they were no longer Yahweh's people and He was no longer their God. The relationship had been broken through their foolishness.

God had revealed to Moses at the burning bush that His Name is "I AM THAT I AM" (Ex.

1. See Appendix 21 of Bullinger, *The Companion Bible*.

3:14), or, according to many authorities, such as Bullinger, the RV margin, and most Hebrew scholars, "I will be Who I will be". God continued by denoting Himself as: "The LORD God [Yahweh Elohim] of your fathers . . . this is My name for ever, and this is My memorial unto all generations" (v. 15). Observe, then, that God, by using the relative pronoun 'who' (which can be both singular and plural, masculine and feminine), is here speaking of an innumerable number united as one. This is therefore a wonderful depiction of the future saints in glory, of men and women in great multitude who will be "so many as the stars of the sky in multitude, and as the sand which is by the sea shore innumerable" (Heb. 11:12).

But the people who stood on the mount and listened attentively to Elijah had cast aside the fact that Yahweh was "from everlasting to everlasting" (Ps. 90:2; 103:17; 106:48). They no longer identified themselves with God's purpose and intent, that He would redeem His chosen people and be manifested in them. Their minds no longer looked to the future with hope, as did Abraham (Jno. 8:56), but rather to the immediate, and to the instant gratification of their fleshly desires.

"The God that answereth by fire, let him be God"

So Elijah challenged the children of Israel: "the God that answereth by fire, let him be God" (1 Kgs. 18:24). Surely they must have tingled with anticipation, since Baal was firmly viewed as the sun god, the god of light and fire. The contest played to their advantage, or so they thought. As they lifted their heads and viewed the scorching, cloudless sky, their hearts would have danced with delight.

Let it be appreciated that "our God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29) and He had already in times past 'answered by fire'. God had responded by fire after the first transgression (Gen. 3:24). He also answered Sodom and Gomorrah by fire (19:24), and confirmed His promises to Abraham with a smoking furnace and a burning lamp (15:17). Fire was also the sign given to Moses at Horeb (Ex. 3:2) and the means by which He led His people out of Egypt (13:21). Besides this, when the covenant was made and the Law given to Moses, God descended in fire (19:18). He accepted faithful sacrifices by fire (Lev. 9:24), yet also reaped judgement upon the wicked with the same agent (10:1,2; Num. 26:10).

So from a historical perspective it was not unreasonable for Elijah to seek an answer from God

by fire. Yet, though the prophet wanted fire, all that the people desired was plentiful rain! Why did fire have to precede rain? The drought was a Divine judgement upon this idolatrous country, and it was necessary for God to see acts of repentance before the windows of heaven could be opened. The principle being illustrated is thus a simple yet profound one: there can be no reconciliation between God and sinful man unless there is atonement, for "without shedding of blood is no remission" (Heb. 9:22; cf. Mt. 26:28). Sin had to be covered, atoned for, put away. God would answer on this day on Carmel by fire, in token of His acceptance of the sacrifice, as it ascended to Him as a sweet-smelling savour, before precipitation was sent.

"Choose you one bullock for yourselves"

Elijah continued to the false prophets: "Choose you one bullock for yourselves, and dress it first; for ye are many" (1 Kgs. 18:25). Notice that the prophet offered them the first opportunity of calling fire down from heaven, so they had the advantage of establishing the credentials of Baal, of settling the dispute without further ado. He knew full well that they would be foiled in their fervent efforts, that no fire would descend and consume the altar.

Only one restriction was to be applied, that they "put no fire under" the wood, so as to prevent any deception (v. 23). And the prophets of Baal were ever grateful for being first on stage. They made immediate preparations for the sacrifice and then called upon Baal "from morning even until noon" (v. 26). Observe here the similarities with the faithful servants of God, especially the Lord Jesus Christ, for they also acted early in the morning in His Name (Gen. 19:27; Ex. 24:4; Job 1:5; Ps. 5:3; Mk. 1:35).

Survey, then, false religion in all its pretence and deception, the "false prophets, which come . . . in sheep's clothing, but inwardly . . . are ravening wolves" (Mt. 7:15). Here they acted as true believers, as a charade, rising up early in complete devotion. The Truth had been utterly corrupted in the Land of Promise.

But there was no answer from heaven. These false prophets could no longer restrain their emotions; their fury uncontrollably spilled over: "they leaped [*pacach*] upon the altar" (1 Kgs. 18:26). Significantly, the Hebrew *pacach* is the same word as used previously for "halt". Were they, then, beginning to doubt their deity? Were they now also of "two opinions" (v. 21)? Notably, the

verb can also mean 'to spring over' or 'to skip'. Though they may well have doubted, they continued nonetheless and skipped upon the altar in a feverish state, dancing in all earnest to please their deity, so as to obtain their request.

Picture the scene; round and round the altar they danced in continual motion in their frenzied state, uttering their monotonous mantra: "O Baal, hear us". Yet after all this exercise and concentrated effort the heaven remained silent, not even a stir was heard from above: "there was no voice, nor any that answered" (v. 26). The sacrifice on the altar remained unconsumed. But what is said of this altar? It was "the altar which was made" (v. 26). The RSV sheds further light: "which they had made". This was a new altar, something they had built as a substitute means of religion.

This is most certainly a warning for us in our daily lives; let us not be so foolish as to erect new altars that consume our time and heartfelt ambitions. The prophets of Baal, besides the children of Israel, had invested their efforts in those things which were new, that sparkled and glistened for a fleeting moment, but were void of any spiritual substance (*cf.* Mt. 6:19-21). Let us carefully observe these timeless warnings.

"Cry aloud: for he is a god"

Hour after hour the prophets of Baal called upon their god to make public demonstration of his existence. Noise rose to heaven, but silence was the reply. And throughout this sorry episode Elijah patiently remained silent. But now he chose to interrupt their ridiculous ceremony and admonish them for their gross folly: "Cry aloud: for he is a god; either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth, and must be awaked" (1 Kgs. 18:27).

Observe a Scriptural irony in all its glory. Elijah commanded them to "Cry aloud". Why? "For he is a god", or, 'In your estimation, he is a supreme god'. Elijah was well aware that the heathen feared to enter into the temples of their gods at noon lest their deities should be disturbed. But at noon the prophet willingly urged them on, that they should rid themselves of any fear and enter in. What a contrast with the true God: "He That keepeth [us] will not slumber . . . He That keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep" (Ps. 121:3,4)!

The prophet continued by suggesting that "he [Baal] is talking [mg. meditateth]" or "is pursuing", or, in the original, "he hath a withdrawal", for the purpose of relieving himself. If this was not

sufficient, Elijah declared, "he is in a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth, and must be awaked". Elijah most certainly "mocked them" (v. 27). But this was nothing more than they rightfully deserved, for this was a righteous reproof directed towards a miserable religion.

"They cried aloud, and cut themselves"

Having taken Elijah's words literally, as though they contained sound advice, the false prophets now furthered their efforts. They not only cried to Baal but also "cut themselves" (v. 28), and poured their blood upon his altar in a most barbaric gesture. There is a story in Ugaritic mythology that Baal died, and it was his father El who cut himself in a state of mourning and anguish to restore his son back to life. Were they, then, attempting to revive Baal's absent powers?

So they made every effort to summon their god into action by spilling their own blood, symbolic of their love and devotion for him. But such suffering and extreme behaviour met with no response. Nor would there be, for the Law was unequivocal on this matter; God had expressly forbidden His worshippers to "cut themselves" (Deut. 14:1; *cf.* Jer. 16:6). Such was an abomination to Him. Also observe what these fools employed in severing and lacerating their tortured bodies: "knives and lancets". The original Hebrew indicates that these were the weapons of heavy-armed troops, the "knives" being swords and the "lancets" spears or javelins. They applied military instruments to inflict the most severe of injuries upon themselves in gestures of their dedication to Baal.

This they continued to do in a hysterical state "till the blood gushed out [*shaphak*] upon them". They were shedding their blood, spilling it on the ground. By contrast, the Law had carefully specified that the priest was to take the blood of the sin offering with his finger, smear it upon the horns of the altar of the burnt offering and "pour out [*shaphak*] his blood at the bottom of the altar of burnt offering" (Lev. 4:25). This was the way in which atonement was to be effected.

Consider this distortion of the Truth. They were literally presenting their own bodies as "living sacrifice[s]" (Rom. 12:1), physically mutilating their members. This they did though God had commanded that they were to be spiritually dedicating their lives, rather than taking the words literally! What a gross undermining of His commandments! God would thus respond in great measure; they would be sorely punished.

(To be continued)