

# The Contest on Mount Carmel

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Date: 30 January 201

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[ 0 : 00 ] Now just before we turn back to scripture, I'm doing this, you understand, to fill in a bit of background for our friends.

When we're singing there about the house of Levi and the house of Aaron, what you have to do here is think about the people of Israel way back in the times of Moses and down through history, going way back to something like 1400 years before Jesus came into the world.

And our calendar is dated either BC, before Christ, or AD, from the time he came. And we're living at 2011 from the birth of Christ.

And we're thinking here tonight about roughly 750 years before Christ came, when we're looking at Elijah.

And the people of Israel had been told to offer certain sacrifices. And these were slaughtered animals, and they were to do it a special way.

[ 1 : 15 ] And all this was talking to them about the need of forgiveness through a victim. And it was all pointing to Jesus.

So when we're looking at these animal sacrifices being offered, it's good to remember that the people were doing these things among the Israelites.

When they were doing them properly, they were doing them because God had told them, do this.

They're holding in them a promise of a final and true sacrifice, the Lord Jesus.

So we're going to turn now and look at the passage we read in the life of Elijah. Elijah. That's in 1 Kings 18.

And it's page 322. And we're taking this, what we've called this contest, the Carmel contest, that is on Mount Carmel, a contest between Elijah the prophet of God and the 450 prophets of Baal.

[ 2 : 39 ] And as I said a moment ago, we're thinking here roughly about 870 years before Christ came. The king in Israel was a man called Ahab.

And the king in the other two parts of the 12 tribes of Judah was a man called Jehoshaphat. But the contest here tonight that we're looking at is set on Mount Carmel.

Now if you look in your Bible at the back, I don't know if it's in this pulpit copy, pew copy, but if you get a map of the land, you'll see that there is a range called the Carmel Range.

And what we might call the northwesterly point of it overlooks the modern city of Haifa. And I'm saying that because it's good to remind ourselves that although we're looking at something that happened long, long ago, the Carmel Range is still there, Mount Carmel.

And the place where they drew the water from, Kishon, is still there. And so on. These things are in reality, you can check them out as it were.

[ 4 : 01 ] But we're looking at this contest between Elijah the prophet of the Lord God of Israel and the 450 prophets of Baal.

Because the time had come for the people who had turned to the false gods, who were following Baal, and the time had come for them to be challenged.

And they had to be asked to think about turning back to the God of their fathers. And the way that this was done was God was going to prove through Elijah the prophet that he is the living and the true God and the saviour of his people.

Now, you may have recalled in the reading, when they were all gathered there on Mount Carmel, Elijah said to them, How long do you halt between two opinions?

If the Lord is God, follow him. If Baal is, follow him. There's no use. I'm halting on two opinions. I'm stepping from one foot to the other.

[ 5 : 15 ] That's what they were doing in their minds. They weren't settled. And when Elijah challenged them, they answered him not a word.

Verse 21. Now, can I just say to our friends, that I'm going to, if you follow this passage through from verse 22, I'm going to be referring to the verses for ease of understanding it.

So, I'll give you the verse as we're going. So, at verse 21, when Elijah had challenged them to follow the Lord, or follow Baal, make up your minds, they answered him not a word.

And so, a contest was needed to demonstrate, to show that one was true and one was false. And because the people were silent, this contest was needed.

And God chose to do this. It's not that, it's not about if he did it, if he brought fire down from heaven and burned up the sacrifices, as we will see, then that proves he lives.

[ 6 : 40 ] Seeing is not always believing. God has to work in what we see in order to us believing. you remember that at the time when Jesus rose on the third day from the grave, one of the disciples, Thomas, one of the twelve, wouldn't believe Jesus was alive.

And he said, I'll not believe unless I see the nail prints in his hands and the spear mark in his side. And Jesus, you remember, said this, blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.

In other words, we must keep in mind that a true turning to God is not based on what we see, but what we believe about God on the basis of his word.

But this contest was a necessary contest. And God had chosen this way to demonstrate, to show the people who had gone far away from him that he is indeed the living and the true God.

They needed a reality check. There on Mount Carmel, all the thousands of them had gathered, they needed a reality check and they needed a U-turn.

[ 8 : 15 ] They needed to turn from idols to serve the living and true God. I want to think about two things mainly, but within these two we'll be looking at one or two points.

First of all, I want to think about Baal's priests prepare and they perform. They prepare.

You'll notice from verse 22, Elijah said to the people, I alone am left, a prophet of the Lord.

But Baal's prophets are four hundred and fifty men. And then he tells them what he's going to do.

We're going to choose two bulls and they can choose their one and cut it up and lay it on the wood but don't put any fire under it.

And you'll notice how Elijah naughtily lets them go first. And he lets them go first.

[ 9 : 26 ] He says, he says, you can do all this, you can do this first and then I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood but put no fire into it.

And so he says, verse 25, he says to the prophets of Baal, you choose one bull for yourselves and prepare first for you are many.

He's taunting them. He's being a bit cheeky. It should have been the other way around. He was alone. He was the only one. There were four hundred and fifty of them.

But Elijah's full of confidence and he naughtily says to them, you go first because you're many. And so they made an altar and they took the bull and they cut it up and they prepared it and they proceeded to call upon Baal.

So they took the bull, verse 26, which was given them and they prepared it and called on the name of Baal from the morning even until noon saying, O Baal, hear us.

[ 10 : 44 ] Now, the priests of Baal were concerned in their preparation not with any rules that God had given but simply doing things their own way.

They weren't interested in the God of Israel in what his word had to say about sacrifices and offerings. Those of us who know our Bible know we're defined in Leviticus, for example, regulations regarding the sacrifices and so on.

They weren't concerned with that. They had their own way and the mark of false worship is, you see, that it neglects or it rejects the rules that God has given on his worship.

And it's interesting to notice as they get into it, they're concerned to do it their own way and not God's way. And so Elijah says to them in verse 25, Call upon Baal, but put no fire under your offering.

Now, I want to just notice something here. when he says put no fire under it, those who have researched this way back in earlier centuries have discovered that these prophets of Baal were able to create sparks and set a fire off without folk noticing them.

[ 12 : 19 ] And Elijah was up to them. No tricks here. No subtle way of making a fire. Keep away no sparks secret igniting here.

No fire under it. You wait and let Baal do it for you. That's really what he was saying. And so he's very careful to make sure that there was no tricks, no falsehood.

he wants them to let their God Baal do it for them. And there's an interesting practical point here and I think it's good to just pause for a moment.

We really don't need God to demonstrate that he lives and that he is the true God.

We have his word on it. We don't need to set up a big gathering and a stage and on it have healings to show that God lives.

[ 13 : 30 ] These things don't really bring a lasting commitment, lasting faith. It's like staging something in order to convince folk that God lives.

The 20th century was full of it and the 21st century is full of it too where people are caught up in the spectacular.

The first thing is then they prepared. But having prepared then they got into what I'll call the first half performance. they called upon his name from morning till noon saying O Baal hear us verse 26 but there was no voice no one answered and then they leaped about the altar which they had made. In other words they got into a frenzy they thought that if they got into a frenzy and danced around that somehow Baal would answer them. that was the first half but there was no answer no voice verse 26 and even when they leaped about the altar it made no difference O Baal answer us but there was no answer not a word the picture of them is of them really desperate to get an answer and so it was at noon that Elijah mocked them verse 27 the idea of mocking there is really taunting he was he was taunting them there they were hopping around in a kind of dervish dance to get Baal to act but it was to no avail there was no voice and not an answer and yet they needed an answer just a wee aside as we move along of course the nations had their versions of Baal and Baal Merkart of the Sidonians was depicted you find them on these stone tablets as a god of fertility and the god of the storm with the indications of his ability in stone but you see there was no answer from it and we were singing in those psalms deliberately to remind ourselves that these idols these images are first and foremostly from the imagination of people and they are simply powerless they are dead and in the scriptures we hear again and again the gods of the nations are dim idols the work of men's hands there's not a sin that takes us up to the end of the first half performance but then we've got the second half performance and the second half signal was from

[ 17 : 27 ] Elijah it's as if Elijah couldn't keep silent and so he said cry aloud verse 27 there middle of it cry aloud for he is a god he's mocking them he's making fun of them perhaps he's meditating or he's busy literally he's gone to the loo or he's on a journey or perhaps he's sleeping and needs to be awakened and you notice although Elijah is taunting them here they think he's serious look at it there verse 28 so they cried aloud Elijah says cry aloud for he is a god verse 28 so they cried aloud they took him seriously he's mocking them he's making fun of them but they do what he says to do so they cried aloud and they did more they kept themselves as was their custom the idea was just giving themselves a superficial wound until the blood gashed out on them they're desperate for an answer some folk have said that

Elijah was being unkind and hard on he shouldn't have made fun of him but the fact of the matter is Elijah hates every false way he hates what they stand for he is the prophet of the Lord who lives and he sees them as blind leaders of the blind they're leading people astray and so he taunts them shout louder he's maybe busy he's meditating he's on a journey he's asleep and they kick in and shout louder they don't see how blind they are and so on they went and when midday was past verse 29 they prophesied until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice that was around four o'clock in the afternoon but there was no answer no voice no one paid attention end of verse 29 not a word we need to remind ourselves here that man is a religious being no matter where you go in the world no matter how primitive the people man is a religious being he is insatiably religious he needs to worship and when he worships the tree or the river or the mountain or the stars or the sun it's because in his heart he feels he needs to worship and in his attempts at worship he will try all sorts of religious rituals hoping that somehow he's pleasing the gods but the lord is different than that he doesn't want us to to to be groping about in the darkness hoping to get up there no he has come down to us he has given us his word to give us light and understanding he tells us what we're to believe about him and he tells us what he wants us to do we're not left to think it out for ourselves he makes it known that's why we said at the beginning for our friends that even these burnt offerings that were offered in

Israel that Elijah was offering we'll see it in a moment he was doing it the way God had shown them how to do it and it was pointing to the greater by far to the great final sacrifice the true sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross outside Jerusalem and one lesson we should take out of this

mad performance of the priests of Baal is that we need to be on our guard lest we wander off into the ways that are against the word of God we're not to be dazzled by religious ritual it's not the flashy clothing of the earthly priests be they scarlet or gold or white with embroidery it's what God has given us to know and to do and to believe great displays you see of religious pomp and ceremony don't equal God's way we mustn't be dazzled by religious ritual and religious attire clothing all their frenzied efforts and all their gorgeous robes and all the blood that spattered out on them it was all empty it all came to nothing verse 29 but there was no voice no one answered no one paid attention that brings us to our final point

Elijah prepares and prays you remember our first point was the priests of Baal prepare and perform Elijah prepares and he prays let's look at his preparation briefly verse 30 the first thing he does Elijah said to all the people come near to me gather round and the people came near to him what did he do first he repaired the altar of the Lord that was broken down it had fallen into disuse he took twelve stones according to the twelve tribes the sons of Jacob to whom the word of the Lord had come saying Israel shall be your name the prophet deliberately took these twelve stones one for each of the tribes and it represented unity the whole of the people and he wanted these ten tribes of

[ 25 : 36 ] Israel to be brought back to the Lord that's what he was about and there was an altar here on the top of Mount Carmel it had fallen into disrepair and disuse these altars were used long before temple times but they had long been forsaken and so his action in the first place was there to focus the people's minds come let us return to the Lord our God and he builds the altar you see in the name of the Lord that's significant verse 32 then with stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord that's its identity it's the Lord's altar and he makes a trench around it then verse 33 he puts wood in order on the altar he cuts up the bull and lays it on the wood in the prescribed way the way given by God he knew the instructions and he does it God's way that must always be our approach to the worship of God we do it God's way we regulate what we do by his word this is something that should always be dear to us it's something that we've had controversy about in recent times of course but it is all about doing his worship and service his way we go to his book and we look there we're not to impose on it what is contemporary what is our own desire we're to take the key elements of worship from his word and for the purpose of this burnt offering

Elijah does it God's way Baalism was the majority religion at that point even in Israel but Elijah calls them back to the way of the Lord and to follow him he uses what was prescribed let us be guided ourselves by the Bible in things concerning the worship of God and of his service then of course he digs this trench around the altar he wants to show the people that there's no way this sacrifice is going to ignite except that God acts and so he digs the trench he fills it with water he saturates the sacrifice and the wood you'll notice at the end of this passage where the priests of Baal are killed they're executed he brought them down to the brook Kishon and it's from the brook Kishon which was fed by a perennial stream a fountain that they got their water and so they soaked the sacrifice and the wood and the altar and all around it and then notice Elijah waited he waited having done this once verse 34 he said do it again and they did it a second time and he said do it a third time he wanted to make perfectly sure you see that everything was soaked through and through there was no chance of it igniting and so the water ran verse 35 all around the altar and he filled the trench also now notice verse 36 and it came to pass at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice

Elijah's mind is on God's way here he waits for the time and at the right time he calls upon the name of the Lord remember the difference here the priests of Baal prepare and they perform a first half and a second half Elijah prepares God's way and he waits God's time and he prays to God this is his concern to wait until the time of the evening sacrifice and then he set about praying no performance no pomp and ceremony he casts himself upon the

[ 31 : 36 ] Lord God of Israel and more in fact upon the God of Abraham and it came to pass verse 36 look at it came to pass at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice that Elijah the prophet came near and said Lord God of Abraham Isaac and Israel let it be known this day that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and that I have done all these things at your word see I wasn't I wasn't imposing something when I said we regulate what we do by the Bible Elijah was fully aware that all he did in preparing he did at the word of God and he waited the time the appropriate time to offer the offering and now he offers prayer he begs the

Lord to vindicate his own name and that of his poor servant let it be known that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and that I have done all these things at your work and he goes on verse 37 he says to hear to say hear me is to answer me answer me oh Lord answer me that this people may know that you are the Lord God and that you have turned their hearts back to you again Elijah is not interested in making a name for himself this is important we're living at a time in history where people want to make a name for themselves they want to be well known it's true of Christians and non Christians alike you only need to turn on your telly and look at one of these programs where folk are trying to make it big I'm afraid I can't give you names because I'm not that into it but I see the blurb at times people want to be stars celebrities well known well off and all there is they want to be gloried in they want people to think well of them they're great is Elijah like that is that what he's concerned about no not at all do it not for my sake not for my name's sake Lord not for my glory but for yours that the people may know that you are the Lord God and that you have turned their hearts back to you and this must always be the way for those who love the Lord Jesus Christ we turn people's eyes to him we want those we love we want our neighbors and work colleagues and acquaintances we want them to come to know Jesus for themselves not that we may get praise but that the Lord may have the praise in their lives and that's the way we ought to think about church life we want people to come in among us we want them to come to know the Lord not for our sake but for the Lord's name we want him to vindicate his name and the name of his holy son Jesus but let's return to Carmel as we finish in answer to Elijah's prayer the fire of God came down from heaven verse 38 the fire of the Lord fell and consumed this burnt sacrifice the wood and the stones and the dust and it licked up the water in the trench God chose to do it this way and what a response came from the people and when the people saw it they fell on their faces and they said the Lord he is God the Lord he is God their hearts are turned back at least there was an acknowledgement that that that God is the living God the God of his son he is the one who answered by fire you remember what Elijah said at the beginning whoever answers by fire he is [37:10] God and God responded and God answered in this way and in a measure the people turned from their idols to serve the living and true God sadly in history we know that it was a wee bit short lived it didn't last very long but immediately it lasted and surely in our thinking we ought to be able to identify with Elijah if we love the Lord if we follow the Lord Jesus Christ then our concern is to do things God's way and to plead with him for this one or that one that he would vindicate his name and cause that people would come to know him and rejoice in him with ourselves that they would experience the gift of everlasting life through believing in the

Lord Jesus Christ we spoke about the sacrifice a moment ago even that burnt offering itself was pointing to the greater it was pointing to the one perfect and true sacrifice once offered needs no repetition needs no representation in any form no rather it did the work it was meant to do we have forgiveness of sins and peace with God through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and not all the ritual and the pomp and ceremony in some quarters of the church is needed at all we draw near to the living and true God through faith in the perfect and finished work of our Lord Jesus Christ who was at one and the same time our great high priest and our perfect sacrifice and as we leave Mount Carmel as it were let us say with renewed insight the Lord he is God Amen