

Elijah on Mt Carmel

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the AM service on the 23rd of August 1998. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled Elijah on Mount Carmel and is from 1 Kings chapter 18 verses 1 to 45. Lord God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, you alone are God. We pray that as we sit under your word, we may be equipped to be your servants in this world.

Amen. Three years of drought and famine in ancient Israel. Three years of Elijah the prophet hiding from the king, King Ahab.

It was Elijah whom we saw last week announcing the drought and now then Elijah hid and for three years in hiding from the king.

[1 : 10] During those three years as we saw last week, three episodes of God's astonishing provision in the midst of drought and famine, feeding Elijah by a little river with bread and meat fed by ravens, then at a widow's house her food supply miraculously never running out and then raising her son to life after he had died.

Three private episodes of God's astonishing power. Three years the king searched for Elijah in his own land and in his neighbouring land.

You may like to have the passage open in front of you, page 283 in the Pew Bibles, chapter 18.

One of the other prophets had said to Elijah in verse 10, As the Lord your God lives, there is no nation or kingdom to which my Lord, that is the king, has not sent to seek you.

And when they would say he's not here, he would require an oath of the kingdom or nation that they had not found you. That shows the desperate measures to which Ahab went in order to try and find the prophet Elijah.

Who will rid me of this turbulent prophet? We can imagine King Ahab saying. But the king, the impotent king, could not find Elijah in his own realm or the nations round about.

[2 : 39] Even though Elijah, as we saw last week, was in hiding in the king's wife, the queen's own land. But during these three years of drought and famine, not once has Ahab the king, not once has Israel the nation turned back to God in worship.

They've continued to worship idols. They've continued to worship the Canaanite gods, false gods, no gods as we saw last week. Gods that they worshipped for fertility because they believed that these Baals, these gods would provide rain and fertility and children and crops and animals.

They engaged in all sorts of immoral pursuits as we saw last week in order to induce their gods to respond with rain and crops and animals and children. No, Israel for three years had kept on worshipping these false gods, had kept on worshipping these idols.

They'd failed to heed the warning of the drought. They'd failed to remember their own early scriptures when in the book of Deuteronomy God through Moses had said that he would send drought and famine on the land if they disobeyed his will.

And here they were disobeying and cursing the drought but not turning back to God in obedience and faith. The lowest point in their history, this is the 860s BC.

[4 : 04] Stubborn, idolatrous Israel, not turning back in the midst of a drought. A hundred years later the prophet Amos would come to the same people and say, quoting God, I sent you a drought and famine yet you did not turn to me.

Stubborn, idolatrous Israel for whom the God of the Bible is dead. Now after three years it's time for Elijah to return to centre stage.

It is God's initiative, it's not as though Ahab eventually found him but rather God told him to get up and go and find Ahab which he did in the early part of the chapter, chapter 18.

And Elijah announces to the king that the drought is over. But before the rains can come something else has to happen. The final contest between Yahweh, the Lord, that is the real living God, the

God of the Old Testament, the God of the Bible and the Baals, the false gods or idols.

We saw last week it was 3-0 to Yahweh. Three episodes where he showed his power over the Baals and the false gods. Now comes the mother of all grand finals.

[5 : 21] Yahweh, the true living God and the Baals, who will win. The point of the contest that we're about to look at is to make it clear that when rain comes it is Yahweh's rain, not Baal.

Baal, the so-called great God of fertility, the God of rain, is nothing, no God. Pictitious, make-believe. It is Yahweh, the God of the Bible, who is the true and living God.

There have been many showdowns in the Bible between Moses and Pharaoh, Samson and the Philistines, Joshua and Jericho, Hezekiah and Sennacherib, David and Goliath.

Probably there is none more spectacular and startling and dramatic as this one, Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. So Ahab, when he saw Elijah, verse 17 said, Is it you, you troubler of Israel?

What a stupid question. He thinks the drought is because Elijah's pulled a fancy trick out of his bag. The real troubler is not Elijah.

[6 : 32] The real troubler is himself, the king, his queen, Jezebel, the people, Israel, for disobeying God. The real troubler is the sins of the nation. That's what's brought about the consequences of drought and famine as God's warning and punishment to the nation.

It's not just Elijah's trick. Is it you, you troubler of Israel? What irony! Because the very one who speaks the words is the real troubler of the nation. It is sin, Israel's sin, the king's sin, the queen's sin, their idolatry and apostasy that has brought about the drought and famine.

It's always worth remembering when things go wrong, when we are in some type of strife, rather than just first blaming somebody else, to think, is God sending a warning sign here?

The drought and famine was meant to be a warning to Israel about their sin. They failed to heed it. Sometimes God does the same. Not every strife we go through is God's warning sign to us, but it's always important and worthwhile asking the question, is this difficulty, is this strife something God is trying to teach me here?

Well, Elijah sets the stage for this final contest. He gets the king to assemble all Israel, the whole nation, in verse 19, onto Mount Carmel, one of the shrines of the Baal, a high mountain where they would go up to worship the Baals.

[7 : 58] It's in Baal territory. He gets them to assemble 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah. Asherah is the so-called wife of Baal, the female goddess.

850 prophets and Elijah. 850 to one. They're the odds, I guess. Verse 20, they all gather and Elijah comes near and he speaks to all the people, not to the prophets or to the king, but to the people because this is a contest for the sake of the people, the nation as a whole.

It's the people that God is trying to win over here. And he says to them, how long will you go limping with two different opinions?

If the Lord is God, if Yahweh, Jehovah, is the other name for God in the Old Testament, if he is God, then serve him. But if it's Baal, well, serve him. Now, to go limping with two opinions is perhaps an idiom to say, well, you've got one foot in both camps.

You try walking. If you've got a foot in one camp and a foot in another, you'll invariably limp. So, it's a statement of their indecision, their ignorance, their indifference.

[9 : 09] But it's not a statement of neutrality. It's not saying that you people have failed to decide which is God, but you're sympathetic to this God and sympathetic to that. It's not a neutral statement.

If you're not in favour of God, you are against him. If you've not got both feet in God's camp, then you are against him. Jesus said as much on a number of occasions.

If you are not for me, you are against me. You see, God demands our exclusive allegiance, our total allegiance. You cannot serve God and mammon, Jesus said.

You cannot serve God and money. You cannot serve God and. You can serve God or you serve other things. But you can never serve God and.

And that was Israel's problem. By serving God and, by mixing up their religions and having a bit of this and a bit of that, they weren't serving God at all. They were rejecting him. They were turning their back on him.

[10 : 06] They were pro-Baal, not pro-God. You cannot serve God and. God is an exclusive God. It's like in a marriage.

He demands total allegiance of his people, just as a husband or wife rightly demands total allegiance of their spouse. Now, that sort of statement is important in our day and age as well. We live in a day and age where people claim that all sorts of gods are valid, that a bit of Eastern mysticism and a bit of Christianity and a bit of Buddhism and a bit of this, that and the other, well, mix it all together, it's all okay, it's all the same God.

No, it's not. The God of the Bible is God. And anything else is the creation of human imagination in the end and is no God.

And if you try to serve both or a mixture, you do not serve the real God. Elijah asks, how long will you go limping with two different opinions?

[11 : 10] If the Lord is God, follow him, but if Baal, then follow him. And the people did not answer him a word. Isn't that pathetic?

Self-incriminating. They had no answer. Just like later on, Baal himself is silent in heaven without an answer, here the people have no answer.

You see, they're on Baal's side. Where he's a no God, there are no people in the end. They down themselves by their silence. Well, Elijah sets up the challenge.

He says, you lot go and get your altar, your wood, your animal, and call on your God to destroy it by fire. And I'll do the same with my altar, my wood, my animal and I'll call on my God to have fire and destroy the sacrifice.

Indeed, Elijah gives every advantage to his opponents, the prophets of Baal here. There are two animals. He says, you take your pick, I'll have the one you don't want. It's not a trick.

[12 : 15] He hasn't got a sort of self-combustible bull and he says, that's yours, but this is mine. He says, you take your pick, I don't mind. And you go first. You set up your altar, you call on your God first.

It's like going white in chess or serving first in tennis. He's giving every advantage to the prophets of Baal. There is no hint of trickery, magic, fraud, deceit, anything like that.

All the advantage lies with the prophets of Baal. It's in their territory, at their shrine, their prophets outnumber him 850 to 1. They have the first go and so they accept the challenge.

Verse 26, they took the bull that was given them, prepared it and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, crying, O Baal, answer us.

From morning till noon. O Baal, answer us. For hour upon hour upon hour, three, four hours maybe. O Baal, answer us.

[13 : 24] But there was no voice and no answer. Not a thing. Not a whisper.

Not even a hint of a flame. Nothing. They limped about the altar that they had made. Probably a ritual, religious type dance.

Maybe even a bit like an Aboriginal corroboree where they sort of dance on one foot and then on to another as they go round and round the altar. But not a thing. Not an answer.

Not even a whisper. At noon, Elijah mocked them, taunted them. Something that was outrageous in the ancient world to do about somebody else's gods.

Maybe he's meditating, he says. Come on, he's a god, come on. Maybe he's meditating as though God is in his, the Baal god is in his private chapel with a do not disturb sign on the door.

[14 : 29] What a stupid idea. What mockery of their gods. Oh, Baal answer us. Hey, maybe he's meditating, shout a bit louder, cry louder. Oh, maybe he's turned aside or wandered away.

It's a euphemism for going to the toilet in the ancient world. What a joke. Gods don't go to their toilets but this one might, your little god might, come on, cry louder.

Maybe he's at the toilet, he must be there a long time if he's been there all morning. Maybe he's on a journey that their god has somehow left them there and he's gone off to travel to a distant land, had a little holiday because he's been a bit busy in the last little while.

What a joke. Oh, Baal answer us. Ha, he's on holidays. Oh, maybe he's asleep and he must be awakened. Gods don't sleep.

Oh, but your little god might. He's so pathetic. Come on, shout louder. He's probably a heavy sleeper. You see, Baal's not a god, not even human.

[15 : 36] He's nothing. So, the people cried aloud, verse 28. They cried louder, that is. They got louder as Elijah taunted them from the sidelines.

Oh, Baal, answer us. And round and round the altar they went, 850 of them. Oh, Baal, answer us. And they cut themselves so that the blood ran from them as ancient people often did in religious

type ceremonies, trying to induce their god to answer them.

Oh, Baal, answer us. And then they ranted and raved, whipping themselves up into some sort of frenzy and ecstasy, it says. Oh, Baal, answer us. Round and round they went in the early hours of the afternoon, hour upon hour, ranting and raving.

Oh, Baal, answer us. But there was no voice, no answer, no response.

Extraordinary. The louder and louder Mount Carmel got, the quieter heaven seemed to be. All the noise is down below and it's dead silent up there where Baal is meant to be.

[16:54] The whole day had gone virtually and heaven was silent.

Now it's Elijah's turn. He repairs the altar of Yahweh. He puts 12 stones there. He shows where his roots and allegiance lies with the God who chose Abraham, Isaac and Jacob whose 12 sons became the names of the tribes of Israel.

And so when altars were made to Yahweh, 12 stones were to be there to symbolise the unity of the people of God and the promises that God had made hundreds of years before. But still the odds are stacked against Elijah.

He says, come and pour water on it and do it again and again. And the thing was sopping wet. The bull, the wood, the trench around it drenched and drenched with water. This isn't petrol as some sceptics think.

What a joke. Where would you get all this petrol from on Mount Carmel in the 8th and 9th century BC? But some people say, well where would you get the water from? It's a three year drought. And yet there remains a spring on the top of Mount Carmel to this day that runs, whether it's drought or not, there is a spring that runs with water.

[18:03] And after all, if God's the one who provides, well he can surely provide some water anyway. The odds against Elijah here, you know if you try to light dead wood it doesn't work, this is drenched, drenched with water.

What is going to induce Elijah's God to respond and answer? Four things. Elijah prays.

He doesn't shout, doesn't rant, doesn't rave, doesn't whip himself into a frenzy, doesn't cut himself, doesn't limp or dance around his altar.

He prays a simple prayer. Not self-flagellation, not eloquence, it's not a trick vocabulary, it's not a simple straightforward formula, he doesn't use a prayer book, he doesn't pray for a long length of time, he doesn't repeat himself, he doesn't keep saying, oh Lord, just do this and just do that.

He doesn't pray loudly, he doesn't pray in numbers, it's just one man against 850, he doesn't adopt a special posture, doesn't adopt a special movement, he prays, that's all he does, he prays.

[19:11] What will induce an answer from God? Prayer will. Prayer. The second thing is that he prays with faith. He prays in verse 36, oh Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel.

That is a prayer of faith. He knows this God, he trusts this God, he acknowledges that this God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, that is the God who six or seven or eight hundred years or more made promises to Abraham, promises to Isaac, promises to Jacob and will keep those promises, that is the prayer of faith, he is trusting God to keep his word, God.

He trusts God. It's not a Peter Cook, Dudley Moore type sketch where it says, oh God, if you're there answer my prayer and make it by 3pm so that I know you're there. That's not a prayer of faith, that's a prayer of scepticism.

But this is a prayer of faith, he knows he's God, he knows what his God has promised and he trusts him. He prays in faith. And it goes on to say in verse 36, that I am your servant.

Let it be known this day that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and I have done all these things at your bidding. That is, I have obeyed what you have told me to do. You see, faith expresses itself in obedience.

[20:34] If you have faith, then you obey. If you don't obey, there's no faith there. Faith, Christian faith, is obedient faith. So the second thing about this inducing God to answer is that it is the prayer of obedient faith of a servant of God.

The third thing is its motive. Its motive is for God's glory. Elijah doesn't pray to save his own skin, although he well knows that if God doesn't answer he's dead, but he prays for God's glory to be known.

So he says, O 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've done all these things at your bidding. Answer me, O

Lord, answer me, not so that I will live, but so that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God and that you have turned their hearts back.

That's his prayer. His prayer is that God's glory will be known by these people. It's not a selfish, me-centered prayer like so many of our prayers are, Lord, heal me, I'm not feeling very well today, but it's a prayer for God's glory to be known in the land.

God's glory will be saved. He doesn't pray for a miracle. He doesn't pray, Lord, consume this altar and sacrifice by fire, full stop.

[21 : 59] The point of the miracle is people's faith. So, he prays for people's faith to come out of it. Sometimes when I'm praying for people who are ill, I don't just pray that they'll get better, but I pray that they will know God's healing hand or that they will know God's presence.

It's one thing for God's presence to be there but if people don't know it, then in a sense you might say, well, what's the point of it being there? But pray that they will know God's presence, that they'll know God's power or know God's healing, that they will know God.

That's a prayer for the glory of God. What will induce an answer from God? Prayer will. Obedient faith will. And a desire for God's glory will.

But the fourth thing, the key thing in the end that's so important is that it is God who answers. The key to prayer is the God to whom we pray. You see, God is not silent, he's not meditating, he hasn't gone to relieve himself, he hasn't gone on a journey, he's not asleep, he's not impotent, he's not absent, he's not deaf or dead.

But God is alive and powerful and real and listening and attentive to the prayers and supplications of his people. He's there, he hears, he listens to his people pray.

[23 : 22] And Elijah's prayer is answered because that is God. What will induce an answer from God? God will in the end because he's that sort of God.

You see, Baal's a joke, he's a non-God, he's a fiction, a delusion, a deception and any other God in our world or any other world is likewise. There is only one God and it's the God of the Bible and if anybody says that their God, which is not the God of the Bible, is just the same as our God, they're wrong, they're deceiving themselves and us.

But the God of the Bible, the God who speaks, the God who reveals himself, the God who answers prayers, the God who came to earth incarnate in the Son Jesus Christ and died for us on the cross, he is God, he alone is God and he is real, he's there, he is powerful and he listens and is attentive to the prayers and supplications of his people and if he is God, then serve him and him alone.

The contest is over, Elijah tells the king it's about to rain which is a bit strange because the sky is perfectly blue without a cloud in it, hasn't been rain for three years. Ahab goes off to his palace, Elijah goes to pray again, he prays for rain, an expectant prayer because he tells his servant each time to go and look for a cloud, seven times it happens, seven times there's nothing but on the seventh time there is the cloud.

Looking out from Mount Carmel across westward, across the Mediterranean sea, a glimpse of a cloud on the horizon and gradually it gets bigger and the clouds develop, dark, thundery clouds and the rain comes as Elijah had prayed.

[25 : 02] The beginning of chapter 17 we saw last week that he announced to the king there will be no rain in this land until I say so according to God's word and now three, three and a half years later it's fulfilled.

Elijah prays prayer and the rain comes. What induces an answer from God? Prayer does.

The prayer of obedient faith does. The prayer of obedient faith desiring God's glory does. But in the end it's God who answers prayer.

James, the brother of Jesus who wrote a letter in the New Testament said that the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

That's what Elijah's prayer was. The one who exercises obedient faith is righteous and his prayer was powerful and effective. Devastatingly so.

[26 : 10] But we probably think well but Elijah's a superhero. He's one of the great heroes of the Old Testament. He's special. He's unique. We're not like him. I mean his prayers will be answered by God because he's somehow closer to God.

He's somehow more special. James says the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

Elijah was a human being just like us.

Isn't that extraordinary to think? that we are just like him. He's just like us. We're people like him. He was a man like us and his prayer was so devastatingly powerful and effective not because he had a special formula but because he prayed.

He prayed in obedient faith. He prayed desiring God's glory and because God answered him as God still does today. Despite what the world thinks, God is not dead.

He's alive and doing very well, thank you. And if God is God, serve him. If God is God, pray.

[27 : 24] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.