

# A Powerful Showdown!

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- [ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, we're going to come now and reflect upon those words that were read there from 1 Kings 17 and 18. But before we do that, let's just have a word of prayer, shall we?
- Father God, at this point in our worship, we've come now to reflect upon a passage of Scripture. We recognize it's your word that we pray that through your Spirit that we will speak into our hearts. It may seem like it's not relevant to our day and age.
- It may not seem to have any contemporary application. But help us, Lord, to see it and to understand that maybe you can speak into our hearts. That we see something we haven't seen before.
- Be it to your glory. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Well, the weather just now has turned a little bit squeaky up here in the north of Scotland, hasn't it?
- Of course, that's what happens when the school holidays start. You know, you get great weather in May, June, and then the school holidays start. You end up with a little bit of rain when it gets cooler and so on.
- [ 1 : 0 2 ] Although we had a great spring, didn't we? I think it was one Friday a few weeks back and it got to 28 degrees. Those who are visiting, that's the truth. It really did get to 28 degrees. But increasingly through our summers, maybe more so in Europe and England, we're getting heatwaves up.
- Periods of dry spells, long dry spells. We were over in Murray last weekend at a place called Dallas. And as we drove from Elgin to Dallas, we were aware of this cloud that was blowing right across Murray and towards Aberdeenshire.
- And of course, there was a huge fire there above the dale. And we were just below the dale in Dallas, so we kind of got to see that. And in previous summers, we witnessed terrible fires, haven't we?
- Destroying communities and taking lives. I think it was in Hawaii a few years back. It was a terrible fire there. And people lost their lives in that situation. Well, our passage this morning from One King, which relates to a period of drought.
- But this drought is not because of extreme heat or climate change and like that. This drought comes through the prophet Elijah and lasts for nearly three years.
- [ 2 : 1 8 ] This drought is about God's judgment upon a people who turn their back on God. They've ignored God. They've ignored Yahweh. Elijah is this charismatic prophet.
- And we come across him in chapter 17 of First Kings. He wears a camel hair coat with a large leather belt around his waist. He lives in the wilderness. He probably eats locusts and honey and so on.
- 800 years later on, we get another character, don't we, who's also a messenger in the wilderness, who adopts exactly the same dress code. And that's John the Baptist. He was also a messenger in the wilderness.
- And Elijah is a messenger. Elijah's Hebrew name means Jehovah is God. Well, the account here in One Kings 18 is a fantastic Old Testament biblical drama.

But it's more than a drama. It contains humor. And it serves a powerful reminder to all of us that maybe, you know, we get caught in this trap.

[ 3 : 23 ] We think all religions lead to some sort of divine power or some great architect of the universe. This fact is about teachers. That is not the truth. Of course, that's universalism.

Well, Elijah reminds us that there's only one true God. And he is sovereign. And he doesn't tolerate rivals. And he doesn't tolerate idols either.

He doesn't tolerate Buddhism. Or Hinduism. Or Islam. Now, the Bible sees those religions as false. This event took place nearly 3,000 years ago in Israel.

A very different time. And a very different culture than the one in which we live today. But the message is as clear for this generation as it's always been.

The book of Kings is exactly what it says it is. It's an account of the kings of Israel. And it starts with Solomon. Solomon began his reign well.

[ 4 : 24 ] But then, due to his extravagances and his excesses, his kingship falls into spiritual decline. And unfortunately, the mold had been set.

The kings that follow Solomon also failed in their spiritual leadership responsibilities. This eventually results in disruption in the land of Israel.

And the splitting of that land into two kingdoms. And we get Israel in the north and Judah in the south. So, many of these kings practiced what we call idolatry.

Worshipping other gods. As well as practicing all sorts of wickedness. And it's during the reign of one of these kings, King Ahab. The reign of the 860 years before Jesus.

In the northern kingdom of Israel. And it's here that Elijah appears on the scene. We're not given any background about Elijah. Other than the fact that Elijah is a tishbite from Gilead.

[ 5 : 26 ] That's all the passage says. There's no information about his parents. Or who raised him. Elijah just appears in chapter 17 of the first kings. The Bible tells us that King Ahab did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any previous king.

Ahab was married to a Phoenician princess called Jezebel. Well, the name Jezebel this age becomes synonymous, hasn't it? Synonymous with sexual sin and immorality.

Which then alludes to the kind of debauchery they practiced as they worshipped Baal. Baal was a god of the weather. So they believed. He was depicted carrying a thunderbolt.

That's how they saw. And that's so they listed the image of Baal. Consequently, the people believed that the harvest and the crops. That their very survival was dependent on pleasing Baal.

The worship of Baal took place in temples. Involved all sorts of debauchery. Sex with prostitutes. Including the sacrifice of children. It was a thoroughly vile and despicable affair.

[ 6 : 36 ] The very opposite to what God had condoned. So here in chapter 17, God's about to expose the fact that Baal is an imposter to his prophet Elijah.

Elijah announces to King Ahab. As the Lord, the God of Israel lives, whom I serve. There will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except my word.

Basically, Elijah is pronouncing a drought upon the land. Well, you can read more about that drought. And how God sustained Elijah in the remainder of chapter 17.

This morning, I want to move on to three years later. In chapter 18. The drought has now become severe in the land. And God tells Elijah to present himself to King Ahab.

Because God wants to send rain on the land. You could say he wants to show mercy to the people. But before God does that, he wants to make it fundamentally clear as to who is the true God.

[ 7 : 41 ] You could say this is a showdown between God and Baal. You would think, wouldn't you, that because Israel suffered such a severe drought and famine, that the people would question this so-called God of the weather.

Baal. Because he's failed. He's failed them miserably. Throughout the years of drought, Queen Jezebel has maintained a policy of religious persecution against the Lord's prophets.

Slaughtering many of them with the ultimate aim of wiping out any followers of Yahweh, the true God. And only promoting Baal worship. And maybe this is part of the story that we can make that contemporary connection with.

Because maybe like some of you, I've received newsletters on a fairly regular basis from organizations who specifically minister and support Christians in countries where it's potentially dangerous to be a Christian.

Countries like Nigeria, where Christians have been murdered literally in their hundreds. Hence, many are trying to leave and come to places like Britain. Because obviously Britain represents a much safer stronghold.

[ 8 : 52 ] But they're not in danger like they are in Nigeria. Pakistan. Afghanistan, where it's virtually impossible to be a Christian. North Korea, where again it's so dangerous to be a practicing Christian that if you are caught in North Korea doing that, you're liable to be sent off the equivalent of a concentration camp.

Even worse, you may be put to death. Seriously. This is not the exact return. Parts of India. Parts of China. Iran. And many Muslim countries.

I think all this just serves to authenticate the reality of the spiritual tension that there is. That the modern media will not be in touch. They won't even report this because, of course, they can't make sense of it.

But it authenticates to us the struggle between God and his enemy. Well, Elijah meets King Ahab. And after the exchange of a few insults, Elijah throws down the gauntlet.

Verse 19. Now he summoned the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the 450 prophets of Baal, the 400 prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table.

[ 10 : 03 ] Jezebel was right at the heart of Baal worship. People worship Baal, as they said before, as the god of the weather. Trusting him for the harvest, they thought of Yahweh as the god of Sinai, the god of the hills, the god of the desert.

Therefore, I guess like we do sometimes, they hedge their bets and worship both, believing they would enjoy the blessings of both. In reality, what they were doing was just bringing Yahweh down to the same level as these other false deities.

And we do that, we're communicating loud and clear, aren't we? That we don't trust God. We don't trust in Jesus. We're actually not exercising faith. I guess the challenge for us is, are we a bit like those Israelites?

Attending church, but also hedging our bets. Seeking security in other things. Lottery maybe, property, money, business, horoscopes sometimes, whatever.

The Bible tells that our god is a jealous god, and he cannot be mocked. It's not the case of he will not be mocked. He cannot be mocked. Well, enough was enough.

[ 11 : 21 ] And the people of Elijah's time had been deceived for too long by this kind of state-promoted religion. Time was now up for Baal. The showdown was to take place on Mount Carmel.

Once the prophets and the people were assembled, Elijah threw down the challenge, didn't he? I hope you can kind of picture in your head of this large and light character.

Elijah's like some character in some biblical epic movie. Verse 21. How long will you waver between two opinions?

If the Lord is God, follow him. If Baal is God, follow him. Couldn't be simple, could it? And nothing has changed. Has it?

Choice today is still a simple one. But just as then, there are issues and circumstances in our lives that seek to cloud our judgment and tempt us away from God.

[ 12 : 22 ] Instead of Baal, it might be our finances or our careers or our interests. The laws be something that seeks to come between us and God.

At this stage, Elijah carefully points out to the crowd that he's only one prophet as opposed to Baal's 450 prophets and then an additional 400 prophets.

If Baal is real, it really shouldn't be a problem, should it? Using two bulls, we have this dramatic showdown between God and Baal. The only catch, no one is allowed to set fire to the sacrifice.

Elijah invites the prophets of Baal to go first. Again, this should not be a problem for Baal, should it? After all, he's the God with the, he's got the thunderbolt in his hand. Elijah tells the people that whoever answers by fire, he is God.

Verse 24. And the people agree with him. The prophets call the name of Baal from morning till noon. Oh, Baal, answer us, they shout. But no answer.

[ 13 : 32 ] They dance around the altar, but that makes absolutely no difference. Elijah tells them to shout louder. Perhaps he's in deep thought or busy.

The literal translation of busy is Baal's on the toilet. That's what Elijah was talking about, really. Or perhaps Baal is traveling. Maybe he's sleeping. Maybe he needs to be awakened.

And then, you can just see the sarcasm here, can't you? Elijah's taunting them. He's mocking them. He's winding them up. So much so, they begin to slash themselves with swords and spears, and their blood begins to flow in a real frenzy.

You can imagine this heightened frenzy, which continues until evening. But still, there is no response. Now it becomes Elijah's turn.

And he calls the people to himself. He repairs a ruined altar, taking 12 stones, symbolic of the 12 tribes of Israel. He then takes a trench around the altar, and eventually piles up the wood and the pieces of wool he puts on top.

[ 14 : 37 ] Bearing in mind, this consciousness has gone through three years of drought. Some of you would say it was quite unusual. He then instructs those present to pour four large jars of water on the surface, on the wool and the wood.

And he does this not once, not twice, but three times. He wants to make absolutely clear who God is. There's so much water that it runs down and fills the trench.

Elijah sees at the moment, and after the pathetic display of the prophets of Babel, and all their friends are shouting, dancing, and slashing themselves, Elijah prays, and he says, O Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and have done all these things at your command.

Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so that these people will know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you would turn their hearts back again. There's a passage tells in verse 13, Then the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones, and the soil, and also lit up the water of the trench.

The outcome of this contest is absolutely black and white, isn't it? Whether through fear or awe, the people fall to the ground crying out, The Lord, He is God.

[ 16 : 07 ] The Lord, He is God. No more confusion. No more a plethora of different gods. Just one God to follow. One God to serve.

The passage then tells us that Elijah had all the prophets of Baal slaughtered. About 3,000 years ago, of course. Elijah's taking no chances.

He's eradicating any possible return to this evil, this false religion. God is a jealous God. I said again, He cannot be mort.

At the end of chapter 18, we see another example of Elijah's faith. He's a slightly eccentric character. And the rain comes just as Elijah had foretold. God is faithful.

What an amazing and remarkable drama this is. Well, this passage wonderfully and powerfully serves to reinforce the first and second commandments.

[ 17 : 09 ] You shall have no other gods before me and you shall not make yourself an idol. Elijah's one of those Old Testament prophets a bit like Joseph and Daniel.

Offsuit display, tremendous faith reflects something of the character and nature of God later to be revealed in our Savior, Jesus Christ. But Elijah doesn't exercise what you might call restless faith.

He doesn't just decide to stick his neck on the line with the hope that God will somehow turn up and meet him in this. Sometimes I think he can wrongly conclude that what is required is a complete step into the dark.

An abandonment of common sense so to speak. That in some way God will condone our actions and not let us down. And I would be the first to admit that this can be difficult.

It can be difficult to discern the genuine bleeding of the Spirit from our personal preferences and desires and so on. Elijah describes himself as a servant of God in chapter 17 at verse 24.

[ 18 : 19 ] There is a process of spiritual growth and maturity in Elijah which didn't just happen overnight. It did take time. Elijah's dedication to God's service was a way of life for him.

There was a dialogue with God and through that dialogue Elijah became spiritually sensitive and open to hear what God was saying. And nothing has changed.

Today our dialogue is through our Savior the Lord Jesus Christ. We describe faith as a gift and I believe it is a gift. It's a gift that has given a response to our relationship with God.

It's what we believe that will govern how we really relate to God. Do we talk to God in prayer? And do we expect to hear an answer from him?

If we can say yes to both of those things then the reality is that we're already living a life of faith. Just like Elijah we may be well surprised with the challenge that God has prepared for us just rare in the corner in our own lives.

[ 19 : 31 ] Elijah faced overwhelming odds on Mount Carmel. One prophet remember as opposed to what was 850 prophets. But it's in these moments of overwhelming odds when in our human strength everything seems absolutely impossible when we are weak.

He says he is strong as me. And the Lord delights in those who have the faith to trust in his resources. God is faithful. And it's all very well me talking in cliches because that conveniently keeps a barrier between the reality of our lives and this whole area of God working out his purposes through us practically.

The last time I worked overseas as a missionary pilot for India was Tanzania in 2006. When I arrived in the country the expected rains had not come.

It's a picture of a couple of pictures. That's what the country looked like back in 2006 when I arrived there. But the next picture you can just see the place is absolutely arid and dry.

It was a terrible drought and people were going hungry. In fact one of my first flights was to take food for a remote village. One morning I was leading worship in the MF hangar.

[ 20 : 52 ] I used to take it in terms of leading worship in the hangar before all the work started. If you were a plane you probably longed on you'd gone at dawn but if you were a plane you used to go and do worship. It's a picture there I think.

Yep there it is there's worship in the hangar. It tells you to do it. And the story I shared that morning came from this book. It relates directly to our passage from 1 Kings 17 and 18.

The book is called The Lonely Lake A Chad Story. It was actually sent to me by a lady from OCH who's one of my prayer supporters. A lady called Elizabeth Betty Patience.

It's long gone now but she sent me this book because she knew I was working in Chad. I watched Chad in 2004. And the story relates to a village on Lake Chad called Bol.

The place has actually cloned to a number of times. And you can read the account on page 80 in this book. And I'm just going read this account too. Go to the next picture then.

[ 21 : 58 ] 80 miles northeast of Baga across the waters of Chad in a sizable town called Bol, the Lord chose to show forth his glory in a wonderful way. Fishing is the main industry in Bol as in most places around the lake.

But it's also a center of commerce in the great republic of Chad. And many of the population are farmers. here's the story of what happened at home as told by Mrs. Elizabeth Longley of MEF.

And we personally knew the Longleys that used to live at Skye Curver near the main bridge. And Elizabeth confirmed to the details that are recorded in this book. Sadly, Elizabeth died some years ago due to help.

The rains had begun after months of dryness and the first crops were growing well when, unaccountably, a dry spell came on the country around the fall. For weeks, not a drop of rain fell at the time where normally there would be rain every day.

There was consternation amongst the people and the leaders of the Muslims were called to perform rites to induce Allah to send rain but still no rain. There's a small group of Christians of the Chadian church in Bo.

[ 23 : 11 ] One of them shared with two of his friends his conviction that the Spirit of God wanted them to use this situation to show forth their faith in him and to pray for rain. These three men decided to fast for three days and to pray that if this conviction was indeed of God, he would hold back rain for this period as a sign that they should go forward.

Early on Sunday morning, three days later, there were still no clouds in the sky but the three men were now absolutely sure what God wanted to do. They sent letters to the district officer and to all the leaders of the local government.

They also sent letters to the leaders of the Muslims. The letter read as follows. The Christian church at Bo, whose church building is situated in the banks of the river close to the wheat company's garage, in view of the drought which has prevailed in the country for many days, in view of the numerous complaints from the country people and from the entire village, in view of the efforts of the fakirs over a period of five days, with the object of inducing rain, an effort which was in vain, aware of the fact that the greenhouse is only one month away, in view of the hunger which has been suffered in the country this year, has decided to set aside its service on Sunday, August the 13th, for prayers, asking the living God, creator of the world, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, to cause it to rain in the country.

For this, the church invites ensure the prefect, the south prefect, the first federal secretary of the lake, and through their subordinates, the first secretary, the subsection of all these deputies, the present Hawa, and three ladies with her, the leader of Islam in both, and others with him, to honor by their presence at the service today at 10.30 a.m.

at the building on the riverside, which is used as a church. By 10.30 a.m., clouds covered the horizon around, but the sky of a ball was completely clear.

[ 25 : 15 ] By 10.15 a.m., the Christians were assembled to church, and by 10.30 a.m., the building was almost full, the majority of those who had been invited having come.

Before the service began, the pastor, Simon Mugoto, reminded the guests of the reason for their invitation to the service. He concluded by saying, we have invited you to come and witness what God is about to do, and also, you may understand today, the true way which leads to God, the Lord Jesus Christ.

After the singing of hymns and a prayer, Simon read the story of Elijah and the police of Baal on Mount Carmel, fearlessly drawing a parallel with their own situation.

As he reads the words, then the fire the Lord fell, they heard thunder and the fire were all outside, and soon rain began to fall. The service of prayer became a service of praise. Muslims and Christians alike gave glory to the Lord.

At the end of the service, one high official asked if you could have a Bible. News spread throughout the whole area of Bals and the surrounding countryside. For five days, it continued to rain.

[ 26 : 26 ] The needs of the countryside were abundantly met. some who previously were hostile began attending church services, Christian services. What a truly amazing account that is.

Elizabeth assured me that was 100% a true account of what happened. What an amazing God. As I shared this story with my MEF colleagues in that time of worship, the Hannah and Dodoma, back in 2006, when they were in the midst of a terrible drought in Tanzania, everyone got very excited.

They all wanted copies of the story and everything we did before I copied it. And we prayed there and then that the drought would end soon and the rains would come. The very next day, I had to make a flight to Dar es Salaam on the coast.

I know you didn't get there. Why? Because guess what? Next picture. That was a picture I took that day. The rain, the clouds covered everywhere.

I was looking to hold the cloud to get there, to get to Dar es Salaam. And the rains came the very next day. What an amazing God we have. Do we grasp?

[ 27 : 39 ] Do we have the faith to really trust Him? What He can do? Let's pray. Almighty, gracious God, you are indeed the sovereign God and you've made yourself known to us through Jesus Christ.

He's the living example of you. The example of how He wants us to follow Him in ways of love, mercy, praise, compassion, restoration, healing, and so on.

But you are a mighty God. And when we come to you in genuine faith, there is nothing that you cannot do. And sometimes you don't give us the answers to the prayers that we want. But we can see your work in your hands.

And I pray, Lord, for anyone here this morning who is struggling with the idea that you're real, that suddenly you'll touch their hearts. Break right into their hearts and make them realize just how real you are, how much you love them, how much you care for them, and that they can trust you.

In Jesus' name, Amen.