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By *Bob Deffinbaugh*  
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# The Life and Times of Elijah the Prophet— Showdown at the Mount Carmel Corral (1 Kings 18:1-46)

## Introduction

This week I received an e-mail with another one of those “Peter and the Pearly Gates” jokes. In order to make this joke theologically tolerable, I had to do some editing, and even so, let the reader beware:

Two Christians die on the same day and go to heaven. When they arrive in heaven they meet Peter, who is handing out the rewards (here, of course is a theological error). One of the men is a minister, and the other fellow who is standing just ahead of him is dressed in sunglasses, a loud shirt, a leather jacket, and jeans. While they are standing in line, he informs the minister that he was a cab driver in Nuw Yowk City. The cab driver receives a crown with many stars. The minister has high hopes for an even bigger crown. But his crown is smaller, with fewer stars. He can't understand why he should be rewarded in this way, especially when the cab driver did so well. The minister protests, “I'm Joseph Snow, and I've served as pastor of Saint Mary's for the last 43 years. How come my reward is less than this cab driver from New York City?” Peter responds, “Well, your reward is based upon the results of your ministry. While you preached, people slept; while he drove, people prayed.”

If God did reward the saints according to the results of their ministry (which he does not!), then Elijah should have received a substantial bonus in his paycheck after the contest on Mount Carmel. Incidentally, I call this contest (and thus chapter 18) “The Showdown at the Mount Carmel Corral.” Who could do better than to call down fire from heaven, while standing before a large crowd of people who had wished him dead? These are the kind of results that many in Christian ministry have yearned for, but have never once experienced. The contest on Mount Carmel was a turning point in the history of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. It is an event far removed from us, both in time and space, but there are many lessons for us to learn from this spectacular incident. Let us listen well, and learn what God has for us from this text.

## Review

You will remember that Elijah is a prophet to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, during the reign of Ahab and his Sidonian wife Jezebel (1 Kings 16:29-34). Elijah appears from out of nowhere to announce to King Ahab that it will not rain in Israel until Elijah speaks the word. This Elijah declares in the name of Yahweh, the God of Israel (17:1). God then instructs Elijah to hide himself by the brook Cherith, where he could drink from its waters and be fed bread and meat morning and evening by the ravens (17:2-6). When the drought became extreme and the brook dried up, God instructed Elijah to go to Zarephath, a city in Sidon, not far from where Jezebel used to live. In other words, God had Elijah hide out in the heart of Baal country, where no one would have been more eager to capture and to kill Elijah than Jezebel's father, the king of the Sidonians (16:31). There in Sidon, God cares for Elijah through a Gentile widow. They are saved from death by starvation, and the boy is raised from the dead, all by the word of God through Elijah (see 17:24).

## **Obadiah: A Believer in Ahab's Court**

or

### **"What's a Man Like You, Doing in a Place Like This?"**

#### **(1 Kings 18:1-15)**

1 Some time later, in the third year of the famine, the LORD told Elijah, "Go, make an appearance before Ahab, so I might send rain on the surface of the ground." 2 So Elijah went to make an appearance before Ahab. Now the famine was severe in Samaria. 3 So Ahab summoned Obadiah, who supervised the palace. (Now Obadiah was a very loyal follower of the LORD. 4 When Jezebel was killing the LORD's prophets, Obadiah took 100 prophets and hid them in two caves in two groups of 50. He also brought them food and water.) 5 Ahab told Obadiah, "Go through the land to all the springs and valleys. Maybe you can find some grazing areas so we can keep the horses and mules alive and not have to kill some of the animals." 6 They divided up the land between them; Ahab went one way and Obadiah went the other. 7 As Obadiah was traveling along, Elijah met him. When he recognized him, he fell facedown to the ground and said, "Is it really you, my master, Elijah?" 8 He replied, "Yes, go and say to your master, 'Elijah is back.'" 9 Obadiah said, "What sin have I committed that you are ready to hand your servant over to Ahab for execution? 10 As certainly as the LORD your God lives, my master has sent to every nation and kingdom in an effort to find you. When they say, 'He's not here,' he makes them swear an oath that they could not find you. 11 Now you say, 'Go and say to your master, 'Elijah is back.'" 12 But when I leave you, the LORD's spirit will carry you away so I can't find you. If I go tell Ahab I've seen you, he won't be able to find you and he will kill me. That would not be fair, because your servant has been a loyal follower of the LORD from my youth. 13 Certainly my master is aware of what I did when Jezebel was killing the LORD's prophets. I hid 100 of the LORD's prophets in two caves in two groups of 50 and I brought them food and water. 14 Now you say, 'Go and say to your master, "Elijah is back,"' but he will kill me." 15 But Elijah said, "As certainly as the sovereign LORD lives (whom I serve), I will make an appearance before him today."

From 1 Kings 17, we were informed that the drought Elijah prophesied came to pass, and we know that it created difficulties for Elijah, and for the widow of Zarephath and her son. We know that the brook Cherith dried up, and that it was necessary for Elijah to go to the land of Sidon to live. From these beginning verses in chapter 18, we learn more about the impact of the drought on Israel. We know that there was such a serious shortage of feed for the livestock that the king himself had to search for any pasture land, in the hope that they would not need to kill some of the horses and mules for lack of feed (18:5-6). We also learn how intent Ahab was on capturing Elijah. Obadiah informed Elijah that Ahab had an "all points bulletin" out for him. Without a

doubt, Elijah was Israel's most wanted fugitive. Ahab not only searched throughout the land of Israel, he pressed the neighboring kingdoms to turn Elijah over to him if he was hiding out within their borders. Even when a neighboring country assured Ahab that Elijah was not living there, Ahab was not satisfied. He insisted that they provide him with the equivalent of a sworn affidavit, stating in writing that they did not know where Elijah could be found (18:10). Ahab was serious about capturing and killing Elijah.

And we know that it was not just Elijah whose life was in danger. In verse 4, we are informed that Jezebel was hunting down every true prophet of the God of Israel and slaughtering them. We are not told how many prophets died at the hand of Jezebel, but one must conclude that it was more than a few. I don't know exactly what time period the writer to the Hebrews is referring, but these words now take on new meaning:

32 And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets. 33 Through faith they conquered kingdoms, administered justice, gained what was promised, shut the mouths of lions, 34 quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, gained strength in weakness, became mighty in battle, put foreign armies to flight, 35 and women received back their dead raised to life. But others were tortured, not accepting release, to obtain resurrection to a better life. 36 And others experienced mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 37 They were stoned, sawed apart, murdered with the sword; they went about in sheepskins and goatskins; **they were destitute, afflicted, ill-treated 38 (the world was not worthy of them); they wandered in deserts and mountains and caves and openings in the earth.** 39 And these all were commended for their faith, yet they did not receive what was promised. 40 For God had provided something better for us, so that they would be made perfect together with us (Hebrews 11:32-40, emphasis mine).

It was while this intensive manhunt was underway that God instructed Elijah to present himself to Ahab, and to inform the king that God was going to bring rain to the parched land of Israel (18:1-2). Elijah was on his way when he encountered Obadiah. Obadiah is a most interesting and perplexing fellow. He is the servant of King Ahab and appears to be one of his most trusted men. It is Obadiah, along with Ahab, who searches the land for any remaining pasture or feed for the king's livestock.<sup>59</sup>

What is most puzzling is that Obadiah is so closely associated with Ahab, and yet we are told that he **"was a very loyal follower of the LORD"** (18:3). The writer gives us some very compelling evidence to validate this assessment of Obadiah's relationship with God. He tells us that when Jezebel began killing the prophets, Obadiah hid 100 of the prophets away in two caves, in groups of 50, providing them with shelter and food (18:4). And yet one has to wonder how such a man could be a part of Ahab's administration. It would appear that neither Ahab nor Jezebel was aware of his faith in the God of Israel. Obadiah appears to be a kind of "closet Christian," not unlike Joseph of Arimathea or Nicodemus in the New Testament (John 19:38-39). He does not seem to have come out into the open concerning his faith.

Obadiah seems to have recognized Elijah immediately (18:7). His response to Elijah's appearance inclines me to think that he was not really that happy to see Elijah. Obadiah apparently was able to keep his sparing of the 100 prophets secret. It was not that he was opposed to Elijah, but it hardly seems that he wants to be publicly associated with him either. Most of all, he does not want to tell Ahab that he knows where to find Elijah, only to have him disappear. Obadiah knows better than nearly anyone else how much Ahab wants to capture Elijah, and he also knows how angry he can get when Elijah makes him look bad by eluding him.

It is somewhat interesting to me that Obadiah can speak of Elijah miraculously disappearing by means of the Holy Spirit. Here is a man who saved 100 prophets by hiding them away, and yet he assumes that the prophet Elijah has been spared in some miraculous way—every time the enemy draws near, he is whisked away by the Spirit (18:12). If Obadiah informs Ahab of Elijah's whereabouts, he fears that the prophet will simply vanish into thin air, and then he (Obadiah) will be left to face the king's wrath. Elijah's instructions sounded like a suicide mission to Obadiah.

I am fascinated and somewhat troubled by the fact that Obadiah brings up the matter of the 100 prophets whose lives he saved. We have already been told this in verses 3 and 4, when we were first introduced to Obadiah and told of his character. Now, Obadiah feels obliged to tell Elijah about it, or at least to remind him of it in verses 12 and 13. Why does he feel he must do so? It sounds as though Obadiah wants to convince Elijah of his piety. And if he can do this, Obadiah seems to hope that this will change Elijah's mind about sending him to Ahab. Does Obadiah think that being pious is a guarantee that one will not suffer for his faith? I hope not, but the description of this man does leave some serious questions.<sup>60</sup> Of course we would like Obadiah to be flawless in his faith, but when we look in the Bible we see that even the greatest saints had their flaws. And so why should we expect perfection of this man?<sup>61</sup> Elijah does not promise Obadiah that he will be safe, but he does assure him that he will be there when Ahab returns (18:15). And so Obadiah makes his way to Ahab, to tell him this amazing news.

## **Elijah and Ahab (1 Kings 18:16-19)**

16 When Obadiah went and informed Ahab, the king went to meet Elijah. 17 When Ahab saw Elijah, he said to him, "Is it really you, the one who brings disaster on Israel?" 18 Elijah replied, "I have not brought disaster on Israel. But you and your father's dynasty have, by abandoning the LORD's commandments and following the Baals. 19 Now send out messengers and assemble all Israel before me at Mount Carmel, as well as the 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah whom Jezebel supports.

From the context, we know that Ahab and Obadiah had gone out in search of pasture and feed for the king's livestock. It would seem that they had prearranged to meet at some designated place when they were finished with their search. I would take it, then, that Obadiah went to this designated meeting place where he found Ahab. If this were the case, Ahab would not have been too far off at that moment, and he may very well have gone directly to the place where Elijah came upon Obadiah. Notice that Elijah did not go to Ahab; Ahab came to him. Perhaps Elijah is attempting to make it very clear to Ahab who is in charge. As the spokesman for God, Elijah is the higher authority. Furthermore, it was wise for Elijah to choose a remote and private place. Ahab could not as easily arrest Elijah in such a place, whereas it would have been relatively easy in the city of Jezreel. And there, in this secluded location, Ahab and Elijah could talk candidly, without the interference of Jezebel. However it came about, the king of Israel and Elijah are now "eyeball to eyeball," as we would say.

When they met, Ahab could not restrain himself from verbally getting in the first blow: "**Is that you, O troubler of Israel?**" (verse 17, NKJ). Ahab could have used a basic course in logic. He was right, of course, that Israel was in a lot of trouble. It was Elijah who announced that this trouble was coming, in the form of a drought. But Ahab was completely off track in concluding that Elijah was the source of his troubles, and those of his nation. Israel's troubles were the result of Ahab's sins, those of his father, and those of the Israelites whom he led:

1 “You must not make for yourselves idols, so you must not set up for yourselves a carved image or a pillar, and you must not place a sculpted stone in your land to bow down before it, for I am the LORD your God. 2 You must keep by sabbaths and reverence my sanctuary. I am the LORD. 3 **“If you walk in my statutes and be sure to do my commandments, 4 I will give your rains in their time so that the land will give its yield and the tree of the field will give its fruit. 5 Threshing season will extend for you until vintage season, and vintage season will extend until sowing season, so you will eat your bread to satisfaction, and you will live securely in your land”** (Leviticus 26:1-5, emphasis mine).

10 “For the land to which you are headed as your possession is not like the land of Egypt from which you came, a land where you sowed seed and which you irrigated by hand like a vegetable garden. 11 Rather, the land to which you go as your possession is one of hills and valleys, a land that drinks water from the rains, 12 one the LORD your God looks after. He is constantly attentive to it from the beginning to the end of the year. 13 **Now, if you conscientiously attend to my commandment which I am giving you today, that is, to love the LORD your God and to serve him with all your mind and being, 14 then, he says, “I will send the rain of your land in its season, the former and the latter rains, so that you might have an ingathering of wheat, new wine, and oil. 15 I will provide pasturage for your livestock and you yourself will eat to satisfaction. 16 “Watch yourselves lest you become deceived and turn to serve and worship other gods; 17 then the anger of the LORD will boil up against you and he will close up the heavens so that they do not rain, the land will not yield its produce, and you will soon die off from the good land that he is about to give you”** (Deuteronomy 11:10-17, emphasis mine).

15 “But if you pay no attention to the LORD your God and are not careful to keep all his commandments and statutes I am relating to you today, then all these curses will come and overtake you: 16 Cursed will you be in the city and cursed will you be in the field. 17 Cursed will be your basket and your kneading-trough. 18 Cursed will be your children, the offspring of your livestock, the calves of your cattle, and the young of your flock. 19 Cursed will you be in your coming in and cursed will you be in your going out. 20 The LORD will send upon you the curse, the unease, and the rebuke in everything you undertake until you are destroyed and quickly perish because of your evil in forsaking me. 21 The LORD will plague you with pestilence until he has completely removed you from the land to which you are going to possess it. 22 He will afflict you with consumption, fever, inflammation, infection, sword, scorching, and mildew, and these will attack you until you perish. 23 **The heavens above your heads will be as brass and the earth beneath you as iron. 24 The LORD will make the rain of your land like powder and dust; it will come down upon you from the sky until you are destroyed.** 25 The LORD will allow you to be struck down before your enemies; you will go out against them one way but flee them seven ways and will become a source of terror to all the kingdoms of the earth. 26 Your carcass will be food for every bird of the sky and wild animal of the earth, and there will be no one to shoo them off” (Deuteronomy 28:15-26, emphasis mine).

Elijah was not “troubled” by Ahab’s angry indictment. He knew better. Quickly turning the tables on Ahab, he informed the king that Israel’s troubles were not due to any wrong doing on his part, but were the consequence of Ahab’s disregard for God’s commandments, and particularly his worship of other gods. Omri had acted wickedly (1 Kings 16:25-26), and now his son—Ahab—has surpassed him. No previous king had matched Ahab in wickedness (16:30, 33). And it was not just Ahab who sinned. Like Omri, Ahab’s “leadership” encouraged the nation to sin as well (see 16:26).

Elijah issues a command to Ahab:<sup>62</sup> **“Now send out messengers and assemble all Israel before me at Mount Carmel, as well as the 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah whom Jezebel supports”** (verse 19). Ahab was told to assemble **“all Israel”** to Mount Carmel. We can safely assume that every Israelite did not come, but Elijah’s instructions inform us that the entire nation was summoned. While Israel had a **“chief of sinners”** at the helm, they had the leadership they deserved. The nation suffered from this drought because the entire nation was under divine judgment for their idolatry. The nation was to gather to be confronted with their sin. I believe that Mount Carmel<sup>63</sup> was chosen for a number of (unspecified) reasons. It was somewhat removed from Jezreel and Samaria. It was not far from Sidon. It was a “high place” that had been used both to worship Baal and to worship the true God of Israel. It was the perfect place for a “battle of the gods.” The altar on which Israel had worshipped God had been torn down, but the stones were still there. It could be rebuilt, and so it was (18:30-32).

Elijah also instructed Ahab to assemble the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah. I am not convinced that the 400 prophets of Asherah showed up. When the people and the prophets arrive at Mount Carmel, Elijah refers only to the 450 prophets of Baal. In verse 22, Elijah indicates that the odds are 450 to 1—450 prophets of Baal to 1 prophet of God, himself. In verse 25, Elijah speaks to the prophets of Baal, but no mention is made of the prophets of Asherah. In verse 40, Elijah orders the Israelites to seize the prophets of Baal. Again, there is no mention of the 400 prophets of Asherah. I am therefore inclined to think that Jezebel and the 400 prophets of Asherah stayed behind, and did not accept the challenge. As someone remarked, for the Prime Minister of Israel to meet with Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat is to give him a certain legitimacy. It is to officially recognize him and the organization which he represents. I do not think that Jezebel was willing to recognize Elijah as a prophet. If Ahab was willing to take orders from this fellow, let him, but not Jezebel.

## **Putting the Gods to the Test (1 Kings 18:20-24)**

20 Ahab sent messengers to all the Israelites and he assembled the prophets at Mount Carmel. 21 Elijah approached all the people and said, “How long are you going to be paralyzed<sup>64</sup> by indecision? If the LORD is the true God, then follow him, but if Baal is, follow him!” But the people did not say a word. 22 Elijah said to them: “I am the only prophet of LORD who is left, but the prophets of Baal number 450. 23 Let them bring us two bulls. Let them choose one of the bulls for themselves, cut it up into pieces, and place it on the wood. But they must not set it on fire. I will do the same to the other bull and place it on the wood. But I will not set it on fire. 24 Then you will invoke the name of your god, and I will invoke the name of the LORD. The god who responds with fire will demonstrate that he is the true God.” All the people responded, “This will be a fair test.”

I honestly don’t know what brought the Israelites to Mount Carmel. Perhaps things had gotten so bad the people were desperate and would do almost anything if they thought it would end the drought. I have to admit that I would probably have gone to Mount Carmel just out of curiosity. It was apparent that there was going to be a major confrontation. I would have been eager to see the standoff between Ahab and this gutsy prophet. I would have wondered what Elijah had in mind. It was sort of like being given free tickets to the Super Bowl. Whatever was going to happen up there, it was going to be interesting, and many were there to see it for themselves. It is obvious that they were not taking sides with Elijah at the outset, but neither

were they openly siding with Ahab. Initially, the people did not say a word; they did not commit themselves, one way or the other (verse 21). It is only after Elijah spells out the challenge that the people openly agree that it is a fair contest (verse 24).

Elijah takes charge when the people arrive on Mount Carmel. He lays out the indictment, **“If the LORD is the true God, then follow him, but if Baal is, follow him!”** (verse 21). The people of Israel were seeking to worship both Yahweh and Baal. This was a violation of God’s commands given to Israel in the Old Testament:

2 “I, Yahweh, am your God, who brought you from the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage. 3 You will have no other gods before me. 4 You will not make for yourself a graven image or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on earth under it, or that is in the water below. 5 You will not bow down to them nor serve them, for I, Yahweh, your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations to those who hate me, 6 but showing faithful love to thousands belonging to those who love me and to those who keep my commandments” (Exodus 20:2-6).

13 “Take heed to do everything I have told you to do, and do not make mention of the names of other gods, do not let them be heard on your mouth” (Exodus 23:13; see also verses 23-24, 32-33).

11 “Keep that which I am commanding you this day. I am going to drive out before you the Amorite, and the Canaanite, and the Hittite, and the Perizzite, and the Hivite, and the Jebusite. 12 Be careful that you do not make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, where you are going, lest it should become a snare in your midst. 34:13 But you will destroy their altars, you will smash their images, and you will cut down their Asherah poles. 14 For you will not worship any other god, for Yahweh, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God. 15 Be careful not to make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, for when they prostitute themselves to their gods and sacrifice to their gods, then you will be invited, and you will eat from his sacrifice; 16 and you take from their daughters for your sons, and their daughters prostitute themselves to their gods, and they make your sons prostitute themselves to their gods. 17 You will not make molten gods for you” (Exodus 34:11-17).

1 “When the LORD your God brings you to the land that you are going to occupy and forces out many nations before you—Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites, seven nations more populous and powerful than you—2 and he delivers them over to you and you attack them, utterly annihilate them; make no covenant with them nor show them compassion. 3 You must not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons nor take their daughters for your sons, 4 For they will turn your sons away from me to worship other gods. Then the wrath of the LORD will erupt against you and he will soon destroy you. 5 To the contrary, this is what you must do to them: You must tear down their altars, shatter their masseboth, cut down their asherim, and burn up their images. 6 For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. He has chosen you to be a people prized above all others on the face of the earth” (Deuteronomy 7:1-5).

18 “You must remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives ability to get wealth; if you do this he will confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, even as he has to this day. 19 Now it will come about that if you at all forget the LORD your God and run after other gods, worshiping and prostrating before them, I testify to you today that you will be utterly destroyed. 20 Just like the nations the LORD is about to decimate from your sight, so he will do to you because you would pay no attention to him” (Deuteronomy 8:18-20).

At first glance, this encounter on Mount Carmel would seem to be between Elijah and King Ahab. But when you begin to identify those verses which speak of Elijah's face-to-face conversation with Ahab, they are relatively few. I believe that Elijah's conversation with Obadiah may be more extensive than his conversation with Ahab. Ahab is almost a spectator here, sitting on the sidelines as Elijah addresses the Israelites. The Israelites are wavering between Yahweh and Baal, and also between Ahab (and Jezebel) and Elijah. They have been straddling the fence,<sup>65</sup> and it is time for them to commit themselves one way or the other. Let them see the folly of thinking they can serve both. Pagan theology often welcomes a plurality of gods, but the God of Israel does not. So let the people choose, here and now, whom they will serve.

And so Elijah challenges the people to make a decision about whom they will serve. He urges them to serve the one who truly is God. His initial challenge is answered with silence. No one says a word. These folks are not about to commit themselves to one God or the other. Elijah makes an offer which no one can refuse. He proposes a contest between the God of Israel and Baal, a contest between himself and the 450 prophets of Baal. The odds of success appear to be 450 to 1 in favor of the prophets of Baal. Elijah has purposely stacked the cards against himself. No one can accuse him of proposing a test which favors him. Now, the rules of the contest are laid down. Let each side prepare an altar and a sacrifice, without lighting the fire under it. Each side will call on its God (god) to consume the sacrifice with fire. The side whose God (god) answers by igniting the sacrifice is the one true God.

You need to understand that both Yahweh and Baal were believed to have the power to control the weather. We are told that Baal was sometimes pictured with a bolt of lightning in his hand: "The people believed Baal to represent the sun-god also and in their epics thought he rode the thunderclouds and sent lightning (as did the Hebrews the LORD, Pss. 18:14; 104:3-4)." <sup>66</sup> So, too, we find that God is said to send fire from heaven:

23 The sun rose over the land when Lot entered Zoar. 24 Then the LORD rained down on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the LORD from the heavens. 25 So he overthrew those cities, and all the region, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew from the ground. 26 But Lot's wife looked back intently and she became a pillar of salt (Genesis 19:23-26).

16 And on the third day in the morning there were thunders and lightning and a dense cloud on the mountain, and the sound of a very loud horn; and all the people who were in the camp trembled. 17 And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their place at the lower end of the mountain. 18 Now Mount Sinai was completely covered with smoke because Yahweh had descended on it in fire; and its smoke went up like the smoke of a great furnace, and the whole mountain shook greatly. 19 When the sound of the horn grew louder and louder, Moses was speaking and God was answering him with a voice (Exodus 19:16-19).

23 Moses and Aaron then entered into the Tent of Meeting and went out and blessed the people, and the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people. 24 Then fire went out from the presence of the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the fat parts on the altar, and all the people saw it so they shouted loudly and fell on their faces (Leviticus 9:23-24).

David built there an altar for the LORD and offered burnt sacrifices and tokens of peace. He called out to the LORD, and he responded by sending fire from the sky and consuming the burnt sacrifice on the altar (1 Chronicles 21:26; see also 2 Kings 1:10, 12, 14; 2 Chronicles 7:1; Luke 9:54; Revelation 20:9).

This time the people were not silent. How could they be? How could they turn down such a contest? They had nothing to lose and everything to gain. Let the people now see which God (god) could produce what he promised. No more need to waver between two choices. Let the best (and only) God win.

## **When Prophets Can't Make Baal (1 Kings 18:25-29)**

25 Elijah told the prophets of Baal, "Choose one of the bulls for yourselves and go first, for you are the majority. Invoke the name of your god, but do not light a fire." 26 So they took a bull, as he had suggested, and prepared it. They invoked the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, "Baal, answer us." But there was no sound and no answer. They jumped around on the altar they had made. 27 At noon Elijah mocked them, "Yell louder. After all he is a god; he may be deep in thought, or perhaps he stepped out for a moment or has taken a trip. Perhaps he is sleeping and needs to be awakened." 28 So they yelled louder and, in accordance with their prescribed ritual, mutilated themselves with swords and spears until their bodies were covered with blood. 29 Throughout the afternoon they were in an ecstatic frenzy, but there was no sound, no answer, and no response.

In all my years of watching football, I have never seen the team that has won the toss of the coin choose to kick off. They always choose to receive. They want the ball first because they see this as an advantage. A team also prefers the home field advantage. After all, would you want a stadium full of booing opponents, or one that is largely your fans? In our text, Elijah gives the opposing team—the 450 prophets of Baal—all the advantages. They also have 450 men on the field, opposing only Elijah on the other team. Elijah gives them the advantage of going first. They also have the home field advantage, because the crowd that has gathered is pro-Baal and pro-Ahab. They would certainly not dare to side with Elijah, the fugitive whose life seems to hang by a thread.

We find no mention of these prophets having to construct or rebuild an altar. I suspect that there was already a functioning pagan altar there, which they utilized. The prophets of Baal prepare the altar by laying the firewood. They also select a bull and then prepare it for sacrifice. They lay the bull upon the altar and then begin to call upon Baal to ignite the fire. They start in the morning, and from morning till noon they call upon their god. I wonder how many people really expected to see fire? If anyone did, they were sorely disappointed. Over and over they called out, "Baal, answer us!" but there was no response. I think the prophets were beginning to feel the heat, and I don't mean any heat from the sacrificial fire. These prophets began to intensify their efforts to gain Baal's attention. They leaped about the altar, going through all kinds of physical contortions to impress their god. Around noon, Elijah began to call attention to the failure of these prophets and their god.

"Elijah's taunt is that Baal was acting in a merely human manner. He uses terms known to the people from the Ugaritic Baal myths. Was the god musing on the action to take (*deep in thought*)? Had he gone aside to answer the call of nature (so Targum; NEB 'engaged'; NIV, after LXX, *busy*) or had he left on a journey with Phoenician merchants? Was Baal asleep as Yahweh was not (Ps. 121:3-4)? The practice of self-inflicted wounds to arouse a deity's pity or response is attested in Ugarit when men 'bathed in their own blood like an ecstatic prophet.'"<sup>67</sup>

"This ritual dance also gets no response. At noon Elijah begins to taunt them, suggesting Baal is preoccupied in some manner. G. E. Saint-Laurent demonstrates that ancient Baal worshipers indeed did imply in their writings that not only could Baal die, but he also could go on a journey,

fall asleep, or even resort to bloody self-mutilation.”<sup>68</sup>

Baal was a “god” with human qualities, and Elijah forcefully drives these home, along with their implications. Perhaps their “god” is preoccupied in thought, like a husband who ignores his wife while reading his paper. He might be busy, on the toilet. Is their god suffering from constipation? It’s crude, but it presses the point of the inferiority of their “god.” What a pathetic “god” this would be! Maybe their god is just “out of the office” at the moment and can’t be reached. He doesn’t even have a beeper or a cell phone. Perhaps he has dozed off, like some people do in church, oblivious to what’s being said by another. If he was sleeping, there was only one solution: yell louder to get his attention. Elijah was brutal in his attack, but this was no time for subtlety. Either their “god” was God, or he was not. If he was not available at a critical time like this, then he could never be counted on; he should never be trusted, and especially if the God of Israel did respond.

You can image what this kind of taunting did to these weary prophets, who got no response from their efforts. Elijah pressed harder and harder. His mocking was difficult to tolerate. No doubt they would love to have killed him, but this would not prove that their god was superior to Yahweh. It would only prove they had failed. It wasn’t just Elijah; the people were watching. And so they took their pursuit of their god to the next level, the frantic level. They cried out loudly, this time punctuating their cries with slashes from their knives and lances. They had to show their god they were serious. Finally, they seemed to enter into a frenzied state of ecstasy, a kind of madness<sup>69</sup> that could even have been demonically inspired.<sup>70</sup>

Isn’t it interesting that these false prophets think that there is some merit in shedding blood. They have not been able to get their god’s attention in any other way, and so they begin to mutilate their bodies with swords and spears, as though the sight of blood will finally arouse Baal. It is not the blood that men shed that counts; it is only the blood which the Son of God shed on man’s behalf. It is His shed blood which should get our attention. It is His shed blood, and His alone, which saves men from their sin.

It was not a pretty scene. Those bloodied priests, expending the last of their strength, desperately attempting to arouse their god. It all just sort of wound down as the “*time of the evening sacrifice*” approached. The author’s final sentence sums it up: “**But there was no voice; no one answered, no one paid attention**” (verse 29). There is probably nothing more insulting than to be ignored, and that is what the people did to these worn out, bloody prophets of Baal.

## **He is There, and He is Not Silent or He Never Sleeps; He Never Slumbers (1 Kings 18:30-38)**

30 Elijah then told all the people, “Approach me.” So all the people approached him. He repaired the altar of the LORD that had been torn down. 31 Then Elijah took 12 stones, corresponding to the number of tribes that descended from Jacob, to whom the LORD had said, “Israel will be your new name.” 32 With the stones he constructed an altar for the LORD. Around the altar he made a trench large enough to contain two seahs of seed. 33 He arranged the wood, cut up the bull, and placed it on the wood. 34 Then he said, “Fill four water jars and pour the water on the offering and the wood.” When they had done so, he said, “Do it again,” so they did it again. Then he said, “Do it a third time,” so they did it a third time. 35 The water flowed

down all sides of the altar and filled the trench. 36 When it was time for the evening offering, Elijah the prophet approached the altar and prayed: “O LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, today prove that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. 37 Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, O LORD, are the true God and that you are winning back their allegiance. 38 Then fire from the LORD fell from the sky. It consumed the offering, the wood, the stones, and the dirt, and licked up the water in the trench.

The account of Elijah offering his sacrifice follows that of the futile floggings of the false prophets. In reflecting on the text, I believe it is clear that these two sacrifices are not completely sequential. By this I mean that the false prophets did not start and finish their attempts to call down fire on their sacrifice before Elijah began making preparations for offering his sacrifice. For some period of time in the afternoon, at least, the two sacrifices are, to some degree, being conducted synonymously. You will notice that the sacrifice of the false prophets comes to a silent halt **“at the time of the evening sacrifice,”** when their ravings ceased (verse 29). Our text likewise informs us that Elijah offers up his prayer **“at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice”** (verse 36). In other words, Elijah’s sacrificial process concludes with fire at the same time the 450 prophets’ sacrifice ends in failure and silence. This means that in order to have constructed the altar and prepared the sacrifice (not to mention hauling the water to pour on the sacrifice) in time for the evening sacrifice, Elijah would have had to start earlier in the afternoon.

It would seem, therefore, that the sequence of events that day went something like this:

### Early in the morning:

---

|   |                       |
|---|-----------------------|
| The prophets of Baal prepared their sacrifice | Elijah waited quietly |
|---|-----------------------|

|   |                       |
|---|-----------------------|
| These prophets then began to call on Baal to answer with fire | Elijah waited quietly |
|---|-----------------------|

### Noon:

---

|   |                             |
|---|-----------------------------|
| The 459 prophets keep on trying to arouse their god | Elijah begins to taunt them |
|---|-----------------------------|

|   |  |
|---|--|
| The prophets now cry louder, and become more animated |  |
|---|--|

### Afternoon:

---

|   |                           |
|---|---------------------------|
| The prophets slash themselves, go into a frenzy | Elijah rebuilds the altar |
|---|---------------------------|

|   |  |
|---|--|
| The prophets begin to wear down, to become silent   | Elijah begins to prepare for the sacrifice |
| The people lose interest in the prophets of Baal    | Elijah has water poured on the sacrifice   |
| No one pays any attention to the prophets           | The people take interest in Elijah         |
| The prophets of Baal give up in fatigue and despair | Elijah prays to God,                       |

God answers with fire!

All of this should help us better grasp the drama being played out before the eyes of Ahab and the people of Israel.<sup>71</sup> In my mind's eye, I envision two altars, not that distant from each other—at least within sight of each other. On the one side, there is the altar of Baal, functional because of its on-going use in the worship of Baal. On the other side is the broken down relic of what used to be an altar of Yahweh. The stones have been torn down and lay in a heap. As the drama begins in the morning, the prophets of Baal arrive at the altar in a regal procession, something like the faculty of a prestigious school filing in for the commencement ceremony. With all dignity and solemnity, they lay the wood for the fire, and then slaughter the sacrificial bull. They place the bull on the firewood, and then begin to call upon Baal to send down fire to consummate the sacrifice.

Nothing happens at first, and no one seems bothered by it. After all, these things take time. But as time passes and there is no response, the ceremony begins to lose some of its pomp and circumstance, and begins to be more intense, louder, and even a bit frantic. At first Elijah says nothing to the 450 prophets. He does not want to be accused of interfering with their efforts, something like sneezing just when your golfing partner is trying to sink a difficult putt. But as noon approaches, I can imagine Elijah making his way over to where the prophets of Baal are laboring unsuccessfully. He may have pushed his way through the crowd, and then after watching for some time, begun to call out to them, offering some suggestions.

The goading comments of Elijah recorded in verse 27 might not have been spoken all at once. Suppose that Elijah had begun to rebuild the altar of Yahweh, and ever so often he would stroll over to see how the 450 prophets were doing. And at each visit, he may have offered one of his helpful suggestions. Back and forth he may have gone in the afternoon, making progress on rebuilding his altar, and taking a jab at the useless efforts of the prophets of Baal. And as the day wore on, the people understandably lost interest in the prophets of Baal. It was obvious that nothing was going to happen there, even though these men were working themselves into a bloody frenzy. No bystander was impressed, and eventually all of the onlookers made their way over to Elijah's altar, so that when the time of the evening sacrifice arrived, only the 450

prophets of Baal were left at Baal's altar, and all the rest were intently watching Elijah. In my mind, this is something like what happened.

Having taken the broad overview of the contest on Carmel, let me now focus on some of the details of Elijah's sacrifice, as they are given in our text. Elijah calls the people over to him, to witness what he does and says. He repairs the broken down altar. I am fascinated by the way Elijah rebuilt the altar. He found the old, torn-down altar, and salvaged the 12 stones from which it was built. He rebuilt the altar, not with 10 stones, representing the 10 tribes of the Northern Kingdom, but with the 12. In spite of the fact that the nation is divided, God still looks upon His people as a unity, because His covenant was made with Israel, and thus with all of his sons. This is amplified by the way Elijah linked this altar with "**the word of the LORD**" that was spoken to Israel (Jacob). This altar was constructed for the worship of a particular people, Israel. It was also constructed for the worship of a specific god: Yahweh. I am not exactly sure what it means to "**build an altar in the name of the Lord**" (verse 32), but at least it seems to indicate that this altar was not for the worship of just any god, but exclusively for the worship of Yahweh, the God of Israel.

I think the people are looking on all the time that Elijah is rebuilding this altar. Elijah was reminding and teaching Israel by everything he did and said. Now things really start to get interesting. Elijah does something unheard of, especially during a drought—he instructs the people who are helping him to dig a trench around the sacrifice, and then to pour water on the sacrifice until the trench is filled with the run-off. The people are not only watching Elijah prepare his offering, some of them seem to be participating.

Twice Elijah instructs them to pour more water on the sacrifice. It is his way of proving that what happens next is of God and God alone. The prophets of Baal were unable to call down fire which would ignite their sacrifice.

Now, at the time of the evening sacrifice, Elijah petitions God to act. He does not make any dramatic gestures as did the false prophets. Loud enough for all to hear, he offered a very short and simple prayer,

"O LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, today prove that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. 37 Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, O LORD, are the true God and that you are winning back their allegiance" (verses 36b-37).<sup>72</sup>

Elijah prays that God will hear his prayer so that the people will know that Yahweh alone is God, and so that His people will worship Him alone. He prays that the people will see that he has done all these things at the Lord's command. He does not pray specifically for Ahab to turn, but rather generally, that *this people* will hear and turn. He prays that they will know that it is God who has turned their hearts toward Him. Almost immediately, it would seem, God did respond. He sent fire from heaven that consumed the bull and the wood, and the stones, the dust, and the water. The fire consumed everything. No cleanup was needed after this sacrifice.

## **The People Get it Right (1 Kings 18:39-40)**

39 When all the people saw this, they fell facedown to the ground and said, "The LORD is the true God! The LORD is the true God!" 40 Elijah told them, "Grab the prophets of Baal! Don't let even one of them escape!" So they grabbed them, and Elijah led them down to the Kishon

Valley and executed them there.

The rules of the contest were clear. God had won, hands down. The people not only reached the right conclusion, they acted on it as they should have. They fell on their faces, acknowledging, **“The LORD, is the true God! The LORD is the true God!”** (verse 39). Elijah seized the moment. It was not enough just to profess that the Lord is God. It was time to practice God’s commandments. These 450 prophets had just demonstrated that they were false prophets, who, according to God’s law, must be put to death:

6 “If your own full brother, your son, your daughter, your beloved wife, or your closest friend should seduce you secretly and say, let’s go and serve other gods that you have not known previously, either you or your ancestors, 7 the gods of the surrounding people whether near to or far from you, from one end of the earth to the other, 8 you must not give in to him or even listen to him; do not feel sympathy for him nor spare nor cover up for him. 9 Instead, you must kill him without fail. Your own hand must be the first to put him to death and then the hand of the whole community afterward. 10 You must pelt him to death with stones because he tried to entice you away from your God, he who delivered you from the land of Egypt, the place of slaves. 11 Thus, all Israel will hear and be afraid; no longer will they continue to do evil like this in your midst” (Deuteronomy 13:6-11).

20 “But the prophet who will presume to speak anything in my name that I have not authorized him to speak or who speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet must die. 21 Or if you say to yourselves, how can we know what the LORD has not spoken? 22 Whenever a given prophet speaks in my name and the thing is not fulfilled, then I have not spoken it; the prophet has presumed to speak it so you need not fear him” (Deuteronomy 18:20-22).

Elijah does not allow the people’s zeal to cool. He commands that these 450 false prophets be seized and put to death (verse 40). Not a one was to be allowed to escape. Elijah then brought these false prophets down to the Brook Kishon, and there he executed them. At long last, Israel was obeying God.

## **The Day the Rains Came (1 Kings 18:41-46)**

41 Then Elijah told Ahab, “Go on up and eat and drink, for the sound of a heavy rainstorm can be heard.” 42 So Ahab went on up to eat and drink, while Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel. He bent down toward the ground and put his face between his knees. 43 He told his servant, “Go on up and look in the direction of the sea.” So he went on up, looked, and reported, “There is nothing.” Seven times Elijah sent him to look. 44 The seventh time the servant said, “Look, a small cloud, the size of the palm of a man’s hand, is rising up from the sea.” Elijah then said, “Go and tell Ahab, ‘Hitch up the chariots and go down, so that the rain won’t overtake you.’” 45 Meanwhile the sky was covered with dark clouds, the wind blew, and there was a heavy rainstorm. Ahab rode toward Jezreel. 46 Now the LORD energized Elijah with power; he tucked his robe into his belt and ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel.

In all the excitement of the contest on Mount Carmel, we almost forget about the rain. But this is what this whole contest is all about. God told Elijah to present himself to Ahab, and to tell him that it was going to rain. All of the events at Carmel simply lead up to this climactic event. If we were honest, we might be willing to admit that the coming of the rain is a bit anti-climactic after the calling down of fire from heaven and the slaughter of the 450 prophets of Baal. But it is the conclusion to this three-and-a-half-year famine.

I am taken aback by the way Elijah deals with King Ahab. From the way he dealt with the 450 prophets of Baal, you might expect Elijah to order the execution of Ahab. Better yet, why not have Ahab burned up with the fire from heaven? Here was a man who had the dubious honor of being called the most wicked king of Israel to this point in time (16:30, 33). Instead of calling for Ahab's death, Elijah instructs Ahab to get up and to eat and drink before the rains come. Was Ahab instructed to partake of the sacrifice? Well, if the sacrificial bull was completely consumed (as it appears), perhaps there was still a feast of some kind.

While Ahab went up to eat and drink, Elijah went up to pray. This prayer for rain—unlike the one he had just prayed before all Israel—Elijah prayed privately, atop Mount Carmel, with his face between his knees. If we note nothing else about this posture, it certainly seems to reflect humility on Elijah's part. The Mediterranean Sea was visible from atop Mount Carmel, and so Elijah ordered his servant to look toward the sea, to see if the rain was yet coming. Six times the servant was sent to look, only to return as there was no rain in sight. The seventh time a very small cloud emerged from the sea, and this Elijah recognized as the firstfruits of an abundant rain from God. Knowing that the rain was soon coming, Elijah ordered Ahab to get his chariot and get on down to Jezreel before the storm rains came. The rains did come, but they did not keep Ahab from reaching Jezreel. Girding up his loins, Elijah was able to outrun Ahab's chariot, and thus arrive in Jezreel before him.

## Conclusion

If we are to understand what has taken place on Mount Carmel, we must view this event in the light of the Old Testament, and particularly the Law of Moses as recorded in the first five books of the Old Testament. When God led the Israelites out of Egypt, it was to bring them into the promised land of Canaan. God would drive out the Canaanites because of their great sin (see Genesis 15:12-16). The Israelites were not to imitate the sins of the Canaanites but rather to destroy every object which the Canaanites used to worship their false gods (Deuteronomy 7:1-6). The famine which God brought upon Israel was due to the sins of her king and the people. Through Elijah, God had announced the coming of the drought and famine (1 Kings 17:1). Now, Elijah is told to appear before Ahab so *that* the rains will come (1 Kings 18:1). The NET Bible really hits the nail on the head with its translation here: "Some time later, in the third year of the famine, the LORD told Elijah, 'Go, make an appearance before Ahab, so I might send rain on the surface of the ground.'" Notice the subtle, but significant difference between this translation and those of the NIV, NASB, and NKJ versions:

After a long time, in the third year, the word of the LORD came to Elijah: "Go and present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the land" (NIV).

Now it happened *after* many days that the word of the LORD came to Elijah in the third year, saying, "Go, show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the face of the earth" (NASB).

And it came to pass *after* many days that the word of the LORD came to Elijah, in the third year, saying, "Go, present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the earth" (NKJ).

The "**and**" is not really a wrong translation; it simply fails to pick up the subtlety of the meaning of the conjunction in this context. There is a distinct cause/effect relationship here, and this relationship is clearly outlined in the Law:

1 "You must not make for yourselves idols, so you must not set up for yourselves a carved image or a pillar, and you must not place a sculpted stone in your land to bow down before it,

for I am the LORD your God. 2 You must keep by sabbaths and reverence my sanctuary. I am the LORD. 3 **“If you walk in my statutes and be sure to do my commandments, 4 I will give your rains in their time so that the land will give its yield and the tree of the field will give its fruit. 5 Threshing season will extend for you until vintage season, and vintage season will extend until sowing season, so you will eat your bread to satisfaction, and you will live securely in your land”** (Leviticus 26:1-5, emphasis mine; see also Deuteronomy 11:10-17; ).

15 “But if you pay no attention to the LORD your God and are not careful to keep all his commandments and statutes I am relating to you today, then all these curses will come and overtake you: 16 Cursed will you be in the city and cursed will you be in the field. 17 Cursed will be your basket and your kneading-trough.... **23 The heavens above your heads will be as brass and the earth beneath you as iron. 24 The LORD will make the rain of your land like powder and dust; it will come down upon you from the sky until you are destroyed. 25** The LORD will allow you to be struck down before your enemies; you will go out against them one way but flee them seven ways and will become a source of terror to all the kingdoms of the earth. 26 Your carcass will be food for every bird of the sky and wild animal of the earth, and there will be no one to shoo them off” (Deuteronomy 28:15-17, 23-26, emphasis mine).

In the Book of 1 Kings, we find that the principle is clearly repeated by none other than Solomon, at the dedication of the temple:

35 “The time will come when the skies are shut up tightly and no rain falls because your people sinned against you. When they direct their prayers toward this place, renew their allegiance to you, and turn away from their sin because you punish them, 36 then listen from heaven and forgive the sin of your servants, your people Israel. Certainly you will then teach them the right way to live and send rain on your land that you have given your people to possess” (1 Kings 8:35-36).

The point is this. Israel’s sin resulted in divine discipline—God ceased to give rain. Elijah was instructed to announce this to Ahab before the drought began (17:1). But when God orders Elijah to appear before Ahab in chapter 18, He does not say to Ahab, “Its going to rain.” He does not even mention rain until after the confrontation on Mount Carmel, until after Israel proclaims the LORD to be God, until after the 450 prophets of Baal have been killed. It is not until verse 41 that Elijah brings up the subject of rain, and that is because God will only withdraw the drought when Israel repents. The confrontation on Mount Carmel, then, was designed to turn Israel away from her idolatry and back to God, in order that God might once again send the rains.

I should say one more thing about Israel’s repentance here. Elijah’s prayer in verses 36 and 37 is for God to show Himself to be God, so that His people would repent. Not only does he pray that Israel would repent, but that they would understand that it was God who brought them to repentance. It was not Israel that was seeking God; it was God who was seeking Israel, as always.

I could not help but find a relationship between the sin of Solomon and the sin of Ahab. Ahab is an exceedingly wicked man, the most wicked king Israel had seen. I find myself very eager to point an accusing finger in his direction, and for good reason. But then I came across these words earlier in 1 Kings:

**1 King Solomon fell in love with many foreign women** (besides Pharaoh’s daughter), including Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, **Sidonians**, and Hittites. 2 They came from nations

about which the LORD had warned the Israelites, “You must not establish friendly relations with them! If you do, they will surely shift your allegiance to their gods.” Solomon was irresistibly attracted to them. 3 He had 700 royal wives and 300 secondary wives; his wives had a powerful influence over him. 4 When Solomon became old, his wives shifted his allegiance to other gods; he was not wholeheartedly devoted to the LORD his God, as his father David had been. 5 **Solomon worshiped the Sidonian goddess Astarte** and the detestable Ammonite god Milcom. 6 Solomon did evil before the LORD; he did not remain loyal to the LORD, like his father David had. 7 To top it off on the hill east of Jerusalem Solomon built a high place for the detestable Moabite god Chemosh and for the detestable Ammonite god Milcom. 8 He built high places for all his foreign wives so they could burn incense and make sacrifices to their gods. 9 The LORD was mad at Solomon because he had shifted his allegiance away from the LORD God of Israel, who had appeared to him on two occasions 10 and had warned him about this very thing so that he would not follow other gods. But he did not obey the LORD’s command. 11 So the LORD said to Solomon, “Because you insist on doing these things and have not kept the covenantal rules I gave you, I will surely tear the kingdom away from you and give it to your servant. 12 However, for your father David’s sake I will not do this while you are alive. I will tear it away from your son’s hand instead. 13 But I will not tear away the entire kingdom; I will leave your son one tribe for my servant David’s sake and for the sake of my chosen city Jerusalem” (1 Kings 11:1-13, emphasis mine).

While Ahab married a foreign wife, he was not the first king of Israel to do so. Ahab was not the first king to marry a Sidonian woman, for Solomon did as well. Ahab was not the first to set up altars for the worship of foreign gods, for Solomon did likewise. What I see from this is that while Solomon may not have gone as far in his idolatry as Ahab, he was guilty of the same kinds of sin. The sins for which God divided Solomon’s kingdom were the sins for which God brought drought upon Israel. Our actions—or more pointedly, our sins—have an impact on others. Solomon’s sin seems to have set a precedent for Ahab’s sin. Ahab’s sins certainly had an impact on the nation. The sins of a leader do impact the people he leads.

There is in our text a very clear contrast between the prophets of Baal and the prophet Elijah. I would like to suggest to you that there is a lesson to be learned here concerning prayer. Both Elijah and the 450 prophets of Baal prayed on that incredible day. Baal did not hear or answer the prayers of the 450 prophets, but God heard the prayer of Elijah. We would all agree, I think, that one of the reasons why the prayers of the 450 prophets were not answered is because they prayed to the wrong god. No matter how many people are praying, or how hard they pray, prayers to the wrong god are futile.

I would like to go even farther with this matter of the prophets in our text and prayer. Very frequently these days, I hear Christians talking as though getting an answer to your prayers is directly related to the following factors:

- The number of those praying.
- The fervency of those praying.
- The frequency of those praying.
- The fame<sup>73</sup> of those praying.

Often when Christians start to talk about spiritual warfare, they begin to speak as though the number of those who are praying is a determining factor. I have seen the expression “prayer power” used in such a way as to suggest that the only way Satan can be defeated is if enough Christians “gang up” in prayer. In our text, 450 people prayed together, they prayed persistently (all day long), and they prayed fervently.

We know from the Book of James that Elijah is a model for us in the matter of prayer. What does James say to us about prayer that we should learn?

13 Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone in good spirits? Let him sing praises. 14 Is anyone among you ill? Let him summon the elders of the church, and let them pray for him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. 16 So confess your sins to one another and pray for one another so that you may be healed. **The prayer of a righteous person has great effectiveness.** 17 Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain and there was no rain on the land for three years and six months! 18 Then he prayed again, and the sky gave rain and the land sprouted forth with a harvest (James 5:13-18, emphasis mine).

If Elijah is an example of a prayer warrior, then I would encourage you to consider the implications. Is God prompted by the number of those who pray? James tells us what Elijah exemplifies, namely that the prayer of one saint has great effectiveness. Jesus said that if two agree on anything in prayer it will be done (Matthew 18:19). Why is it that we think we have to amass large numbers of people to pray in order for God to hear and to answer us? Why is it that we place so much emphasis on ourselves, on the number of us who pray, and on the fervent manner? I fear that it is because we think we can manipulate God.

Having said this, I know that I may have upset you. What about “concerts of prayer”? What about encouraging groups of people to pray in large groups? I’m all for it, *so long as we do not think that God will be impressed with our numbers, and that how we pray, or how many pray is what determines whether or not God will answer us.* Groups of people did gather for prayer, and this is good. But I am cautioned about “prayer meetings” by some of the Scriptures that I read. In Acts 1, the church had gathered for prayer, and surely that was a good thing, but then they proceeded not to “wait” as our Lord had instructed, and appointed the twelfth apostle. I wonder if they did not feel that because they had prayed about it, it was the right thing to do? And when some of the same people gathered to pray for Peter in Acts 12, they did not even have sufficient faith to believe that their prayers had been answered. Surely God did save Peter, but the prayer meeting here had its deficiencies.

I want to confess that I do not pray as much as I should, or as persistently as I should. I delight to see saints gather together for prayer, and much more should be done. It is a beautiful thing for the saints of a city to gather for prayer in a large facility like a stadium, but let us not ever suppose that the prayer of one person is of little value. Elijah prayed. It was a short prayer. It was, by all appearances, not a fervent (dramatic, like the 450 prophets) prayer. But it was a prayer that was according to the will and Word of God. It only takes one such prayer, though others would surely have been blessed to participate.

Let me be very clear about the application of this text, lest someone use it to justify their misconduct. In our text, Elijah commanded the Israelites to kill the 450 prophets of Baal, and they did so. In those days, God governed His people through kings and prophets. In those days, murderers, rapists, and false prophets were to be stoned by the people of God. It is not so today. God has ordained human governments to execute capital punishment (see Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:11-17). There is no justification for bombing abortion clinics or shooting doctors who perform abortions. In the present, human government has been given the responsibility and authority to deal with those who take human life. And they will give account to God in the future. Our text does not mandate violence, nor justify it.

Having said this, there is an example for us here. Finally those who lived in Elijah’s day took

their sin seriously. In obedience to the law and the command of Elijah, they killed the false prophets. We are not to take sin lightly, either, especially our own sin:

42 "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone tied around his neck and to be thrown into the sea. 43 If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life crippled, than to have two hands and go into hell, to the unquenchable fire. 45 If your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better to enter life lame, than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. 47 If your eye causes you to sin, throw it away. It is better to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, 48 where their worm never dies and the fire is never quenched. 49 Everyone will be salted with fire. 50 Salt is good, but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other" (Mark 9:42-49).

I fear that we do take sin lightly. We have become so accustomed to it, we hardly recognize it. Revival in our nation will be evident when Christians first, and then unsaved sinners, take their sin seriously. We should mortify sin in our flesh. It must not be allowed to co-exist with us. Revival is evident when men take their sin seriously.

1 Therefore, if you have been raised with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Keep thinking about things above, not things on the earth, 3 for you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ (who is your life) appears, then you too will be revealed in glory with him. 5 **So put to death whatever in your nature belongs to the earth: sexual immorality, impurity, shameful passion, evil desire, and greed which is idolatry. 6 Because of these things the wrath of God is coming on the sons of disobedience.** 7 You too lived your lives in this way at one time, when you used to live among them. 8 But now, put off all such things as anger, rage, malice, slander, abusive language from your mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another since you have put off the old man with its practices 10 and have been clothed with the new man that is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of the one who created it. 11 Here there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all and in all (Colossians 3:1-11, emphasis mine).

I want to say a word about supernatural Christianity. It seems to me that Christianity has tended to divide into two polarized extremes. There is the one extreme which insists that we must have signs and wonders and miracles today. They seem to say that if it happened in the Bible, it must happen today, and if it does not, it is because we lack the faith to claim what we have been promised. The other extreme is, perhaps, a reaction to the first group. They don't openly deny the possibility of God healing, but they don't expect it, don't ask for it, and question the veracity of claims that it has happened. Those on this side place a great deal of emphasis on human methods of organization, ministry, and fund-raising.

I wish to be found somewhere in the middle. I don't have to see miracles daily to believe that God is there, and that He is all-powerful. Nevertheless, there are times when God does intervene in a miraculous way, and this can be a powerful witness to the lost (as it was to the Israelites on Mount Carmel). The miraculous manifestation of God's power on Mount Carmel was necessitated by Elijah's obedience to God's command. After all, how could a sacrifice be ignited with water-soaked wood? Sometimes I fear that we do not see more of the miraculous because we are reluctant to obey God's Word. We trust in our insurance and investment programs and our bank accounts. And if all else fails, we trust in our credit cards. We take our Lord's teaching about money and service as too extreme, and thus we seldom need divine

intervention—or so we falsely conclude. Most of us who profess faith in Jesus Christ could probably live a lot closer to the edge than we do. It is when we are on the edge that we more often and more dramatically see His hand. I am not, by this, calling for foolishness or “testing God,” but simple obedience to His commands.

Just add water. How often we read this on boxes of prepared food. But in our text we cannot overlook Elijah’s command to “add water” three times. Such water was precious at the time, but Elijah ordered it poured out on the altar and the sacrifice. He knew the rains were coming. It was the water which made the offering of his sacrifice impossible. After all, the 450 prophets of Baal could not accomplish lighting the fire with dry wood; how could Elijah’s offering be consumed when it was soaking wet?

I believe God has a way of “adding water” so that we must trust in Him, and so that He gets the glory. How many times in the Bible does God create impossible situations, so that His power will be evident? God told Abraham and Sarah (Abram and Sarai at the time) that they were going to have a son, and this was when they were already old. But God waited another 25 years to fulfill His promise. By that time, bearing a child was a joke—which is why Sarah laughed when she overheard the prophecy (Genesis 18:9-15). When God led Israel out of Egypt, He did not take them the easy way, but led them to the edge of the Red Sea, with the Egyptians in hot pursuit. There was nowhere to go! More water. When our Lord was about to feed the five-thousand, He first told His disciples to feed the people. Their response, paraphrased, was “impossible!” Right. That’s exactly the way our Lord wanted it. Then He fed them. When our Lord learned that Lazarus was ill, he waited until He knew Lazarus was dead. More water on the altar. Everyone believed that Jesus could have prevented Lazarus’ death, but raising the dead, that was too much.

Has God ever poured water on your hopes, your goals, your desires? Some of these may have been wrong to start with, and we should not expect God to bless them. But it has been my observation that even when God does intend to do something, He first pours water on it, He brings unexpected difficulties and obstacles, so that it will be more than evident that it was His doing, and not ours. Are there difficulties in your life, my friend? Maybe they are just water on the altar. What God chooses to accomplish, He often purposes to accomplish as something that is humanly impossible. As someone has said, “I love the word *impossible*.”

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59 Among the livestock are the horses and mules (18:5), which would be needed to draw the chariots of the king in battle.

60 Matthew Henry recognizes the problem, and seeks to resolve it when he writes: “But it is strange to find such an eminently good man governor of Ahab’s house, an office of great honour, power, and trust. [1.] It was strange that so wicked a man as Ahab would prefer him to it and continue him in it; certainly it was because he was a man of celebrated honesty, industry, and ingenuity, and one in whom he could repose a confidence, whose eyes he could trust as much as his own, as appears here, v. 5. Joseph and Daniel were preferred because there were none so fit as they for the places they were preferred to. Note, Those who profess religion should study to recommend themselves to the esteem even of those that are without by their integrity, fidelity, and application to business. [2.] It was strange that so good a man as Obadiah would accept of preferment in a court so addicted to idolatry and all manner of wickedness. We may be sure it was not made necessary to qualify him for preferment that he should be of the king’s religion, that he should conform to the *statues of Omri, or the law of the house of Ahab*. Obadiah would not have accepted the place if he could not have had it without bowing the knee to Baal, nor was Ahab so impolitic as to exclude those from offices that were fit to serve him,

merely because they would not join with him in his devotions. That man that is true to his God will be faithful to his prince. Obadiah therefore could with a good conscience enjoy the place, and therefore would not decline it, nor give it up, Continued...though he foresaw he could not do the good he desired to do in it. Those that fear God need not go out of the world, bad as it is. [3.] It was strange that either he did not reform Ahab or Ahab corrupt him; but it seems they were both fixed; he that was filthy would be filthy still, and he that was holy would be holy still. Those fear God greatly that keep up Continued...the fear of him in bad times and places; thus Obadiah did. God has his remnant among all sorts, high and low; there were saints in Nero's household, and in Ahab's." Henry, Matthew, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Bible*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers) 1997.

61 We wonder how Obadiah can be a saint and yet a servant of Ahab at the same time. We likewise wonder how Lot can be a godly man, living in Sodom and Gomorrah (see 2 Peter 2:6-9).

62 In the Hebrew text, the verbs "send" and "gather" are imperatives. Elijah is not asking, he is instructing. No matter, it would seem that Ahab was used to taking orders from someone, usually Jezebel. Provan comments, "... from the moment Elijah meets the king he dominates him. Ahab speaks but once in the entire story (18:17), and having been silenced by Elijah's aggressive and fearless response (18:18), he spends the rest of the time either doing what the prophet tells him (18:19-20, 41-42, 44-45) or watching from the sidelines so quietly as to be invisible (18:21-40). He is as impotent as the god he worships. Elijah's 'win' over him is as comprehensive as his 'win' over the prophets of Baal." Iain W. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), p. 139.

63 "Mount Carmel (six hundred metres high, south of modern Haifa) may have been chosen as it lay on the border of Israel and Phoenician territory and possibly as a high place venerated by both parties." Donald J. Wiseman, *1 and 2 Kings: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, Illinois, U.S.A.; Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), p. 168.

64 The same word, rendered "falter" here, is used in verse 26

65 "The challenge 'How long will you go on limping (*waver*) between two opinions?' ... can be interpreted also as roads or even crutches.' This is the English idiom to 'sit on the fence' (so NEB). The clear choice is between acknowledgment of the LORD (Yahweh) or Baal. Syncretistic worship of both at the same time is impossible." Wiseman, p. 169.

66 Wiseman, p. 169.

67 Wiseman, p. 169.

68 Paul R. House, *1, 2, Kings* (Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1995), pp. 219-220.

69 "Baal's priests acted like ecstatic prophets (v. 29, NIV, *frantic prophesying*; better RSV 'ranted and raved'). This rare form of the verb ... is used of mad actions (*cf.* 2 Ki. 9:11; Je. 29:26). The fact that there is no response indicates Baal's impotence (Je. 10:5)." Wiseman, p. 170.

70 "This is not the only place in the OT where this is so. Numbers 11:16-30 and 1 Samuel 10:5-6, 10-11 come to mind. Even more striking are 1 Samuel 18:10-11 and 19:18-24, where we find precisely the bizarre sort of behavior evidenced in 1 Kings 18. The condition is commonly referred to as 'ecstatic,' because the person involved 'stands outside himself' (Gk. *ekstatis*) in a state of spirit possession. In OT thinking this possession can be by good influences or by bad

(cf. the Spirit of God in Num. 11:16-30; the 'evil spirit' in 1 Sam. 16:14; 18:10), although whichever is involved, it is always liable to be interpreted by others as equivalent to madness (cf. 2 Kgs. 9:11; Jer. 29:26)." Provan, p. 138.

71 The reader should understand that my account is purely hypothetical and is intended to help him understand the drama that is being described in our text.

72 "This prayer incorporates concern, then, for God's reputation, the validity of the prophet's work, and for the people's well-being." House, p. 220.

73 I must thank Brenda Smith, our friend and fellow member of our church, for pointing this one out. Some think that if you can get someone famous to pray for you that you will surely get what you want.

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