

Fire at Carmel

THE LORD God sent Elijah back to the land of Israel, because it was time for the famine to end.

When Elijah returned to the land, King Ahab was desperately trying to provide water and grass for his horses and mules. Ahab and his steward, a man called Obadiah, divided up the land between them, to try and find a spot which had not been affected by the drought. Obadiah was a godly man:

Now Obadiah feared the LORD greatly. For so it was, while Jezebel massacred the prophets of the LORD, that Obadiah had taken one hundred prophets and hidden them, fifty to a cave, and had fed them with bread and water (1 Kings 18:3–4).



This would have required a lot of work, to ensure that the prophets were fed, even with meagre rations, and especially to escape detection by Jezebel.

Whilst Obadiah was searching, Elijah met him, asking him to go and tell Ahab that he was back. Obadiah was reluctant to do so, suspecting that the minute he went off Elijah would vanish again. The king had searched everywhere for Elijah.

As the LORD your God lives, there is no nation or kingdom where my master has not sent someone to hunt for you; and when they said, 'He is not here,' he took an oath from the kingdom or nation that they could not find you (v10).

Obadiah had a very real fear that Elijah would simply vanish away again, as he had done in the past, and so he would incur Ahab's wrath, to say nothing of what Jezebel might do. Elijah had to patiently reassure him that he was going to talk to Ahab that day.

It was not a very encouraging meeting. Ahab saw all of the problems of his kingdom as emanating from Elijah.

Then it happened, when Ahab saw Elijah, that Ahab said to him, "Is that you, O troubler of Israel?" (v17).

Elijah needed to explain the real source of the problem:

And he answered, "I have not troubled Israel, but you and your father's house have, in that you have forsaken the commandments of the LORD and have followed the Baals" (v18).

The Challenge

It was then that Elijah gave Ahab a challenge, an invitation to a decisive test to see which was the true God. Ahab was to assemble all of the prophets of the false god Baal and the Asherah at Mount Carmel, a total of 850. When they were assembled, Elijah told them the details of the contest.

Each group, the 450 prophets of Baal, and just Elijah, on his own for the Lord God, was to prepare a sacrifice, and a bull for each group laid on wood. The difference from a normal sacrifice was that they were not to set it alight; each party in turn would call on the name of their god, and the one who answered by fire was undoubtedly the true God. The prophets of Baal accepted this, and also Elijah's challenge to be first to try.

They began to call "O Baal, hear us!", but there was no answer. They continued till noon, by which time Elijah began to mock them. He suggested that they needed to call louder, perhaps Baal was meditating, or on a journey, or perhaps asleep.

As they continued into the afternoon, the noise of 450 prophets must have been quite deafening, they began cutting themselves with knives and lances so that blood flowed freely. Still no answer, the bull



and the wood lay there untouched and uncharred.

Power and Prayer

At the time when the evening sacrifice should have been offered in the Temple at Jerusalem, Elijah called a halt. There presumably had been an altar to the Lord God there on Carmel at some time, but now it was broken. Elijah had begun to repair it, first taking twelve stones, one for each of the tribes of Israel, and making these into an altar, with a trench all around it. The trench was large enough to hold about 15 litres.

Elijah then laid the wood on the altar, cut the bull into pieces and put that on the wood. Then he told some of those helping him to do a remarkable thing. They were to fill four water jars with water and pour it out over the sacrifice, wood and altar.

Some have wondered after the drought where the water would come from, but Mount Carmel was not far from the sea,

and so that would be possible. Having done so once, Elijah asked them to repeat the exercise and then to do it a third time. The sacrifice and wood were soaked, and there was even enough water to fill the trench that ran around the altar.

Then, with none of the histrionics of the prophets of Baal, Elijah prayed to the Lord God.

LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that You are God in Israel and I am Your servant, and that I have done all these things at Your word. Hear me, O LORD, hear me, that this people may know that You are the LORD God, and that You have turned their hearts back to You again (v36–37).

God's answer was immediate, powerful and direct. Fire fell from heaven, consuming the bull, the wood, and even the stones and dust, finally licking up the water in the trench. The crowd's reaction was sensational:

Now when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, "The LORD, He is God! The LORD, He is God!" (v39).

This is particularly appropriate, as the name 'Elijah' means 'The LORD is God'.

Rain at Last!

Elijah was able to capitalize on this and ordered that all of Baal's prophets should be executed. They would not be allowed to continue their work. Then he instructed Ahab to prepare himself for his homeward journey, back from Carmel to Jezreel.

Then Elijah said to Ahab, "Go up, eat and drink; for there is the sound of abundance of rain" (v41).

This would have seemed a little optimistic, for as yet there was no sight of a cloud in the sky. Ahab went to eat, Elijah to pray. Taking his servant, he went up to the top of Carmel and putting his head between his knees he prayed for rain. His prayer complete, he sent his servant to see if there was any evidence of a cloud, but still the sky remained entirely blue. Elijah prayed again and sent the servant once more. It was only at the seventh time that the servant came back with the message:

There is a cloud, as small as a man's hand, rising out of the sea! (v44).





It was enough for Elijah. The servant was sent off with another message, this time to Ahab, that he should set off for Jezreel before the rain stopped him.

On the Move Again

The gathering storm built up. It had not rained for more than three years, but now “the sky became black with clouds and wind, and there was a heavy rain” (v45).

Ahab set off in his chariot, but Elijah was also going to Jezreel, and he ran in front of Ahab until he came to the entrance of the town. It was about 27 miles from Carmel to Jezreel, the equivalent of a marathon, and at the end of what had already been a strenuous and tiring day.

Whilst we assume that he was given miraculous help by God here, Elijah must have been a man of tremendous physical

as well as moral and emotional strength. Yet in the New Testament he is described as being like us.

Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit (James 5:17–18).

James is teaching us about the power of prayer. God will listen to us and wants us to go to Him like a father when we need His help. We do not have to be physically different from others.

It had been a tremendous triumph for the Lord God over the false idols, and also for Elijah as His prophet. Yet before long Elijah was to be brought to the depths of despair, and that will provide a warning for us all.



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