

On Top of Mt. Carmel

By David H. Roper

SERIES: ELIJAH

I was thinking of having us stand and sing "On Top of Old Smokey" because we are going to talk about the contest between Elijah and the priests of Baal on top of Mt. Carmel. I am sure this is a very familiar passage to you, but perhaps you will see it in a fresh way this morning. This is Elijah's finest hour. There are a lot of lessons to be learned from Elijah's life, but this is certainly the most memorable. Although it occurred early in his ministry, it is actually the climax of his long and very fruitful ministry in the northern kingdom of Israel.

You will recall that in 1 Kings 17 Elijah had announced to Ahab that there would be neither rain nor dew until he gave the word. True to his announcement, Scripture says Israel was "gripped" by a drought. There was absolutely no rain for three years. During that time, Elijah was sheltered by the Lord, first at the brook Cherith, where he was fed by ravens, and then later along the coast of Phoenicia, where he was fed by a widow. At the end of the third year, Elijah was told to show himself to Ahab. In the first 15 verses of 1 Kings 18, we are given the setting for that historic meeting between Ahab and Elijah. In this introductory section, I want to call your attention to a parenthetical statement that is made about Jezebel in verses 3 and 4:

And Ahab called Obadiah who was over the household. (Now Obadiah feared the Lord greatly; for it came about, when Jezebel destroyed the prophets of the Lord, that Obadiah took a hundred prophets and hid them by fifties in a cave, and provided them with bread and water.)

It doesn't take much reading between the lines to see what had happened during the three years that the drought had gripped the nation. Jezebel took vengeance on the prophets of the Lord because they were associated with Elijah. These were the sons of the prophets who were Elijah's friends and students. Jezebel retaliated by massacring these prophets of the Lord. Were it not for Obadiah's step, the prophets of the Lord would have been exterminated. But Obadiah took a hundred prophets and hid them in caves by the Jordan River and fed them.

These verses give us some idea of the tenor of these times and of the vicious character of Jezebel. We know, from Canaanite literature, that the priests and priestesses of Baal were incredibly cruel, vicious people. There are some hair-raising accounts of their bloodthirsty actions. Human life meant nothing to them. Jezebel had wreaked vengeance on the prophets of Israel--many of them friends of Elijah--and had taken many lives.

During this time Elijah had been sheltered, first at Cherith and then at Zarephath, and now he is called upon to make an appearance. Of course, Elijah must have felt very fearful at turning up at Samaria, knowing that his life was at stake. But in obedience to the Lord, he went out to meet Ahab. In the first 15 verses of chapter 18, we are told how that meeting came about. Ahab, the king of Israel, and his servant Obadiah divided the land between them and went looking for springs. Their animals were dying and they wanted to find water wherever it could be found, so they went in search of any sources of water that may have remained. In the course of their search Obadiah encountered Elijah. and as a result of that encounter, a meeting with Ahab was arranged. In verses 16-18 that meeting is described:

So Obadiah went to meet Ahab, and told him; and Ahab went to meet Elijah. And It came about, when Ahab saw Elijah that Ahab said to him, "Is this you, you troubler of Israel?" And he said, "I have not troubled Israel, but you and your father's house have, because you have forsaken the commandments of the Lord, and you have followed the Baals."

Elijah rightly corrects Ahab, because, though it would appear that Elijah was the one who was responsible for the drought and the suffering it caused for children and entire families, it was really Ahab who was responsible for it. He had turned away from the Lord and his Word and was worshiping Baal, and he had led the people to worship Baal. It was Ahab, not Elijah, who was the source of trouble.

Sin always causes trouble. That is where trouble comes from in our lives as individuals and in our homes. When we get moody and grouchy and irritable, or when we withdraw into ourselves because we are hurt, we always cause trouble in our family and unrest in others. They react, and it stirs up relationships. Sin always troubles people. If there is trouble in our lives and we are filled with unrest and turmoil, it is because sin, somewhere, is causing it. That was what was happening in Israel at this time. Ahab was responsible, and Elijah rightly puts his finger on the culprit. Then, in verse 19, Elijah issues the challenge:

"Now then send and gather to me all Israel at Mount Carmel, together with 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of the Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table."

The challenge is laid down and the stage is now set for the contest. If this had happened in the twentieth century A.D. instead of the ninth century B.C., I think that ABC television would have covered the event, with camera crews on top of Mount Carmel, coaxial cables all over the place, and Howard Cosell and Frank Gifford would be there to give the commentary. I can see it all now--even the locker room interview with the high priest of Baal before the encounter. It probably would have been billed for months as "Super Baal I"!

The whole thing strikes me as a combination of some very sobering, serious elements, and some absolutely ludicrous things that were going on. Elijah himself enters into the fun, as we will see in a moment, and prods the priests of Baal in a very humorous way. This was how the prophets frequently dealt with idolatry. Idolatry itself is a very sobering thing, but idols are silly. It is silly to worship a thing that you make with your hands. As Isaiah rightly points out, they would cut down a tree and use part of it to make an idol and the rest of it to provide fuel to cook their food. It is absurd to worship an idol as your source of life. It is absurd to have your joy and completeness and your sense of peace and wellbeing come from a thing that is made or a thing that is seen. Basically, that is what the word "idolatry" means. It is worshiping a thing that is seen or made--a manufactured thing.

And you see that element of absurdity in this account. Elijah has a lot of fun out of this encounter; but at the same time, this account deals with a very serious issue: Whom do you trust for your life? What is it that gives worth and value and completeness to your life? What makes you whole? Or to use an expression from this passage, "What makes life fertile?" Where does blessing come from? It is either from the Lord God of Israel, or it is from something else. The whole point of this contest is to tell how impotent anything other than the Lord God of Israel is. There is no idol, there is no other god that can satisfy the deep, abiding hunger of the heart.

It is interesting to look at some of the ads in current magazines. You see products that will make you live again. Other products that put "gusto" into your life. There are many products that you can believe in. There is even one that saves. Now, I don't think we need to get concerned about advertisements--that is not the issue--but they indicate that most people sense that there is some ingredient or dimension that is missing from their lives.

People come out here to California with its perfect climate and relaxed lifestyle because they think this is where it's at! This is where they are going to find wholeness of life! True, there is a lot of life here; this is a very enjoyable place to live. But still there is that missing element when you live apart from God. There is an itch that you cannot scratch. And the older you get, the more overwhelming the desire to scratch becomes! There is no satisfaction. You can see this in your community, your office--you know it yourself. There are many of you here who sense that there is something missing from your life. You basically have a fulfilled life, but you are hurting somewhere.

This is the issue this passage deals with--whether or not you will serve the Lord God of Israel, the Lord Jesus himself, who is the only one who can make life fertile and blessed and productive. Either you are worshiping him, or you are worshiping something else. Those are the only two options in life. That is the issue that is at stake.

Elijah confronts the people with this decision in verses 20-21a:

So Ahab sent a message among all the sons of Israel, and brought the prophets together at Mount Carmel. And Elijah came near to all the people and said, "How long will you hesitate between two opinions?"

Literally, the expression is "hop from one leg to the other." They had one leg on the Lord and one leg on Baal. They couldn't decide whom to serve, so they had tried to serve both. Jezebel tried to eradicate the worship of the Lord God of Israel. For herself, she worshiped only Baal. But the rest of Israel had a kind of syncretistic religion in which they worshiped Baal and the Lord and everything else. Elijah challenges them with the impossibility of that position (verses 21b-24):

If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him. [Make up your mind whom you will serve.] **But the people did not answer him a word. Then Elijah said to the people, "I alone am left a prophet of the Lord, but Baal's prophets are 450 men. Now let them give us two oxen; and let them choose one ox for themselves and cut it up, and place it on the wood, but put no fire under it; and I will prepare the other ox, and lay it on the wood, and I will not put a fire under it. Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the Lord, and the God who answers by fire, He is God."**

So they agreed to this arrangement. It was to be a trial by fire. The God who answers by fire, who ignites the sacrifice, is God. The stage is set.

I asked myself a couple of questions when I read this passage. The first was, "Why did Elijah call the people to Carmel? Why not Samaria?" It would appear as though Elijah was stacking everything in his favor. He selected the place, he set up the rules of the contest. But actually the reverse is true. He has arranged everything so that the advantage goes to the priests of Baal. Carmel was the location of one of the Baal sanctuaries. At one time, there had been two sanctuaries there--one to the Lord, and another to Baal. Jezebel had evidently destroyed the altar dedicated to the Lord of Israel, and the only sanctuary left was that of Baal. It was located on Mount Carmel because from there you could look off to the west across the Mediterranean and see the storms that generate off the coast in the fall of the year. This evidently was the place from which they tried to manipulate the elements of nature.

Baal worship operated out of a seasonal cycle that is much like our cycle here in California. It would begin to rain in the fall and would rain through the winter. In the spring it would stop raining, and the summer would be a time of drought. The Canaanites believed that it was Baal who brought the rain in the autumn. In the summer, he would die and go down into the nether world, and Mot, who was the god of sterility and famine and drought, would prevail. But then, in the fall, Baal would always prevail. In fact, he is called "Baal the Overcomer". He would come out of the nether world and would be locked in combat with Mot and overwhelm him, then he would bring the storm. The priests of Baal believed that by their sacrifices on Mount Carmel they could thus manipulate Baal and the other gods to perform according to their wishes. So, Elijah is playing right into their hands. He is saying, "I will give you the home field advantage. We will play on your terms, on your turf."

Secondly, the arrangements themselves are designed to give the advantage to Baal. It was Baal who brought the lightning. Baal is described in their literature as the one who "hurls the lightning to the earth." His voice is heard in the clouds. The thunder was his voice, the lightning was his spear. He controlled those elements which were the forerunners of the rain. So again, the ignition of the sacrifice was the sort of thing you would expect from Baal. That was what he was accustomed to doing in their mythology. So, again, Elijah is playing right into their hands. He is making things difficult for the Lord. The contest is described beginning in verses 25-29:

So Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose one ox for yourselves, and prepare it first for you are many, and call on the name of your god, but put no fire under it." Then they took the ox which was given them and they prepared it and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon saying, "O Baal, answer us." But there was no voice and no one answered. And they leaped about the altar which they made. And it came about at noon, that Elijah mocked

them and said, "Call out with a loud voice, for he is a god; either he is occupied or gone aside, or is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and needs to be awakened." So they cried with a loud voice and cut themselves according to their custom with swords and lances until the blood gushed out on them. And it came about when the midday was past, that they raved until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice [the evening sacrifice in Jerusalem would be about 3 o'clock in the afternoon]; but there was no voice, no one answered, and no one paid attention.

This description parallels many other descriptions of the activities of the priests of Baal. They would begin by leaping about the altar, then they would start going in circles like the whirling dervishes do today in Syria. They would shout and scream and leap into the air. Finally, they would tear off their robes and begin to cut themselves with lances and swords and give way to incoherent cries, ecstatic utterances, and finally would fall exhausted at the base of the altar. This was the practice they followed.

Zechariah 13 says that in the Millennium the false prophets will explain the marks between their hands by saying, "These were marks that I received at the house of my friends," i.e. they would disavow any association with the Beast or with Baal worship, and explain the marks on their body on some other basis. The point is, that these prophets, by gashing themselves repeatedly, bore dreadful scars on their bodies and were readily identified. They mutilated themselves terribly in the practice of their religion, and it is this that is being described here.

So, early in the morning, they begin to leap about as they carry out their rites, and in the midst of this Elijah begins to goad them. "Now, wait a minute," he says. "The problem may be that you are not calling loud enough. Shout louder!" By this time the priests were hysterical and shouting at the top of their lungs. "Perhaps he is occupied," Elijah suggests. Perhaps "preoccupied might be a better translation because the Hebrew word means to muse, or to ponder. "Perhaps your god is in deep thought and can't hear you, so shout louder. Or perhaps your god has gone aside." This is a very delicate way of saying, "Perhaps he has gone to the restroom." That actually is what "to turn aside" means. I am sure that must have brought a chuckle to Elijah. "Or perhaps he is asleep." The interesting thing is that in Canaanite literature, Baal does all these things. Elijah is saying, "Since he is your god, and your god behaves this way, perhaps this is your problem. Shout louder! That is all that is necessary!"

This goes on right through the day until 3 o'clock in the afternoon--"but there was no voice, no one answered, and no one paid attention." This phrase "no one paid attention," is used in 2 Kings 4 to describe a dead person. When an attempt was made to revive the corpse, there were no signs of life. There was absolutely nothing--no response! Finally, by 3 o'clock in the afternoon, the priests had worn themselves out entirely. In verses 30-37, we read about the rest of the contest:

Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come near to me." So all the people came near to him. And he repaired the altar of the Lord which had been torn down. And Elijah took twelve stones according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord had come, saying, "Israel shall be your name." So with the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord, and he made a trench around the altar, large enough to hold two measures of seed. Then he arranged the wood and cut the ox in pieces and laid it on the wood. And he said, "Fill four pitchers with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood." And he said, "Do it a second time," and they did it a second time. And he said, "Do it a third time," and they did it a third time. And the water flowed around the altar, and he also filled the trench with water. Then it came about at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that Elijah the prophet came near and said, "O Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, today let it be known that Thou art God in Israel, and that I am Thy servant, and that I have done all these things at Thy word. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that Thou, O Lord, art God, and that Thou hast turned their heart back again."

The first thing Elijah does is to gather the people around him; then he begins to erect an altar in the name of the Lord--the altar that had been destroyed, perhaps by Jezebel, and was now in neglect. He gathers twelve large stones and heaps them together to make an altar, according to the Old Testament practice of making altars out of

unhewed, rough fieldstones. He gathers twelve because he wants to symbolize that the nation Israel, though it may be divided politically, is still one spiritually.

It was God's intention for a time that the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom be divided politically, but it was never his intention that they be divided spiritually. He wanted them to worship the Lord who was worshiped in Jerusalem--the Lord God of Israel, the Lord who had delivered them from Egypt, the One who took them through the wilderness and into the land, the One who drove the Canaanites out of the land so they could possess it, the One who gave them vineyards that they never planted. The Israelites reaped the harvest of fields they had never sown. They lived in villages they didn't build. The Lord had done all this for them, he had protected them and preserved them, and it was always his intention that they trust him and count on him for blessing. He is the One who promised in the Law that, if they obeyed him, he would insure fertility. There would always be adequate rainfall and their needs would be met. For Israel the issue of fertility was always spiritual and moral. It wasn't achieved through various ritual practices, through forms of worship--it was something that was the natural result of a living relationship with God. When they loved God and loved his Word, everything else would be added to them.

It is to this Lord that Elijah is calling them back in this symbolic way, building an altar of twelve stones, symbolizing each of the tribes of Israel gathered together again around the Lord. Then he prepares the sacrifice. He cuts up the ox, and lays it on the altar. Then he proceeds to pour water over the entire offering--over the ox and the wood and the stones. He digs a trench at the bottom. It is difficult to know from this description just exactly what is going on, but it appears that he digs a trench at the bottom to hold the water, which flows down through the offering and into the trench, so that the whole thing is entirely saturated. Again, he is making things difficult for the Lord. It is right to take the most difficult circumstances of life and set them before the Lord. Perhaps Elijah also does this so that there will be no suspicion that any trickery was involved here, that he had something up his sleeve, some way of igniting the fire in a natural way. This has to be a miracle--something only God can do.

When I was in high school I used to work at a conference grounds in Dallas. The opening night of the conference was a big affair and we always had a bonfire and dressed up like Indians (this was an elementary school camp.) We would lead the kids into the area where the campfire was and seat them in a circle. Then we would call on the winds to bring the fire, so our campfire would ignite miraculously. Sometimes fire would fall from heaven, sometimes the campfire would just burst into flames, and these little kids would be astonished. They would go home and tell their parents about this amazing campfire that they saw on the first night. One of the attractions of the conference, for us, was thinking up creative ways to make the thing burst into flame. We used fuses, trolleys, and all kinds of things.

I suspect that this sort of thing was going on in Baal worship. They weren't above using tricks or illusions to create certain effects. I think Elijah is trying to preclude any impression that this kind of trickery was going on. This event can only be explained in terms of God's activity. It was a hard, impossible thing to do, yet Elijah made it even more difficult.

Then Elijah calls on the name of the Lord. First he builds an altar in God's name, then he calls on God's name. This is a simple prayer--no raving, no theological language. He says, "Lord, answer me." That is all he does. He just calls on the God of Israel. I couldn't help but think of the words in the Old Testament, "Call unto me and I will answer you, and show you great and marvelous things that you haven't seen before [unexplainable things]" (Jeremiah 33). The same principle is stated in the New Testament: "Ask and you shall receive..." (Matt. 7:7). That is the sort of Lord that we have. We don't have to express our needs in special, technical, theological language; we don't have to be religious, or get religion, or express ourselves in religious terms. We just ask. He is a father; you ask him, and he answers you.

In the New Testament (Luke 18), the Lord told the story of the importunate widow, the persistent widow who had been wronged. There was no one who could set things right except a judge and the judge was reluctant to help her. But she continues to plead with him until he wearies of her and hears her case. The Lord is not saying here that you have to harass God to get him to answer you. The point is that if even an unjust judge will respond eventually,

how much more will a loving father immediately move to meet your needs. What is so impressive to me about this whole account is the contrast between the wild raving of the priests of Baal and the quiet faith and obedience of Elijah. He gathers the people, builds the altar, and says, "Lord, do it." God responds in verse 38:

Then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, "The Lord, He is God; the Lord, He is God."

There must have been an ear-splitting crash and claps of thunder as the lightning struck the offering, and the whole thing just exploded in a blaze of light. All that was left was a little patch of burnt earth. For a moment there must have been an awesome silence, and then everyone fell on their faces, saying, "The Lord is God!"

That is what you call a convincing victory. It was sort of like the last Super Bowl--there is no question about who won that game! There are a lot of Viking fans around here, but for that day we had to go around admitting that Oakland was unquestionably the better team. The issue here is that, for all time, God is the victor. Baal is not the Overcomer; the Lord is. What a convincing victory! He won, and the people acknowledged him as Lord.

Paul tells us in Philippians that the day is coming when the Lord is going to be manifested in such a convincing way that every knee will bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. There will be no doubt about it in anyone's mind. But why wait for that day? He is Lord now. He is the Lord who acted in Elijah's day; he is the Lord who acts in miraculous ways today in your life and in mine, who transforms our lives into fertile, productive, meaningful, complete lives. He is Lord today, and he wants us to make him Lord and worship him as Lord.

It is out of that relationship that the blessing comes. The term "blessing" actually means fertility. He will make our lives fertile and productive. He will give us the meaning and the purpose that we are looking for. He will supply the missing dimension in our lives, but he can only do that when he is Lord, and only he is Lord. As long as we limp between two opinions we are going to experience the same frustrations and feelings of weakness and loss and desperation that the people in Elijah's day felt--the same drought, the same deadness of soul.

As Jesus put it, "When the eye is single, the whole body is full of light. But if the eye is evil [if we have one eye on him and one eye on something else], how great is that darkness!" (Matt. 6:22, 23). We have all been there. I have been there. I know what that is like. I still try to go there occasionally, and so do you. It is misery personified. All of the light and joy goes out of our lives. But when we make Jesus Christ Lord, and cling to him as the only Lord, then life begins to be productive. That does not mean that we don't have problems and hard times and difficult situations, but our lives become fertile again. There is blessing.

Note what the Israelites did (verse 40):

Then Elijah said to them, "Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape." So they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon, and slew them there.

This was in accordance with the Old Testament law. The law told them that if false prophets came into their midst they were to slay them. They were not to listen to them. It is a harsh and terrible thing to do. We are not called upon to stone false prophets today--but we are called upon to deal with the other gods in our lives as harshly as Israel dealt with the priests of Baal, and to put away the things that we trust in, the things that we count on, the things that we believe in, that we think will give life, apart from God. That was the Israelites' first act after making the Lord their God. In verses 41-46, the Lord brings blessing to Israel:

Now Elijah said to Ahab, "Go up, eat and drink; for there is the sound of the roar of a heavy shower." So Ahab went up to eat and drink. But Elijah went up to the top of Carmel; and he crouched down on the earth, and put his face between his knees. And he said to his servant, "Go up now, look toward the sea." So he went up and looked and said, "There is nothing." And he said, "Go back" seven times. And it came about at the seventh time, that he said,

"Behold, a cloud as small as a man's hand is coming up from the sea." And he said, "Go up, say to Ahab, 'Prepare your chariot and go down, so that the heavy shower does not stop you.'"

He saw the storm beginning to form out over the Mediterranean, and in a short time a heavy shower began and the drought was broken. Israel was blessed again; its fertility returned because its people had made the Lord God of Israel Lord in their lives.

Lordship is still the issue in our lives today. Things really haven't changed that much. We still struggle; we still try to hold together both the Lord and everything else in life that we think will satisfy us, instead of making the Lord the God in our lives. But when we make him God, when we are willing to turn loose of the things we grasp to ourselves and worship him, how fertile life becomes! I had a young man in my office last week who said, "I came in to argue, but what I really think I need is to come home." That is what we need. When we are away from the Father, trusting every other resource in life but him, there is only one place to go, and that is home to a waiting Father. He is the only One who can make life fertile.

Father, we would ask again that you would guard us from idols, from the things in our lives that we think will bring satisfaction. We cling to them so desperately because they are things that are known and seen and recognized by our society as being dependable. They look so solid and trustworthy, and yet they don't provide the thing that we need. You are what we need, Lord. Give us the courage to trust you and you alone. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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