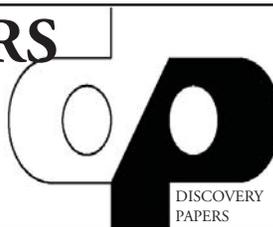


THE GOD WHO ANSWERS BY FIRE

SERIES: FIRE FROM HEAVEN



Catalog No. 5204
1 Kings 18:20-40
5th Message
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The Ten Commandments begin with the call to put God first, to recognize no idol (Exodus 20:3-6). What represents a temptation to idolatry in our time?

It's easy to be dismissive of the stories of the ancients who revered false gods with handmade figures, engravings, statues, and similar objects. But the old gods of the sun and the moon, the gods of sex, war, and weather, are not so far removed from our world. Listen carefully and you will hear folks around you say: "I believe in love"; "I believe in strength"; "I believe in patriotism."; "...in science."; "...in Mother Earth."; "...in the accumulation of wealth."; "...in hearth and home."; and "...in rock 'n' roll."

For some of us, Bob Dylan's old song *Gotta Serve Somebody*¹ comes back when we consider these things. We are not strong enough in ourselves to make the world right, to fix ourselves, or to prevent what's hard and so we find ourselves looking for help.

With this in mind we re-enter our study of Elijah. The story that we're going to consider now in 1 Kings 18 is probably the most dramatic of all the stories about him.

Up to this point, the text has centered on an extended period of drought. Suffering grew much worse over time as the drought had its terrible effect. Then Elijah as the spokesman of God challenged Ahab, the king of Israel, to a showdown on Mount Carmel, calling on heaven for rain. "Now then send and gather to me all Israel at Mount Carmel . . ." (1 Kings 18:19a).

If you visit Mount Carmel today, you will see it's a high and beautiful place. Off to one side you can see the Mediterranean Sea, and off to the other side you can see the valley of Jezreel. It seems like the kind of place where important things would happen, and on this occasion, dramatic and important things did happen.

1 Kings 18:20-21:

²⁰So Ahab sent a message among all the sons

of Israel and brought the prophets together at Mount Carmel. ²¹And Elijah came near to all the people and said, "How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him." But the people did not answer him a word.

A necessary choice

Literally, Elijah asks the people how long they will go on limping or hopping from one foot to the other. It's a figure of speech for being double-minded; trying to believe that two things are true when it's only possible for one of them to be true. "How long will you go dancing between two opinions?"

The first thing Elijah identifies in these people and what we can identify in ourselves is that very often we want to postpone the decision, don't we? We'd rather put off the day when we have to declare ourselves to be one thing or another; when we have to claim an identity that we will own.

We can't serve two different gods. We can't have two identities. We can't be honest and generous on the one hand, and then when it serves us, be hard and self-centered on the other. We can't be people who serve God and serve ourselves. We weren't designed that way. We must make a choice.

Elijah is clearly drawing the line and is calling for a response from these people. If Yahweh is God, follow him; if Baal is god, follow him. And there's an ominous silence. The people don't say anything. You might recognize the ominous silence. It might be that familiar avoidance of your own, that recognition that something important has been called for, and you don't know what to say.

1 Kings 18:22-24:

²²Then Elijah said to the people, "I alone am left a prophet of the LORD, but Baal's prophets

are 450 men. ²³Now 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. ²⁴Then 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.” And all the people said, “That is a good idea.”

One vs. many

The contest is arranged. Both sides are given an animal to be sacrificed, the opportunity to build an altar, and wood to burn the sacrifice when ignited. Elijah is even doing a favor to those who worship the idol Baal. As I mentioned in the first message (Discovery Paper 5200), Baal is the storm god, and in the ancient literature he’s often depicted with a lightning bolt in his hand. Fire and rain are his specialties.

It’s very clear that we are supposed to visualize this situation as seriously unbalanced. On one side is Elijah all by himself. No one stands with him; he has only the authority that comes from knowing the word of God. On the other side, there are 450 of his opponents.

Now, it is almost certain that there were not 450 seasoned prophets of Baal. When Jezebel married Ahab, she brought some of these Baal-worship leaders with her from her home. There may have twelve or fifteen. But they came with the intention of seducing the people of Israel, winning them away from the faith in a life-giving God to one that was deadly. So the size of the entourage here is telling: many of these would very likely be young people from Israel who were taken with the new ideas, captivated by the dark and sexy power of Baal worship. Along with a dozen or so hardened prophets of Baal, who like Jezebel believe utterly in what they are doing, there are a lot of wannabes, acolytes, and attendants. Yet they are impressive as they chant, wave, and cheer enthusiastically, singing the songs and beating the drums of Baal.

So what do we make of the disparity between 1 and 450? What happens when all the momentum and excitement and noise and buzz are on one side? What are we likely to conclude? Aren’t we mostly attracted to that? Where are the larger crowds going? What’s the latest new thing?

Elijah stands by himself without even a staff in his hand, nothing to call attention to himself, and over there is all this excitement. In the church, we’re as susceptible as anyone else to the tug of the most glittery, the highest energy, and the direction of the trend. We’re drawn to those things, as if style equaled meaning, or entertainment equaled joy, or drama equaled power.

The servants of Baal dance, they sway back and forth in choreographed gyrations for long hours, whipping up enthusiasm, creating a kind of energy for the onlookers.

1 Kings 18:28-29:

²⁸So they cried with a loud voice and cut themselves according to their custom with swords and lances until the blood gushed out on them. ²⁹And it came about when midday was past, that they raved until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice; but there was no voice, no one answered, and no one paid attention.

It’s a gripping narrative, isn’t it? But at the end, nothing happens—no answer, no response.

The God who has spoken

1 Kings 18:30a:

^{30a}Then Elijah said to all the people, “Come near to me.” So all the people came near to him.

There’s a subtle point being made here. Elijah is not shouting. He says, “Come closer.” They should listen not because of his ability to project or his dramatic persona, but because of what he says.

1 Kings 18:30b-32a:

^{30b}And he repaired the altar of the LORD which had been torn down. ³¹Elijah 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.” ^{32a}So with the stones he built an altar

in the name of the LORD....

It's a simple altar. There's nothing that makes it beautiful or eye-catching. He just takes twelve large, rough, and uncut stones and arranges them in such a way that he can lay wood on them and then an animal on top of the wood.

The stones, however, represent something important: the history of the people. It's not arbitrary that he's using twelve stones (Joshua 4). He is saying, "We serve a God who has already spoken. We are not waiting for him to speak as if for the first time. He has already made promises to us, his people. We already know that he loves us, that he has provided for us, and that he has drawn near to us. He is the God of our fathers, the God of our history, the God of Scripture, the God of the covenants and promises." Twelve stones are set to honor the Lord's faithfulness.

The false gods, the Baals of the world, need to be persuaded over and over again to act on our behalf. They never make sure promises. They cannot be depended upon. They're not reliable, but the Lord God who says, "I love you and will never cease to love you," will keep his promise. So in making the altar, Elijah is reminding the people that rather than waiting for God to speak, they need to believe the word that he has already spoken.

Now, while Elijah prepares his altar, he has people go down to the Mediterranean with big jars, fill them, and bring them back up the mountain. They pour jar after jar of drenching water on the altar. If there was going to be some trickery involved or some magic show, this renders it impossible. The wood cannot be ignited.

1 Kings 18:36-40:

³⁶Then 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 You are God in Israel and that I am Your servant and I have done all these things at Your word.

³⁷Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that You, O LORD, are God, and that You have turned their heart back again." ³⁸Then 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. ³⁹And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, "The LORD, He is God; the LORD, He is God." ⁴⁰Then 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.

The God of miracles

There are a couple of points to consider. One has to do with the execution of the prophets of Baal. The prophets who are put to death are the ones who have been the source of seduction in Israel. They are as hardened as Jezebel, committed to undermining these people, and completely unwilling to even consider repenting. These are the twelve or fifteen I mentioned earlier.

In a previous message (Discovery Paper 5202) we learned that Jezebel was on the warpath to destroy the prophets of Israel, those who would speak truth for God (1 Kings 18:4). These executions may have the effect of stopping the killing of Israel's prophets, when Jezebel and others realize that it has been done to their prophets as well.

The executions here are a bit like surgically removing a tumor. These individuals have been determined and successful in taking the nation off a cliff to its ruin. Their end is the end of a spiritual cancer.

Jesus made a similar point in the Sermon on the Mount. He said if your eye makes you stumble, tear it out, and if your hand makes you stumble, cut it off (Matthew 5:29-30). He was saying that if the things you look at or the things you touch are leading you to sin, you need to be ruthless with them. In order to say, "Yes" to something good, you've got to say, "No" to things that would keep you from what is good. Now, of course Jesus didn't intend people to go around without eyes or hands. Those are metaphors, but they're conveying the same insight as these executions. We can't become a whole, single-minded person if we persist in holding on to the false at the same time we attempt to believe in the truth.

The other point to consider concerns the declaration of the people, "The LORD, He is God; the LORD, He is God." Do they mean it? Is this a widespread revolution in which people everywhere will turn away from the

darkness toward the light? We don't know the answer to that. Some of them surely mean the words, because insight has penetrated their hearts on this day. They realize that they have abandoned true glory for something terrible. As the miracle occurs they sense the holy presence of God and turn their hearts back to him.

Perhaps the majority are just applauding: "Well done, God! Great show!" They'll feel differently about God for a week or two, maybe a month. But not very much changes in the nation. Ahab and Jezebel aren't overturned anytime soon, there is no record of significant revival. Some believe and some merely applaud, and nobody but God knows what is in each heart.

So what do we conclude? First of all, we should not forget that the God who threw fire from heaven on Mount Carmel still does miracles. As a church we tend to be people who want explanations. For good reasons we try to make sense of things, extract principles, but God doesn't have to explain. He still does miraculous, frightening, remarkable, wonderful, and world-changing things when we least expect it.

The other thing we can take from this is that Elijah's certainty as he built the altar was based on his knowledge of the promises of God. He knew that the God he served was faithful. We can be certain in the same way. We can be people who receive life from the word of God, know that it's true, and live our lives based on what we know is true.

The God of Elijah has not changed—doing miracles, keeping promises, and present in this place.

NOTES:

¹Bob Dylan, *Gotta Serve Somebody*, © 1979, Special Rider Music.

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