



## First Kings - Chapter Eighteen

### **V 1 Kings 17:1-22:40 - Elijah and Ahab (continues)**

#### Summary of Chapter Eighteen

In Chapter 17 Elijah has lived privately, first in the Transjordanian wilderness and then in a Sidonian home. Now he reappears in public. The drought is to end, but it must become clear beforehand, not only to the widow of Zarephath but also to all Israel, who is God.

Elijah is commanded by God to go to Ahab. On his way he meets a servant of the Lord called Obadiah who, although he worked for Ahab, had also saved the lives of one hundred of the Lord's prophets from death at the hands of Jezebel. Elijah told Obadiah to go to Ahab and say that Elijah was there to meet with him but Obadiah was afraid that Elijah would again disappear and Ahab would take out his anger on Obadiah. Elijah reassured him that he would meet with Ahab and he did so.

Elijah challenged Ahab to a test to see whether it was the Lord or Baal who was the true God. He had Ahab send for all the people to meet at Mount Carmel where eight hundred and fifty priests of Baal and Asherah were also gathered. They were to lay out wood and cut a bull to lay on the wood but were not to burn it. They then called upon Baal all day in a frenzy to show himself by burning the offering to himself but nothing happened.

Elijah then too set up an offering of a bull to the Lord. He placed its pieces on the wood he had prepared and then had the people drench it with water. When he cried out to the Lord fire reigned down, consumed the offering and evaporated all the water. The people then realised that Yahweh was the only Lord, Baal was a non-entity. So Elijah had the priests of Baal arrested and they were killed for their idolatry.

Elijah then informed Ahab that the drought was about to end. Elijah went up Mount Carmel again and prayed to the Lord. Slowly, a cloud appeared followed by heavy rain. Ahab raced back to Jezreel but Elijah got there before him.

## V.b 1 Kings 18:1-46 - Elijah and the Prophets of Baal

Refer to the chapter summary above.

### V.b.i 1 Kings 18:1-19 - Elijah's Message to Ahab

Even though Elijah has been living only a few miles from Jezebel's hometown of Sidon, he has remained hidden from Ahab. Obadiah, like the widow of Zarephath, connects the prophet's presence with imminent punishment for his own sin. Yet as genuine as his piety is, Obadiah has misunderstood the situation. Elijah assures him of this with a solemn oath, stating that he is there to meet with Ahab.

<sup>1</sup> After many days the word of the Lord came to Elijah, in the third year of the drought, saying, 'Go, present yourself to Ahab; I will send rain on the earth.'<sup>2</sup> So Elijah went to present himself to Ahab. The famine was severe in Samaria.

#### 1 Kings 18:1-2

In the third year of the drought. This remarkable drought lasted three and a half years by the fervent prayer of Elijah.

Go, present yourself to Ahab. Earlier, God had told Elijah to hide himself. Now it was time to present himself to the evil king. There is a time to hide and be alone with God, and there is also a time to present one's self to the world. Some wish to always remain hidden when they should step up and present themselves. Elijah simply obeyed God's command. Although it happened through the prayers of Elijah, his prayers were sensitive to the leading of God. The drought did not begin or end as a result of Elijah's will, but at God's will.

**By even greater personal resolve and sacrifice Jesus too allowed his human life to end according to his Father's will: <<Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done>> (Luke 22:42).**

<sup>3</sup> Ahab summoned Obadiah, who was in charge of the palace. (Now Obadiah revered the Lord greatly;<sup>4</sup> when Jezebel was killing off the prophets of the Lord, Obadiah took a hundred prophets, hid them fifty to a cave, and provided them with bread and water.)<sup>5</sup> Then Ahab said to Obadiah, 'Go through the land to all the springs of water and to all the wadis; perhaps we may find grass to keep the horses and mules alive, and not lose some of the animals.'<sup>6</sup> So they divided the land

between them to pass through it; Ahab went in one direction by himself, and Obadiah went in another direction by himself.

### 1 Kings 18:3-6

Ahab summoned Obadiah. The effects of the drought on Samaria were dire and Ahab was desperate to find sources of food and water for his animals, so he commanded Obadiah to scour one part of the land while he searched in another.

Now Obadiah revered the Lord greatly. Despite serving an apostate king, probably out of fear, Obadiah maintained his faith in the Lord and indeed took great personal risks by hiding the Lord's prophets as seen below.

When Jezebel was killing off the prophets of the Lord, Obadiah took a hundred prophets, hid them fifty to a cave, and provided them with bread and water.

This man Obadiah was a brave man who stood for God and his prophets in a difficult time. Obadiah would have had little trouble in finding caves to hide these prophets for there are over two hundred in the Mount Carmel area alone. Yet there was great personal risk for there was always the chance that he would be seen taking the food to the caves and there were many prepared to inform the king, especially as they would probably receive a reward for doing so.

This may be the same Obadiah whose prophecy against Edom is recorded among the Minor Prophets. It is a little difficult to be certain, because there were thirteen Obadiah's in the OT. The prophecy of Obadiah may indicate that it was written around 850 BC placing the prophet as a contemporary of Elisha and therefore he may have been the same man as here. However, the prophet of the Minor Prophets is generally thought to have come from Judah and it seems strange that he should serve a king in the northern kingdom. The Hebrew name Obadiah means 'Worshipper of Yahweh' or 'Servant of Yahweh'.

A hundred prophets. The title prophet is not only given to those who are endowed with an extraordinary spirit of prophecy, but also to such ministers who have devoted themselves to the service of God in preaching, praying, praising God, etc.

<sup>7</sup> As Obadiah was on the way, Elijah met him; Obadiah recognised him, fell on his face, and said, 'Is it you, my lord Elijah?' <sup>8</sup> He answered him, 'It is I. Go, tell your lord that Elijah is here.' <sup>9</sup> And he said, 'How have I sinned, that you would hand your servant over to Ahab, to kill me?' <sup>10</sup> As the Lord your God lives, there is no nation or kingdom to which my lord has not sent to seek you; and when they would say, "He is not here", he would require an oath of the kingdom or nation, that they had not found you. <sup>11</sup> But now you say, "Go, tell your lord that Elijah is here." <sup>12</sup> As soon as I have gone from you, the spirit of the

Lord will carry you I know not where; so, when I come and tell Ahab and he cannot find you, he will kill me, although I your servant have revered the Lord from my youth. <sup>13</sup> Has it not been told my lord what I did when Jezebel killed the prophets of the Lord, how I hid a hundred of the Lord's prophets fifty to a cave, and provided them with bread and water? <sup>14</sup> Yet now you say, "Go, tell your lord that Elijah is here"; he will surely kill me.'

#### 1 Kings 18:7-14

As Obadiah was on the way, Elijah met him. The drought was so severe that King Ahab himself and his trusted servant Obadiah were out searching for pasture land. God arranged this unexpected meeting between Obadiah and the prophet Elijah.

How have I sinned, that you would hand your servant over to Ahab, to kill me? Obadiah knew that King Ahab had conducted an exhaustive search for Elijah in order to punish him for the drought that his prayers had imposed on Israel. Obadiah feared that if he announced that he had met Elijah and the prophet disappeared again, Ahab would punish Obadiah for letting Elijah get away. He may also have concluded that Obadiah was trying to make a fool of Ahab by saying that Elijah was waiting to meet him only to find he was not.

<sup>15</sup> Elijah said, 'As the Lord of hosts lives, before whom I stand, I will surely show myself to him today.' <sup>16</sup> So Obadiah went to meet Ahab, and told him; and Ahab went to meet Elijah.

#### 1 Kings 18:15-16

As the Lord of hosts lives, before whom I stand. Elijah makes an oath in the sight of the highest authority. A believer such as Obadiah would immediately know that Elijah's word could be trusted because of this oath made in the name of God: <<*You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name*>> (Exodus 20:7).

I will surely show myself to him today. Kindly and wisely, Elijah responded to Obadiah's legitimate fears. He would not see Obadiah martyred on his own behalf.

<sup>17</sup> When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, 'Is it you, you troubler of Israel?' <sup>18</sup> He answered, 'I have not troubled Israel; but you have, and your father's house, because you have forsaken the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals. <sup>19</sup> Now therefore have all Israel assemble for me at Mount Carmel, with the four hundred and fifty

prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table.'

### 1 Kings 18:17-19

Is it you, you troubler of Israel? Ahab sees Elijah, the prophet who has pronounced God's judgement, as the cause of the nation's trouble. However, Elijah rightly answers that Ahab, who has turned to other gods, is the true 'troubler of Israel'. The relatively rare Hebrew verb '*akar*, 'to trouble,' is also found in 1 Samuel 14:24-46, where there is also a dispute about who is really 'the troubler of Israel'. Is it Saul, who has bound the people under a foolish oath, as Jonathan claims in 1 Samuel 14:29, or is it Jonathan himself? Another foolish oath is found in the story of Jephthah's daughter in Judges 11:29-40. On a previous occasion Israel had found and killed a man who was bringing 'trouble' on them, and had thus escaped God's curse in Joshua Chapters 6-7; especially the use of '*akar* in Joshua 6:18 and 7:25 should be noted. These other stories make it clear that much is at stake in this debate about who has truly troubled Israel. Elijah's claim is that the trouble has religious roots: the abandonment of the commandments of the Lord and the embrace of the Baals, which were various local manifestations of the god Baal-hadad; refer to the comment made on 1 Kings 16:31-33. Ahab, not Elijah, is the Achan of this particular narrative.

Ahab was easily the worst, most ungodly king that Israel ever had. Yet he did not hesitate to blame the godly prophet Elijah for the problems of Israel. If Ahab would at least stop the active persecution of the people of God, God would relent in the drought. However, the wicked king of Israel found it easier to blame the godly prophet.

According to his theology, it made sense for Ahab to blame Elijah. Ahab believed in Baal, so much so that his government promoted and supported Baal worship and persecuted the worshippers of Yahweh. Ahab believed that Elijah had angered the sky-god Baal and therefore Baal withheld rain. Ahab probably thought that Baal would hold back the rain until Elijah was caught and executed. Instead, Ahab should have turned to the Word of God. Deuteronomy 28:23-24 promised that drought would come to a disobedient Israel. Verse 36 makes it clear that Elijah did all this at the command of God. This was not his clever idea or strategy. This was a God-inspired plan that Elijah obeyed. It was important to confront and eliminate these prophets of Baal before God sent rain to the land of Israel. It was crucial that everyone understand that the rain came from Yahweh, not from Baal.

Now therefore have all Israel assemble for me at Mount Carmel. All Israel here would actually mean the elders and clan leaders so that they would witness what happened and report it back to the people they represented.



Mount Carmel

Mount Carmel was most significant in ancient times as a barrier to traffic along the coastal plain. The 1500 foot high limestone mountain impeded armies and merchants travelling to the Jezreel Valley. Biblically, Mount Carmel is referenced most often as a symbol of beauty and fertility. To be given the <<*majesty of Carmel*>> was to be blessed indeed (Isaiah 35:2). Solomon praised his beloved: <<*Your head crowns you like Mount Carmel*>> (Song 7:5a). But for Carmel to wither was a sign of devastating judgement: <<*He rebukes the sea and makes it dry, and he dries up all the rivers; Bashan and Carmel wither, and the bloom of Lebanon fades*>> (Nahum 1:4).

With the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah. Elijah challenged King Ahab to gather the idol prophets of Baal and Asherah for this meeting at Mount Carmel.

Who eat at Jezebel's table. This refers to fact that these prophets of Baal and Asherah were sponsored and supported by the government of Israel, having a special patron in the wicked Queen Jezebel. Jezebel was not content with a private chapel, nor with her husband's readiness to pay lip service to Baal; she intended to dethrone the God of Israel, make her Baal the chief deity and her faith into the official state religion.

#### V.b.ii 1 Kings 18:20-40 - Elijah's Triumph over the Priests of Baal

Elijah challenges the priests of Baal in order to demonstrate to the people of God whether it was the Lord or Baal who was really God. The priests had the first opportunity to make an offering of a bull on a prepared altar of firewood but could not set it alight. Instead they were to call on Baal to reign down fire on it. The frenzied chants lasted all day, urged on by Elijah's mocking comments about their god. No fire came. As the evening sacrifice time approached, Elijah then set his wood and bull in place for the offering to the Lord. He then got the witnesses to drench the whole thing in water. He prayed to the Lord who immediately sent fire down from heaven to consume the offering, the wood and the water as well. Thus the representatives of Israel knew that it was the Lord and not Baal whom they should follow. Elijah ordered that the priests should be taken away and they were executed for their apostasy.

<sup>20</sup> So Ahab sent to all the Israelites, and assembled the prophets at Mount Carmel.

1 Kings 18:20

So Ahab sent to all the Israelites, and assembled the prophets at Mount Carmel.

It is hard to know why Ahab did this, carrying out the instructions of Elijah. Perhaps he hoped that the people would be so angry with Elijah for the last three years of drought that this crowd would turn against the prophet. The identity of the true ‘troubler of Israel’ in Joshua Chapter 7 had been settled in public before all Israel; similarly, all Israel, at least the elders and clan leaders representing all the people of Israel, is now gathered on Mount Carmel – a hill situated on a headland by modern Haifa that forms the north western end of a range of hills 13 miles or 21 km long, commonly referred to as the Carmel range. As a notable landmark, it is mentioned in early Egyptian and Mesopotamian texts.



The traditional site of Elijah’s victory for the Lord

This is probably the best view of the area of Elijah’s contest, assuming tradition is correct. The monastery of Muhraqa is at the top of the hill, but tradition places the contest slightly lower near a spring. The crowds of Israelites would have filled the spacious territory around to see whose god would win.

These prophets of Baal hated Elijah. They loved the favour of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, and they enthusiastically promoted the persecution of any true follower of Yahweh. But over the last three years they had been severely humbled by Elijah and the drought sustained by his prayers. All their cries to the weather-

god Baal were ineffective for three years. They hated this prophet of God who humiliated them and their sham priesthood so thoroughly.

<sup>21</sup> Elijah then came near to all the people, and said, ‘How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.’ The people did not answer him a word.

### 1 Kings 18:21

How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him. This was a logical and useful question. In general, the people of Israel were in a spiritually lukewarm condition. They wanted to give some devotion to both Yahweh and Baal, but the God of Israel was not interested in such divided devotion.

Spiritually speaking, Israel was like an unfaithful partner in a marriage who does not want to give up their marriage partner, but also does not want to give up their illicit lover. The marriage partner has a legitimate claim to the exclusive devotion of their spouse. It is worth reading Ezekiel Chapter 16 at this point to remind the reader of what God has done for his people and how they have acted as a faithless bride.

The rare Hebrew verb *pasakh* or limping occurs again in v.26, where the prophets of Baal ‘limped around the altar.’ The irregular steps of their ritual dance portray an inability to move properly. The worship of the people is no better than the worship of these prophets, as they refuse to choose between the Lord and Baal but look to retain both options.

The appeal of Elijah made it clear that there was a difference between the service of Baal and the service of Yahweh. Perhaps in the minds of many, there was not a great difference - the only important thing was to have some kind of religion, and to be sincere about that, following the heart to whatever god the heart might lead to. Yet Elijah knew that it could never be this way. One either served Baal or served Yahweh; there was a difference.

In his 1979 song ‘Gotta Serve Somebody’ Bob Dylan shows that no matter what social status one has, what political or financial power a person may wield, everyone must serve a higher authority in their life. He concludes, “But you’re gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed you’re gonna have to serve somebody. Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord. But you’re gonna have to serve somebody.” Thus he shows that those who do not explicitly follow the Lord are implicitly following Satan.

Charles Spurgeon wrote, “Elijah’s appeal also called his hearers to account for the period of time in which they had not made a decision between Yahweh and Baal. How long, he asked them. How many more sermons do you want? How

many more Sundays must roll away wasted? How many warnings, how many sicknesses, how many tollings of the bell to warn you that you must die? How many graves must be dug for your family before you will be impressed? How many plagues and pestilences must ravage this city before you will turn to God in truth? How long halt ye between two opinions?”

The people did not answer him a word. There was no objection and no repentance. They lacked the courage to either defend their position or to change it. They were willing to live unexamined lives of low conviction. Again Spurgeon commented, “Elijah could so accurately see their hearts because he could see their actions. It was as if he said, ‘I know you are not decided in opinion, because you are not decided in practice. If God be God, follow him; if Baal, follow him. You are not decided in practice.’”

<sup>22</sup> Then Elijah said to the people, ‘I, even I only, am left a prophet of the Lord; but Baal’s prophets number four hundred and fifty.

#### 1 Kings 18:22

I, even I only, am left a prophet of the Lord. Although other prophets of the Lord still existed in Israel at this time, Elijah’s emphasis here is on his belief that he is the only one willing to take a public stand against the prophets of Baal. Furthermore, it is part of Elijah’s general strategy to underscore the overwhelming odds against his success, as seen in the numerical imbalance (v.25), and in his allowing the Baal prophets first choice of bull and first opportunity at evoking a divine reaction.

But Baal’s prophets number four hundred and fifty. Verse 19 referred to: <<*the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah*>>, but all subsequent references in this chapter seem only to refer to the prophets of Baal. In 1 Kings 22:6 a further four hundred prophets are referenced and it seems these could be the prophets of Asherah listed here.

<sup>23</sup> Let two bulls be given to us; let them choose one bull for themselves, cut it in pieces, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it; I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. <sup>24</sup> Then you call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of the Lord; the god who answers by fire is indeed God.’ All the people answered, ‘Well spoken!’

#### 1 Kings 18:23-24

Let two bulls be given to us; let them choose one bull for themselves. In this proposed test, Elijah was careful to give the prophets of Baal every potential

advantage. They picked the two bulls, and picked which one they would sacrifice and which one Elijah would sacrifice.

**The god who answers by fire is indeed God.** The fire would not come from either Elijah or the prophets of Baal. It had to be supernatural in origin, and supplied by either Baal or Yahweh. Again, Elijah gave plenty of advantage to the prophets of Baal. It was thought that Baal was the sky-god, lord of the weather and the sender of lightning, which was thought to be fire from the sky. If Baal were real, he certainly could send fire from heaven. To put God and himself on the line before the gathered nation of Israel took a lot of faith. Elijah learned this faith over the many months of daily dependence on God, both at the Wadi Cherith and at the widow's house at Zarephath. Of course, Elijah had plenty of reasons for confidence in the Lord God. First, he was following express instructions from the Lord (v.36). Second, he knew from the history of Israel that God could and would send fire from heaven upon a sacrifice; refer to Judges 6:20-21 and 2 Chronicles 7:1-7.

The Lord's association with fire is well attested in the Pentateuch, e.g. Leviticus 9:24 and 10:2; and Numbers 16:35. Similarly, extra-biblical sources give evidence that Baal was thought of as a god who controls fire and lightning. The question here is which of these claims about control over fire is true?

<sup>25</sup> Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, 'Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many; then call on the name of your god, but put no fire to it.' <sup>26</sup> So they took the bull that was given them, prepared it, and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, crying, 'O Baal, answer us!' But there was no voice, and no answer. They limped about the altar that they had made. <sup>27</sup> At noon Elijah mocked them, saying, 'Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.'

### **1 Kings 18:25-27**

**So they took the bull that was given them, prepared it, and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, crying, 'O Baal, answer us!'** The prophets of Baal had a devoted prayer life. Here they prayed long and with great passion. Yet because they did not pray to the living God, their prayers meant nothing. **There was no voice, and no answer.** How could there be?

The Hebrew verb 'answer' is a key word throughout this story; as confirmed by: <<No answer>> (v.29), and: <<Answer me, O Lord, answer me>> (v.37).

They limped about the altar that they had made. It seems that the energy they had shown for prayer was beginning to wane and fatigue was setting in. The longer they went on without any answer from their god the more dispirited they became.

Elijah mocked them. Elijah could not resist the opportunity to mock the prophets of Baal for their evidently foolish faith. After several hours Elijah begins to taunt the prophets of Baal with some disrespectful suggestions as to why they are receiving no answer. A real god would not be limited in such ways; Elijah's irony bordered on sarcasm. The words meditating and wandered away can be translated to be engaged in business and may be a euphemism for bodily elimination.

<sup>28</sup> Then they cried aloud and, as was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them. <sup>29</sup> As midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice, no answer, and no response.

### 1 Kings 18:28-29

They cut themselves with swords and lances. The prophets of Baal were utterly sincere and completely devoted to their religion. They were so committed that they expressed it in their own blood. They had zeal, but without knowledge - therefore their zeal profited them nothing. The attempt to manipulate Baal into action involves self-mutilation. The kind of condition in view here as these prophets raved on is also well attested to outside of Palestine, e.g. in the account of an Egyptian traveller, Wen-Amon, circa 1100 BC, about a violent prophetic frenzy amid a temple ritual in Byblos, on the Phœnician coast north of Jezebel's hometown of Sidon.

Until the blood gushed out over them. In line with their pagan beliefs, if the blood of the animal was insufficient to get their god's attention then they would offer up their own blood or the blood of others, even to the point of killing a living child or adult. This is a sacrifice that the Lord has never condoned: *<<And they go on building the high place of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire – which I did not command, nor did it come into my mind>>* (Jeremiah 7:31).

But there was no voice, no answer, and no response. This is the sad result of worshipping an imaginary god or the god of one's own making. People may dedicate great sincerity, sacrifice, and devotion to such gods but it means nothing. There is no one there to answer.

About one thousand years later the silversmith Demetrius in Ephesus made a statement that was both laughable but also a very indictment of those who put their trust in idols: *<<Men, you know that we get our wealth from this*

*business. You also see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost the whole of Asia this Paul has persuaded and drawn away a considerable number of people by saying that gods made with hands are not gods. And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be scorned, and she will be deprived of her majesty that brought all Asia and the world to worship her>> (Acts 19:25b-27).*

<sup>30</sup> Then Elijah said to all the people, ‘Come closer to me’; and all the people came closer to him. First he repaired the altar of the Lord that had been thrown down; <sup>31</sup> Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord came, saying, ‘Israel shall be your name’; <sup>32</sup> with the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord. Then he made a trench around the altar, large enough to contain two measures of seed. <sup>33</sup> Next he put the wood in order, cut the bull in pieces, and laid it on the wood. He said, ‘Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt-offering and on the wood.’ <sup>34</sup> Then he said, ‘Do it a second time’; and they did it a second time. Again he said, ‘Do it a third time’; and they did it a third time, <sup>35</sup> so that the water ran all round the altar, and filled the trench also with water.

### 1 Kings 18:30-35

Come closer to me. When it was Elijah’s turn to sacrifice, he first wanted to get the attention of the people. This was for their benefit, not his own or really primarily for the benefit of God. They needed to pay attention so they would see that the Lord was the true God, in contrast to the silent Baal. They could also be witnesses that there was no underhand trickery such as using mirrors to ignite the fire by reflecting the sun’s rays or the use of a flammable liquid rather than the water that he has everything drenched with.

First he repaired the altar of the Lord that had been thrown down. Elijah was very aware that he repaired something that once stood strong. There was once an altar of the Lord at Carmel and in Israel in general. Elijah looked to revive something that once was. The authors of 1-2 Kings are generally opposed to worship at such high places, refer to the comment made on 1 Kings 3:2, but they are even more opposed to idolatry, and they do not criticise Elijah for this action. The Lord himself removes the altar after it has served its purpose (v.38).

Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt-offering and on the wood. In wanting to make a deep impression upon the people, Elijah required more of Yahweh than he did of Baal. Elijah did not even suggest to the prophets of Baal

that they soaked their sacrifice once or twice, much less three times. Yet Elijah did this, confident that it was no harder for God to ignite a wet sacrifice than it was for him to set a dry one ablaze.

**So that the water ran all round the altar, and filled the trench also with water.**

The whole area is saturated with water so that there is no possibility of natural combustion. If this offering is consumed in fire, it must be the Lord's doing alone.

<sup>36</sup> At the time of the offering of the oblation, the prophet Elijah came near and said, 'O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your bidding. <sup>37</sup> Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.'

**1 Kings 18:36-37**

**At the time of the offering of the oblation.** Some fifty years before this, Jeroboam the King of Israel officially disassociated the citizens of the northern kingdom from the worship of the God of Israel at the temple in Jerusalem. Nevertheless, Elijah still remembered the evening sacrifice that was offered according to God's commandment every day at the temple in Jerusalem.

**O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant.** Both were important. It was important for the people of Israel to know who their God really is, and who God's servant was.

**And that I have done all these things at your bidding.** This also was essential, and helps the reader to understand the whole event. Elijah did this according to the word of God that he had received. It was not prompted because of his own cleverness, because of presumption or because of his own vanity. God led Elijah to this showdown with the prophets of Baal.

Spurgeon recommended that believers use the same principle in prayer, especially those who preach the Word of God: "Go you to the mercy-seat with this as one of your arguments, 'Lord, I have done according to thy word. Now let it be seen that it is even so. I have preached thy word, and thou hast said, It shall not return unto me void. I have prayed for these people, and thou hast said, The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much; let it be seen that this is according to thy word.'"

**Answer me, O Lord, answer me.** Elijah's public prayer gives evidence of great faith and confidence that God will answer.

<sup>38</sup> Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt-offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench. <sup>39</sup> When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, 'The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God.' <sup>40</sup> Elijah said to them, 'Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape.' Then they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Wadi Kishon, and killed them there.

### 1 Kings 18:38-40

Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt-offering. The fire of the Lord consumes not only the burnt offering and the wood but also the inflammable stones and the saturated dust, as well as the water that was in the trench. This cannot be the result of any natural phenomenon, since even lightning would not consume the stones. As all the people realise, this fire can only be a special work of God.

The prophets of Baal had passion, commitment, sincerity, devotion, and great energy. What they did not have was a living God in heaven who answered by fire. Elijah's petition had lasted less than a minute but had produced spectacular results. The difference lay in the One whom Elijah had addressed. When the fire of God fell, its work was beyond expectation. It would have been enough if merely the pieces of bull on the altar were ignited, but God wanted more than simple vindication - he wanted to glorify himself among the people.

God rightly desires glory for his name, as Jesus shows: <<Father, glorify your name.' Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again'>> (John 12:28). He did so by glorifying Jesus: <<So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed>> (John 17:5).

When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, 'The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God.' At this moment, the people were completely persuaded. Asked to choose between Baal and Yahweh, there was no choice to make - obviously, the Lord was God. Tragically, this was only a momentary persuasion. This was no lasting revival in Israel. The people were decidedly persuaded, but not lastingly changed.

Elijah said to them, 'Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape.' Since this was a contest between Yahweh and Baal, the prophets of each deity had to be responsible for their respective results. The great sin of King Ahab was his official sponsorship of the prophets of Baal, and now that the fraud of Baal was exposed, his prophets had to answer for it and were dealt with according to the Law of Moses; refer to Deuteronomy 13:5, 13:13-18, 17:2-5, and 18:9-22.

**Then they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Wadi Kishon, and killed them there.** Elijah simply demanded that the prophets of Baal receive the treatment they promoted for the prophets of Yahweh.

### V.b.iii 1 Kings 18:41-46 - The Drought Ends

Elijah informs Ahab that the drought is about to end even before there is any sign of rain. He then goes back up Mount Carmel and prays to the Lord. He keeps sending his servant up to look for any sign of rain as he prays. At last a small cloud appears away in the distance. Soon, however, the sky was black and heavy rain results. Ahab returns to Jezreel by chariot but Elijah outruns him and arrives first.

<sup>41</sup> Elijah said to Ahab, ‘Go up, eat and drink; for there is a sound of rushing rain.’ <sup>42</sup> So Ahab went up to eat and to drink. Elijah went up to the top of Carmel; there he bowed himself down upon the earth and put his face between his knees. <sup>43</sup> He said to his servant, ‘Go up now, look towards the sea.’ He went up and looked, and said, ‘There is nothing.’ Then he said, ‘Go again seven times.’ <sup>44</sup> At the seventh time he said, ‘Look, a little cloud no bigger than a person’s hand is rising out of the sea.’ Then he said, ‘Go and say to Ahab, “Harness your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.”’

#### 1 Kings 18:41-44

**Go up, eat and drink; for there is a sound of rushing rain.** Elijah knew that once the official worship of Baal had been defeated, the purpose for the drought was fulfilled. Rain was on the way. Elijah and Ahab would now each do what they wanted to do - Elijah would pray and Ahab would eat.

**There he bowed himself down upon the earth and put his face between his knees.** The significance of this prophetic action, like that in 1 Kings 17:21, is not made clear. He is most likely praying for rain, giving thanks to God or he might simply be exhausted after the day contesting with the priests of Baal.

**Go again seven times.** The lesson here for all believers is not to be discouraged if there is no sign of answered prayer on the first, second or any subsequent occasion. Just keep praying and God will answer.

**At the seventh time he said, ‘Look, a little cloud no bigger than a person’s hand is rising out of the sea.’** This was stubbornly persistent prayer. It was as if Elijah would not take no for an answer, because he had confidence that God’s will was to send rain. He stubbornly furthered the will of God by his persistent prayer. Elijah prayed, asking in faith for God to send the rain. Elijah obviously sensed this was the will of God, yet it was his fervent prayer that brought the rain. The evidence

of the rain came slowly and in a small way, but out of this small evidence God brought a mighty work.

In the 9 November 1904 edition of *The Life of Faith*, a London newspaper dedicated to the deeper life movement, a writer named Jessie Penn-Lewis reported on a remarkable work just beginning in Wales under the ministry of men like Evan Roberts and Seth Joshua. She reported that a cloud no bigger than a man's hand had arisen in Wales. It was a fitting description of the clear but small beginning of what became a mighty work of God.

Charles Spurgeon used this text as an illustration of the small signs that precede a mighty work of God. He spoke of four certain signs and tokens for good which prayerful faith clearly perceives when an awakening, a genuine revival is about to come. Christians should regard the following things as clouds, as small as a man's hand, rising out of the sea:

- A growing dissatisfaction with the present state of things, and an increasing anxiety among the members of the church for the salvation of souls.
- When this anxiety leads believers to be exceedingly earnest and importunate in prayer.
- When ministers begin to take counsel one with another, and to say, "What must we do?"
- When the church shall see the doctrine of the individual responsibility of each Christian fully felt and carried out into individual action.

**Harness your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.** This was a word of faith from Elijah to Ahab. Based only on the sighting of a cloud that was as small as a man's hand, he knew a torrent was on the way.

<sup>45</sup> In a little while the heavens grew black with clouds and wind; there was heavy rain. Ahab rode off and went to Jezreel. <sup>46</sup> But the hand of the Lord was on Elijah; he girded up his loins and ran in front of Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel.

### **1 Kings 18:45-46**

**In a little while the heavens grew black with clouds and wind; there was heavy rain.** God's word through Elijah was proved true. The long drought was over, and it was demonstrated that the prayers of Elijah both withheld the rain and then subsequently brought the rain.

**Ahab rode off and went to Jezreel.** As the rains began, Ahab went to Jezreel, where he had a palace (1 Kings 21:1), and where his wife Queen Jezebel was staying (1 Kings 19:1-2). The fact that Elijah also went to Jezreel suggests that he

may have thought that his war with Baal worship was over, which turned out to be a misjudgement.

**But the hand of the Lord was on Elijah; he girded up his loins and ran in front of Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel.** This was an obviously supernaturally empowered 14 mile cross-country run. The reader does not know exactly why it was important to God for Elijah to reach Jezreel first; perhaps it was so that he would be the first to tell Queen Jezebel. What is clear is that Elijah was not afraid to go into the midst of his enemies having just destroyed their faith in a pagan god, knowing that it would not be well received by the Queen especially.