

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The Bible and Miracles: Elijah at Mount Carmel

If you take a map of Israel and run your finger down the coastline from the Lebanon towards Egypt, you will come to a piece of land jutting out into the Mediterranean Sea. There you will find Mount Carmel. It is right on the edge of the land. It was here that one of the greatest contests recorded in the Bible took place. The contest was between the prophet Elijah and the priests of Baal. One man faced 450 of his enemies. On the throne of Israel at that time was Ahab, a wicked and weak king who was under the control of Jezebel his wife. It was Jezebel, whose name is still synonymous with evil, who had introduced Baal worship into Israel. As a result the worship of God had all but been driven out of the land. It is striking then, that the events which led to revival in Israel, took place on the edge of the land of Israel on Mount Carmel. God uses Mount Carmel as a great illustration of how He is able to bring about victory from the most desperate situations. It is a story which not only demonstrates God's power in history but encourages us to prove God in the desperate situations which we sometimes have to face.

You will find the story of Elijah at Mount Carmel in 1 Kings 18:20-46. It is the story of one man's courage in the face of overwhelming opposition. I would like to look at this story in the following ways.

- Courage to follow the Lord completely
- Courage to expose idolatry
- Courage to rebuild faith in God
- Courage to pray believing God will answer

Courage to follow the Lord completely

Elijah was a man whose life was directed by God's word. Last week we heard how God had told him where to go and what to do. This pattern continues at the beginning of chapter 18. God tells Elijah to meet Ahab and God also promises to send rain which would end the long drought Israel had suffered. It is impossible for us to challenge others to follow the Lord Jesus unless we first recognise His Lordship in our own lives and are obedient to His word. It is very easy to get carried away with the great exploits the Bible describes and those we read about in the biographies of outstanding Christians. We sometimes think, "I would like to do something remarkable in my Christian life which would make people sit up and take notice." But it is invariably true that behind all the great feats which have been done for God there have been lives of simple faith and obedience. In the Old Testament for example, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Hannah, Samuel, David, Job, Daniel all learned to prove God in the ordinariness of their lives before God made them such powerful witnesses.

It was with a background of learning to follow God, that Elijah was able to arrange a contest which would challenge the nation of Israel to follow God as well. When Elijah meets Ahab, the king describes him as the "Troubler of Israel." It is amazing that the king was so blind to his own responsibility for the terrible spiritual state of his kingdom that he blames the prophet. Elijah stands out as a man who was unafraid to speak the truth. He was not afraid to confront Ahab with his failure as a king to lead the nation spiritually by following God's commandments and also by introducing idolatry to Israel. It is worth reflecting upon the responsibility governments have for the spiritual welfare of a nation. Our own country has gained an awful lot from the Christian heritage it has enjoyed. Governments are also responsible for the direction in which their powerful influence can take people. In the UK we have seen the emergence of materialism as one of the great idols of our day. We are in danger, in the words of Oscar Wilde, of "knowing the cost of everything and the value of nothing." Ahab, through the influence of his wife, had led the people of God away from the worship of God into the slavery of idolatry.

Elijah's challenge, against all the odds, was to prove the reality of God and the falsehood of Baal. He could not have done this before first proving in his own life the reality of the God he believed in. This is a challenge to us as well. Do we experience the power which comes from following the Lord Jesus in our daily lives? And, as a result, are we effective witnesses in a society which is doing so much to marginalise the very faith to which it owes so much?

I do not think Elijah's audience on Mount Carmel had entirely lost all sense of God. We must remember they lived in a nation where it had become compulsory to serve Baal. Nations are often ruled by tyranny. There were brave men like Obadiah who secretly feared the Lord and who were prepared to risk their lives to protect God's servants (18:4). In

chapter 19 God tells Elijah in verse 18 that He had “reserved seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.”

If we go back in the Old Testament to the story of Gideon in Judges 6 we learn a very important lesson. In Gideon’s day the people of God were dominated by the Midianites. They were reduced to living in dens and caves. It tells us the people prayed to God for deliverance. God sent a prophet to explain exactly why their lives were so impoverished. They were idolaters. They worshipped the gods of the Amorites. In other words, they lived double lives. On the one hand they prayed to God, whilst at the same time they worshipped idols. Israel in Elijah’s day had gone even further. They had all but forgotten God and had become worshippers of Baal. Today we can still live double lives. We can be Christians but allow the world and all it offers to displace the Lord Jesus in our hearts. We might not call ourselves idolaters but the truth is that we can value the wealth, esteem and values of the world above the Person who died to deliver us from it.

Courage to expose idolatry

Elijah exposed idolatry by standing against it. He was determined to prove publicly what he knew personally: the reality of God. He wanted to demonstrate who the true God was and also the emptiness of the idols. His challenge was simple “If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, then follow him” (verse 21). The people did not reply to Elijah’s challenge which was understandable in view of the fear they lived under. Elijah’s test of the true God was quite simple. A bull would be sacrificed and placed on an altar ready to be burned with fire. The prophets of Baal would call upon their god to consume the sacrifice with fire. Elijah would call upon the LORD. The God who answered with fire would be the true God. The people agreed that this was a fair test.

Elijah’s confidence in God is outstanding. He is willing to give the prophets of Baal the advantage of going first. He also allows them a lot of time. From morning until noon. We might think that the prophets of Baal had no chance of calling down fire on to the sacrifice. However, if we go back to Exodus 7:8-13, we read about Aaron’s rod which miraculously changed into a serpent. Pharaoh’s sorcerers were able to change their rods into serpents as well. Of course, God’s power was greater and Aaron’s serpent destroyed those produced by the sorcerers. However, this story illustrates that not every miraculous occurrence is of God and that idolaters are sometimes able to do extraordinary things. Sorcery was well known in Bible times but condemned by God because of the evil source of its power.

It is important to understand that at Carmel it may not have been impossible for the prophets of Baal to conjure up fire but that God’s power made them powerless. When we pray for God’s power to be demonstrated, we should remember that this can be done in two ways. First, He can do powerful things. Second, He can annul the power of His and our enemies. What happened at Carmel was that the powerful prophets of Baal who had dominance in Israel were suddenly rendered powerless. For all their excessive behaviour, leaping about and cutting themselves, it says “But there was no voice; no one answered.” Elijah mocks the prophets by suggesting they call louder to Baal because he may have been meditating, busy, on a journey or even asleep. There is a great contrast between powerless Baal and the God of Israel who is described in Psalm 121:4 as “He who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.” God’s power is always available to His people.

Courage to rebuild faith in God

The chaos of the prophets of Baal with their unsuccessful attempts to bring down fire on their sacrifice contrasts sharply with the calmness and gentleness of Elijah. These are not attributes we readily associate with the dynamic prophet. But his deep seated love for his people is shown in his words and actions. First he says, “Come near to me.” The people, who were so far away from God, were invited to come close to the prophet. In this way he shows how God wanted His people to draw near to Him. “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you” (James 4:8). It is possible for us to get away from the Lord Jesus and we need to encourage one another to come back. Elijah then begins to rebuild the altar of the Lord. He used twelve stones. Each stone represented one of the tribes. Imagine the people watching the prophet carefully rebuilding the altar of the Lord. The nation, since Abraham’s day, had always been associated with the altar of the Lord. It was the place where they worshipped God. That altar had fallen gradually into disuse and ruin. In the sight all the people, Elijah rebuilds the altar. Israel was already divided into northern and southern kingdoms but Elijah recognises one nation, chosen to worship God. They had failed but Elijah shows that by rebuilding the altar that they can be restored once again to worship and serve God.

The Christian should have an altar. Not an altar made out of stones but simply a time when we come into the presence of God to worship Him and commit ourselves to Him each day. I have a friend in Switzerland who has a large family. He told me once, “I do not want my family to tumble unprepared into the day.” He ensured that his family started each day in the presence of God. Do we allow ourselves and our children to stumble into a spiritually dangerous world without first coming into God’s presence? Do not let your family altar fall into disrepair. If you no longer have this altar, have the humility and courage to build it again. Start today.

Elijah did everything in order. We are reminded by Paul to “Let all things be done decently and in order.” We live in a noisy and often disorderly world. Even some Christians believe the more outrageous and unrestrained we are the better. There was never a more dynamic prophet than Elijah but he saw the importance of doing God’s work in God’s way. Even though he was instrumental in bringing down fire from heaven he had himself to learn about the “still small voice”. Another dynamic prophet, Isaiah, put it this way, “In returning and rest you shall be saved; In quietness and confidence shall be your strength.” Isaiah 30:15.

Elijah also placed himself at a disadvantage by pouring water over the sacrifice until it filled the trench he had dug. Water quenches fire. Even in our modern world it is still the most effective way to put out a fire. Ask any fire-fighter. In the Bible we are told not to quench the Spirit. Elijah had seen how the people of God had allowed the worship and service of God to be quenched. Now Elijah was about to show how God would overcome all the apathy and indifference towards Him and set the hearts of His people on fire again. I am reminded of the story of the village church which caught fire. Everyone rushed out to help. They formed a line and passed buckets of water to throw on the fire. The pastor of the church was in the line and found himself next to a man who never came to the church. The pastor said to him, “I’ve never seen you at our church before.” The man replied, “No, that’s right but it’s never been on fire before.” Are we on fire for the Lord? Or has apathy and indifference quenched our desire to follow the Lord Jesus? Do we pour cold water over the efforts of others or have others discouraged us in our Christian pathway? The only thing to do is bring such things into God’s presence and allow the fire of His holiness and love to deal with our failure or bitterness and revive our hearts. Remember His love for us can never be quenched.

Courage to pray believing God will answer

Elijah’s timing was also important. It was at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice that Elijah prayed to God. All the sacrifices instituted by God in the Old Testament were simply pictures of the greatest sacrifice of all which was revealed in the New Testament: the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus. All God’s love and blessing are demonstrated on the basis of sacrifice. We have life because the Lord Jesus sacrificed Himself for us. The content of Elijah’s prayer is helpful. Elijah prays on the basis of who God is; the greatness of God’s person. He prays on the basis of God’s relationship with His people; the greatness of God’s faithfulness. Elijah also prays on the basis of his own obedience; the importance of our obedience to God’s word. And finally he prays believing God would turn “their hearts back to You again” (verse 37); the importance of believing prayer.

God’s response to the first prayer of Elijah was as instantaneous as it was powerful. That it happened so quickly shows the great desire of God to demonstrate His power to His people. He wanted them to return to Him. The power is astounding. The sacrifice, wood, stones, dust and water were all consumed. But the power was also controlled. The world has seen great fires but none so powerful and controlled as this. Neither Elijah nor the people nor the prophets of Baal were harmed by it. Yet it consumed the rock as well as the wood. A fire which consumed the sacrifice and the altar completely yet did not harm one bystander. At Calvary the power of God’s judgement and love are seen. At the cross the Lord Jesus bore in His own body our sins. God’s judgement fell in all its terror and holiness upon Him. Because judgement fell on the Lord Jesus, it does not fall on me. I once read of a ferocious forest fire which swept through the countryside in the USA. Afterwards all that was left was the charred remains of the farms that once stood there. As one farmer walked through what was the back yard of his home, he came across the burnt remains of a hen. He moved it with his foot and to his great surprise, underneath, and still alive, were the hen’s chicks. As the fire had swept at such speed through the farm yard the hen remained protecting her chicks. She bore the fire so her children would not. At Mount Carmel the judgement which the people so deserved fell upon the sacrifice. As a result the people realised who the true God was and fell down in worship. Judgement did of course fall on the prophets of Baal. And it was a complete judgement. We must never think that God overlooks evil. He requires us to judge evil in our own lives and to warn of it in the lives of others.

Elijah’s second prayer, when he goes to the top of Mount Carmel, was answered gradually. There he bows down upon the ground. He also sends his servant to look towards the sea. Seven times Elijah sends the servant and on the seventh time he sees a cloud like a man’s hand. Many times in the Bible the hand is used to describe power and blessing. For example, in verse 46, “the hand of the LORD was on Elijah”. The skies soon became black with cloud and torrential rain followed.

There is a striking mix of fire and water in the story at Mount Carmel. In the fire God acts in power and grace. In the rain He sends showers of blessing. God is revealed as the only true God and also the God who blesses. The land of Israel which had suffered drought because of their idolatry now enjoyed rain from heaven and the blessings it would bring. This happened because one man acted in obedience towards God in spite of all the opposition he faced. James 5:17 reminds us that Elijah was a man just like us. But he also had outstanding characteristics. He was a righteous man. As we have seen, he was obedient to God’s word in all that he did. He was fervent in what he did for God. In other words, he had a passionate faith in God. He was also effective in his prayer life. God was able to work through Elijah and answer his prayers because Elijah was completely committed to standing for God at one of the

worst periods of Israel's history. Today we need to be completely committed to the Lord Jesus at a time when there is so much opposition to the Person of Christ and the Christian faith. God is still able to work when individuals begin to trust Him and live for Him against all the odds. The story of the contest at Mount Carmel teaches us that when we trust Him, God is able to turn desperate situations into times of remarkable blessing.

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