

Lesson 4 25 August 2013

Elijah at Mount Carmel

Lesson Scope: [1 Kings 18](#)

Lesson Focus

Ahab desperately sought for Elijah during Israel's period of drought (1 Kings 18:10), but God had hidden him securely. Now Elijah was to initiate a meeting with Ahab before God would end the drought.

"Art thou he that troubleth Israel?" Ahab's first words to Elijah reveal humanity's universal, fatal flaw of shifting the blame. It began in Eden, and it continues yet today. Ahab clearly was the real culprit, but he refused the evidence. No one is as blind as he who is unwilling to see. He had committed himself to evil. He had married Jezebel. He had chosen to worship her idols. Evil clouds the issues and distorts reality so much that its followers believe a lie.

The contest between Elijah's living God and Ahab's dead one was about to commence. The fact that Ahab accepted Elijah's challenge reveals how spiritually destitute he really was. He must have thought there was at least a chance that his god would win, but it was not to be. Meanwhile Elijah was moving forward with the calm confidence of a strong faith in God. How can finite, mortal minds begin to understand an infinite, eternal God? Human language is inadequate in considering such a concept, but we keep trying to understand Him. Through the general revelation of creation (Psalm 19:1-2) and through the special revelation of His Word, we gradually form a picture of who God is and of what He is like. Slowly and deliberately, God revealed Himself to fallen man through the Old Testament Era. His greatest revelation was the incarnation of His Son in the New Testament Era. This lesson discusses one of the many Old Testament building blocks that help us understand how great God really is.

Israel's concept of God was far too small. Too often ours is also too small. We will never fully comprehend Him: He is infinite and we are finite. This account should reinforce and increase our understanding that God is great and good in all His purposes.

The eye of faith does not question the reality or authority of God. God has shown Himself strong on behalf of those who believe and obey Him.

Lesson Aim: To proclaim the one true God.

Theme Verse: [1 Kings 18:21](#). And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, How long halt ye between two opinions? if the LORD be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him. And the people answered him not a word.

Lesson Text:

The Challenge

[1 Kings 18:1](#) ¹And it came to pass *after* many days, that the word of the LORD came to Elijah in the third year, saying, Go, shew thyself unto Ahab; and I will send rain upon the earth.

[1 Kings 18:17-21](#) ¹⁷ And it came to pass, when Ahab saw Elijah, that Ahab said unto him, *Art* thou he that troubleth Israel? ¹⁸ And he answered, I have not troubled Israel; but thou, and thy father's house, in that ye have forsaken the commandments of the LORD, and thou hast followed Baalim. ¹⁹ Now therefore send, *and* gather to me all Israel unto Mount Carmel, and the prophets of Baal four hundred and fifty, and the prophets of the groves four hundred, which eat at Jezebel's table. ²⁰ So Ahab sent unto all the children of Israel, and gathered the prophets together unto mount Carmel. ²¹ And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, How long halt ye between two opinions? if the LORD *be* God, follow him: but if Baal, *then* follow him. And the people answered him not a word.

The Contest

[1 Kings 18:23-27](#) ²³ Let them therefore give us two bullocks; and let them choose one bullock for themselves, and cut it in pieces, and lay *it* on wood, and put no fire *under*: and I will dress the other bullock, and lay *it* on wood, and put no fire *under*: ²⁴ And call ye on the name of your gods, and I will call on the name of the LORD: and the God that answereth by fire, let him be God. And all the people answered and said, It is well spoken. ²⁵ And Elijah said unto the prophets of Baal, Choose you one bullock for yourselves, and dress *it* first; for ye *are* many; and call on the name of your gods, but put no fire *under*. ²⁶ And they took the bullock which was given them, and they dressed *it*, and called on the name of Baal from morning even until noon, saying, O Baal, hear us. But *there was* no voice, nor any that answered. And they leaped upon the altar which was made. ²⁷ And it came to pass at noon, that Elijah mocked them, and said, Cry aloud: for he *is* a god; either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, *or per-*

adventure he sleepeth, and must be awaked.

1 Kings 18:31-36 ³¹And Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, unto whom the word of the LORD came, saying, Israel shall be thy name: ³²And with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD: and he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two measures of seed. ³³And he put the wood in order, and cut the bullock in pieces, and laid *him* on the wood, and said, Fill four barrels with water, and pour *it* on the burnt sacrifice, and on the wood. ³⁴And he said, Do *it* the second time. And they did *it* the second time. And he said, Do *it* the third time. And they did *it* the third time. ³⁵And the water ran round about the altar; and he filled the trench also with water. ³⁶And it came to pass at *the time* of the offering of the *evening* sacrifice, that Elijah the prophet came near, and said, LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that thou *art* God in Israel, and *that I am* thy servant, and *that I have done* all these things at thy word.

The Consummation

1 Kings 18:38-39 ³⁸Then the fire of the LORD fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, 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* the God; the LORD, he *is* the God.

Questions for Study

The Challenge

1. Why might Elijah have had apprehensions about coming out of hiding at this time?
2. What gave Elijah courage to obey despite his apprehensions?
3. How do we explain God's sovereignty in light of the suffering and wickedness in this world?
4. In what situations might we halt between two opinions?

The Contest

5. What was the point of this contest, and how did Elijah make this aim crystal clear?
6. What can we learn from Elijah's carefulness in building the altar and offering the sacrifice?
7. What cherished dogmas of our day are we called to dispel? How can we do so?

The Consummation

8. How can we make the world in which we live more God-conscious?

Analyzing the Passage

Two groups of prophets are mentioned—four hundred fifty prophets of Baal and four hundred prophets of the groves (1 Kings 18:19). The difference between the two groups is unclear, but both of them were on Jezebel's side and were opposed to Elijah. Both groups ate at her table (1 Kings 18:19). Elijah could have been intimidated by the great numbers against him, but the Lord had promised, "One man of you shall chase a thousand: for the LORD your God, he it is that fighteth for you" (Joshua 23:10). One man with God is a majority.

Israel's halting between two opinions indicates either that they were trying to serve both God and Baal or that they were vacillating between the two. Elijah's choice of twelve stones to build the altar could symbolize the unity God intended for Israel to have in their worship to Him. The barrels were earthenware pitchers commonly used in households. No doubt Elijah's purpose in pouring water over the sacrifice was so that no one could reasonably suggest that a fire had been secretly lit. It also added to the demonstration of the mighty power of God in consuming the sacrifice and the water contrary to the laws of nature.

Principles and Applications

The Challenge

1. The passage of time has no effect upon God's sovereignty (1 Kings 18:1). The few short years of drought that Israel experienced surely must have seemed like a long time. But what area few years to an eternal God who counts one day as a thousand years (2 Peter 3:8)? God was in complete control all the time. The mortality of mankind is punctuated by the passing of time: one generation lives and dies, and another takes its place. But our sovereign God does not change.

2. God's requirements do not change, no matter whom or how many have been deceived (1 Kings 18:17-18). "No one believes that anymore." "If God were writing the Bible today, He would write it differently." "Everybody does it." These are common expressions of deceived people. But God and His Word do not change. The thing that changes as more and more join the ranks of the deceived is that error seems more acceptable. A society that holds to the godless philosophy of relativism has no spiritual anchor. Finally all men will answer to God on the basis of His pure, eternal,

and unchanging Word.

3. God in mercy brings men to the point of moral decision (1 Kings 18:19-21). Indecisiveness and lukewarmness keep one from knowing just where he is spiritually. If he is hot or cold toward God, he at least knows where he stands with Him. Every sound-minded person must choose for or against God.

The Contest

4. God works individually with everyone who is faithful (1 Kings 18:22). What does it matter if we are in the minority when we know that we are on God's side? We can rest, knowing that ultimately all will be well. "If God be for us, who can be against us?"

5. God presents His demands in terms that all can grasp (1 Kings 18:23-24). God's Word is not an obscure, mystical book. To those who want to hear what it says, the Scriptures are crystal clear. Many deny its clarity in an attempt to escape their responsibility to obey it. When Jesus said babies understand it better than the "wise and prudent" (Matthew 11:25), He was clarifying the fact that discerning God's will is more a heart issue than a mind issue. "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5); His message is the same.

6. God's infinite wisdom dispels even the most-cherished dogmas of worldly wisdom (1 Kings 18:26-27). Moral, secular humanism strives to answer humanity's deepest questions—where we came from, why we are here, and where we are going—with no consideration of God at all. But rejecting God leaves man with no meaning, no purpose, and no hope for the future. All forms of unbelief will ultimately end in profound disappointment and despair. "For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, He taketh the wise in their own craftiness" (1 Corinthians 3:19). "But the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day" (Proverbs 4:18).

7. God will be worshiped only according to His pattern (1 Kings 18:31-33). In building the altar, Elijah was careful to follow the instructions God had given Israel (Exodus 20:24-26). We come to God on His terms, not ours. Since the essence of worship is obedience, our worship is only as valid as our spirit is submitted and obedient.

8. God is not limited by men's perception of His laws (1 Kings 18:34). The laws of nature make life predictable. But God, who created them in the first place, can and sometimes does circumvent them to accomplish His wise purposes. In this case He consumed a soaking-wet sacrifice and the altar itself with flames hot enough to lick up the water in the surrounding

trench. Christ's resurrection, ascension, and Second Coming in the clouds of heaven constitute impossibilities for a secularist, but not for a man of faith.

The Consummation

9. God answers the prayer of the obedient (1 Kings 18:36-38). "Call unto me, and I will answer thee, and shew thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not" (Jeremiah 33:3). We can have confidence that God is near and is ready to hear us when we cry to Him for salvation and for help in our times of need.

10. Every knee shall bow, and every tongue shall confess that the Lord is God alone (1 Kings 18:39). When God is seen in all His glory and power, the most powerful and the most brilliant of men will fall instantly before the King of kings and Lord of lords. No earthly mortal is a match for the Creator of the universe. "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God" (Psalm 14:1).

Answers to Questions

1. Why might Elijah have had apprehensions about coming out of hiding at this time?

Ahab was seeking his life. Elijah was one against four hundred fifty prophets of Baal plus four hundred prophets of the groves. He was greatly outnumbered.

Jezebel's influence in Israel at this time was obviously very strong. Serving the true God was very unpopular. A feeling of social exclusion must have gone along with Elijah's lifestyle.

2. What gave Elijah courage to obey despite his apprehensions?

On his side he had a sovereign God, whose power, presence, and wisdom are unmatched. Absolutely nothing that He does not allow will happen. He had just been the recipient of God's provision in the face of severe drought. He had been instrumental in helping the widow of Zarephath—clearly miracles, beyond his own power. He had been preserved from Ahab's wrath for the last three-and-one-half years.

3. How do we explain God's sovereignty in light of the suffering and wickedness in this world?

As Creator of the universe, God is sovereign over all of it. In creating us with freedom of will, He has limited His sovereignty for a time. He has given each of us limited sovereignty over our own will; and He does not violate this freedom, even though we may choose against Him. But God also determines the consequences of man's choices. Someday everything will

be made right, but in the meantime, evil and suffering beset mankind.

4. In what situations might we halt between two opinions?

Our old nature is always on the verge of exerting itself. When the church speaks to an issue that we do not agree with or have convictions on ourselves, we will be tempted to favor our own opinion above that of the group.

Every day we make moral decisions. Will we obey the speed limit, or not? Will we shade the truth to save face, or not? Will we keep ourselves pure when faced with impurity, or not? If we struggle too long without finding clear victory, we need help to rise higher. We are halting, limping, spiritually. We will have struggles, but there must come a time when we make a complete surrender and find rest for our souls.

5. What was the point of this contest, and how did Elijah make this aim crystal clear?

The aim of the contest was to reveal who really is the true God—Jehovah or Baal. Everything was to be done in the open. The altars were to be built in the presence of all the people. There would be no cheating or underhandedness, no hidden fires under the altars. The conditions were fair and very simple, so that even a child could understand them. When it was over, there would be no legitimate question as to who was the true God.

6. What can we learn from Elijah's carefulness in building the altar and offering the sacrifice?

There are proper ways to come to God in worship. We must be careful to come to Him on His terms, not our own. Casual worship and casual Christianity are unacceptable. "Take heed unto yourselves, lest ye forget the covenant of the LORD your God, which he made with you, and make you a graven image, or the likeness of any thing, which the LORD thy God hath forbidden thee. For the LORD thy God is a consuming fire, even a jealous God" (Deuteronomy 4:23-24). When Moses approached the burning bush, he did so on God's terms, because the ground near that bush was holy ground; God was present. He is no less holy today. We are to come to God boldly (with confidence) but not brazenly, as we please.

7. What cherished dogmas of our day are we called to dispel? How can we do so?

Evolution. Both atheistic and theistic evolutionary theories begin with the false assumption that God was an unnecessary entity in the formation of this world. We must continue to believe in the literal, six-day week of Creation.

Secularism. This life is all there is—eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow

we die. This belief leads to a lifestyle that considers only the present moment without sensing accountability to a greater authority. It leads to nihilism, which accepts no objective truth—all is relative—and ultimately ends in utter despair. We must live in such a way that others can see that our reason for living is beyond ourselves.

Hedonism. Too many professing Christians are caught up with pleasure-seeking. Fun and pleasure-seeking are incompatible with self-denial and the pilgrim-and-stranger ethic that the New Testament teaches. We must help our young people grow out of the games of childhood into sobriety befitting true, serious-minded saints.

Halfway Christianity. In this view, it is all right to be a Christian, but not to be radical about it. It is all right to be plain, but not to be too plain. In contrast, God calls us to uphold time-honored Biblical practices.

Individualism. "You let me alone, and I'll let you alone." We all are subject to this tendency in one way or another. The fact is that we all need help at times. The only perfectly balanced person who ever lived on this earth was Jesus Christ. So be open to others' help; you need it. We tend to go off on tangents of our own interest and need to be corrected to stay on course.

8. How can we make the world in which we live more God-conscious?

Live the Bible every day. Do not be afraid to speak a word for the Lord in everyday conversation. Make it a practice to carry tracts with you and give one as often as possible. Visit neighbors who have needs—social, physical, spiritual, emotional. Lend a helping hand wherever and whenever possible, without being a busybody. Let people know you genuinely care about them. We cannot change the whole world or the whole nation, but we can work to change one life at a time.

Important Teachings

1. The passage of time has no effect upon God's sovereignty (18:1).
2. God's requirements do not change, no matter whom or how many have been deceived (18:17-18).
3. God in mercy brings men to the point of moral decision (18:19-21).
4. God works individually with everyone who is faithful (18:22).
5. God presents His demands in terms that all can grasp (18:23-24)
6. God's infinite wisdom dispels even the most-cherished dogmas of worldly wisdom (18:26-27).
7. God will be worshiped only according to His pattern (18:31-33).
8. God is not limited by men's perception of His laws (18:34).
9. God answers the prayer of the obedient (18:36-38).

10. Every knee shall bow, and every tongue shall confess that the Lord is God alone (18:39).

11. God has chosen to reveal Himself through His servants, no matter how unpopular the message (18:36).

Summarizing the Lesson

0 Thou in all Thy might so far, In all Thy love so near,
Beyond the range of sun and star, And yet beside us here.
What heart can comprehend Thy name, Or searching find Thee out
Who art within, a quickening Flame, A Presence round about?
Yet though I know Thee but in part, I ask not, Lord, for more;
Enough for me to know Thou art, To love Thee and adore.
And dearer than all things I know Is childlike faith to me,
That makes the darkest way I go an open path to Thee.

—*Frederick L. Hosmer*

Research Guide

The Antiquities of the Jews by Flavius Josephus (Book 8, Chapter 13) and Halley's Bible Handbook (pp. 198, 199) add some interesting details about this experience on Mount Carmel.