

A HILL ON WHICH TO STAND

1 Kings 18:20-21, 36-39, 19:1-3, 13-18

Have you noticed how many people have seemingly crazy ideas about the economy, about the role of government, about the need for personal responsibility, about the role of faith in our lives, about such questions as absolute truth versus relative truth, and about what is a reasonable world view? We see a lot of controversy around the Christmas season with the discussions about what really happened over 2000 years ago and what it means. There are billboards sponsored by atheists pleading for people to make this the “season of reason” which is to imply that those who believe the account of the birth of Jesus are not reasonable.

Such disagreements have been going on since the Garden of Eden. The arguments and ideas may have become more sophisticated than in the past but the alternative beliefs are still around and many people find themselves not knowing what they **should** believe or even what they **do** believe. The situation gets really complicated when the government gets involved in the religious debates. We see this in today’s world in which a government supports the death penalty for those who abandon the state-supported religion or persecutes or kills those who are advocates of another point of view.

After the breakup of Israel into the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, the Northern Kingdom (which kept the name Israel) drifted away from God and incorporated the religions of the pagans into their society. They ended up with a mixture of true and false religions. Instead of being “black or white” they had shades of gray. The result has been called syncretism - an attempt to align two alien faiths and make them one. The Northern Kingdom (Israel) attempted to worship both God and Baal. The Southern Kingdom (Judah) was often apostate in that they would swing totally to pagan ways or they would return to God. Apostasy can be recognized and dealt with. Syncretism is, by nature, difficult to recognize and is often protected in the name of “reasonableness.”

Israel had one of the greatest prophets of all time in Elijah and at the same time had a king named Ahab and a queen named Jezebel. Their marriage was an example of combining two alien cultures. Ahab was an Israelite, but Jezebel was a Phoenician from Tyre. Her father was king Ethbaal, obviously named for the pagan god he worshiped. We can even see traces of the word “baal” in Jezebel’s name. It is not surprising that she influenced Ahab to build a temple to Baal and to support 450 prophets of Baal. Her influence corrupted the government and the people. This sorry state of affairs caused the prophet Elijah to challenge Ahab and Jezebel on many occasions.

Baal was thought to be the god of agriculture, rain, lightening, and prosperity. The term “Baal” literally meant “lord” or “owner.” When Elijah called for a drought that lasted over three years, this was a direct challenge of the power and authority of Baal. This challenge initiated a crackdown by Jezebel and Ahab on those who were associated with Jehovah. Many of God’s prophets were killed and Elijah left the country. This is the time period that he stayed with the widow in Zidon (Phoenicia) and the miracle occurred of the oil and flour not being used up.

Eventually, God told Elijah to call for a showdown between God and Baal. Elijah confronted Ahab and this led to the confrontation on Mt. Carmel where Elijah challenged the people of Israel to make a choice and he challenged the prophets of Baal to demonstrate whether their god had **any** power.

Choose Your Camp - 18:20-21

²⁰ So Ahab sent a message among all the sons of Israel and brought the prophets together at Mount Carmel. ²¹ 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. 1 Kings 18:20-21 (NASB95)

Ahab had looked for Elijah for over three years and was not able to find him. Then, in God’s timing, Elijah sent word to Ahab to meet him. We see the conversation in verses 17-19 of this chapter. Ahab did as he was instructed by Elijah. When Elijah was not around Ahab did as he was instructed by Jezebel. We see then that part of the problem that caused Israel to sin was lack of leadership by the king. He had allowed Jezebel, who was a pagan, to influence or control

what happened in the nation.

The choice of Mt. Carmel was deliberate in that it was thought to be the stronghold of Baal. Mt. Carmel was a chain of ridges that separated the land of the Phoenicians from Israel. It was the border between the two nations. This added some drama to the question that Elijah raised about the people trying to stand in two camps. The question is translated as “hesitating” or “halting” between two opinions. The word could also be translated as “limping” as you might image a person doing who is trying to walk while straddling a fence.

Why do you think people take a position of trying to stand in two camps or camping on the border or straddling the fence? The reasons could be uncertainty or lack of conviction. Others might do this in an effort to hedge their position. Some people will argue that they are believers because “even if they are wrong, it won’t hurt anything to believe.” Others may refuse to make their choice known because of fear of reprisal. Any or all of these reasons may have been influencing the people when they did not give an answer to Elijah.

On Mount Carmel, Elijah and 450 of the prophets of Baal faced off in the sight of the people. The challenge was to see whose God could or would send fire to consume an offering. You are familiar with the story of how the prophets of Baal called out to a false deity who had no ears to hear and no power to act. Elijah mocked them and encouraged them to call louder so they might “wake him up.” For hours they carried on even to the point of cutting themselves as a means of encouraging Baal to act and **nothing** happened.

Elijah called the people to come near so he could have many witnesses of what God was going to do. The very reason for the challenge of the prophets of Baal was to demonstrate to the people the power of the true and living God.

The first task for Elijah was to repair the altar of the Lord that was on Mount Carmel. The Bible tells us it has been broken down. When things are left unused, they fall into disrepair and when things are not valued they fall into disuse. The altar areas of many of our churches are little used today. Those churches that have taken on the “way of the world” and have tried to combine the philosophy and psychology of the day with the wisdom and way of the Living God see more use for the psychological counseling session than a time of sacrifice, confession, obedience and praise at the altar of God. Churches need to “repair to” the altar of the Lord.

Elijah took twelve stones to build the altar. These represented the twelve tribes of the descendants of Jacob who was given the name “Israel.” Altars need to be built on some basis and the mention of Jacob’s name being changed to Israel is significant in that it was at that occasion that Jacob really surrendered to the Lord and quit relying on his own strength. It was his conversion experience. Our altars also need a basis or foundation and we are reminded in the New Testament, “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.” [1Cor 3:11] Our altars must be based on the atoning and sanctifying work of Jesus Who is Lord of our lives.

The final thing that Elijah did was to dig a trench around the altar. In digging the trench he defined the boundary of the altar area. It was in that area God was going to work. We tend to confuse the fact that God is everywhere with the fact that God chooses to work and manifest Himself in certain areas. If we see God working in a particular area, then we need to go where He is working to be included in what God is doing.

The sacrifice was prepared in the appropriate order. The wood was placed on the altar in a certain way and the bullock was cut up and placed there in a prescribed manner. We would do well to recognize that proper decorum is important when we approach God in a time of worship. When Jesus taught us to pray saying “Hallowed be Thy Name” we were put on notice that proper reverence is due our Great God! We should seek His face in His way.

Elijah then did something very unusual: He had people bring barrels of water to him to pour on the meat, the wood, and the altar area. It was so much that it even filled the trench around the altar. For this demonstration of God’s power it would take something more than ordinary fire to consume the offering. If fire was going to burn up this offering, it had to be supernatural. There would be no doubt in the minds of the people who would see what was to happen.

Trust in God's Help - 18:36-39

³⁶ At the time of the offering of the *evening* sacrifice, 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. ³⁷ "Answer 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." 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. ³⁹ When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, "The LORD, He is God; the LORD, He is God." 1 Kings 18:36-39 (NASB95)

Elijah prayed a simple prayer in which he asked God to answer him for three things that would benefit the people. The first was simply that the people would know that the God of their fathers (Abraham, Isaac, and Israel) was still the God in Israel. There is a tendency even today for people to dismiss the importance of the place God should have in our lives in this "modern" world in which we live. Many seem to think that the interaction of God with people is something out of the antiquities and is no longer relevant today. The people of Israel in the time of Ahaz were familiar with the stories about how God visited and talked with Abraham and made promises to him. They had some knowledge about Isaac and Jacob and how God brought their ancestors out of Egypt and into the land in which they lived. Many likely thought "that was then and this is now and things were different then." They probably argued that there was nothing wrong with making a sacrifice to Baal since it would be for good luck with the crops and the herds. After all, it is just part of the tradition in this area.

The second request was that the people would know that Elijah was the servant of Jehovah and that he was doing what he did because God had instructed him to do so. Bring this situation up to our time: How would most people (even those who are serious about their Christianity) react to a person who would announce that he had a message from God and that he was acting on specific instructions from God? He would likely be dismissed as a fanatic and most people would not have any reaction other than being annoyed. What would it take to convince most people that someone was really speaking for God? Would the effective operation of the spiritual gifts that were in operation during the early days of the church help in this matter?

The third request was similar to the first but perhaps of a broader scope. This first was that they would know that Jehovah was God in Israel and this request was that they would know that Jehovah is God, period. He is not limited to Israel and He deserves the credit for causing the people to repent and return to Himself.

At the end of Elijah's prayer God acted by sending "fire" to consume the sacrifice and the water and stones of the altar. Some commentaries suggest that the "fire" was lightning and that it was a miracle in that there were no clouds in the sky. This obviously was a different kind of fire in that it burned up the water and the rocks in addition to the sacrificial meat on the altar. There are other references in the Old Testament where a sacrifice was burned up by fire from heaven. In each of the previous four cases the presence of the fire was an indication that the offering was accepted.

The first time something like this is recorded is in Leviticus 9:24. This happened in conjunction with the completion of the Tabernacle and the consecration of Aaron and his sons as priests to serve in the Tabernacle. The next time this phenomenon was recorded was in Judges 6:21 when the Angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon. Gideon prepared a meal for his "guest" and the meal was consumed with fire went the Angel touched the meat with the staff He had in His hand. The third occasion was recorded in First Chronicles 21:26 where we find David making an offering on an altar he had built on the threshing floor of Ornan which would eventually be the location of the temple Solomon built. The fourth time (Second Chronicles 7:3) was on the occasion of the end of Solomon's prayer of dedication of the Temple.

This fifth occurrence was a little different in that not only was the sacrifice burned (indicating it was accepted) but the altar itself was consumed. We can speculate why. Some have thought that it was a message from God that further sacrifices and offerings should NOT be made on Mt. Carmel.

In the face of such convincing evidence, the people of Israel were ready to declare that Jehovah was the God. Following this, Elijah directed that the prophets of Baal be killed and then

he prayed for rain. The rains came and Ahab headed back to Jezreel.

Watch for Slips - 19:1-3

¹ Now Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. ² Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me and even more, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time." ³ And he was afraid and arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. 1 Kings 19:1-3 (NASB95)

You get the impression that Ahab was a man of little or no conviction. He watched the events on Mt. Carmel and did not raise any protest to the drastic action that Elijah took in killing the prophets of Baal. He followed Elijah's instruction to have something to eat and then to head back to Jezreel because a heavy rain was coming. The first thing he did when he returned home was to report what had happen to Jezebel. My guess is that he did not care one iota whether the people of Israel worshiped Jehovah or Baal. He may have been what some have described as a practical atheist. He probably had a form of religion and likely participated in the rituals for worship of Jehovah and Baal. It was an activity that he carried out because it was expected for him to do so.

Jezebel was the strong personality in that family and she was obviously the one in charge of Ahab and what was happening in Israel. She was upset that her prophets had been killed and she vowed to do the same thing to Elijah. Elijah had no fear of Ahab, but he was afraid of Jezebel.

What did Elijah do? He panicked and ran. This is really ironic in that Elijah had just demonstrated that the gods of Jezebel had no power whatsoever. This is what happens when we take our focus off God and look at the circumstances. Elijah had been bold in the "religious" battle with the prophets of Baal because he recognized that this was not so much his fight as it was God's battle to wage and win. When the "religious" event was over and it was back to everyday life events, then he failed to see that he still needed to rely on God and trust in His sufficiency.

The practical implications of such thinking are seen even today in that many Christians are involved in their churches and attend and participate on a regular basis but this "faith" does not carry over into the work place or school or even in the home. When challenge with regard to our belief as to how people are saved and that Christ is the only way, then we are ready to argue and defend the faith. When challenged on the job with questionable practices, then we may fail to stand up for what is right and go along with the crowd. When we are threatened, then we may retreat from the position we know we should have.

Elijah left Israel and stopped off in Beersheba where left his servant and he went on further south to the desert in fear of losing his life. He was in such deep depression that he despaired of life itself. But God was not through with him. A messenger (angel) came to him and prepared food for him, encouraged him to eat and prepare for a long journey. That journey would take him to Mt. Horeb (where God had met with Moses) and the trip itself took forty days to complete. This was like the reverse of the 40 years in the wilderness and it seems as if God was taking him back to the point of an encounter with God that was similar to what Moses had experienced on that same mountain.

Climb Back Up - 19:13-18

¹³ When Elijah heard *it*, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave. And behold, a voice *came* to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁴ Then he said, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away." ¹⁵ The LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus, and when you have arrived, you shall anoint Hazael king over Aram; ¹⁶ and Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint king over Israel; and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint as prophet in your place. ¹⁷ "It shall come about, the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall put to death. ¹⁸ "Yet I will leave 7,000 in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal and every mouth that has not kissed him." 1 Kings 19:13-18 (NASB95)

When Elijah arrived at Mt. Horeb he moved into a cave and God came to him and challenged him with the question “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Elijah’s answer was that of a person who was totally discouraged and in deep depression. D. A. Carson observed that he had underrated his own achievements and undervalued the work of others. He apparently felt that he was totally alone. God had been magnificently present in the sacrifice on Mt. Carmel and the events that followed immediately after that, but Elijah did not sense that God was with him after the spectacular things had happened.

What happened on Horeb was a lesson regarding where to look for God. God was going to pass by and there were strong wind, earthquake and fire and God was not in those. Then something else happened and we see a comment on this in verse 13. The “it” that Elijah heard has been translated as a “still small voice.” The words used could also be translated as “the sound of silence.” The lesson is that we tend to look for God in the spectacular and in the mountain top experiences but we fail to see Him in the absence of all things physical. We fail to hear Him in the sound of silence. We see Him and we hear Him by faith and we can know that He is always there with and for us.

God then sent Elijah on his final assignment. Often, the best cure for being depressed or discouraged is to find something useful to do. It was the responsibility of prophets to designate or anoint kings. It is somewhat surprising that Elijah was sent to the northern neighbor of Israel to declare a person to be king in that country. However, God would use the Arameans under Hazael to rid Israel of both Ahab and his son who became king after him. Israel was still practicing worship of Baal and continued to do so until Jehu became king. It took many years for all this to come to pass, but these three men (Hazael, Jehu and Elisha) were instrumental in helping Israel turn away from Baal worship.