

PROVEN

1 Kings 18:25-39

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? Everywhere we turn, we see a lot of controversy around everything. 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 some governments get involved in the religious debates. We see this in parts of today's world in which a government may impose the death penalty for those who abandon the state-supported religion or persecutes those who are advocates of another point of view.

After the break up 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 more than 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 of the oil and flour not being used up occurred.

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.

Futility – 18:25-29

²⁵ Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many, and call upon the name of your god, but put no fire to it." ²⁶ And they took the bull that was given them, and they prepared it and called upon the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, "O Baal, answer us!" But there was

no voice, and no one answered. And they limped around the altar that they had made. ²⁷ And at noon Elijah mocked them, saying, “Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.” ²⁸ And they cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them. ²⁹ And as midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention. 1 Kings 18:25–29 (ESV)

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 near the border between the two nations. This added some drama to the question that Elijah had raised earlier about the people trying to stand in two camps.

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. We 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 “awaken him.” For hours they carried on even to the point of cutting themselves as a means of encouraging Baal to act and **nothing** happened.

Alexander MacLaren commented on the actions of the prophets of Baal. The monotonous and almost mechanical repetition of a few pious words, repeated until the syllables have no meaning to the chanting crowd, is characteristic of the excitement so common in idolatry. To call such repetitions worship, praise or prayer, degrades the name. They are the very opposite of the sacred communion of a believing soul with the God, whom it knows, trusts, and beseeches with reverential submission. Neither knowledge nor trust is in these phrases, which seek to propitiate an imagined stern god by rhythmically repeating his name as a kind of charm.

Preparation – 18:30-35

³⁰ Then Elijah said to all the people, “Come near to me.” And all the people came near to him. And he repaired the altar of the LORD that had been thrown down. ³¹ 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,” ³² and 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 seahs of seed. ³³ And he put the wood in order and cut the bull in pieces and laid it on the wood. And he said, “Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood.” ³⁴ And he said, “Do it a second time.” And they did it a second time. And he said, “Do it a third time.” And they did it a third time. ³⁵ And the water ran around the altar and filled the trench also with water. 1 Kings 18:30–35 (ESV)

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 (in the name of the Lord) 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. Henry Blackaby wrote that 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 pour twelve barrels of water 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.

Response – 18:36-39

³⁶ And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near and said, “O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that 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 hearts back.” 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 And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, “The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God.” 1 Kings 18:36–39 (ESV)

Elijah prayed a simple reverential 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. The historical accounts do not record that God had specifically told Elijah to carry out this specific challenge, however, Elijah stated in his prayer that he was acting on the word of God. This was an act of faith that was obedient to God’s word rather than just a rash presumptuous experiment that Elijah dreamed up.

Let’s 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? As we know, some will believe and others will not. As Jesus pointed out in the story of the beggar Lazarus, even if someone were to rise from death, many will still not believe.

The *third* request was similar to the first but perhaps of a broader scope. The first was that they would know that Yahweh was God in Israel and this request was that they would know that Yahweh is God, period. He is not limited to Israel and He deserves the credit for causing the people to repent and return to Himself. This repentance or turning back to God was (as we know from history) temporary for most of those who were there. MacLaren commented on this kind of repentance. “The faith that is founded on a miracle may be deepened into something better; but unless it is, it speedily dies away. The faith that is due to the influence of some strong personality may lead on to an independent faith, based on personal experience; but, unless it does, it too will perish.”

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 lightening 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 those 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 (2 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. Others have suggested the consumption (burning up) of the twelve rocks meant that not only had God accepted the sacrificial bullock, but that He was accepting the twelve tribes (all of Israel) as His own when they sacrificially submit themselves to God.

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.