

## 11-15-09 1 Kings 18:20-40 “Carmel: The Fire Returns” by Richard Boatman

<sup>20</sup> So Ahab... assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. <sup>21</sup> Elijah went before the people and said, "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him." But the people said nothing. [*I've preached some of those sermons*]. <sup>22</sup> Then Elijah said, "...Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets. <sup>23</sup> Get two bulls for us. Let them choose one...and...cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull...but not set fire to it. <sup>24</sup> Then call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD. The god who answers by fire is God." Then all the people said, "What you say is good."... <sup>29</sup> Midday passed, and [the prophets of Baal] continued their frantic prophesying...But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.

Evil's greatest power comes when goodness forfeits its place. Darkness is filler for light that dims. When you enter a room, there is no dark switch. Darkness is there because of the absence of light. But when light asserts itself, the darkness vacates. These are thoughts built upon the teaching of St. Augustine, and are apropos for this lesson, the focus of which is the challenge posed by Elijah at **Mount Carmel**.

Carmel is a "low range of mountains running northwest to southeast from the Mediterranean Sea" (Russell Dilday). The actual site for the challenge was probably a level plateau half way up the mount where crowds could easily assemble. The Brook Kishon still flows just below this area. There are also active springs around the plateau which would have made this region the least affected by the three year drought. Indeed, Carmel means "the garden land." This garden land was the designated dais for confronting evil and the spiritual drought in Israel.

Edmund Burke said, "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing." The last five decades of Israel's history had been filled with good people doing nothing as Baal worship was systematically introduced to God's covenant nation. As the good cowered, as the light dimmed, as love faded, so evil and darkness and hatred prevailed.

Elijah asked the gathered crowd, "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him." In other words, how long will you continue **waffling with worship**? Their worship had become a mix of a whole lot of paganism with a little dash of Yahweh thrown in for good measure. The altars of God were torn down, replaced with altars dedicated to Baal. Their time was taken up with elaborate, time demanding rituals that titillated the

senses but left their souls bankrupt. Movement without meaning—these were **empty rituals—suds without substance**. Like cotton candy, its initial size dazzles the taste buds but disappears as a mist when actually eaten. Root Beer is great, but if the bubbles aren't allowed to burst and settle, you get a whole lot of foam without much soda...suds without substance. Listen to Paul's description of dead religion: "People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful...abusive, disobedient...ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control...not lovers of the good, treacherous...conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power" (2 Timothy 3:1-5). He speaks of darkness with a *form of godliness*; they go through the religious motions, but it is empty ritual...suds without substance.

How is our worship? How is the substance of our faith? If you were hot and parched and I offered you a cold bottle of water, would you likely take it? Of course. But what if I told you I had mixed just a little manure in it. Would you take it now? Not a chance, right? But think of all the poison we drink in and mix with our worship—apathy or pettiness or unforgiveness or all the images of violence or sensuality with which we fill our minds, never thinking twice that it's like manure mixed with water...empty ritual...suds without substance.

Elijah's challenge would cut to the core of such trumped up religion. The prophets of Baal were to choose a bull as was Elijah. The 450 false prophets would first endeavor to get Baal to consume the sacrifice with fire, thus proving he was the true God. Elijah gave them most of the day. But after hours of "frantic prophesying," i.e. empty ritual, verse 29 says, "But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention." Elijah was about to call Israel back to its roots.

<sup>30</sup> Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come here to me." They came to him, and he repaired the altar of the LORD, which was in ruins. <sup>31</sup> Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the [twelve] tribes [and] built an altar in the name of the LORD, and he dug a trench around it... <sup>33</sup> He...cut the bull into pieces and laid it on the wood. Then he said to them, "Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering..." <sup>35</sup> The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench. <sup>36</sup> At the time of sacrifice, Elijah ...prayed: "O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel..." <sup>37</sup> Answer me so these people will know that you are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again." <sup>38</sup> Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench. <sup>39</sup> When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, "The LORD -he is God!" <sup>40</sup> Then

Elijah commanded them, "Seize the prophets of Baal!" They seized them, and Elijah had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and slaughtered there.

**The fire returns to Israel.** Fire is an important symbol of God's power, holiness and judgment. In Genesis 15 when God confirmed Abraham as the covenant head of His people, a flame of fire consumed Abraham's evening sacrifice. When the people were delivered from Egypt and led towards the Promised Land, God was manifested in a cloud by day and pillar of fire by night. At the giving of the Law to Moses, fire descended from heaven upon Mount Sinai. Whereas John the Baptist baptized with water, Jesus would baptize with "the Holy Spirit and with fire." At Pentecost, the birth of the Church, tongues of fire filled the disciples with power.

In Leviticus chapter 10, Moses' nephews used their own fire rather than that from the altar of God and fire from God's presence instantly consumed them. They may have thought, *Fire is fire...it's no big deal*. In Joshua 7 we find that Achan had stolen from the city of Jericho that which was devoted to God. He was killed for his action. He probably thought, *It's just one little thing; no one will know*. In Acts chapter 5, the Church is brand new. Many are bringing substantial amounts of money to the Apostles. Ananias and Sapphira gave much of their profit to the church. But they *said* they gave it *all*. Surely *just a little lie* wouldn't hurt. But when confronted and convicted of lying to the Holy Spirit, they instantly died. In all three instances, God was revealing that real power in a holy relationship with him cannot be compromised with sin. "It's no big deal" or "It's just one little thing; no one will know" or "Just a little lie won't hurt"—how much has our individual and cooperate worship been affected by mixing it with such poison?

Before the fire could return, Elijah needed to take the people of God back to the very basics: **he rebuilds the foundation of their faith**. Using twelve stones representing the twelve tribes of Israel or Jacob, he rebuilds the altar. The altar was a specified place where people met God, where people took seriously talking and listening and responding to the Lord. For us it can be a corporate place of worship or a place of devotion, Bible study and prayer. How are our personal altars holding up? Have we gotten so busy or distracted or bored that we, like Israel, have neglected those special times and places of meeting with the Lord? Recent statistics tell us that even many pastors find little more than seven minutes of formal prayer a day in their busy lives. We—shepherds and sheep—have forgotten the spirit language of our faith.

Daughter Mandy recently went with me to southern Iowa where we took Mom to a doctor's appointment. On the trip, Mandy visited with me while doing text

messaging on her phone. I soon realized that when asked a question, I had about twenty seconds to respond before her text bell went off. Then with two thumbs going at dizzying speed, she'd tap out her response to them while still feigning attention to me. (It seems with texting and all the shortcut codes—btw, lol, fyi, etc., we've gone back to the telegraph, only portable.) It's a new language.

While at the home place, Mandy was looking at an old photo album. (That's where you put actual pictures in a big notebook. You don't even have to have a computer with you to look at them. Wow, what will they think of next?) So Mandy started talking to Mom about having these pictures scanned and burning them on to a CD. Mom said, "Burning on a what?" You see, when Mom hears CD, she thinks Certificate of Deposit. I said, "Mandy, you're talking a different language here." So we explained the process.

Elijah, by a visual aid, was explaining the forgotten process and language of coming before the Lord so the people would know God was **"turning their hearts back again."** Today we teach people the components of prayer by using the acronym A.C.T.S.: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication. By his object lesson, Elijah was teaching the people five essential things. We can use the acronym **DR. POD** to explain them. **F**irst, **D**raw near to where God moves. In verse 30, Elijah said, "Come here to me." Where is God moving in your life? **S**econd, **R**epair the "altars" of your life. Be intentional about restoring time and space given to communing with God. **T**hird, **P**repare your heart to receive. Elijah not only rebuilt the altar, but prepared the sacrifice the way God had instructed. Romans 12:1 says, "I urge you therefore brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living sacrifice, *acceptable and well-pleasing to God*, which is your spiritual service of worship." You don't show up to baseball practice without a glove. Come into God's presence prepared to receive what God gives. **F**ourth, **O**pen your heart to the fire of God's judgment and power. The fire of the Lord fell upon the sacrifice and consumed it. And **f**ifth, **D**estroy those things that pull you down and away from the Lord. What are our "prophets of Baal" that need removed? What's the *manure* in our water? 2 Corinthians 10:5 tells us we are to be about "destroying speculations [and images and arguments] and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ."

A youth I know was recently so touched by God he destroyed all his rock music because it stood between him and the Lord. Lots of things happen when we return to our rightful place and when the fire of the living God returns to our hearts.