

5. PROPHET TO PRODIGALS

1 Kings 18v 16-26

Back in 1983 I spent two months in Israel, much of that time exploring the land off the beaten track. During my travels I visited the precise location of the event described in our text. I caught a bus from Haifa to the Druse village of Daliat and walked a mile or more to the Carmelite “Elijah” monastery. 400 yards down a precipitous path you come to a large open area, not unlike an amphitheatre, with the valley of Jezreal stretched out below. This is almost certainly the place where a vast crowd gathered before Elijah and fire fell from heaven.

This is one of the great narratives in Scripture. It is inspiring and instructive as we think, in this series, about being a prophetic people in our secular culture. We will be looking at it over these next two weeks. Let’s get straight into the text. We will read through the chapter, pausing to see what God’s word has to say to us today.

1. The Prophet’s Analysis

v18. “Ahab went to meet Elijah. When he saw Elijah he said to him, “Is that you, you troubler of Israel?”

The first thing to notice here is that Ahab’s first instinct is to deflect blame and to point to Elijah as the great culprit. *“It is your fault Elijah that we are suffering this drought.”* The analysis of secular prophets today is much the same. People in public life who dare to even mention God’s name are lambasted. Did you notice how quick the media were this weekend to jump on the Prime Minister when he dared to say on the Parkinson show that God would be his judge over the decision to invade Iraq. Anything or anyone admitting to be Christian is fair game today.

“I have not made trouble for Israel,” Elijah replied. “But you and your father’s family have. You have abandoned the Lord’s commands and have followed the Baals”.

Elijah’s analysis of the nation’s woes is the very opposite. Ahab himself was responsible, as had been his evil father Omri, for taking the nation away from allegiance and devotion to the Lord God. The nation had abandoned the One True God for a terrible lie. That was the root cause of all their woes.

I recall hearing Joseph Ton, an exiled Romanian pastor, speaking in the UK over 25 years ago. Like Alexander Solzhenitsyn, he didn’t just settle into exile in the west enjoying its comforts. He became a prophetic voice to the west. I heard him speak on the subject “Where does Britain go from here?” It was fascinating to listen to a prophet’s analysis. He described the march of secularism and the decline of the church in the UK in the 20th century. He said that the experience of Eastern Europe (with Marxism) was that the promises of secularism were very different from the harsh reality.

He then went on to say this: *“My understanding of the Bible teaches me that God will sometimes allow those who have had God’s truth, and not taken it seriously, to be taken in by a powerful deception. Like the Prodigal Son, the Father allows them to leave home and experiment with the lie until they reach the pigs and cry out.”* Joseph Ton then said. *“Britain is in great danger. Will God say to this nation, “Let it have the lie.”?”*

How do these words sound 25 years on? Where is our nation now? It has already left the Father’s house. The picture Jesus paints in Luke 15v13 of the Prodigal in a distant country squandering his wealth surely describes our nation. Perhaps a God intended “famine” is already on the way which will lead many to come to their senses. We must look with prophetic eyes at our culture and current affairs.

2. The Prophet’s Clarity

v19-21. Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel’s table.” So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. Elijah went before the people and said, “How long will you waver between two opinions? Literally, how long will you “limp (lamely) between tow opinions. We see this today. Many people live their life as if God did not exist, but then when someone dies they say “He’s gone to a better place”. They have not thought through what they believe; they have absorbed a mish mash of ideas. **If the Lord is God follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.”**

Elijah is in charge here. He issues orders to the King who obeys because he realises the prophet holds all the cards concerning the resumption of rain. Elijah then presents the alternatives clearly before the people. He has deliberately asked for the false prophets, all 850 of them, to be lined up for everyone to see alongside himself.

Many people in the west today need something similar. They are not aware of what they have absorbed from the culture around them and they hardly realise there is an alternative. One of the tasks of a prophetic people will be to say to a prodigal nation, *“Here, look, this is what you are being offered today! Take a good look!”*

Take a look at the prophets of secular humanism. They say that natural causes are sufficient to explain everything. Human beings are accidents of evolution; we evolved from impersonal primordial matter; our closest relations are apes & monkeys. The world around is a mess because of ignorance or inequality. The answer is education, redistribution of wealth, getting rid of religion. There is no ultimate meaning to life. When we die, that’s it.

Bertrand Russell, one of the twentieth century’s foremost apostles of atheism wrote: *“(Man’s) origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves, his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms. All the labours of the*

ages, all the devotion, all the inspirations, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast depth of the solar system, and the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins. All these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation, henceforth, be safely built." (Quoted by Ravi Zacharias in 'A Shattered Visage'. The challenge of atheism.1990)

But there is a glorious alternative which we believe makes much more sense of the world we live in. It is Biblical Christianity focused in the person Jesus Christ who contradicts Russell about foundations for your life. (See Matthew 7v24-27). We must present this alternative at every opportunity with prophetic clarity.

- God created the universe, the world, and us too. We are not the product of chance, but the deliberate creation of an Almighty, loving, purposeful God. We are made in His image to reflect His nature. The answer to the question "Who am I?" will not be found by looking to chimps, but in looking up to God. We were made with the capacity to enjoy a relationship of love with God.
- But the world we see now is not as it was in the beginning. The Bible says man mutinied and became separated from God. This is the cause of the decay & turmoil we see all around us. The Bible uses the word "sin". This isn't just talking about things we do wrong; it describes a disease of the soul. Humanity is still capable of good (the image of God has not been totally obliterated), but now every man & woman is born with a serious malignant spiritual disease.
- So what can we do about it? We can do nothing. We are helpless. Nothing man can do from his side can bridge the gap between man and God e.g. trying to be good, or being religious. But the good news is: *God has done something.* God grieved over the separation & all the pain & disintegration. So He Himself came into this fallen, rebellious world in the Person of Jesus Christ; the perfect man. He lived without sin & died on a cross & was raised to life. God has bridged the gap. *"For God so loved the world that He gave His only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."* (John 3v16)

This gospel is God's dynamite. Like Elijah's audience the first response of many can be stunned silence. **But the people said nothing. (v21)** Some may be silent because God has convicted them or opened their minds to a whole new way of thinking. . Others may be silent because there is an inner struggle going on, or because they understand the serious implications of what they have heard. But sadly, many others are silent because they are hardening their hearts against the gospel.

3. The Prophet's Challenge.

v22. Then Elijah said to them, "I am the only one of the LORD'S prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets.

What a sight this must have been. What a scene! What hushed expectation as the prophets of Baal and of Asherah paraded themselves and as the King was introduced with the usual royal fanfares. And there, standing alone this strange looking man Elijah. What would he do? The general expectation was that he would pray for rain and it would come. Elijah would have made his point, and everyone could get back to normal living again. But no, there was business to settle before any rain could come. Little did this great crowd know what drama lay ahead. Little did the false prophets realise what was in store for them before the day would end.

v23-26. Get two bulls for us. Let them choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD. The god who answers by fire - he is God." Then all the people said, "What you say is good." Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose one of the bulls and prepare it first, since there are so many of you. Call on the name of your god, but do not light the fire." So they took the bull given them and prepared it.

Elijah threw down the gauntlet to these purveyors of the lie. He threw down a challenge *"Let's put the truth and the lie to the test!"* In our generation Secular Humanism says that, when it comes to testing the validity of truth, all the evidence is on its side. "Science" is the infallible judge. So what ground can we choose to challenge this? Elijah chose his ground, Carmel, very carefully, and he also chose the specific challenge of sacrificing an ox.

We can challenge secularism on its own ground. That's what Elijah did. Sacrificing on high places was part of the Baal cult. But can we really challenge secularism on scientific grounds? Well, yes actually. We mustn't be scared by the sheer number of these false prophets. Let me give one simple example. There is a great deal of debate in the USA at present about teaching in schools on Creation & Evolution. Attention has been turned on Christians who want to put forward "Intelligent Design" as a legitimate alternative to Evolutionary Theory. Secular Humanists will not have it. They see this as "Creationism" in disguise. Their evolutionary theory has become so sacrosanct it cannot be challenged. But let me quote one of the greatest scientific minds of all time: Albert Einstein: *"The religious feeling of the scientist takes the form of rapturous amazement at the harmony of natural laws - which reveal an intelligence of such superiority that, compared with it, all the systematic thinking & acting of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection"*.

Some believers, like Elijah, are raised up & gifted to challenge secularism on its own ground. Over 40 years John Polkinghorne was such a man. He was a

theoretical physicist, one of the most respected in his field, and President of Queens College Cambridge. He constantly refuted the idea that science had done away with belief in a Creator God and argued that *"this one world is the way it is because it is the creation of the will of a Creator who purposes that it should be so. This"*, said Polkinghorne, *"is an explanation of equal intellectual respectability."* Thank God for such gifted people; the rest of us can brief ourselves by exploring some of the websites available.

We can challenge secularism on our own ground. The ground of God's mighty supernatural power. **"The god who answers by fire – he is God."** We might conclude that the lesson of Elijah on Mount Carmel is that mighty miracles will do the job; some great healing on TV for example. *"If only we saw more miracles then this nation would be different"*. But Jesus warned us against this mentality. He performed many miracles and people just asked for more. Yes, a few saw them as signs and went on to believe, but the vast majority did not. Yet there *is* something of God's mighty supernatural power built into the gospel that means it can do what science cannot possibly do – change lives, to change the human heart.

In Bertrand Russell's 'Why I am not a Christian' ((George Allen & Unwin. 1957) there is an amazing gap. He gives no attention to the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. Was he afraid to venture on to this "ground"? One fact stands out and has never been refuted. The disciples of Jesus changed from cowards into heroes. What happened? What transformed these men in a matter of days and weeks? What made them willing to die, in some cases terrible deaths? Would they have died for a lie? Would they have been able to consistently cover up a deception? They were changed men because they had encountered the risen Jesus Christ.

Men and women today are still being changed by an encounter with Jesus Christ. Read any issue of the Alpha newspaper. Each one contains story after story of people whose lives have been radically turned around. Better still, you have your own story. Your own life should be a mighty piece of evidence to challenge the great lie.

Next week we will continue looking at this great event on Mount Carmel at 'The God who Answers by Fire'

John Wilthew. March 2006