

THE GOD WHO ANSWERS BY FIRE.

1 Kings 18v22-40

This morning we are going to see a man near the summit of human experience in prayer. The apostle James turned to Elijah when he needed an illustration of believing prayer, or *"the prayer of faith"*. (James 5v17,18) But even though James points out that Elijah *"was a man just like us"*, most of us feel like we are strolling in the park while he is scaling Everest.

So today let's ask God to speak right into our hearts and minds so that we are not content to stroll in the park, or climb comfortable hills. Let's ask God to do something life changing which stirs us to move on up in believing prayer.

This kind of praying didn't start on Carmel for Elijah. It had been nurtured in private prayer over many years. He had lived in the presence of God. He had trusted God for a miracle every day by the brook at Kerith and in the home at Zarephath, and then had cried to God for a dead child and seen the first raising from the dead in Scripture! Elijah had climbed increasingly challenging heights in prayer before he scaled Carmel.

But first, in stark contrast to Elijah, we have the prophets of Baal.

1. AN EXAMPLE OF FUTILE PRAYER

Here is the scene. Elijah faces up to hundreds of demon possessed prophets. **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 - plus 400 prophets of Asherah who are also there. Elijah is seriously outnumbered.**

23-24. 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." Fire! Why not water? After all it was rain everyone wanted. God's revelation of Himself in fire was part of Israel's history. He caught Moses' attention through a burning bush. (Exodus 3v2) He went before the Israelites in a pillar of fire as they made their exodus from Egypt. (Exodus 13v21) When God gave the law we read that *"Mount Sinai was covered in smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire."* (Exodus 19v18) When Aaron and Moses first entered the Tabernacle in the wilderness *"the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people. Fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat portions on the altar.* (Leviticus 9v23, 24)

So Elijah threw out this great challenge: **"The god who answers by fire - he is God" v24-26. Then all the people said, "What you say is good."** It's show time! They would be delighted at the prospect of entertainment (and relieved not to be Baal's prophets!) **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." In other words, no skulduggery! **So they took the bull given them and prepared it. Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. "O Baal, answer us!" they shouted. But there was no response; no-one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made.**

v27. At noon Elijah began to taunt them. The sun was at its highest and and strongest. Baal was reputedly the lord of the sun, a fire god, so if they were expecting a response this would be prime time. **"Shout louder!" he said. "Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or travelling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened."** The prophet is mocking them. But is this godly? Well, we are told that God Himself mocks those who in their pride oppose Him. (Psalm 2v4; Proverbs 1v24-28) Nevertheless mockery is not our best weapon; safer to leave this to God who is righteousness in every way.

v28,29. So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. It was now 3.0 pm. They had been at it for six hours.

If you want a model of how *not* to pray this is it. This is futile prayer.

- They called on the wrong name. **they called on the name of Baal**
- They worked themselves into a frenzy; they begged and pleaded, pranced and danced around the altar, frantically prophesied; they shouted louder. They were certainly zealous, but it was misplaced zeal.
- They repeated themselves for hours. Can you imagine shouting **"O Baal, answer us"** from morning to noon? What a noise! 850 voices chanting this mantra for hours on end.
- They appealed in prayer with their own blood. **They slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed.** There is no need for us to bleed before God because Jesus has already done it for us once and for all.

v29. But there was no response, no-one answered, no-one paid attention. At times demonic powers are able to counterfeit God's power with "pretended signs and wonders". But here God does not permit this. His glory and the integrity of Elijah are at stake.

2. AN EXAMPLE OF BELIEVING PRAYER.

v30. Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come here to me". Notice the change of pace. Elijah is calm and deliberate. **They came to him, and he repaired the altar of the Lord, which was in ruins.** Elijah would not use the same altar as the prophets of Baal. He made a very clear distinction. One of the great sins of Elijah's generation was syncretism. They had tried to marry the worship of the Lord with the cult of Baal; light with darkness. Instead, Elijah **repaired the altar of the Lord, which was in ruins.** The broken altar was a symbol of the nation having abandoned pure devotion to God. Elijah was making it plain to everyone that this was the root issue.

v31,32. Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord had come saying, “Your name shall be Israel.” With the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord, Elijah was calling the people back to their spiritual roots; reminding them of who they were. They were God’s chosen people, descendents of the twelve sons of Jacob. They were God’s “treasured possession (Exodus 19v3-6) They had a great heritage and a special place of honour. They had entered into a solemn covenant with God. But they had made a ruin of this along with the altar. But now it was time to rebuild the altar.

And this restoration was not cosmetic. This was an altar ready for worship and prayer and miracles. **v32-35. and he dug a trench round it large enough to hold two seahs of seed. He arranged the wood, 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 and on the wood." "Do it again," he said, and they did it again. "Do it a third time," he ordered, and they did it the third time.** Where did all the water come from after a prolonged drought? It could have been carried from the nearby Mediterranean in the large jars. But there is another possibility. At the site of this drama there is a deep well which never runs dry. I have seen it for myself. **The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench.** Elijah wanted there to be no doubt about the miracle. There could be no charge of trickery; no hidden spark secretly used to ignite the sacrifice.

This drenching of the sacrifice with water is a mighty act of faith. You and I try to smooth out difficulties that might stand in the way of people believing. We try to get rid of obstacles - to give God a hand. Elijah did the opposite. He deliberately put difficulties in the way of God. He drenched the sacrifice. This is an extraordinary example of the gift of faith (1 Corinthians 12v9), the kind of faith that *“moves mountains”*.(1 Corinthians 13v2) To speak of moving mountains was a way of referring to the impossible. Through faith, said Jesus, *“nothing will be impossible for you.”* (Matthew 17v20

Elijah’s is one of the great Biblical examples of the prayer of faith. But it is remarkably brief and to the point. **v36. At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed:** There is no hiding or hedging. He puts his life on the line. **“O Lord God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, He calls on the name of the Lord; let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command.** God’s glory is uppermost in his mind; and his own reputation is tied into this; Elijah himself is a servant not a superhero. **v37. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.** He grieves over the backsliding of God’s people and longs for them to be restored. But notice, there is no working himself into a frenzy; no prancing, no shouting, no long repetition, no frantic prophesying no cutting of himself.

v38. 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.

We get the impression that God answered before the words had left Elijah's lips. **Then the fire of the LORD fell.** Some have suggested that this was a lightning bolt, because the fire "fell". If so, it not only ignited the sacrifice but heralded the coming of rain. But lightening needs clouds and at this moment there were none in the sky. Certainly this was no ordinary fire. It not only burned up the sacrifice but the stones as well. Some years ago I was told that a man called Leonard Pearson had been looking over this site on Carmel when he picked up an interesting piece of stone or glass; in fact he wasn't sure what it was. He was so puzzled he decided to have it analysed by an expert at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He was called back and asked "Where did you find this?" Apparently he had found a piece of ninth century pottery fused with limestone by an "indescribable heat", something akin to nuclear fusion. **Then the fire of the LORD fell.** This was no ordinary fire.

Where is the God of Elijah today? In his book 'Sit, Walk, Stand' Watchman Nee records an extraordinary example of something very similar.

During a New Year holiday, Nee took five men for a fifteen day preaching visit to an island of the South china coast. At the last moment another young man (Brother Wu) joined them; he was 16 and had only recently been born again. He was so eager to come that Nee agreed.

'The island was a fairly large one with a big main village of 'six thousand stoves'. An old school mate of mine was there as headmaster of the village school, and I wrote to him in advance asking for a room in which we might lodge during our stay from January 1st to 15th. When however we arrived, late and in darkness, and when he discovered we had come for Gospel preaching, he refused us accommodation. So we sought through the village for somewhere to lodge, until eventually a Chinese herbalist had pity on us and took us in, making us quite comfortable on planks and straw in his attic.

It was not long before the herbalist became our first convert. But though we laboured systematically and hard, and though we found the people of the village most courteous, we had very little fruit from the island, and we began to wonder why this was.

On January 9th we were outside preaching. Brother Wu with some others was in one part of the village and suddenly asked publicly: "Why will none of you believe?" Someone in the crowd replied at once: "We have a god – one god – Ta-Wang (which means 'Great King'), and he has never failed us. He is an effective god" "How do you know that you can trust him?" asked Wu. "We have held his festival procession every January for 286 years. The chosen day is revealed by divination beforehand, and every year without fail his Day is a perfect one without rain or cloud," was the reply. "When is the procession this year?" "It is fixed for January 11th at eight in the morning." "Then", said brother Wu impetuously, "I promise you that it will certainly rain on the 11th." At once there was an outburst of cries from the crowd: "That is enough! We don't want to hear any more preaching. If there is rain on the 11th, then your God is God!"

I was elsewhere in the village when this occurred. As soon as I heard of it I saw that it was most serious. The news had spread like wildfire, and before long over twenty thousand people would know about it. What were we to do? We stopped our preaching at once, and gave ourselves to prayer. We asked the Lord to forgive us if we had overstepped ourselves. I tell you, we were in deadly earnest. What had we done? Had we made a terrible mistake, or dare we ask God for a miracle?

We did not mind being thrown out if we had done something wrong. After all, you can't drag God into a thing against His will! But, we reflected this would mean an end to the Gospel testimony in the island, and Ta-wang would reign supreme for ever. What should we do? Should we leave now?

Up to this point we had feared to pray for rain. Then, in a flash, there came a word to me: "Where is the God of Elijah?" It came with such clarity and power that I knew it was from God. Confidently I announced to the brothers: "I have the answer. The Lord will send rain on the 11th." Together we thanked Him, and then, full of praise, we went out – all seven of us – and told everyone. We could accept the devil's challenge in the name of the Lord, and we would broadcast our acceptance.

That evening the herbalist made two very pointed observations. Undoubtedly, he said, Ta-wang was an effective god. The devil was with that image. Their faith in him was not groundless. Alternatively, if you preferred a rationalistic explanation, here was a whole village of fishermen. For two or three months on end the men were at sea, and on the 15th they would be out again. They, of all people, should know by long experience when it would not rain for two or three days ahead.

This disturbed us. As we went to our evening prayer, we all began once more to pray for rain – now! Then it was that there came to us a stern rebuke from the Lord. "Where is the God of Elijah?" Were we going to fight our way through this battle, or were we going to rest in the finished victory of Christ?

We confessed our sins again. "Lord", we said, "we don't need rain until the 11th morning." We went to bed and next morning (the 10th) we set off for a neighbouring island for a day's preaching. The Lord was very gracious, and that day three families turned to Him, confessing Him publicly and burning their idols. We returned late, tired out but rejoicing. We could afford to sleep late tomorrow.

I was awakened by the direct rays of the sun through the single window of our attic. "This isn't rain!" I said. It was already past seven o'clock. I got up, knelt down and prayed. "Lord", I said, "please send the rain!" But once more, ringing in my ears came the word: "Where is the God of Elijah?" Humbled, I walked downstairs before God in silence. We sat down at breakfast – eight of us together, including our host – all very quiet. There was no cloud in the sky, but we knew God was committed. As we bowed to say grace before the food I said, "I think the time is up. Rain must come now. We can bring it to the Lord's

remembrance.” Quietly, we did so, and this time the answer came with no hint whatever of rebuke in it.

“Where is the God of Elijah?” Even before our Amen we heard a few drops on the tiles. There was a steady shower as we ate our rice and were served with a second bowl. “Let us give thanks again,” I said, and now we asked God for heavier rain. As we began on that second bowl of rice the rain was coming down in buckets full. By the time we had finished, the street outside was already deep in water and the three steps at the door of the house were covered.

Soon we heard what had happened in the village. Already, at the first drop of rain, a few of the younger generation had begun to say openly: “There is God; there is no more Ta-wang! He is kept in by the rain.” But he wasn’t. They carried him out on a sedan chair. Surely he would stop the shower! Then came the downpour. After some ten or twelve yards, three of the coolies stumbled and fell. Down went the chair and Ta-wang with it, fracturing his jaw and his left arm. Still determined, they carried out emergency repairs and put him back in the chair. Somehow, slipping and stumbling, they dragged or carried him half-way round the village. Then the floods defeated them. Some of the village elders, old men of 60 to 80 years, bareheaded and without umbrellas as their faith in Ta-wang’s weather required, had fallen and were in serious difficulties. The procession was stopped and the idol was taken into a house. Divination was made. “Today was the wrong day”, came the answer. “The festival is to be on the 14th with the procession at six in the evening.”

Immediately we heard this there came the assurance in our hearts: “God will send rain on the 14th.” We went to prayer: “Lord, send rain on the 14th at 6.0 pm and give us four good days until then.” That afternoon the sky cleared, and now we had a good hearing for the Gospel. The Lord gave us over thirty converts – real ones – in the village and in the island during those three short days. The 14th broke, another perfect day, and we had good meetings. As the evening approached we met, and again, at the appointed hour, we quietly brought the matter to the Lord’s remembrance. Not a minute later, His answer came with torrential rain and floods as before.

The next day our time was up and we had to leave. We have not been back. (Others have worked this field since then.) For us the essential point was that Satan’s power in that idol had been broken. Ta-wang was no more “an effective god.”

The impression on us all was a lasting one. God had committed Himself. We had tasted the authority of the name that is above every name – the name that has power in heaven and earth and hell. In those few days we had known what it is to be, as we say, “in the very centre of the will of God”.

(‘Sit, Walk, Stand.’ Watchman Nee. 1957. Victory Press. pp58-63)

Back now to Carmel where the fire of the Lord had fallen. **v39. When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, "The LORD - he is God!**

The LORD - he is God!" In that moment perhaps the people realised how close they had come to the fire of God falling on *them*. When the nation entered into covenant with God centuries earlier Moses had solemnly warned the people: *"Be careful not to forget the covenant of the Lord your God that he made with you; do not make for yourselves an idol in the form of anything the Lord your God has forbidden. For the Lord your God is a consuming fire."* (Deuteronomy 4v24)

They deserved the judgment of God's consuming fire; but instead the fire fell on a sacrificial offering. We are in the same position. We deserve nothing but God's wrath for our rebellion and sin. But instead, the wrath of God fell on Jesus. He is *"the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world"*. (John 1v29) *"He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree"* (1 Peter 2v24)

There was no escape from judgment for the false prophets. **v40:Then Elijah commanded them, "Seize the prophets of Baal. Don't let anyone get away!" They seized them, and Elijah had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and slaughtered there.** The law was very clear. False prophets were to be put to death. (Deuteronomy 7v2f; 13v13ff)The statue outside the Elijah monastery on Carmel records this. Elijah is shown with sword raised and standing over a prone prophet of Baal.

Today we have better news. Even peddlers of evil and falsehood can receive grace. Even the hearts of cruel enemies of the gospel can be won. Saul of Tarsus stands as an example. "The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly" he later wrote, even though he had been the "worst of sinners." The great persecutor of the church became the great church planter.

What is God saying to us today through this great drama on Carmel? It is a call to grow and develop in believing prayer. We may not be ready to climb Everest, but we can move on from strolling in the park.

- This begins for you and me in secret. Do you set aside regular time for personal prayer?
- Then there is the key training ground of the home – the smelting furnace - where we face issues day by day which cast us on God.
- This flows over into the challenges we face at work; again, we are thrown on God in prayer and we learn new lessons of faith.
- This carries over into our mission together in this county planting churches. We are a small minority called to live for God and share the gospel in a prodigal nation. The task is beyond our capabilities. So what can we do? We pray and believe God. For example, we have a gift day in two weeks and your finances are stretched to the limit; what can you do? What can we do? We pray and believe God for what we need.

As we do these things we are no longer strolling in the park. We are learning to become mountain climbers in God's school of believing prayer.

John Wilthew. March 2006.