

Praying like Elijah – prepared for battle

How do you prepare for a crisis?

After three and half years in hiding Elijah now re-emerges to confront the forces of evil and declare both God's judgement and mercy on the nation of Israel.

I Kings 18:16-46 (NIV)

“So Obadiah went to meet Ahab and told him, and Ahab went to meet Elijah. 17 When he saw Elijah, he said to him, ‘Is that you, you troubler of Israel?’

18 ‘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. 19 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.’

20 So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. 21 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.”

Additional reading: Ephesians 6:10-20

Introduction

It is perhaps too easy to be impressed by the spectacle of Mt Carmel and miss the reality and humanity of what is at stake. Elijah has been the subject of an international manhunt. In modern terms King Ahab has issued a “shoot to kill” order against him as public enemy number one.

On re-appearing Elijah turns the tables on Ahab and confronts him as the source of Israel's troubles. He has failed to keep the people faithful to God. His wife has fed 850 false prophets at her table. Now it's time to see who really is God.

Elijah has learnt to depend upon God's grace on a daily basis to keep him alive. In company with a helpless widow his every meal has been a gift from God's hand. This dependence on God has built a deep resolve in the one whose name means, “Jehovah is my God”. Now, he declares this publicly and challenges the nation to return to its God. They stand silent before him as he accuses them of “having an each way bet”. They lack conviction instead “wavering” or “limping” between two opinions.

A contest is set up to allow the true God to answer by fire. This is a battle to the death. If Elijah loses he knows that he will be executed on the spot like many of his fellow prophets have been over the previous three years.

It is important for us to note as followers of Christ that our enemy is never other human beings. The apostle Paul makes this clear in Ephesians 6 when he describes an invisible spiritual battle. Similarly, Jesus rebuked his followers James and John when they wanted to “call down fire from heaven” and destroy a village of Samaritans who had rejected them (Luke 9:54).

The heart of the matter

Elijah’s question identifies the heart of the matter and the basis of his preparation for the battle ahead. His dependence on God is aligned with his devotion to God. He has experienced God’s lifesaving grace and provision and he knows that the religion of Baal is made up of false and empty promises.

We may be tempted to think that he is guaranteed of the outcome of the contest. Certainly, he has a legitimate confidence in God from his past experience. But he has also seen many of his fellow prophets lose their lives. But his uncompromising stance is that he will not bow down and worship any other god. (Compare Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in Daniel Chapter 3)

Grace or works

Elijah’s experience of grace and confidence in God is contrasted with the ranting, raving and cutting rituals of the prophets of Baal. By midday Elijah is taunting them and asking if their god is asleep, busy (literally “relieving himself”) or travelling. Their focus is on working harder and shouting louder to get Baal’s attention.

Finally, at the designated time for the evening sacrifice he prays a simple prayer asking God to honour his word as given by his servant, confirm that he is indeed “The Lord God of Israel” and turn back the hearts of the people to himself.

Conclusion

The fire that falls represents God’s vindication of Elijah and judgement of the religion of Baal. It is followed by Elijah’s prophetic declaration of rain accompanied by a prayerful persistence in seeking a cloud in the sky as evidence of its coming.

Today, our battle is subtler and yet just as real. We are constantly offered alternative people, products and belief systems which promise to provide, protect and validate us instead of God.

Questions

- Elijah stands alone against the prophets of Baal. Have you ever felt like you were standing alone in faithfulness to God? What helped you to do so? What made it hard?
- Elijah’s courage and confidence in God was born from an extended experience of God’s grace and provision. How have you experienced God’s grace in your life?
- Who or what are you tempted to rely on more than God to meet some of your needs? (Often it is good people or good things which God has provided but which we “idolise”)
- What encourages you from these readings? What challenges you?
- What does this reading teach you about the character of God?
- How might you pray differently as a result of considering these readings?