

Guest Preacher - Rev. George Macaskill

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 13 October 2024

Preacher: Rev. George Macaskill

[0 : 00] Well, now let's turn to the passage of God's Word, which we read in the first book of Kings, chapter 18.

And what I want to refer to most is in the chapter. We'll just read again verse 24. First Kings, chapter 18, reading verse 24.

And you call upon the name of your God, and I will call upon the name of the Lord.

And the God who answers by fire, He is God. And all the people answered, it is well spoken.

Amen. This chapter of God's Word has been entitled various things by commentators. One of them has called it the world's greatest God contest.

[1 : 09] One other commentator has entitled it, will the real God please stand up? I don't think we can call it anything better than the words that's in our text, the God who answers by fire.

It's important to understand the background to this story, this well-known narrative. So we'll look first of all at the background, then we'll look at the context, and then have a conclusion.

First of all then, the background. The background is that the people of God, the people of God, the children of Israel, had given up worshipping Jehovah.

And they had instead turned to worship Baal. They had gone over to Baal worship.

And throughout the land of Israel, there were shrines to Baal everywhere. The whole land was devoted to worshipping the pagan god Baal.

[2 : 29] The land had been judged for this for three years now. A three-year famine with no rain.

And the nation was brought to its knees. And the king, King Ahab, was actually desperate.

Whenever Elijah had gone to him and said, there will be no rain for three years, the king didn't really believe it.

And he sent out word to find Elijah. He wanted to deal with Elijah for being responsible for sending no rain.

The hierarchy of the Baal worships, they were actually embarrassed with the situation. Because, you see, their new god, Baal.

These false gods, these pagan gods, we must realize, did not claim to be god of everything. They were only god of certain sections of the world.

[3 : 43] And Baal had apparently two specialities. One was he was in charge of fire. He was the god of fire. But he was also the god of rain.

He was the god responsible for sending rain. And here they were. Here they were. And they were so embarrassed. No rain.

There was a drought for three years. And it was a real embarrassment to the hierarchy amongst the Baal worshipers. And then the real god, the only god there is, decided to send rain.

But before he did so, he wanted Elijah, his prophet, to meet and confront the king Ahab. So, a meeting between Elijah and King Ahab was arranged.

Remember, the last time that Elijah met King Ahab, it was for Elijah to stand before him and said, there'll be no rain for three years.

[4 : 58] And of course, Ahab was so angry with Elijah, he wanted him killed and gave instructions, find Elijah and destroy him.

So, we might very well ask at this point, why now does King Ahab agree to meet with Elijah and have a discussion? Elijah called for him and said, we want to meet.

Well, why did he agree to meet him if he was wanting him dead? And the explanation is this. King Ahab was absolutely desperate.

The famine was biting sore in the land. If you look at 2 Kings chapter 6, you'll find out there what happened during famines, how serious things were.

To keep alive, they were selling dung, dung, dung, for food. And you could sell, as it says, a cab of dung, dung, dung, droppings.

[6 : 08] You could sell it for five shekels of silver. That's what hunger's like. That's what a famine is like. And that's the situation in Israel at this time.

And the king is desperate. People were dying of hunger. And what was really needed, the explanation for it all, for it all, as we know, is that Israel had given up worshipping Jehovah and instead turned to Baal worship.

What was needed was Baal, the false pagan god, Baal, to be publicly discredited as a non-god and Jehovah, the god of Israel, to be confirmed as the one living and true god publicly.

That's the background. So, the contest. They agree it, we've summarized it in verse 24, that they'll have a contest on Mount Carmel.

That really was quite a suitable location when you think in it, because in Mount Carmel was where Jehovah, the Israelites, worshipped Jehovah.

[7 : 31] That is, in the past when they worshipped him. But now, the place where Jehovah was worshipped by Israelites, they now worshipped the pagan god Baal.

So, the location, quite appropriate. Fire was to be the symbol of the real god, and that was quite understandable, because, as we said already, Baal was a god of fire.

And as we know from the New Testament, we're told, you'll know the verse, our god is a consuming fire.

So, fire being the symbol of god, quite appropriate. Our text tells us, and it's interesting, that they consider these terms to be quite fair.

You call upon the name of your god, I'll call upon the name of the lord, and the god who answers by fire he is god. And all the people answered, it is well spoken.

[8 : 50] Now, here we have 850 prophets calling on the pagan god Baal, and one prophet calling on the god of Israel, Jehovah.

They all agree it's fair. 800, can you hear, can you see the headlines in the press? The opinion, public opinion polls will be saying 850 to 1.

You see in the end of verse 19, we're told, 400 prophets of 450 prophets of Baal plus the 400 prophets of Asherah, they were all to be employed in this work.

Well, I suppose if Netflix were making a film of this, the directors would be showing you a scene shrines to Baal everywhere.

850 prophets on one side, one prophet on the other. It would show you dead carcasses of animals lying around who were dying of hunger.

[10 : 16] It would probably show you something equivalent of wanted, dead or alive, posters of Elijah hanging on their buildings. So, so that's the scene.

The terms, each one, each one had to call on their own God, and the God who answers by fire, follow him.

But do you notice, it's quite significant. While in verse 24, they agree, it is all well spoken.

Do you notice, in verse 21, do you notice, they don't make any commitment about following whoever wins?

Verse 21, and Elijah came near to all the people and said, how long will you go limping between two different opinions?

[11 : 20] If the Lord is God, follow him. But if it bail, then follow him. And the people did not answer him a word.

They're not prepared to make a commitment. Isn't that quite like us today? Have your opinion, but don't get too serious about it all.

It's just your opinion. Again, nothing changes. You see, religion, like today, it's not a popularity contest.

Religion is a life or death issue. Religion is about truth. It's not about winning a competition or a contest.

Religion is a life or death issue. And it's essential we make commitments. So, we turn now to the contest.

[12 : 29] Call on the name of Baal. Well, let's read what they're calling on the name of Baal in verse 26 to verse 28.

And they took the bull that was given them, and they prepared it, and called upon the name of God from morning until noon, saying, O Baal, answer us.

But there is no voice, and no one answered. And they limped around the altar that they had made.

And at noon, Elijah mocked them, saying, Cry aloud, for he is God.

Either he's musing, or he's relieving himself, or he's on a journey, or perhaps he's asleep and must be awakened. And they cried aloud and cupped themselves after their custom with swords and lances until the blood gushed out upon them.

That's what the Baal prophets did. What's the answer? We don't need to say anything else but what verse 29 says.

[13:51] 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. attention. I can't expand that.

I can't make that any simpler. No one answered. No voice. No one paid attention.

attention. Well, that's the prophets of Baal calling upon their God with a small g.

But then some things happen and you find Elijah calling upon his God in verses 36 and 37.

[14:56] So I'll just read them just now. At the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near and said, O Lord, the 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.

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.

Simple prayer. But note, first of all, note, first of all, they have to repair the altar.

Verse 30, 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.

Does that not say it all? Is that not where all the problem began? Is that not where the famine really began? the altar had been thrown down.

[16:26] What the original word has been translated elsewhere, destroyed. It had been destroyed. They'd given up worshipping God. That's how it all began to go wrong.

Now, you'll notice also that they had the sacrifice a bull. You see, that was, they had to sacrifice a bull first, and then the pouring of water.

It's quite significant, actually, this pouring of water. It was quite often done when people came before the Lord to make a request. You see, in Old Testament times, in this period of redemption, history, before you could make a request of God, you had to offer a sacrifice.

You had to please the God. And God records sacrifices. That was the Old Testament system. A bull had to be sacrificed. But there was also this pouring of water.

And if you turn to 1 Samuel chapter 7 verses 5 and 6, you'll find out what the significance of the pouring of water is. This is Samuel.

[17:49] This is before Elijah's time. In 1 Samuel chapter 7 verses 5 and 6, we read, Then Samuel said, Gather all Israel at Mizpah, and I will pray to the Lord for you.

So they gathered at Mizpah, and they drew water, and poured it out before the Lord, and said there, We have sinned against the Lord.

And Samuel judged the people of Israel at Mizpah. They drew water, and poured it out before the Lord.

What's the significance of pouring water? Well, apparently, it meant, it symbolized three things, and they all begin with the letter W.

First of all, it signified waste. A repenting people were to say, poured out the water to say, you might say, well, what a waste that is.

[18:57] We have sinned against the Lord. What a waste. What a waste of our time. What a waste of our lives. What a waste of our energy.

We have sinned. sin is a waste. The second W it refers to is washing. It washes.

It's symbolizing we need to be washed. We need to be cleansed from our sin. And the third W stands for willful intention.

In other words, it was a symbol of we're dead serious about this. We really do repent of our sins.

We really do turn to God and ask for forgiveness, forsaking our old way and turning to God again.

[19:56] A symbol of waste, a symbol of washing for cleansing, a symbol of your will. Now we really do want to forsake our sin and worship the Lord God.

So we come now to the prayer. We read it 36 or 35 and 36 no 36 and 37.

Answer me, O Lord, answer me that this people may know that you, Lord, are God and that you've turned their hearts back.

now tell me, that prayer, was it profound? Was it profound? Was it academic?

Was it a bit highbrow? Did you have to practice it to learn it? Was it long? Was it long?

[21 : 02] How simple. How simple. How straightforward. How short. How sincere. If you're not used to praying, what a good way to start.

Four S's. Simple. Straightforward. Short. Sincere.

straightforward. You really mean it. That's the way to be honest with God. That's the way to repent. That's the way to believe in Jesus. To believe in God. That's the way to forgiveness of sin. That's the way to get right with God.

short. Simple. Straightforward. Sincere. Prayer. How long had they to wait?

[22 : 10] Six weeks? Six hours? Six minutes? What does verse 37 say? Then, then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering.

Straightforward, isn't it? That's it. The God who answered by fire. Well, now, today, we might have questions to ask.

You might not be very happy about verse 40. Destroying Baal's prophets. Why is that included?

Do you think that's right? Was there any need for that? Why destroy the prophets of Baal? answer?

The same reason as we destroy cancer cells.

If you don't destroy them, they will destroy you. You see, the prophets of Baal were the reason for the famine.

[23 : 32] The prophets of Baal were the ones that persuaded Jezebel and Ahab to slay God's prophets. God sent prophets to Israel to tell them, you've got it all wrong.

Repent and turn to me and all can be forgiven. And what did Jezebel and Ahab do? Kill the prophets. That's the reason.

That's the explanation. There's famine was the result of the king obeying the prophets of Baal.

Here's a second question. Can God do the same thing today? Can we arrange to do the same thing and demonstrate in the town centre?

Arrange the same thing. Can we? No, we can't. Why? Can God not do the same thing today? Has God got the power to do that today?

[24 : 36] Of course he has. He's got the same power today as he always had. Of course he could do the same thing today. But is that the way God works today under the New Testament system?

Since Christ Jesus came and offered himself? Is that the way God operates today? Do remember in that Old Testament system?

There was first of all this extreme famine. Do you want a famine? Would you like it if we could get an Elijah today to do the same things?

Do you think it would work? First of all you have to go through a famine. And get Tesco supermarket to sell doves droppings to keep alive.

Do you want that? Do you want to go back to that system? There was, of course, bulls to be sacrificed as well.

[25 : 50] Under the Old Testament you had to offer acceptable sacrifices first before you made your requests. and do notice this. This was not an idea Elijah had.

Some people would say, oh, Elijah just thought of this great idea and we'll do this experiment, have this contest. No, no. Do notice what is said at the end.

What verse is it? Verse 36. 36. The end of verse 36. And that I have done all these things at your word.

God told him to do this. the last word in verse 36, which is the word word, that last word, word, is elsewhere, in fact, elsewhere in the Old Testament translated as commandment.

In fact, it's translated commandment 20 times. The original is 20 times translated elsewhere in the Bible, commandment. So, Elijah did this at the commandment of the Lord.

[27 : 11] We cannot make up our own ideas and arrange contests like this today. Everything's to be done, even in Old Testament times, at the commandment of the Lord.

Here's a third question to ask. Tell me, was it a success? Did it work?

Did it turn Ahab? Did it change Jezebel? Did the land of Israel repent and turn to God?

That's the object of it all. The object of it all is not to perform a miracle to see how much power God has. That's incidental. The object is getting Israel to repent of their sins and turn to God in faith.

Did that happen? It didn't. It didn't happen. God demonstrated he's the God of fire.

[28 : 20] He's the God of everything. He's the only one living and true God there is. But the exercise, the contest, did not turn Israel back to God.

In fact, those of you who know your Bible know that in the next chapter, Elijah is so depressed about things. As a result, actually, Queen Jezebel had more hatred and venom against Elijah than she had before.

And Elijah has to run for his life. And he goes under a tree and asks God to take away his life. Do you wish the same thing could happen today as happened then?

Listen. Listen to God. Behold, a greater than Elijah is here. We today have a greater prophet, you can't say, than Elijah.

Elijah. Elijah was only a prophet. Jesus Christ is a prophet, a priest, and a king.

[29 : 41] Elijah predicted a judgment. Christ can predict mercy, the Holy Spirit, salvation, Christ.

Elijah could only sacrifice bulls. King Jesus sacrificed himself.

Elijah could only bring down a famine. Jesus Christ can bring down forgiveness, peace with God.

Christ can send the Holy Spirit and give you a new heart. Elijah could not do that. Elijah lived in the early stages of redemptive history.

Do you want to go back to famines? Do you want to go back to sacrificing bulls? Do you want to go back to that system? before prayer could be heard, sacrifices to be made.

[30 : 57] Bulls, the sacrificing of bulls was only symbols ultimately pointing to Christ who was to come. And even in the Old Testament, God said, I do not delight in the blood of bulls.

What does he say in the New Testament? it is not possible that the blood of bulls can take away sin. Now that Christ has sacrificed himself, there's no more sacrifice for sin.

There's no need for anything else. Christ has offered himself at the place called Calvary as an atonement to God for all the sins of every soul, man, woman, and child who will believe in him.

And there is no need for anything else. You don't need to do anything. Christ has done it all. just believe it. Just believe it. Elijah could not bestow repentance or forgiveness on Israel.

[32 : 28] Christ Jesus today can give you repentance, forgiveness, the Holy Spirit in one moment.

Christ can give you in one moment his Holy Spirit if you mean it, if you want it, if you ask him for it. If you been evil, been evil, if you evil people ask me for the Holy Spirit.

If you been evil can give, you give good gifts to your children, will not your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit and it doesn't say to his children.

This is what I love about the gospel. The illustration is a father, a loving father, giving good gifts to his children. And he says, as you evil fathers love your children and give your children good gifts, if they ask for it, how much more will a heavenly father give the Holy Spirit, not to his children, although that's true.

[33 : 47] The gospel is he'll give the Holy Spirit to them that ask. Ask God for Christ's sake to give you the Holy Spirit that you repent and believe and accept the Christ's death at Calvary as a sacrifice for your sins.

May God, the Holy Spirit, make his word, his gospel, his truth effectual to every one of us.

Let's pray. our gracious Father in heaven, be pleased to take the things of Christ and make them ours.

Show us your Son in all his love, in all his beauty, in all his compassion, in all his power, and bestow saving faith upon us.

Graciously hear us in mercy and answer us in peace as we pray all in Christ's name and for Christ's sake alone.

[35 : 07] Amen. We'll conclude our service of worship by singing from the same psalm, but this time in the Scorish Psalter, Psalm 118, on page 399, page 399, Psalm 118, and we sing from verse 24 to the end.

This is the day God made, in it will joy triumphantly, save now, I pray thee, Lord, I pray, send now prosperity.

blessed is he in God's great name that cometh us to save away from the house which to the Lord pertains, you blessed have.

Psalm 118, verse 24, to the end, to God's praise. this is the day God made in it will joy triumphantly, save now I pray thee, Lord, I pray, send now prosperity.

Blessed is he in God's great name that cometh us to save.

[37 : 05] we prove the house which to the Lord pertains you blessed have.

Good is the Lord who unto us us hath made light to our eyes, but ye unto the altar shores with for the sacrifice.

thou part my God highly exiled, my God I will thee praise, give thanks to God for he is good, his mercy has no waste.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and forever more.

Amen.