Elijah on Mount Carmel

Bible Stories Anthology — 1 Kings 18

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> **Romans 15:4** *For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.*

Why These Stories Were Written — Romans 15:4

Paul had just quoted a thousand-year-old psalm and applied it to Christ (Romans 15:3, quoting Psalm 69:9), and then he explained why he could: *whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning*. **Written aforetime** — the scriptures that already stood before this present age of grace opened at Pentecost: the record God gave through Moses, the prophets and the writings, along with the Gospel accounts of Christ's earthly ministry, which belong to that same time before Pentecost. (When Paul wrote these words, the scriptures he had in hand were the Hebrew scriptures; the Gospels had not yet been written down.) **Written for our learning** — "learning" is the Greek word for *teaching*, the very word rendered "doctrine" in 2 Timothy 3:16. These are not quaint tales; they are doctrine in narrative form. Adam, Ruth and David never knew us, but God did, and He had their lives recorded with us in mind — written *for* us, though not all of it written *to* us, which is why we read Israel's history as our instruction and not as our marching orders. **Through patience and comfort of the scriptures** — "patience" is literally *remaining under*, the staying power we gain from watching men and women stay under a load; "comfort" is a *calling alongside*, the strength God brings when He meets them there, which is why Paul calls Him "the God of patience and consolation" in the very next verse. **That we might have hope** — not a wish, but confident expectation: the return of Jesus Christ and everlasting life with Him. That is why these accounts exist, and it is how they should be read.

The God That Answereth by Fire

For three and a half years it had not rained in Israel. Not a shower. Not even dew. The brooks had dried up, the grass was gone, and the king himself was out searching the countryside for enough green to keep his horses alive.

The nation had been told the drought was coming. One man had walked into the palace and said so to the king's face, in the name of the LORD. Then he disappeared, and the king's men searched every nearby kingdom and could not find him.

Now he was back. And he had a proposal.

Gather the whole nation on Mount Carmel. Bring the prophets of Baal — all four hundred and fifty of them — and the four hundred prophets of Asherah besides. Two altars. Two bulls. No fire. Each side calls on its god. **"The God that answereth by fire, let him be God."**

It was one man against eight hundred and fifty, with a silent nation watching. By sunset the prophets of Baal had shouted themselves hoarse, danced around their altar and cut themselves until they bled — and nothing had happened. Then Elijah soaked his own altar with water three times, prayed a prayer you could say in half a minute, and the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones, the dust, and the water in the trench.

The people fell on their faces and cried, *The LORD, he is the God.* And before the day was over, the sky went black and the rain came.

This is the story of a nation that could not make up its mind, and the day God made it plain.

The Setting

When. The reign of **Ahab** over the northern kingdom of Israel, about 874–853 B.C. by the reckoning most often used. The kingdom had split after Solomon's death, some seventy years earlier. The ten northern tribes, called **Israel**, had their capital at **Samaria**; the southern kingdom of **Judah** kept Jerusalem and the temple.

The spiritual state of the north. From the start, the northern kings had set up golden calves at Bethel and Dan so their people would not go to Jerusalem to worship (1 Kings 12:28-29). Ahab went much further:

> **1 Kings 16:30** *And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD above all that were before him.*
>
> **1 Kings 16:31** *And it came to pass, as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he took to wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Zidonians, and went and served Baal, and worshipped him.*
>
> **1 Kings 16:32** *And he reared up an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he had built in Samaria.*

Who was Baal? *Baal* means "lord" or "master." The Baal of the Phoenicians and Canaanites was a storm god — pictured in ancient art holding a thunderbolt, and praised in Canaanite texts as the one who rode the clouds and gave the rain that made the crops grow. Beside him was **Asherah** (the "groves" of the KJV), a mother goddess worshipped at wooden poles or trees. For a farming people who lived or died by the rain, Baal was a very practical god to follow.

Where. Mount Carmel is a ridge about fifteen miles long, running from the Mediterranean coast (at modern Haifa) southeast into the land. Its name means "garden land" or "fruitful field," because it was usually green and fertile. It stood near the border between Israel and Phoenicia — Jezebel's homeland — and was the kind of high, green place where Baal would be expected to show his power. Below it runs the **brook Kishon**. About seventeen miles to the east lay **Jezreel**, where Ahab had a royal residence.

Who.

- **Elijah the Tishbite,** from Gilead, east of the Jordan. His name, *Eliyahu*, means **"My God is Yah"** (the LORD). His name was his message.
- **Ahab**, king of Israel, and his wife **Jezebel**, a Phoenician princess who brought Baal worship with her and hunted down the LORD's prophets.
- **Obadiah**, the manager of Ahab's household, whose name means "servant of Yah," and who **"feared the LORD greatly."**
- **The prophets of Baal (450) and the prophets of the groves (400),** fed at Jezebel's table.
- **All Israel**, gathered on the mountain — and unable to choose.

The administration. The **Mosaic Law**. God had warned Israel through Moses that if they turned to other gods, He would **"shut up the heaven, that there be no rain"** (Deuteronomy 11:17). The Law also set the penalty for a prophet who led Israel after other gods (Deuteronomy 13:1-5; 18:20).

The Story, Told Faithfully

"There Shall Not Be Dew Nor Rain"

> **1 Kings 17:1** *And Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the inhabitants of Gilead, said unto Ahab, As the LORD God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word.*

Elijah enters the Bible with no introduction — no father named, no call recorded, just a man from the hill country walking into the court of the most wicked king Israel had ever had.

"As the LORD God of Israel liveth." An oath, and a challenge. Baal worshippers believed that during the dry season Baal was dead, and that he came back to life with the rains. Elijah declared that the LORD *lives* — always.

"Before whom I stand." An idiom for a servant who stands in attendance before his master, ready to be sent. Elijah stood before Ahab, but he served another King.

"There shall not be dew nor rain." The drought was aimed at the very thing Baal claimed to control. If Baal was the lord of the rain, let him send it. He could not. And it was exactly what God had said would happen if Israel served other gods (Deuteronomy 11:16-17; 28:23-24).

"But according to my word." Not Elijah's own power, but the word God gave him. James tells us how it came about: **"he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months"** (James 5:17). Elijah prayed in line with what God had already promised in the Law.

In chapter 17 God hid Elijah by the brook Cherith, where ravens fed him, and then sent him to a widow in **Zarephath**, a town belonging to Sidon — Jezebel's own country — where the meal and oil never ran out, and her son was raised from the dead. Jesus later pointed to that widow: **"many widows were in Israel in the days of Elias, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months … But unto none of them was Elias sent, save unto Sarepta"** (Luke 4:25-26).

"Go, Shew Thyself unto Ahab"

> **1 Kings 18:1** *And it came to pass after many days, that the word of the LORD came to Elijah in the third year, saying, Go, shew thyself unto Ahab; and I will send rain upon the earth.*
>
> **1 Kings 18:2** *And Elijah went to shew himself unto Ahab. And there was a sore famine in Samaria.*

"In the third year." Jesus and James both give the full length of the drought as three years and six months. The two fit together: "the third year" in 1 Kings is counted from an earlier point in the story — most likely from Elijah's going to Zarephath, or from the start of the famine — while the full drought, counting from the last rain, ran three and a half years.

"I will send rain." The rain was God's to give, and He would give it — but first, Israel had to face the question of who was God.

Obadiah

> **1 Kings 18:3** *And Ahab called Obadiah, which was the governor of his house. (Now Obadiah feared the LORD greatly:*
>
> **1 Kings 18:4** *For it was so, when Jezebel cut off the prophets of the LORD, that Obadiah took an hundred prophets, and hid them by fifty in a cave, and fed them with bread and water.)*
>
> **1 Kings 18:5** *And Ahab said unto Obadiah, Go into the land, unto all fountains of water, and unto all brooks: peradventure we may find grass to save the horses and mules alive, that we lose not all the beasts.*

A man who **"feared the LORD greatly"** served as the chief steward in the palace of Baal's king. While Jezebel was killing God's prophets, Obadiah was hiding a hundred of them in caves — fifty to a cave, so that if one was found, the other would survive — and feeding them in a famine, with bread and water that were worth more than gold. Not every faithful man in a wicked system can leave it. Some are placed there to protect God's people from inside.

Notice Ahab's priorities. His people were starving. He went looking for grass for his **horses and mules**. His military strength — the chariot horses — mattered more to him than repentance. He never asked why there was no rain.

> **1 Kings 18:7** *And as Obadiah was in the way, behold, Elijah met him: and he knew him, and fell on his face, and said, Art thou that my lord Elijah?*
>
> **1 Kings 18:8** *And he answered him, I am: go, tell thy lord, Behold, Elijah is here.*

"Go, tell thy lord." Obadiah had called Elijah "my lord"; Elijah reminded him who Obadiah's earthly master was. Obadiah was terrified. Ahab had searched every nation for Elijah (18:10). If Obadiah announced him and then **"the Spirit of the LORD shall carry thee whither I know not"** (18:12), Ahab would kill the messenger. Obadiah knew God had moved Elijah before and could do it again.

> **1 Kings 18:15** *And Elijah said, As the LORD of hosts liveth, before whom I stand, I will surely shew myself unto him to day.*

"The LORD of hosts." *Hosts* are armies — the armies of heaven. Elijah stood alone before a hostile king, but he stood before the LORD of armies. He gave his word, and Obadiah went.

"Art Thou He That Troubleth Israel?"

> **1 Kings 18:17** *And it came to pass, when Ahab saw Elijah, that Ahab said unto him, Art thou he that troubleth Israel?*
>
> **1 Kings 18:18** *And he answered, I have not troubled Israel; but thou, and thy father's house, in that ye have forsaken the commandments of the LORD, and thou hast followed Baalim.*

"He that troubleth Israel." The Hebrew word *akar* means to stir up disaster, to bring ruin on a community. It is the word used of **Achan**, whose sin at Jericho brought defeat on the whole nation: **"Why hast thou troubled us? the LORD shall trouble thee this day"** (Joshua 7:25). Ahab was calling Elijah an Achan — the man whose presence brought ruin.

Elijah turned it around. **"I have not troubled Israel; but thou."** The drought was not the fault of the man who announced it, but of the king who had led the nation away from God. The one who tells the truth about sin is often blamed for the trouble that sin causes.

“Baalim.” The Hebrew plural of Baal. There were many local Baals — Baal of this town, Baal of that mountain. Ahab had not only added one god; he had opened the door to a crowd of them.

The Challenge

> **1 Kings 18:19** *Now therefore send, and gather to me all Israel unto mount Carmel, and the prophets of Baal four hundred and fifty, and the prophets of the groves four hundred, which eat at Jezebel’s table.*
>
> **1 Kings 18:20** *So Ahab sent unto all the children of Israel, and gathered the prophets together unto mount Carmel.*

It is remarkable that Ahab obeyed. The king who had hunted Elijah everywhere now did what Elijah told him. After three and a half years of drought, Ahab could not refuse the one man who seemed to hold the key to the rain.

“Which eat at Jezebel’s table.” The prophets of Baal were state-funded, fed by the queen. They were not only false; they were paid to be false.

“How Long Halt Ye Between Two Opinions?”

> **1 Kings 18:21** *And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, How long halt ye between two opinions? if the LORD be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him. And the people answered him not a word.*

This is the centre of the story.

“How long halt ye between two opinions?” To *halt* is to limp. The Hebrew verb *pasach* means to limp, hobble, or hop. The word for “opinions,” *se’ippim*, means **branches** or divided boughs — a forking of the way. The picture is of a bird hopping back and forth between two branches, never landing on either; or of a man limping along with one foot on each of two paths. Israel had not rejected the LORD. They had simply added Baal. They kept the LORD for the old stories and the festivals, and Baal for the rain and the crops.

“If the LORD be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him.” Elijah refused to let them keep both. One or the other is God. It cannot be both. Moses had said it: **“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD”** (Deuteronomy 6:4). Joshua had said it on this same land: **“choose you this day whom ye will serve”** (Joshua 24:15). Jesus would say it later: **“No man can serve two masters”** (Matthew 6:24).

“And the people answered him not a word.” Silence. Maybe from fear of the king and queen. Maybe from shame. Maybe because they honestly did not know. Their silence was its own answer: they were still limping.

“The God That Answereth by Fire”

> **1 Kings 18:22** *Then said Elijah unto the people, I, even I only, remain a prophet of the LORD; but Baal’s prophets are four hundred and fifty men.*
>
> **1 Kings 18:23** *Let them therefore give us two bullocks; and let them choose one bullock for themselves, and cut it in pieces, and lay it on wood, and put no fire under: and I will dress the other bullock, and lay it on wood, and put no fire under:*

> **1 Kings 18:24** *And call ye on the name of your gods, and I will call on the name of the LORD: and the God that answereth by fire, let him be God. And all the people answered and said, It is well spoken.*

"I, even I only, remain." Elijah meant he was the only prophet of the LORD standing openly before the people. Obadiah's hundred were hidden in caves. As far as the crowd on Carmel could see, it was one against four hundred and fifty.

"The God that answereth by fire." Elijah chose the test carefully. Baal was the storm god, pictured with a thunderbolt in his hand. Fire from the sky — lightning — was supposed to be his weapon. Elijah gave Baal every advantage: his own specialty, on high ground near his homeland, with his prophets going first and outnumbering Elijah four hundred and fifty to one.

Fire from heaven was also how God had shown His acceptance of sacrifices before. When Aaron offered the first sacrifices at the tabernacle, **"there came a fire out from before the LORD, and consumed upon the altar the burnt offering"** (Leviticus 9:24). God had answered David the same way (1 Chronicles 21:26), and Solomon at the dedication of the temple (2 Chronicles 7:1). Elijah was asking God to do what He had done before.

"It is well spoken." The silent crowd finally spoke. They agreed to the test. Everyone would see.

From Morning Until Noon

> **1 Kings 18:25** *And Elijah said unto the prophets of Baal, Choose you one bullock for yourselves, and dress it first; for ye are many; and call on the name of your gods, but put no fire under.*
>
> **1 Kings 18:26** *And they took the bullock which was given them, and they dressed it, and called on the name of Baal from morning even until noon, saying, O Baal, hear us. But there was no voice, nor any that answered. And they leaped upon the altar which was made.*

"O Baal, hear us." Three words, shouted over and over, for hours. Jesus later warned against exactly this: **"use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking"** (Matthew 6:7).

"They leaped upon the altar." The word translated "leaped" is the same Hebrew verb, *pasach*, that Elijah used in verse 21 for *halting* or limping. The prophets of Baal did a limping, hopping dance around their altar — the very thing Elijah had said the people were doing between two opinions. The writer is showing us: *this* is what following Baal looks like.

"But there was no voice, nor any that answered." The psalmist would describe idols the same way: **"They have mouths, but they speak not ... They have ears, but they hear not"** (Psalm 115:5-6).

Elijah Mocked Them

> **1 Kings 18:27** *And it came to pass at noon, that Elijah mocked them, and said, Cry aloud: for he is a god; either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth, and must be awaked.*

At noon, with the sun at its height, Elijah began to mock them. This is sarcasm, and it is in the Bible on purpose.

“Cry aloud: for he is a god.” Shout louder — after all, he’s a god, isn’t he?

“Either he is talking.” The Hebrew word means musing or deep in thought — *perhaps he’s busy thinking*.

“Or he is pursuing.” Literally, *he has gone aside*. Many Hebrew scholars take this as a polite way of saying he has stepped out to relieve himself.

“Or he is in a journey.” Maybe he’s away travelling. Phoenician sailors were famous travellers; perhaps their god was off at sea.

“Or peradventure he sleepeth, and must be awaked.” Baal worship actually taught that Baal died and slept through the dry season and woke up with the rains. Elijah threw their own teaching back at them. *Wake him up!* The God of Israel **“shall neither slumber nor sleep”** (Psalm 121:4).

The mockery had a purpose. It showed the people how empty the whole thing was. A god who had to be shouted awake was no god at all.

“Till the Blood Gushed Out”

> **1 Kings 18:28** *And they cried aloud, and cut themselves after their manner with knives and lancets, till the blood gushed out upon them.*
>
> **1 Kings 18:29** *And it came to pass, when midday was past, and they prophesied until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that there was neither voice, nor any to answer, nor any that regarded.*

“And cut themselves after their manner.” Self-wounding was a known practice in the worship of the Canaanite gods — an attempt to move the god by showing him their pain and devotion. God had forbidden it to Israel: **“Ye are the children of the LORD your God: ye shall not cut yourselves”** (Deuteronomy 14:1; compare Leviticus 19:28). The true God does not need His people to bleed to get His attention. False gods always demand more, and give nothing back.

“They prophesied.” Here it means they raved in a frenzy, as if possessed.

“Neither voice, nor any to answer, nor any that regarded.” Three nothings. No voice. No answer. No one even paying attention. From dawn until the middle of the afternoon, eight hundred and fifty prophets gave everything they had — and heaven was silent.

The Altar Repaired

> **1 Kings 18:30** *And Elijah said unto all the people, Come near unto me. And all the people came near unto him. And he repaired the altar of the LORD that was broken down.*
>
> **1 Kings 18:31** *And Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, unto whom the word of the LORD came, saying, Israel shall be thy name:*
>
> **1 Kings 18:32** *And with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD: and he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two measures of seed.*

“Come near unto me.” Elijah called the people close. They were to see everything, so that no one could say there was a trick.

“He repaired the altar of the LORD that was broken down.” There had once been an altar to the LORD on Carmel. It had been torn down — whether by neglect or by Jezebel’s campaign, the text does not say. Before God’s fire could fall, His altar had to be rebuilt. Restoration begins with repairing what has been broken in the worship of God.

“Twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes.” The kingdom had been split for seventy years. Only ten tribes stood on Carmel. But Elijah built with **twelve** stones. In God’s eyes Israel was still one people, the sons of the man to whom God had said, **“Israel shall be thy name.”** Moses too had built an altar with twelve pillars **“according to the twelve tribes of Israel”** (Exodus 24:4). Elijah was calling the nation back to the covenant God made with all of them.

“Two measures of seed.” A *seah* was a dry measure of grain. The phrase is read either as a trench that would hold about two seahs, or as a trench enclosing the area two seahs of seed would sow. Either way it was a real trench, dug in a ring around the altar to catch the water.

Water on the Altar

> **1 Kings 18:33** *And he put the wood in order, and cut the bullock in pieces, and laid him on the wood, and said, Fill four barrels with water, and pour it on the burnt sacrifice, and on the wood.*
>
> **1 Kings 18:34** *And he said, Do it the second time. And they did it the second time. And he said, Do it the third time. And they did it the third time.*
>
> **1 Kings 18:35** *And the water ran round about the altar; and he filled the trench also with water.*

“Fill four barrels with water.” In the third year of drought, water was the most precious thing in the land. Elijah poured it out on the altar — four jars, three times: **twelve** jars of water on an altar of **twelve** stones. As this series understands it, the water likely came from a spring on the mountain or from the sea below, which was within reach of Carmel.

Why soak it? To remove any possibility of a trick — no hidden coal, no smouldering ember, nothing that could catch by accident. Wet wood does not burn. A soaked bull does not burn. A trench full of water does not burn. Elijah made the test as hard as it could possibly be, so that the answer, when it came, could only be God.

Elijah’s Prayer

> **1 Kings 18:36** *And it came to pass at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that Elijah the prophet came near, and said, LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word.*
>
> **1 Kings 18:37** *Hear me, O LORD, hear me, that this people may know that thou art the LORD God, and that thou hast turned their heart back again.*

“At the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice.” In Jerusalem, at about three in the afternoon, the priests offered the evening lamb (Exodus 29:39-41). Much later, this was still **“the hour of prayer, being the ninth hour”** (Acts 3:1). Elijah, far from the temple in the northern kingdom, prayed at the very hour God had appointed for Israel’s worship.

Compare the two prayers. The prophets of Baal prayed for about eight hours. Elijah's prayer is about sixty words in the KJV. He did not shout, dance or cut himself. He simply came near and spoke to the God who was already listening.

Look at what he asked for:

"Let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel." First, God's honour. Not Elijah's.

"And that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word." Elijah had not staged this on his own. The drought, the challenge, the water — all at God's word. A servant acts on his master's instructions and can therefore ask his master to back them.

"Hear me, O LORD, hear me." Repeated — the earnest cry of a man who knows only God can answer. James calls it **"the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man"** (James 5:16).

"That this people may know … that thou hast turned their heart back again." Elijah's goal was not to win a contest. It was to bring the people home. The fire was for their hearts.

"The Fire of the LORD Fell"

> **1 Kings 18:38** *Then the fire of the LORD fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench.*
>
> **1 Kings 18:39** *And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces: and they said, The LORD, he is the God; the LORD, he is the God.*

"Then the fire of the LORD fell." No delay. No repetition needed. God answered the first time.

And look at what it consumed. **The burnt sacrifice** — expected. **The wood** — expected. **The stones** — stones do not burn. **The dust** — the very soil under the altar. And it **licked up the water** in the trench. This was not a lightning strike or a natural fire. It was a fire that burned what cannot burn and drank up what puts fire out. Nothing was left of the altar at all.

"They fell on their faces." The same response Israel gave when fire fell on Aaron's first offering (Leviticus 9:24).

"The LORD, he is the God; the LORD, he is the God." The silent crowd finally answered Elijah's question, and they answered it twice. In Hebrew their cry is *Yahweh hu ha-Elohim* — and it is almost Elijah's own name turned into a confession: *Eliyahu*, "My God is Yah." What the prophet's name had said all along, the nation now said with its own mouth.

The Prophets of Baal

> **1 Kings 18:40** *And Elijah said unto them, Take the prophets of Baal; let not one of them escape. And they took them: and Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon, and slew them there.*

This verse is hard for modern readers, and it should be read honestly.

Under the Mosaic Law, a prophet who led Israel after other gods was to be put to death: **"that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams, shall be put to death; because he hath spoken to turn you away from the LORD your God"** (Deuteronomy 13:5; compare 18:20). These men were not private worshippers of a foreign god; they were the paid leaders of a state religion that had led the nation into idolatry and

whose patron queen had massacred the prophets of the LORD. Elijah carried out the sentence the Law of Israel prescribed, in the administration in which he lived.

As this series understands it, this is not a pattern for anyone today. When James and John wanted to call down fire on a Samaritan village **"even as Elias did,"** Jesus rebuked them (Luke 9:54-55). (Some manuscripts add, **"Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of. For the Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them"** [9:55-56]; whether or not those words are original, the rebuke itself is certain.) In the grace administration, **"the weapons of our warfare are not carnal"** (2 Corinthians 10:4). Believers pull down false beliefs with the truth, not with the sword.

"A Sound of Abundance of Rain"

> **1 Kings 18:41** *And Elijah said unto Ahab, Get thee up, eat and drink; for there is a sound of abundance of rain.*
>
> **1 Kings 18:42** *So Ahab went up to eat and to drink. And Elijah went up to the top of Carmel; and he cast himself down upon the earth, and put his face between his knees,*

"There is a sound of abundance of rain." There was not a cloud in the sky. Elijah heard the rain by faith before anyone could see it. God had promised, **"I will send rain upon the earth"** (18:1), and now that the people had turned back, Elijah took God at His word.

Notice the contrast. **Ahab went up to eat and to drink.** Elijah went up to pray. The king went to feast; the prophet went to his knees.

"He cast himself down upon the earth, and put his face between his knees." A posture of deep humility and intense prayer — crouched to the ground, head bowed all the way down. The man who had stood tall before eight hundred and fifty prophets now bowed low before God.

Seven Times

> **1 Kings 18:43** *And said to his servant, Go up now, look toward the sea. And he went up, and looked, and said, There is nothing. And he said, Go again seven times.*
>
> **1 Kings 18:44** *And it came to pass at the seventh time, that he said, Behold, there ariseth a little cloud out of the sea, like a man's hand. And he said, Go up, say unto Ahab, Prepare thy chariot, and get thee down, that the rain stop thee not.*

"There is nothing." The fire had come at the first prayer. The rain did not. Elijah kept praying. Six times the servant came back with the same report. Elijah did not quit. **"And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain"** (James 5:18). Jesus taught **"that men ought always to pray, and not to faint"** (Luke 18:1).

Why did God answer the fire at once, and the rain only after seven times? Scripture does not say. As this series understands it, the fire was God's public answer to the question of who is God, and it came at once, before the whole nation. The rain was God's promise already given, and Elijah's persistence was faith holding on to that promise until it was fulfilled.

"A little cloud out of the sea, like a man's hand." Small beginnings. A cloud the size of a hand over the Mediterranean. It was enough for Elijah. He sent word to Ahab to leave before the roads turned to mud.

The Rain and the Run

> **1 Kings 18:45** *And it came to pass in the mean while, that the heaven was black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain. And Ahab rode, and went to Jezreel.*
>
> **1 Kings 18:46** *And the hand of the LORD was on Elijah; and he girded up his loins, and ran before Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel.*

"The heaven was black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain." Three and a half years of drought ended in a downpour. The LORD, not Baal, sent the rain.

"The hand of the LORD was on Elijah." God's power came on him. **"He girded up his loins"** — he tucked his long robe up into his belt so his legs were free — **"and ran before Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel,"** about seventeen miles, ahead of a king's chariot in a storm. In the East, runners went ahead of a king's chariot as an honour guard. As this series understands it, Elijah was showing Ahab that he was willing to serve him, now that the king had seen the LORD's power — giving Ahab every opening to lead the nation back.

What Ahab did with that opening is the next story. When he got home, he told Jezebel everything — and Jezebel swore to kill Elijah by the next day (1 Kings 19:1-2). The fire had fallen, the people had confessed, the rain had come. But the queen had not changed, and the king would not stand up to her.

Where the Story Leads

To the Messiah

The one sacrifice God accepted. On Carmel, God's fire fell on a sacrifice and showed that He had accepted it. The sacrifices of the Law had to be offered again and again. Jesus Christ **"hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling savour"** (Ephesians 5:2), and **"after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God"** (Hebrews 10:12). God did not show His acceptance of that sacrifice with fire. He showed it by raising Jesus from the dead and exalting him to His own right hand.

"Hear me, O LORD, hear me." Elijah stood alone for the nation and prayed that God would turn their hearts back. Jesus Christ stood alone for the whole world, and now as **"one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus"** (1 Timothy 2:5), he is the one through whom God turns hearts back to Himself.

The Elijah to come. Malachi, the last of the Old Testament prophets, promised: **"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children"** (Malachi 4:5-6). It is the same thing Elijah prayed for on Carmel — that God would turn Israel's heart back. The angel said of John the Baptist that he would go before the Messiah **"in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children"** (Luke 1:17), and Jesus said of John, **"if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come"** (Matthew 11:14). John was not Elijah come back to life (John 1:21), but he did Elijah's work: calling a divided nation to decide.

The Transfiguration. On another mountain, Peter, James and John saw **"Moses and Elias talking with him"** (Matthew 17:3). Jesus called it a **"vision"** (17:9) — a revealed sight of the kingdom to come. The Law (Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah) both pointed to Jesus Christ.

Fire that saves. When James and John wanted to call fire down on those who rejected Jesus, as Elijah had done, Jesus rebuked them (Luke 9:54-55). The Messiah came to save men's lives, not to destroy them.

To the Grace Administration

One God, and no limping. The question Elijah asked Israel is still the question: who is God? Paul's answer to the believers at Corinth, a city full of temples to other gods, was plain: **"But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him"** (1 Corinthians 8:6).

Turning from idols. The believers at Thessalonica did what Israel did on Carmel: they **"turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; And to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead"** (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10).

No double life. Israel wanted the LORD and Baal both. Paul will not allow a believer to have both either: **"Ye cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup of devils: ye cannot be partakers of the Lord's table, and of the table of devils"** (1 Corinthians 10:21). **"What agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God"** (2 Corinthians 6:16).

Modern Baals. Most readers today do not bow to a storm god. But Baal was a god of rain, crops and prosperity — a god people served because they thought he would make them rich and safe. Paul says covetousness **"is idolatry"** (Colossians 3:5). Anything a person looks to for what only God can give has become a Baal. **"Little children, keep yourselves from idols"** (1 John 5:21).

Not carnal weapons. Elijah executed the prophets of Baal under the Law. The believer in the grace administration fights false beliefs differently: **"the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds"** (2 Corinthians 10:4).

Prayer with confidence. Elijah prayed briefly at the fire and persistently for the rain. The believer today is told to be **"praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance"** (Ephesians 6:18), and to let their requests **"be made known unto God"** in everything (Philippians 4:6).

Our sacrifice. No believer today builds an altar or offers a bull. **"Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service"** (Romans 12:1).

To the Topic of Prayer

The planning notes point this story toward James 5, and James draws the lesson himself:

> **James 5:16** *Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.*
>
> **James 5:17** *Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months.*
>
> **James 5:18** *And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit.*

"A man subject to like passions as we are." Elijah was not a superhuman. He had the same nature, the same weaknesses and fears as anyone — as the very next chapter will show, when he runs for his life.

His prayers worked not because he was more than a man, but because he prayed according to God's word.

- **Pray according to God's word** — Elijah prayed what God had already said in the Law and told him directly.
- **Pray for God's honour first** — "let it be known this day that thou art God."
- **Pray for people's hearts** — "that thou hast turned their heart back again."
- **Many words do not move God** — Baal's prophets prayed eight hours; Elijah prayed about sixty words.
- **Some answers come at once; some take persistence** — the fire at the first prayer, the rain at the seventh look.
- **Believe before you see** — "there is a sound of abundance of rain."
- **Small beginnings are still answers** — a cloud like a man's hand.
- **Faith pleases God** — "he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him" (Hebrews 11:6).

The Main Takeaway

After three and a half years without rain — the judgment God had warned would come if Israel served other gods — Elijah had King Ahab gather all Israel and the 850 prophets of Baal and Asherah to Mount Carmel, and asked the nation, "How long halt ye between two opinions? if the LORD be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him," and they answered not a word; he proposed that "the God that answereth by fire, let him be God," and Baal's prophets called, danced and cut themselves from morning to evening with "neither voice, nor any to answer, nor any that regarded"; then Elijah rebuilt the LORD's broken altar with twelve stones, drenched it with twelve jars of water, and prayed a short prayer at the hour of the evening sacrifice that God would show He is God and turn the people's hearts back — and "the fire of the LORD fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust," and the people fell on their faces crying, "The LORD, he is the God"; then Elijah prayed on the mountaintop seven times until a cloud like a man's hand rose from the sea, and the great rain came — showing that there is one God, who answers His people, and who alone gives what idols only promise.

- **You cannot serve God and something else as god.** Decide.
- **The LORD lives and answers;** idols do not.
- **The one who names sin is often blamed for its trouble.**
- **Restore what is broken in your worship of God** before looking for His fire.
- **God's power is seen most clearly when the odds are impossible.**
- **Short, sincere prayer according to God's word is heard.**
- **Keep praying for what God has promised,** even when there is nothing yet to see.

For Our Learning — The People

- **Elijah the Tishbite.** Prophet from Gilead whose name means "My God is Yah"; announced the drought, challenged the prophets of Baal on Carmel, prayed down fire and rain.

- **Ahab.** King of Israel who married Jezebel and served Baal; called Elijah the "troubler of Israel"; saw the fire fall but did not turn.
- **Jezebel.** Phoenician princess, daughter of Ethbaal king of the Zidonians; promoted Baal worship, killed the LORD's prophets, and fed the prophets of Baal and Asherah at her table.
- **Obadiah.** Governor of Ahab's household who "feared the LORD greatly"; hid and fed a hundred prophets in two caves; carried Elijah's message to Ahab.
- **The prophets of Baal (450).** Called on Baal all day and cut themselves; no answer came; executed at the brook Kishon under the Law.
- **The prophets of the groves (400).** Prophets of Asherah, also fed by Jezebel.
- **The people of Israel.** Silent at first, "halting between two opinions"; fell on their faces and confessed, "The LORD, he is the God."
- **Elijah's servant.** Went up seven times to look toward the sea and saw the little cloud.

For Our Learning — Customs and Orientalisms

- **Oaths "as the LORD liveth"** to confirm a solemn word.
- **"Before whom I stand"** — the posture of a servant ready to serve his master.
- **Baal as the storm god** and giver of rain; Asherah worshipped at wooden poles ("groves").
- **Royal patronage of prophets** — "which eat at Jezebel's table."
- **High places and mountain altars** for sacrifice.
- **Hiding refugees in caves** in the hill country.
- **Horses and mules** as the king's military strength.
- **Cutting the body** in pagan worship, forbidden to Israel.
- **Ecstatic, frenzied "prophesying"** among pagan prophets.
- **The evening sacrifice** at about the ninth hour, the appointed hour of prayer.
- **Twelve stones for twelve tribes** as a sign of the covenant people.
- **Water jars** for carrying and pouring water.
- **Crouching with the face between the knees** in intense prayer.
- **Girding up the loins** — tucking the robe into the belt to run.
- **Runners going before a king's chariot.**

For Our Learning — Figures of Speech

A figure of speech is a deliberate departure from the plain, ordinary way of saying something, used by God to add emphasis and feeling. These are the ones in this story:

- **Metaphor / idiom** — "How long halt ye between two opinions?" (18:21), literally *limp* or *hop between two branches*: wavering between two paths.
- **Paronomasia (word play)** — the prophets "leaped upon the altar" (18:26) with the same verb as "halt" in 18:21; the people's cry "The LORD, he is the God" (18:39) echoes Elijah's own name, "My God is Yah."

- **Idiom** — “before whom I stand” (17:1; 18:15), I serve Him; “girded up his loins” (18:46), prepared for action.
- **Erotesis (rhetorical question)** — “Art thou he that troubleth Israel?” (18:17).
- **Anticategoria (retort)** — “I have not troubled Israel; but thou” (18:18).
- **Irony / sarcasm (mimesis)** — “Cry aloud: for he is a god; either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth” (18:27).
- **Euphemism** — “he is pursuing” (18:27), understood by many as *he has gone aside*.
- **Polysyndeton** — “the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water” (18:38), piling up each thing the fire consumed.
- **Epizeuxis (repetition)** — “Hear me, O LORD, hear me” (18:37); “The LORD, he is the God; the LORD, he is the God” (18:39).
- **Anthropopatheia** — “the hand of the LORD was on Elijah” (18:46); “the fire of the LORD” (18:38).
- **Simile** — “a little cloud … like a man’s hand” (18:44).
- **Metonymy** — “a sound of abundance of rain” (18:41), the sound put for the rain that was surely coming.

What the Bible Actually Says

- **The drought was announced by God’s word** and prayed for by Elijah (1 Kings 17:1; James 5:17).
- **It lasted three years and six months** (Luke 4:25; James 5:17); “the third year” in 18:1 counts from an earlier point in the story.
- **Ahab blamed Elijah;** Elijah said the trouble came from forsaking God’s commandments.
- **There were 450 prophets of Baal and 400 of the groves.**
- **The people “answered him not a word”** until the fire fell.
- **Elijah let Baal’s prophets go first** and gave them all day.
- **Elijah mocked them openly.**
- **They cut themselves “after their manner.”**
- **Elijah rebuilt a broken altar of the LORD with twelve stones.**
- **Twelve jars of water** were poured on the altar.
- **Elijah prayed at the time of the evening sacrifice.**
- **The fire consumed the sacrifice, wood, stones, dust and water.**
- **The people confessed twice: “The LORD, he is the God.”**
- **The prophets of Baal were executed at the brook Kishon,** under the Law of Moses.
- **Elijah prayed seven times before the cloud appeared.**
- **He ran before Ahab’s chariot about seventeen miles to Jezreel.**
- **James says Elijah was “a man subject to like passions as we are.”**

God’s Will and Intent

- **God wants His people wholly His,** not divided between Him and other gods.
- **God warns before He allows judgment,** and uses hardship to call hearts back.

- **God answers those who call on Him** according to His word.
- **God shows Himself plainly** so that people may know He is God.
- **God wants hearts turned back to Him,** not just a contest won.
- **God gives what idols only promise** — rain, fruit and life.
- **God hears persistent prayer** for what He has promised.
- **God was preparing the one sacrifice He would accept forever,** Jesus Christ — crucified, raised, and ascended — through whom all who turn from idols serve the living and true God.