

"THE GOD THAT ANSWERETH BY FIRE"

I Kings 18:16-40

When Obadiah informed Ahab that Elijah was in the neighborhood, the king did not hasten towards him with a firing squad. Rather, he approached him with a measure of deference. The wicked king had some sense of the greatness of God whose irresistible power His servant could wield. The whole country was suffering severely under the sentence pronounced by Elijah's lips.

Ahab's greeting is very suggestive. He said unto Elijah, "Art thou he that troubleth Israel?" How the words of our lips betray the state of our hearts! Such language from the king after the sore judgment which God had sent upon his dominion revealed the hardness and impenitence of his heart. Elijah was the one who above all others stood out against Ahab's desire for uniting Israel in the worship of Baal. He was the one who in Ahab's view had been responsible for all the distress and suffering which filled the land. There was no discernment of God's hand in the drought nor any compunction for the king's own sinful conduct. Instead, Ahab sought to transfer the blame and charged the prophet with being the author of the calamities which had befallen the nation. It is always the mark of an unhumiliated and unjudged heart for one who is smarting beneath the righteous rod of God to throw the blame upon someone else.

There certainly was trouble in Israel, but, apparently, it did not occur to Ahab's mind to trace it to the idolatry which had spread everywhere. Temples, altars, prophets and priests of an evil character were scattered throughout the land. There was no disposition on the part of either king or people to humble themselves before God and acknowledge the wickedness of all this with the determination to put it all away. Accordingly, Ahab blamed the servant of God for the widespread distress. Had Satan not blinded his eyes, the king would have perceived that the fault was with himself and not with the prophet.

In every age faithful witnesses for God and His truth are regarded as troublemakers. Men and women who are wrong in their relationship with God do not care to have facts set before them. They prefer to live undisturbed in a dreamland of their own. He who presses upon their attention the gravity of sin and the reality of God's judgment is a troublemaker.

It is no unusual thing for God's upright ministers to be spoken of as troublemakers of peoples and nations. The presence of the man who lays sin upon the conscience and brings the sinner into the presence of God is ever troublesome in this world. At the coming of Christ into the world, Herod "was troubled and all Jerusalem with him." In a later day, Paul and his companions were looked upon as troublemakers, for the enraged citizens of Philippi said, "These men . . . do exceedingly trouble our city." The worldly Christian will never be viewed as a troublemaker. It is always the man of God, as he stands apart from the course of this world while witnessing to it and warning it of coming judgment, who will ever be called the troublemaker even though he proclaims grace and points the way of blessing.

With great boldness and bluntness the prophet put the truth before the king by throwing the charge back upon him. He said, "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." The real trouble in Israel was not Elijah but Ahab, and Ahab's own conscience must have felt that it was true.

It is ever the duty of God's servants to warn men of their danger, to point out to them that the way of rebellion against God leads to certain destruction and to call upon them to throw down the weapons of their revolt and flee from the wrath to come. It is their duty to teach men that they must turn from their idols and serve the living God. It is their duty to declare that the wages of sin is death, and this will never make for their popularity.

Elijah refused to be intimidated by the wicked aspersion which had just been cast upon him. With undaunted courage he denied the foul charge, boldly placed the blame where it duly belonged and proceeded to supply the proof of the charge which he had made against Ahab: "in that ye have forsaken the commandments of the Lord, and thou hast followed Baalim." The king and his family were the leaders in rebellion against God, and the people had followed blindly. Here then was the cause of the distress. They were the reckless "troublers" of the nation, the disturbers of its peace and the displeasers of God. Those who by their sins provoke God's wrath are the real troublers and not those who warn them of the dangers to which their wickedness exposes them.

Having charged Ahab with his sins, Elijah showed the king that there was but one way to end the famine and reach the day when the Lord would send rain upon the earth. The sin which had brought the judgment had to be dealt with accordingly. It is amazing, when we stop to consider the relative position of the two men, that Elijah commanded the king to convene a meeting of the people of Israel on Mount Carmel, together with the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of the groves who ate at Jezebel's table. It was important that all who had been involved in this great sin should be present. The leaders and the led were called to assemble at Carmel. We do not know how long it took to bring the thousands of Israelites to the spot chosen by the prophet but in all likelihood some days.

Behold the many thousands of Israel occupying every foot of vantage ground from which they could obtain a view of the proceedings. Were they to witness a miracle? Was the long hoped-for rain about to fall? As they sat wondering, Elijah appeared on the scene. Behold the sea of upturned faces as every eye was focused on that strange and stern figure at whose word the heavens had been as brass for more than three years. With what intense interest and awe they must have gazed upon this lone man of sinewy build, with flashing eyes and compressed lips. What a solemn hush must have fallen upon that vast assembly as they beheld one man pitted against the whole company. With malignant glances the jealous prophets and priests watched his every movement. As Ahab watched this man of God, fear and hatred must have alternated in his heart; for the king regarded Elijah as the cause of all his troubles; yet, he felt that somehow the coming of rain depended upon him.

Elijah walked forth, stood calmly facing the crowd and began preaching. His sermon was right to the point. With all the eloquence and passion which he possessed, he tried to arouse the consciences of the people and make them see that it was either the Lord or Baal, but never both.

Elijah may have said much more than is recorded for us, but from what we are told his question was intended to bring them to a decision. "How long halt ye between two opinions? if the Lord be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him." Realizing the reasonableness of what Elijah had said, the people did not reply. Conscience-stricken and self-condemned, they stood before the prophet in silence. They had apparently sought to play safe, as they thought, by worshiping both God and Baal. Elijah let them know that there cannot be two gods who have supreme power and challenged them to end their foolish attempt to serve both God and Baal.

Elijah boldly proposed that a test be made to determine who would be the God of Israel. His proposal was very simple. Two bullocks were to be provided, one for Baal's 450 prophets and one for himself. Each bullock was to be cut in pieces and laid on wood with no fire under it. Then the prophets of Baal were to call upon their god, and Elijah would call upon Jehovah, and the one who answered by fire was to be Israel's God.

This proposal struck the people as being an excellent method of determining the controversy and arriving at the truth as to who was the true God and who was not; so, they readily accepted it. The prophets of Baal remained silent, but they could not evade the issue. Of course, this trial by fire would force the prophets of Baal out into the open and make

manifest the emptiness of their pretensions, and that would prove most satisfactory to Elijah. They prepared their altar, dressed their bullock and called upon their god.

Hour after hour, from morning until noon, the prophets cried, "O Baal, hear us." They realized that for them everything was at stake. They urged Baal to make public demonstration of his existence by causing fire to come down from heaven and consume the sacrifice which they had placed upon his altar, but it was all in vain as no answer came. Until twelve o'clock Elijah was a silent witness of their futile efforts, but at that time he broke his silence by speaking in derision to those false prophets.

In mocking the unhappy prophets while the multitudes looked on, Elijah suggested that they were not crying loudly enough; perhaps their god was occupied with other matters and could not attend to them; probably he was away from home; or possibly he might be asleep. Lashed by the scorn of Elijah and goaded by his taunts, the frantic prophets gashed themselves with knives and lancets till the blood gushed out on them. Although they redoubled their efforts for three more hours, all of their exertions and implorings were unavailing. No fire came down to consume their sacrifice. Thus we should learn that the expenditure of great earnestness and enthusiasm does not prove the worthiness of a cause.

At three o'clock, which was "the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice" in Jerusalem, Elijah decided that his opportunity had come. He addressed the people with the gracious words, "Come near unto me." In response "all the people came near unto him." In silence they watched the prophet as he repaired the altar of the Lord. Having thrown down the altar of Baal, he set up the altar of the Lord. It is not enough just to expose the false; the truth must be upheld.

Having built his altar of twelve stones, Elijah made a trench around it, put the wood in order, cut the bullock in pieces and laid it on the wood. His conduct teaches us a very important lesson, namely, that the work of the Lord is not to be performed carelessly and hurriedly but with great precision and reverence. Christ is entitled to our best. Then, Elijah commanded them to pour four barrels of water on the sacrifice and the wood. He had them to do this twice more. He was putting every possible difficulty in the way in order that the impending miracle might be the more convincing. He was not under any apprehension about success but was certain of the outcome. He was so sure of God that he did not hesitate to put additional difficulties in His way, knowing that there can be no difficulty to Him who is omniscient and omnipotent. The more unlikely the answer was, the more God would be glorified therein.

All who were there well knew that no ordinary fire could consume this sacrifice. The prophet drew near the altar and offered a simple prayer to God. He prayed, "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. 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" (I Kings 18:36-37). It should be observed from this prayer that the prophet did not seek any honor for himself. He made nothing of himself but everything of God. He did not have any desire to exalt himself before the people. He merely wanted to be known as a servant carrying out the commands of his Lord. His heart was filled with a burning zeal for the glory of God. He could not tolerate the land being defiled with the God-insulting and soul-destroying idolatry of the heathen. He could not allow the people of Israel to entertain the idea that God had abdicated in favor of Baal. His spirit was stirred to its depths as he thought of how grievously God was dishonored. The burden of his prayer was that God should vindicate Himself that day, that He would make known His mighty power, and that He would turn the hearts of the people back to Himself.

The prayer of Elijah received an immediate answer. "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. 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." The great decision was made; and God, who is compassionate for nations as well as for individual sinners, could now grant blessing. The rain would soon descend.

In obedience to Deuteronomy 13:1-5, Elijah commanded that all the prophets be arrested. Willing hands promptly obeyed, and the whole ghastly host were led down to the brook Kishon and slain. With regard to this incident, we need to distinguish between the ways of God in different dispensations. From Moses to Christ was the age of law. Among other righteous enactments, death was the penalty for false teaching. It is otherwise in this age of grace.