

Study 48: Elijah – Part 2 (I Kings 18)

1 Kings 18:1-2a – Go to Ahab

Long afterward, in the third year, the word of the LORD came to Elijah: Go, present yourself to Ahab, that I may send rain upon the earth. So Elijah went to present himself to Ahab.

(Note: Ahab's father, Omri, had purchased the land that became the capital city of Samaria and when Ahab assumed the throne he became the great builder of Israel.)

Although God had displayed His life-giving power during Elijah's stay in Zarephath, He hadn't spoken to the prophet...until now. "*Long afterward, in the third year*" God suddenly spoke. We've been told little about Elijah's stay with the widow, but we know that the prophet still heard the voice of the Lord.

God commanded Elijah to show himself to Ahab, the king who despised the prophet and no doubt wanted him dead. Was Elijah surprised by this command? We're not told. God simply commanded. He gave no advance notice. He didn't discuss things with Elijah. He didn't ask Elijah how things were going for him, whether he wanted to see Ahab. It is enough for God to command, "*Go present yourself to Ahab.*"

Only then, after giving His command, did the Lord explain that He intended to "*send rain upon the earth.*" Until now, the rain had been locked away within the silence of Elijah -- "*...except at my word.*" – a prophecy yet to be fulfilled.

What had Elijah thought during the years of God's silence? We're not told. Elijah knew God was with him. The miracles of bread and life told him this. But Elijah didn't ask himself when the time for rain would come. He knew his word was safely held with the Word of the Lord. Now, this word is to be released to the world, but God ensures it remains Elijah's word.

Elijah's mission had not changed. Although he had been hidden from the people, he was still known because what he prophesied remained true. The people, then, realized the power of the living God of Israel also remained – a punishment that called them to repentance. As for Elijah, he knew only that he was called to live a life of prayer and obedience. Whatever his obedience asked of him, whether in action or in prayer, Elijah's mission remained with him. It is an obedience that asks no questions because it accepts the truth, the goodness, and the omniscience of God. And "*So, Elijah went to present himself to Ahab.*"

1 Kings 18:2b-6 – Ahab, Obadiah, and the Famine

Now the famine in Samaria was severe, and Ahab had summoned Obadiah, master of his palace, who greatly revered the LORD. When Jezebel was slaughtering the prophets of the LORD, Obadiah took a hundred prophets, hid them away by fifties in caves, and supplied them with food and water. Ahab said to Obadiah, "Go through the land to all sources of water and to all the wadies. We may find grass and keep the horses and mules alive, so that we shall not have to slaughter any of the beasts." Dividing the land to explore between them, Ahab went one way by himself, Obadiah another way by himself.

The famine was obviously great, so great Ahab must act. His wife, Jezebel, had apparently decided to solve the problem by killing the prophets of Israel's God, assuming this would somehow alter and eliminate that drought Elijah had commanded. Like most pagans, she believed the gods responded to the commands of their priests through a kind of magic, not that God commands and His disciples obey.

Here we also encounter Ahab and the master of his household, Obadiah. Each was affected by the drought, but one was faithless and the other a man of faith. Obadiah and Ahab both have the same desire to find water, but Obadiah, the man of faith, does not hope, but believes. Ahab seeks without faith but has hope.

Obadiah, ordered to search half the kingdom, obeyed his king, and does so eagerly even though he has no hope of success. He knew that no water would come until Elijah called for rain. Ahab, because he was faithless, could still hope that he might find a spring that had escaped the prophet's word. Obadiah was, of course, the nobler of the two. He also had the more difficult task since he knew it would fail.

Notice, too, that Ahab's concern was for the animals, the horses and mules, the beasts who would support his military forces. His orders to Obadiah showed no concern for the people or for their herds.

We witness the depth of Obadiah's faith when we are told how he had courageously protected and cared for a hundred of God's prophets, an act that certainly would have led to his own death, had it been discovered by Jezebel. From this brief passage we come to an awareness of the stark difference between these two men.

1 Kings 18:7-15 – Elijah and Obadiah

As Obadiah was on his way, Elijah met him. Recognizing him, Obadiah fell prostrate and asked, "Is it you, my lord Elijah?" He said to him, "Yes. Go tell your lord, 'Elijah is here!'" But Obadiah said, "What sin has your servant committed, that you are handing me over to Ahab to be killed? As the LORD, your God, lives, there is no nation or kingdom where my lord has not sent in search of you. When they replied, 'He is not here,' he made each kingdom and nation swear they could not find you. And now you say, 'Go tell your lord: Elijah is here!' After I leave you, the spirit of the LORD will carry you to some place I do not know, and when I go to inform Ahab and he does not find you, he will kill me—though your servant has revered the LORD from his youth! Have you not been told, my lord, what I did when Jezebel was murdering the prophets of the LORD—that I hid a hundred of the prophets of the LORD, fifty each in caves, and supplied them with food and water? And now you say, 'Go tell your lord: Elijah is here!' He will kill me!" Elijah answered, "As the LORD of hosts lives, whom I serve, I will present myself to him today."

No sooner had Obadiah begun his search for water than he encounters Elijah. Immediately Obadiah was relieved of the hopelessness that arose from his pointless searching. He demonstrated his esteem for the prophet by falling to the ground in homage. And yet Obadiah's anxiety only grew when Elijah told him to inform Ahab that the prophet wanted to meet with the king. But Obadiah is worried and expresses his concerns to Elijah. For years now, everyone, especially Ahab, had been searching

fruitlessly for Elijah. None had expected him to be living in Zarephath at the widow's house. Because Elijah had been so effectively hidden, Obadiah was sure Elijah would disappear again, carried off by God to some other place. Also, would Ahab think that Obadiah had known the prophet's location all along? All of this, Obadiah knew, would only enrage Ahab who would kill the messenger when he couldn't find the prophet.

Despite his faith, Obadiah feared for his life. We sense that this man, in his service to the king, had compartmentalized his life. He perhaps saw his life as one thing and his faith as something else. But in Elijah's presence, he seemed to recognize his conflict. Although he knew he lacked the power to convince the king, he also knew the power was with Elijah, with the Spirit of God, and with God's voice. Filled with anxiety he had to speak with the prophet.

Obadiah attempted to appease Elijah, telling him all he had done to protect God's prophets: he had hidden and fed 100 of them. But this had no effect on Elijah. He may take no path but that given him by the Lord. The mission always took priority because Elijah was a disciple of perfect obedience. He had convinced the widow with only a few words, but Obadiah was a tougher case.

Elijah promised he would not disappear and stressed the meeting will be between Ahab and Elijah only. The prophet's promise was a sacred promise made upon the name of God Himself. This convinced Obadiah to obey Elijah. Obadiah's task was limited. He need only arrange the meeting, but he must do so as an instrument of God.

Those who are sent by God – prophets and apostles, among others – often seem so unyielding because of the divine logic that ties together obedience and mission. It is revealed only in dialogue with God, in the prayer of the one who is sent. Those who are not sent often find this incomprehensible and puzzling.

Ahab, because he lacked faith, sought where there was nothing to be found. He should have sought Elijah to accept his word in repentance, but instead he searched for water. Obadiah, too, sought water, but in faith he knew the task was pointless. In his search, then, he found not water but Elijah, the true aim of his search.

God had given Elijah one simple command: "Go, show yourself to Ahab." Why did he not just follow Obadiah and go to Ahab? It seems Elijah knew that his charge to go to Ahab must end right here where he was, where God placed Obadiah. This, of course, is just a piece of the mystery that defines Elijah's relationship with God. It is a mystery mostly concealed, although sometimes revealed indirectly. We may, then, ask why Elijah didn't go farther, but in faith we must accept that Elijah knew he may not do other than remain and wait for Ahab.

So often God's Word, His call to us, may take twists and turns that to us seem like detours, and yet ultimately lead us to the place He wants us to be.

1 Kings 18:16 – Ahab Goes to Elijah

So Obadiah went to meet Ahab and informed him, and Ahab came to meet Elijah.

Obadiah first had to learn something new about his faith. It had to be broadened, so that even when danger threatened it would be strong enough to overcome his fears. It had

to overcome love of self and be stronger than human reason. His belief in the living, righteous God could not tolerate a split in his faith, a split that would question obedience. Obadiah came to recognize Elijah as a man of God, a prophet sent by God, one who was above Obadiah, and therefore one to whom he owed obedience.

Obadiah, then, took on his mission from that of Elijah and went to the king despite his fears. In obedience he brought the king to the prophet. He came to see his task as part of the mission of Elijah. Although he did not yet fully grasp Elijah's mission, he knew his task, now complete, did its part. And it had come to an end.

How about you and me?

Does our faith or our parish sometimes call us to carry out tasks in the Church that seem so small, that we don't really consider their true meaning and value? The primary mission of the Church is evangelization, making disciples by leading others to Jesus Christ and His Church. Think of all the ways the tasks demanded by your own seemingly small and limited ministries can help bring about this end. True discipleship always calls for obedience.

Like Obadiah, doing the tasks that support the greater mission may result in much good that we will never recognize. But as Obadiah learns, his faith deepens and so too does his humility. He also learned to leave the power to the Word of God. For God's power is the only power that truly counts

1 Kings 18:17-19 – Ahab Comes to Elijah

When Ahab saw Elijah, he said to him, "Is it you, you disturber of Israel?" He answered, "It is not I who disturb Israel, but you and your father's house, by forsaking the commands of the LORD and you by following the Baals. Now summon all Israel to me on Mount Carmel, as well as the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah who eat at Jezebel's table."

It would seem Ahab took one duty seriously, to keep his people from misery. He saw Elijah as the catalyst, the one whose prophecy had disturbed everything, caused the kind of trouble even the king could not overcome. "You disturber of Israel," Ahab called the prophet, challenging him. The confrontation was simply between sin and faith. Sin was lost in the midst of its severe punishment without Ahab truly understanding what it was all about, that the punishment was deserved and inflicted in the name of God.

Ahab accused first, but Elijah replied at once, not in a personal attack but simply by proclaiming the truth about Ahab, about his father, King Omri, and their apostasy. It was Ahab and his predecessors that brought punishment to the nation. But Elijah didn't stop there. Ignoring Ahab's accusation, he instructed the king on what must be done. He said nothing about repentance or the effect of the prophet's word. Elijah's faith in the Lord of all stood before and far above the smallness of human lordship.

Elijah's demands were all tied together, all necessary. Everything had to be carried out as a unity. The entire people were to be assembled with all the prophets of Baal, on Mount Carmel, with Elijah. The prophet wanted maximum publicity. He wanted all to witness what would take place. Ahab was essentially ignored, although he would find

himself in the midst of the people and the false prophets of Baal as the sinner who led the nation astray. Since the sin was public, the conviction of sin must also be public.

Why was Mount Carmel chosen? First, it was not located in the original territory settled by the Israelite tribes. Until the time of David, the Canaanites were sovereign in this area, and quite likely Baal was venerated on these heights. After the split of the kingdom, the YHWH altar was abandoned, and Solomon actually mortgaged Israelite territory to the King of Tyre. In Ahab's day, the district was likely subject to Tyrian sovereignty, making the proposal of divine judgment on Carmel a fitting conclusion. Which is the true God? The Tyrian Baal, under the protection and patronage of Queen Jezebel, had many worshippers throughout all of Israel. But the champion of YHWH's sole sovereignty were persecuted and handed over to death.

The Word and power of God speaking through Elijah had its effect. Ahab yielded, for he stood before a far greater power. There was no discussion, although Ahab might sense the high stakes involved.

1 Kings 18:20-22 – Sacrifice on Mount Carmel

So Ahab summoned all the Israelites and had the prophets gather on Mount Carmel. Elijah approached all the people and said, "How long will you straddle the issue? If the LORD is God, follow him; if Baal, follow him." But the people did not answer him. So Elijah said to the people, "I am the only remaining prophet of the LORD, and there are four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal."

Ahab obeyed the prophet, perhaps out of fear, confusion, or simply a lack of understanding...or because, even though he was king, he simply knew he must obey. He called all the people together, as well as the prophets of Baal, and they assembled on the mountain. They came to see Elijah, this prophet who had demonstrated God's power, and to see this power for themselves. But they came, too, to follow their king and to meet Elijah's demands. Of course, they also wanted to justify their worship of Baal and their rejection of the Lord God. The people, like Ahab, were also confused.

Elijah looked out at the people standing before him. Yes, they obeyed by assembling, but this slight concession was incompatible with their disobedience to God and they showed no sign of true conversion. Elijah saw himself as the only prophet left to serve the Lord. For a man like Elijah, one totally devoted to God, there could be no lack of harmony or clarity, there could be no imperfection in the service of God. God Himself spoke to and through Elijah, who then spoke as prophet. Through Elijah's word, then, his hearers perceived the Word of God.

That the people did not answer him is perhaps a sign of their likely deep-seated guilt. At the very least they knew they had abandoned the God of Israel for selfish reasons. They had simply decided to "get along" with the world and cave to the societal pressures that would make lives easier for the present.

Elijah reproached the people because their "both-and," "either-or" attitudes were intolerable – "limping with two different opinions." For Elijah, God's Word is the only valid truth. Baal is not only a false god, but worship of Baal is an abomination. Like the people, the king obeyed Elijah, but he, too, stood on the other side, with the people and the false prophets.

1 Kings 18:23-24 – The Test of Baal

Give us two young bulls. Let them choose one, cut it into pieces, and place it on the wood, but start no fire. I shall prepare the other and place it on the wood, but shall start no fire. You shall call upon the name of your gods, and I will call upon the name of the LORD. The God who answers with fire is God.” All the people answered, “We agree!”

Elijah proclaimed the test, a challenge to the false god, Baal. It was a challenge issued by God Himself, through Elijah His prophet, so it was only a one-way challenge and Elijah knew this.

The alliance with Tyre resulted from the marriage of Ahab and Jezebel. In terms of politics and economics, it was a steppingstone to unheard of prosperity; but in the religious realm it had led Israel to the very edge of doom. Interestingly, Queen Jezebel, who had introduced the new cults of Melkart and Baal-Shamem in Israel, had pressed for a confrontation with the YHWH cult. It seems Elijah and the true God were very willing to provide the opportunity. These Canaanite gods were not local gods but considered cosmic deities. Melkart, king of the underworld, symbolized the dying, setting sun, while Baal-Shamem incorporated the youthful, rising sun. The younger god, then, rises from the ashes of the elder in a continuous process of dying and return – in a relationship of father and son. Baal had always been venerated as the god of the life cycle, constantly renewed and ever verdant. The Baal rites were centered on the two equinoxes. The king personified the divinity and became a kind of epiphany, a representation or an apparition of their god among the people. One can see why a king would prefer such gods, as opposed to serving YHWH in humility. Even the names of the key characters in this drama are important. Jezebel means “Where is the Lord” – i.e., Baal – while Elijah means “My God is YHWH.”

Elijah stood alone before the people, really against the people, as he confronted their sinfulness. In this solitude we see perhaps a foreshadowing of Jesus on the Cross when He stands before the sin of the whole world and takes up the battle against it by bearing it alone. The difference, of course, is that here on Mount Carmel, we have a confrontation, a statement by Elijah that becomes so much clearer because of the silence of the people. They have recognized their sinfulness and have no words to excuse them, so they can say nothing.

Elijah is always focused on his mission, to bring God’s people back to him. His plan was seen by the people as a fair one, in which he gave the true God and the false god an equal chance. Elijah realized it is in truth horribly unfair, for the false god could do nothing. He also knew God stood by him and would not abandon him. Elijah, wrapped as he is in his obedience, knew the time had come. For Elijah the question is settled, but for the people it remains open. In a sense, Elijah stood in glorious isolation opposed to a hostile and rebellious world: one lone prophet versus 450 prophets of Baal.

The true God is to answer with fire from heaven, the Holy Spirit responding to a sacramental call of *epiclesis*, a calling down by Elijah, prophet and priest. Yes, Elijah calls upon God to do the miraculous. Sadly, while the Church has long taught the truth of the Scriptural narrative of Elijah, most historical-critical commentators seem to

characterize it as a pious legend or myth. Why? Because of the presence of the miraculous. I prefer to believe that for the God of the Bible, the miraculous is the most natural thing in the world. Our faith tells us that the God of Israel is a God of miracles, a God who can always, and everywhere, do anything He wills.

1 Kings 18:25-29 – Baal Is Silent

Elijah then said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose one young bull and prepare it first, for there are more of you. Call upon your gods, but do not start the fire." Taking the young bull that was turned over to them, they prepared it and called upon Baal from morning to noon, saying, "Baal, answer us!" But there was no sound, and no one answering. And they hopped around the altar they had prepared. When it was noon, Elijah taunted them: "Call louder, for he is a god; he may be busy doing his business, or may be on a journey. Perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened." They called out louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears according to their ritual until blood gushed over them. Noon passed and they remained in a prophetic state until the time for offering sacrifice. But there was no sound, no one answering, no one listening.

Now the Baal prophets seemed to be the lonely ones. They could make no contact with their god. Everything had been prepared as is the custom, and according to Elijah's instructions, but absolutely nothing happened. They doubled their efforts and Elijah encouraged them. He wanted to ensure they could not blame anything else for Baal's failure, that they could make no excuses. Elijah even mocked them, but this just encouraged them further. For hours they prayed and pleaded, they danced and even self-mutilated, to entice their god. Several contemporary Greek writers actually commented on the strange religious dances of the Tyrians, describing the leaping, skipping, squatting, and whirling, all aimed at appeasing and serving Baal. But the non-existent god remained silent. With the arrival of the hour of evening sacrifice, still nothing. Elijah, of course, infuriates his opponents. The more they try, the more bizarre their efforts, the more Elijah shows and expresses his disdain.

Elijah, like all who have faith in God, knew that prayer is always heard. Here on Mount Carmel, we find this beautifully displayed. God Himself has instructed Elijah to set up this test, so there is only one possible answer for God. Those who pray to the false god are left in the solitude of the sinner who seeks salvation from that which is opposed to God, who hopes for truth from a false image. Baal is only sin and lies and death, and the work of sin is always ineffectual. Here we see evidence that man can do nothing by himself, nothing without the help of God. The prophets of Baal stood before one thing, before nothing, before emptiness.

1 Kings 18:30 – Elijah and the People

Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come here to me." When they drew near to him, he repaired the altar of the LORD which had been destroyed.

Only after time did the truth of Elijah's prophecy of drought become clear to the people. For Elijah it was clear instantly, but for the people it became one truth among many. And the true God, who guaranteed the prophecy, in His uniqueness was hidden from the people.

But now Elijah appeared to fulfill his mission. He came with the same divine power present in his words of prophecy, but now that power would be witnessed concretely. He therefore calls the people to draw near, and they obey. (Are they learning to obey?) The contemplative Elijah was replaced by the man of action, the man the people needed to see, the man who would reintroduce them to the God of Israel. He was, of course, calmly certain because He knew God had chosen him for this mission. His mission was his only concern. He knew he must ensure the people see the power of God within him. This they truly see as they gather around him filled with expectation.

Does Elijah recruit the people to join him as he begins to repair the destroyed altar of God? Probably so because it is hard work, and he will need their help. The people, too, are likely willing helpers. Having witnessed the failure of the priests of Baal, they surely want to see what Elijah has planned. And by calling the people to him, Elijah is also calling them away from false gods and toward a renewed faith in the one, true God.

1 Kings 18:31-35 — Elijah Sets the Stage

Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD came, saying, "Israel shall be your name"; 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. And he put the wood in order, and cut the bull in pieces and laid it on the wood. And he said, "Fill four jars with water, and pour it on the burnt offering, and on the wood." And he said, "Do it a second time"; and they did it a second time. And he said, "Do it a third time"; and they did it a third time. And the water ran round about the altar, and filled the trench also with water.

Elijah reconstructs the Altar of God using 12 large stones, representing the 12 tribes of Israel, the sons of Jacob. The act of rebuilding the altar also symbolizes the recalling (a renewal?) of Israel's covenant with God, in a sense restoring their history to them. He shows the people that YHWH is no "new God", but the eternal God, vastly different from the false gods that had been introduced into Israel. YHWH is the God of Israel from its very beginning. He formed them and shaped their entire history as His people.

To manifest the power of God, the one, true God, to an unbelieving people, Elijah makes the conditions naturally impossible. The sacrifice — including the wood and the sacrificial bull; indeed, the entire altar and the trench surrounding it — are drenched three times, each time with four large jars of water; in other words, 12 times to reflect the 12 tribes.

Here, on the mountain, during a time of drought, Elijah poured out extravagant amounts of precious water to demonstrate the power of God's fire. Elijah poured out the water when so little was left; but soon enough real rain would come down in response to the faith of Elijah.

This action likely created in the people a degree of excitement as they wondered if they were about to witness a miracle by the God of Israel. The preparations by Elijah were so thorough that no one could possibly have any doubts. Elijah also pointed back to the impotence of the false gods and the foolishness of their priests. Through his actions

Elijah seemed to counter all that is natural in a way that demonstrates the supernatural power of God.

1 Kings 18:36-40 – Elijah Calls on God

At the time for offering sacrifice, Elijah the prophet came forward and said, "LORD, 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 have done all these things at your command. Answer me, LORD! Answer me, that this people may know that you, LORD, are God and that you have turned their hearts back to you." The LORD's fire came down and devoured the burnt offering, wood, stones, and dust, and lapped up the water in the trench. Seeing this, all the people fell prostrate and said, "The LORD is God! The LORD is God!" Then Elijah said to them, "Seize the prophets of Baal. Let none of them escape!" They seized them, and Elijah brought them down to the Wadi Kishon and there he slaughtered them.

Once the altar was rebuilt, Elijah stepped forward and offered a brief prayer, using simple words, a prayer that all the people could hear and understand. Unlike the wild and crazy antics of the priests of Baal, it was a calm prayer, one of praise and supplication. Through his words offered to God, the prophet reminded the people of God's identity – the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, the God of their patriarchal forefathers. He then presented himself as the humble servant of God who had done all that God had asked of him. Finally, he confidently pled with God to answer his prayer, to accomplish the miraculous act that would reestablish the faith of the people.

The people, hearing this prayer, certainly recognized the vast difference between Elijah and the prophets of Baal. Elijah, the lone prophet, prayed calmly but with obvious assurance that the God of Israel would hear and answer his prayer. He did not need to dance and self-mutilate as the Baal priests had done. He need only ask because the whole conduct of his life revealed his faith and his continued union with God.

Immediately, the fire of God (manifested perhaps as lightning?) fell from the sky and *"devoured the burnt offering, the wood, stones, and dust, and lapped up the water in the trench."* Although God often uses naturally occurring phenomena to exert His power – and why not, since He is the Creator of all that is natural – this event was clearly understood as miraculous by the people because of the time and place of its manifestation. It occurred immediately after Elijah's prayer and in such a way that it demonstrated the greatness of the God of Israel and the powerlessness of Baal and all other false gods. This act of God reminded the people that YHWH is the God of Creation, the One, True God. God also demonstrated that although He certainly hears the prayers of a people, the prayer of one faithful person can be just as powerful. By responding to Elijah's prayer, God turns the people's hour of need into an hour of glory. The people learn that the prayer of the faithful can generate miracles greater than they could ever imagine.

Elijah had the prophets of Baal immediately seized and executed, thus removing unbelief from the midst of faith, showing the people the cost, the punishment for sinfulness. Some today cannot understand and are appalled by this act, influenced as they are by our modern concepts of religious freedom. Perhaps they fail to appreciate

how deeply religious worship and values penetrated the cultures of the ancient world. Most aspects of societal life were driven largely by a people's religious beliefs. Elijah knew that Israel, from its very beginning, had been formed as God's People, and the land granted to Israel was truly God's country. This had all been done for a purpose, for God's purpose. In the collective mind of the people, Tyrian control of the country was an unbearable oppression. That this "bloodbath" at the brook of Kishon had been possible is further evidence of the bitterness which had already filled the nation's heart. For Elijah, then, and for the God of Israel, the presence in Israel of Baal worship was nothing less than an infestation of evil. Indeed, Baal worship, introduced by the Baal priestess, Jezebel, and tolerated by her husband, King Ahab, had brought to Israel such atrocities as infant sacrifice and other abominations. Additionally, Jezebel had begun a process of deadly persecution of those who worshipped YHWH, hoping to eliminate any residual faith in the God of Israel. Jessica knew, as did Elijah, that the worship of YHWH, the God of Israel, and the worship of the false god, Baal, could simply not coexist. These were indeed anxious hours in which the faith of the people in YHWH was fighting for its existence. The destruction of the priests and prophets of Baal was seen as the only way to purify the nation for God's holy purpose.

The sheer numbers involved make it unlikely that Elijah personally took part in the execution of the Baal prophets and priests, although it was probably done through his encouragement. It was probably carried out by the people who, having regained their faith realized the evils that had infiltrated Israel were the direct result of Baal worship. And so, we find the miracle on the mountain is more than God's acceptance of the sacrifice, the killing of the false prophets, the repentance of the people, and the end of the lie that has plagued Israel. The miracle is also and more importantly the continuation of the dialogue between Israel and their God, the prayer of Elijah and of the people, a prayer that will ultimately reveal God's true intention.

1 Kings 18:41-46 – The Draught Ends

Elijah then said to Ahab, "Go up, eat and drink, for there is the sound of a heavy rain." So Ahab went up to eat and drink, while Elijah went up to the top of Carmel, crouched down to the earth, and put his head between his knees. He said to his servant, "Go up and look out to sea." He went up and looked, but reported, "There is nothing." Seven times he said, "Go look again!" And the seventh time the youth reported, "There is a cloud as small as a man's hand rising from the sea." Elijah said, "Go and say to Ahab, 'Harness up and go down the mountain before the rain stops you.'" All at once the sky grew dark with clouds and wind, and a heavy rain fell. Ahab mounted his chariot and headed for Jezreel. But the hand of the LORD was on Elijah. He girded up his clothing and ran before Ahab as far as the approaches to Jezreel.

Elijah and King Ahab still have a relationship...of sorts. But it's a relationship in which Elijah maintains dominance. Even after what has just happened, Elijah commands the king, telling him to eat and drink, and Ahab obeys. But Elijah also informs the king that he hears "a sound of the rushing of rain." As yet, however, there is no rain, but Elijah hears it in faith. Another miracle is coming, one in which Ahab will not take part. The king must simply obey and strengthen himself with food and drink, while Elijah goes up

the mountain to pray. From Mount Carmel the entire plain of Sharon is visible, all the way to the coastal dunes and the sea. To the north is the Galilean mountain country, and eastward, across a chain of hills, he could have glimpsed the Sea of Galilee. It is a place where the world seems distant, and God seems so very close.

Seven times the prophet sends his servant to look to the sea for a cloud, for signs of rain. And six times he sees nothing. The servant's faith was probably waning, although Elijah, who "hears" the rain, is unaffected by the negative reports. He remains in prayer, in his ongoing dialogue with God. Elijah knows that the natural observations, while contradicting what he "hears", are no threat to the supernatural reality that God will soon deliver to Israel. He lives in this supernatural dimension of his prayer. The negative reports, the seven comings and goings of his servant, recall the gifts of the Spirit, and the rain will be God's answer to His servant, Elijah. The Spirit's gift of rain will be the fulfillment of the Word of God, the promise made and entrusted to Elijah at the very beginning: rain would appear at the word of the prophet, Elijah.

Finally, on the servant's seventh observation, a small cloud appeared. Elijah accepts the word of his servant even though he cannot see the cloud himself. He then sent the servant to Ahab, with instructions to tell the king to harness his chariot and depart lest he be overcome by torrential rains. Indeed, the heavens grew black, signifying the coming storm. Ahab must flee, and he must do so in faith, at the word of the prophet. Ahab did as he was commanded and traveled to the city. But Elijah became the object of another miracle, as God gives him more strength and speed than any human body could naturally possess. The king is drawn by horses, but he must follow Elijah who is powered only by his own body. This superhuman power – a supernatural power? – is an image of the power that God has granted to Elijah in the Word.

At the prophet's word, God sends rain, a gift from heaven itself that brings fruitfulness to the earth. But the rain falls in superabundance, just like the faith of Elijah, who believes for more than himself, but for all of Israel, for all twelve tribes. The faith of this one man, then, can bring life to all.