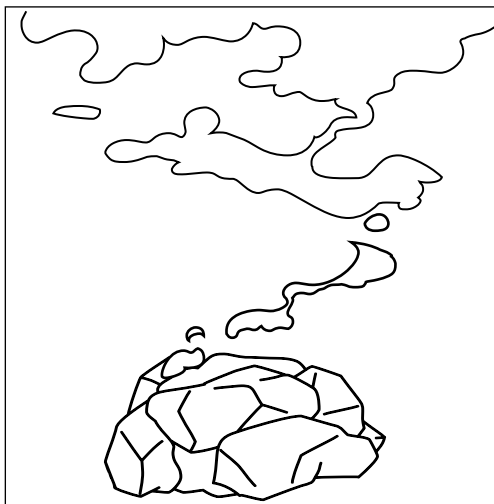


The contest on the mountain



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1 Kings 18:26-39

Elijah challenged the prophets who were serving the idol Baal to a contest! He suggested that they each put a bull sacrifice on an altar with some firewood, but not light up the fire. Then they would each call on the name of their own god. The god who answered by fire – he would be proven to be the real God.

They [Baal's prophets] chose their bull, then they got it ready and prayed to Baal all morning, asking him to start the fire. They danced around the altar and shouted, "Answer us, Baal!" But there was no answer. At midday, Elijah began making fun of them. "Pray louder!" he said. "Baal must be a god. Perhaps he's daydreaming or using the toilet or travelling somewhere. Or perhaps he's asleep, and you have to wake him up." The prophets kept shouting louder and louder, and they cut themselves with swords and knives until they were bleeding. This was the way they worshipped, and they kept it up all afternoon. But there was no answer of any kind.

Elijah told everyone to gather around him while he repaired the Lord's altar. Then he used twelve stones to build an altar in honour of the Lord. Each stone stood for one of the tribes of Israel, which was the name the Lord had given to their ancestor Jacob. Elijah dug a ditch around the altar, large enough to hold almost fourteen litres. He placed the wood on the altar, then they cut the bull into pieces and laid the meat on the wood.

He told the people, "Fill four large jars with water and pour it over the meat and the wood." After they did this, he told them to do it two more times. They did exactly as he said until finally, the water ran down the altar and filled the ditch. When it was time for the evening sacrifice, Elijah prayed: our Lord, you are the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel. Now, prove that you are the God of this nation, and that I, your servant, have done this at your command. Please answer me, so these people will know that you are the Lord God, and that you will turn their hearts back to you. The Lord immediately sent fire, and it burnt up the sacrifice, the wood, and the stones. It scorched the ground everywhere around the altar and dried up every drop of water in the ditch. When the crowd saw what had happened, they all bowed down and shouted, "The Lord is God! The Lord is God!"

Commentary

After three years of hiding during the drought, it was now time for Elijah to face King Ahab again. The contest that follows is one of the most memorable stories in the Old Testament. Ahab is mocked by Elijah as someone who can't decide which god to worship, and Elijah challenges the king's so-called prophets to a public duel on Mount Carmel.

The scene is described quite comically at times, as the hundreds of followers of Baal try to force their god to act, while the lonely but confident figure of Elijah orders his altar to be drenched with water, because he is determined to make it clear that this will be a genuine answer to prayer. He doesn't need to shout at God or dance around.

Elijah's motivation was a desire, not to be proved right, but to see the nation turn back to God. Just as Moses had encountered a fire that did not burn up a bush on Mount Sinai, so here on Mount Carmel, Elijah and all the people witness a fire that burns and that no amount of water can quench. This is the holy fire of God, later described as the fire of the Holy Spirit.

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Questions

- ▶ The odds against Elijah in this contest were huge: over 850 to 1. How can God's victory for Elijah be an encouragement for you at the moment?
- ▶ The prophets of Baal believed that they could make their god do what they wanted him to do. Do we sometimes treat God like this?
- ▶ Pick out the many ways Elijah showed courage in this amazing story.
- ▶ How can we show that we trust in the one true God when many people around us don't?



Visual aid

Using twelve small stones, construct a model altar like the one that Elijah built on Mount Carmel. The stones stood for each of the twelve tribes, so Elijah was, in effect, putting the nation back together again, as God had always intended it to be.



Activity idea

Tell the story again to each other, adding lots of sound effects for the noisy, crazy prophets. When it comes to Elijah's part, simply recreate the sounds of stones being placed on each other, water being poured, and the whisper of a quiet prayer.



Prayer idea

True prayer doesn't have to be full of loud words. Use the simple words of the Lord's Prayer together. It can be reduced further to nine key words: Father, Heaven, Holy, Kingdom, Will, Give, Forgive, Guide and Deliver. Say these words together slowly, allowing pictures from God to form in your mind.

Key verse

When the crowd saw what had happened, they all bowed down and shouted, "The Lord is God! The Lord is God!" (1 Kings 18:39).

New Testament story link

James 5:16-18: James uses the example of Elijah's prayer life as an inspiration for ours.



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