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## The Real Showdown I Kings 18:41-46

**Intro:** There is no doubt that the majority of the narrative of **ch18** is riveting stuff! If a Hollywood screen writer had been tasked with coming up with this story, they would have never imagined that it would have played out like it did. This truly was a life or death situation although few if any of the participant recognized it as such. Elijah was calling out Ahab and his cadre of Baal priest and challenged them to demonstrate the reality of their belief system. But, in this contest, Elijah gave the priests of Baal all the advantages and gave himself only handicaps. Why would he do such a thing when the reputation of Yahweh was on the line? Elijah knew that it was not up to him to prove anything but that Yahweh was quite capable of making Himself known to His own rebellious and unbelieving people.

We saw the initial disparity in the contest: Baal's bunch hooped and hollered from morning until 3 in the afternoon. Then it was Elijah's turn. He offered up a simple yet earnest prayer and suddenly, fire fell from heaven and devoured the sacrifice, the altar and all the water in the trench around the altar. There was nothing left of Elijah's sacrifice that could be picked up and turned into a relic or a shrine, as the Israelites (and others) had a habit of doing. All that was left of the contest was the very conspicuous altar of Baal; untouched, unmoved, unanswered. The altar to Baal stood as a silent monument to a lost cause. Baal's prophets were stunned; they had never seen a divine response like that in their lives. Of course, they weren't as stunned as they were about to be...But most important, the people of Israel fell on their faces and acknowledged, "The Lord, He is God!"

But, as amazing as the God contest was on top of Mt. Carmel, it's not the main event of **ch18**. It's only the prelude. In the contest, Yahweh showed beyond question that He is the real God but He must still show that He is the giving God, just as He promised in **v1**. God will fulfill His promise in our text today (**41-46**). This passage reveals 2 contrasts and contains 2 themes. The contrasts are between the King the prophet. In one, Ahab straps on the feedbag while Elijah goes off to pray. In the other, Ahab rides while Elijah runs. The text also develops two different themes: in the first, we are enrolled into the school of prayer (**41-45a**); in the second; we observe the

drama of grace.

**40-45a** – School of prayer. Prayer is both the easiest thing a believer can do and the most difficult. New believers often confess that they don't know how to pray; more experienced believers rarely confess that even though it is still true. I guess in the back of our minds we tend to think that there is a formula, a correct sequence of words that make some prayers more acceptable to the Lord than others. Or, we imagine that there are some Christians who are more familiar with the mechanics of prayer or are walking a little closer to the recipient of our prayers and so they have a better success rate than we do so we figure; "If we could get them to pray for me then..." Fortunately, prayer doesn't work like that and our text today will instruct us further in how proper prayer is supposed to work.

Elijah is still barking orders on top of Mt. Carmel; strangely enough, King Ahab listens to him and obeys. Here's a guy who had both the unction and the power to kill Elijah just one day prior; now he's letting Elijah call all the shots. He commands Ahab to, Go up; eat and drink...and Ahab complies. Of course, it had been a long and disappointing day for the King, so he was probably quite ready to retire for the evening. Besides being hungry, he no doubt needed time to come up with a plausible explanation for why all of Jezebel's priests wouldn't be coming for supper anymore.

But, while Ahab is noshing, Elijah treks back up to the top of Mt Carmel for an intense prayer meeting. This is the first contrast between these two and it is a telling one. Missionary Amy Carmichael wrote, "Every day we live we have to choose whether we should follow in the way of Ahab or Elijah. **Mt 6:33** gives us the scriptural basis for this decision.

1<sup>st</sup>) The humiliation of prayer. Now, I'll grant you that in the text, the Hebrew verb for prayer is not used but Elijah's body language says it all. This is the posture of intense, concentrated prayer. The first thing we notice is how humbling fervent prayer actually is. It seems a bit ironic that the brash Baal-buster of the previous narrative has now become the humble petitioner of **v42**. All throughout **ch14**, Elijah's been the one giving the orders, using imperative verbs at every turn. Now we see him humble himself to beg for Yahweh's favor.

Of course, Elijah is used to that. If you've been following along in our study you will have noticed that through **ch17-18**, Elijah is reduced to the

helplessness of prayer over and over. In [17:20-21](#) he prayed for life; in [18:36-37](#) he prayed for fire; now here, he prays for rain. In [ch19](#) we'll see he even prays to be decommissioned or dismissed from service. Elijah prays for these things because he has no inherent power to produce any of these changes. We may like to think of Elijah as a super-prophet but can only do so if we ignore the complete testimony of the text. Elijah is always demonstrating his inability because he's always begging Yahweh to do the things that he can't do himself.

The biblical picture of Elijah is this: for all his seeming enthusiasm and charisma, his assertiveness and control, his gumption and boldness; Elijah has no magic, no ace up his sleeve to play in a pinch. There is no slight of hand that he can call upon to help him escape from tight spots and dead-end dilemmas. We would like to think there was but there wasn't. Elijah can only confess his helplessness; meaning he can only pray and pray's a most humiliating work.

2<sup>nd</sup>) The principle of prayer. When Elijah commands Ahab to go get his supper, he seems so certain that rain was coming. Was his certainty presumptuous? Was it brash? If it wasn't and if Elijah was truly certain rain would come, why does he pray so earnestly for it in [v42](#)? We can be sure that Elijah was sure because he had a general assurance from [I Kings 8:35-36](#). You could say Elijah's prayer was prompted by Solomon's prayer. Sure, the entirety of Israel wasn't praying to Yahweh but Elijah, as prophetic intercessor, was. But Elijah has more than just Solomon's prayer; he has a specific promise ([v1](#)). Yahweh had promised, now Elijah prays for that promise to be fulfilled. Put these 2 together: Yahweh wills to send rain and He also wills that His will should come to pass through Elijah's prayer.

This provides a valuable principle for effectual prayer. God's will is certain, but He delights to do His will in answer to the prayers of His people. The prayers of the saints are the appointed channel by which God accomplishes His will on earth. God is not limited to this channel but the Bible teaches us that He highly prefers it. In [Ez 36:37-38](#), God promises that a population explosion will certainly come ([38](#)) but He will let the house of Israel ask Him to bring it about. Prayer is certainly implied in Jesus' promise to return in [Rev 22:20](#). No sooner does Jesus assure us of His return than His people immediately pray, Even so, come, Lord Jesus! This principle is clear through the scriptures. [Isa 11:9b](#) declares that, the earth shall be full of the

knowledge of the Lord as the water covers the sea; yet, we are still commanded by Christ to pray Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done (Mt 6:10).

Human rational asks, “If God has promised rain, why must Elijah pray for it?” What we need to understand is that the promises of God are not given to us to restrain our prayers but to incite them! God’s promises provide an indication into the direction in which we should pray and the extent to which we can expect an answer. His promises are the mold into which we can pour our fervent prayers without fear or hesitation. The Bible teaches us that our God finds real pleasure and value in doing things for His people on earth, if He can first stir us up to pray for these things. God loves to bless His people but He takes particular pleasure in blessing them in response to their faith-filled prayers.

3<sup>rd</sup>) The mystery of prayer. From the looks of 43, it seems like opposing Baal’s prophets on Mt. Carmel wasn’t nearly as arduous as pleading with Yahweh there. This verse provides the tension for the entire passage, one we can readily feel. As soon as the servant reports that there is nothing to report, suspense reigns and continues to build. Elijah is crouching in earnest and praying with all the fervor he can muster at the end of a long day but 6 times the servants returns and says, “Nada!”

How different are Yahweh’s responses to one servant’s prayers. When Yahweh’s reputation was on the line, He sent an immediate and fiery answer to Elijah’s previous prayer but here He put Him through an agonizing process before sending His delayed and soggy response. We can understand the urgency of Yahweh’s response in v38 but why all the foot dragging here in our text? There’s no way to really know but what we can say is that God’s responses to our faith-filled, fervent prayers are never predictable. There is nothing boring in the way God answers our prayers.

The true God is not capricious or moody but He is also not boring. He loves to delight His people with variety, not the least in the way He answers our prayers. This swerves to make God more interesting and mystifying at the same time. What to do? We must learn to live with the mystery and allow it to teach us some caution. This is especially true for those saints who like to write God’s script for Him and assume He has provided a one-size-fits-all conversion experience; or has a uniform way of answering prayer or

adheres to one strict pattern in providing guidance in the midst of our circumstances. Our God's not so dull as that.

Sometimes prayer is relatively effortless; sometimes it is agonizing. We don't know why but we see it reveal Elijah's stubborn faith. He was stubbornly persistent in his prayer because he had confidence that God's will was to send the rain. He stubbornly furthered the will of God through his persistent prayer. How many times would we receive a negative report before we would give up and quit praying? Sometimes it seems we want our petitions to be important to God when they're not really that important to us. We pray about them once, maybe twice and then they sort of slide off the list. If it's important enough to petition God for, it's important enough to persist in that petitioning.

4<sup>th</sup>) The benefits of prayer. In our text, the benefits are clear – a heavy rain fell. This is what the country folk call a gulley-washer or a toad-strangler! It was coming down like nobody's business! Rain meant life: water for soil, people, livestock; grain for food; grass for animals. Yahweh is the God of dramatic intervention and of daily provision and the one is just as important as the other. Israel's apostasy and divided mind had forfeited all these material benefits. Now Yahweh graciously restores them. Israel would learn again that the God who sends fire to convert their hearts would also send rain to refresh their souls and feed their bodies.

Yahweh is the God of the spectacular and of the routine; the One who sends both fire and food. He raises us up out of the miry clay of sin and gives us our daily bread. Whenever we fail to acknowledge these mundane provisions as gifts from God, we're in danger of slipping into a more contemporary, sophisticated form of Baal worship. Whenever we start to assume that these daily blessings are ours by right, we become blind to the Father's hand of grace. We forget that the common is special too. It was by God's gracious intention and Elijah's tenacious intercession that the earthly, material benefits were Israel's once again. Never forget: the God who consumes altars also serves oatmeal.

**45b-46** – those old knees that had been bent in prayer are now running cross-country! Elijah has gone from intense worship to extreme aerobics. His feet are pounding the pavement out in front of Ahab's chariot with some 17 miles to cover. We would have never guessed that old Elijah was an

experienced and trained long distance runner but we don't really have to because the text tells us plainly that this was not feat of strength on the part of Elijah but was the direct result of the hand of the Lord coming upon him. But why has the Lord's hand come upon him and why on earth does the Lord compel Elijah to run ahead of Ahab for 17 miles? Surely, there must be a good reason but what is it?

Clearly, this was for Ahab's benefit, not Elijah's. But what is the benefit? Well, let's step back and look at all that Ahab receives from this God contest. 1<sup>st</sup>, the reality of Yahweh was proven beyond question (1-40). Then, the blessing of Yahweh was restored, also beyond question (41-45a). Now, the appeal of Yahweh is being extended.

What does Elijah running before Ahab's chariot signify? Since it was the hand of the Lord that equipped Elijah to run this race, we can assume God wanted to communicate something by it. Instead of concentrating on the characters in this race, we should focus on their respective offices; that of prophet and king. When we look at this as the prophet running before the king, we see that Yahweh is extending to Ahab an offer, a demand and a decision.

The fact that Elijah runs before Ahab as a herald or forerunner suggests that the prophet of God is supposed to be a servant of the king, not just his opponent. The king and prophet were designed to work together in God's kingdom to bring about ongoing reform. There was no inherent reason that the prophet must always be a burr in Ahab's saddle (apart from his apostasy). The king could have the prophet as his willing servant instead of his hot adversary. So they ride and run together, the prophet with the king and going before him. This was the offer extended to Ahab.

But, if Elijah is running before Ahab; that means Ahab is following Elijah! Is this significant? This image – prophet running on foot before the king, symbolizes the restoration of the proper order intended for the Israelite monarchy: the king follows the prophet. This had always been the case from the outset of the monarchy; Saul had Samuel and David had Nathan and others. This was the exact relationship Yahweh wanted at that moment: the king on the way to his throne; preceded by the bearer of the Word of the Lord. God's Word gloriously leads the way! The Word of prophecy must show the king the path to follow! This is the demand being placed on Ahab

by Yahweh. He must not act in his own autocratic way – he must submit to the divine word. Royal power must seek prophetic direction.

All this leaves Ahab with a decision to make. The people of Israel had to make a hard decision that day, now their king is faced with a hard one as well. It's Ahab's turn; this is his moment of opportunity. This is a gracious, pictorial appeal from Yahweh. Gracious? Yes, despite all of Ahab's faults and sins, and there were many; Yahweh now offers this swine a gospel opportunity. He is showing Ahab the road to repentance and offering him the assistance of the servant of the Word. Does that seem like a bit of a stretch? This was the guy who was trying to kill Elijah; the gutless wonder who stood by while his wife slaughtered the prophets of Yahweh and allowed her thugs to pull down His altars.

Is the writer trying to imply that this guy deserves God's grace? Not at all! He's not trying to convince us that a snake like Ahab deserves God's grace; he's simply showing us that God's grace was being extended to that old reprobate just as it has been extended to us. We don't deserve it any more than Ahab did so how dare we object when grace is extended to the likes of this rebellious loser. This is incredible grace because there really isn't any other kind.

Imagine the scene: Ahab pulls up into his driveway and there's Elijah, all crouched over and heaving, trying to catch his breath. Ahab goes barreling past and stops at the door. Both he and Elijah can see that there's a light still on inside the queen's chambers. Ahab has a decision to make: he has an offer of grace in his hands but his feet will soon be standing right in the devil's bedroom. What would he decide to do? How will he as the leader of God's people carry himself after all that has been revealed to him this day?

Sadly, the 3 year drought and subsequent famine hadn't brought Ahab and Jezebel to repentance and it didn't seem likely that fire from heaven or the return of torrential rain would move their hearts either. But divine grace had been extended and undeserved grace demands a response. It's not too presumptuous to assume that the decision Ahab will make would set the tone for the remainder of his reign. Would he be a servant of Yahweh, the only one, true God or would he continue to be His rebellious adversary?

That is the same decision every person must make. If we decide to be the

servant of the Lord than, as His servants, we must determine to know His will, to pray for His will and to expect His will to be accomplished in this world by our faith-filled prayers and through our faithful service. 😊