**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**1 KINGS-018. THE TRIAL BY FIRE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"25. And Elijah said unto the prophets of Baal, Choose yon 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. 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. 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. 28. And they cried aloud, and cut themselves after their manner with knives and lancets, till the blood gushed out upon them. 29. And it came to pass, when midday was passed, 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. 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. 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: 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. 33. And he put the wood in order, and cut the bullock in nieces, and laid him on the wood, and said, Fill four barrels with water, and pour it on the burnt sacrifice, and on the wood. 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. 35. And the water ran round about the altar; and he filled the trench also with water. 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. 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. 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. 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."*

*1 Kings 18:25-39*

The place, the purpose, and the actors in this scene, make it among the grandest in history. A nation, with its king, has come together, at the bidding of one man, to settle no less a question than whom they shall worship. There, on the slope of Carmel, with the brassy heaven gleaming hard and dry above them, and the yellow, burnt-up plain of Jezreel at their feet, the expectant people stand. The assembly was a singular proof of Elijah's ascendency; for Ahab's bluster had sunk, cowed in his presence, and he had meekly done the prophet's bidding in summoning all Israel and the eight hundred and fifty Baal and Asherah prophets, for an unexplained purpose. The false priests would come unwillingly; but they came.

Then Elijah takes the command, and, though utterly alone, towers above the crowd in the courage of his undaunted confidence in his message. His words have the ring of authority as he rebukes indecision, and calls for a clear adhesion to Baal or Jehovah. If the people had answered, the trial by fire would have been needless. But their silence shows that they waver, and therefore he makes his proposal to them.

Note that the priests are not consulted, nor is Ahab. The former would have had some excuse for shirking the sharp issue; but the people's assent forced them to accept the ordeal,--reluctantly enough, no doubt.

**I. The vain cries to a deaf God.**

It is strange that one of the parties to the test has power to determine its conditions, especially as Elijah's prophetic authority was one of the things in dispute; but it is a sign of the magnetic power which one bold man with absolute confidence in his own convictions exercises over men. The Baal prophets are given every advantage in priority of action. Error is best unmasked by being allowed free opportunity to do its best; for the more favourable the circumstances of trial, the more signal the defeat. God's servants must never be suspected of unfair tricks in their controversy with error. They can afford to let it try first. Notice the substitution of your god, in the Revised Version, for your gods in the Authorised Version. That is obviously right; for the only question was about one god,--namely, Baal.

So, in the early morning, with all the people gazing at them, the Baal priests or prophets begin their attempt. It was easy to prepare the sacrifice, and lay it on the altar,--though, no doubt, it was done sullenly, with foreboding of the coming exposure. The whole account of the wild invocations of the priests may suggest some of the characteristics of idolatry, and touch our hearts with pity, as well as with the sense of its absurdity, which animated Elijah's mockery.

Note, then, the vivid picture, in verse 27, of the long hours of vain crying. On the one hand, we hear the wild chorus echoing among the rocks; on the other, we feel the dead silence in the heavens.

The monotonous and almost mechanical repetition of the invocation, prolonged till the syllables have no meaning to the yelling crowd, is characteristic of the frenzied excitement so common in idolatry. To call such howlings prayer, degrades the name. They are the very opposite of that sacred communion of a believing soul with the God whom it knows, trusts, and beseeches with submission. Neither knowledge nor trust is in these shrieks, which seek to propitiate the stern god by repeating his name as a kind of charm. Heathenism has no true prayer. Wild cries and passionate desires, flung upwards to an unloved god, are not prayer; and that solace and anchor of the troubled soul is wanting in all the dreary lands given up to idolatry.

The melancholy persistence of the unanswered cries may stand as a symbol of the tragic obstinacy with which their devotees cling to their vain gods,--a rebuke to us with a more enlightened faith. The silence, which was the only answer, is put in strong contrast with the continuous roar of the four hundred and fifty,--so long and loud the hoarse cries here, so unmoved the stillness in the careless heaven. That, too, is typical of heathenism, which is sad with unavailing cries and ignorant of answers to any. As the day wore on, and the voices grew hoarse, and hope declined, more violent bodily exercise was resorted to, and the shouting crowd danced (or, perhaps, as the margin says, limped,--a picturesque and contemptuous word for the grotesque contortions around the altar), as if that might bring the answer. That again is a feature common to all heathenism. No wonder that Elijah's scorn broke forth vehemently at such a sight. Noon was the hour of the sun's greatest power, and, since Baal was probably a solar deity, it was the hour when, if ever, he would spare one of his abundant fiery beams to light the pyre. So Elijah's taunts came just when they were most biting, and none can say that they were undeserved. His fiery zeal and his naturally stern character broke out in the bitter irony with which he imagines a variety of undignified positions for Baal.

Sarcasm is not the highest weapon, and the spirit of Elijah is not the spirit of Jesus; but the exposure of the absurdity of idolatry is legitimate, and even ridicule may have its place in pricking wind-distended bladders. A man throttling a serpent may be excused using anything that comes handy for the purpose. But, at the same time, the right attitude for us as Christians in the presence of that awful fact of idolatry, is neither contempt nor scientific curiosity, but pity deep as Christ's, and earnest resolve to help our darkened brethren. The taunts stirred to fiercer excitement and more extravagant acts, as ridicule is wont to do, and therein proves itself an unreliable instrument of controversy. Laughing at a man generally makes him more obstinate. The priests answered Elijah by savagely gashing their half-naked bodies with knives and lances,--a ready way to make blood come, but not to bring fire. The frenzy became wilder as the day declined, and at last, covered with blood, hoarse with shouting, panting with their gymnastics, they prophesied, having wrought themselves into that state of excitement in which incoherent rhapsodies burst from their lips. What a scene to call worship! That is what millions of men are ready to practise to-day. And all the while there is no voice, no answer, no care for them, in the pitiless sky. The very genius of idolatry is set before us in that tumultuous crowd on Carmel.

**II. The sacrifice of faith and the answer by fire.**

We pass from a scene of wild commotion into an atmosphere of sacred calm in verse 30. The contrast is striking. The fiery fervours of the day are past, and the sun is sinking behind the top of Carmel, and there is much to do before it sets. Elijah with his own hands, as would appear, repairs a ruined altar among the woods. Probably it had been erected for secret worship of Jehovah by some faithful amid the national apostasy, when access to Jerusalem was forbidden them, and had been destroyed by Ahab in his crusade against Jehovah worshippers. The selection of the twelve stones was symbolical of the unbroken unity of the nation, and was Elijah's protest against the very existence of the Northern kingdom, and its assumption of the name of Israel The writer explains what was meant, when he reminds us that Israel was the name given to Jacob, and therefore, as he would have us infer, was the common property of all his descendants. Judah was a part of Israel, and Israel should be an undivided whole, uniting in all its tribes in bringing offerings to Jehovah.

It was a daring thing to do before Ahab's face; but the weak king was, for the time, subjugated by the imperious will and courage of Elijah. The building of the altar, with its mute witness to God's purpose, would touch some hearts in the gazing, silent crowd. The next step was, of course, meant to make the miracle more conspicuous by drenching everything with water, probably brought, even in that drought, from the perennial fountain near at hand. Perhaps, too, the number of barrels was intended, again, as symbolical of the twelve tribes.

One can fancy the wonder and eagerness of the people, and the dark frowns of the baffled and exhausted Baal priests, as they gradually came out of their frenzy, and knew that they had lost their opportunity. The tranquil though earnest prayer of the prophet is in sharpest contrast with the meaningless bellowings to Baal. Note in it the solemn invocation. The great Name, which all listening to him had deposed from rule over them, is set in the front; and the ancestral worship, as well as the divine gifts and dealings with the patriarchs, is pleaded with God as the reason for His answer now. The name of Israel instead of the more common Jacob, has the same force as in verse 31.

Note the substance of the petitions. The deepest desire of a truly devout soul is that God would make His name known. Zeal for God's honour and love for men who have gone astray from Him, conspire to make that the head and front of His true servant's prayers. It is God, not his own credit, about which Elijah thinks first. For himself, all that he desires is to be known as an obedient servant, and as not having done anything at the bidding of his own will or judgment, but in accordance with the all-commanding Voice.

Clearly we must suppose that in all the ordering of this sublime trial by fire, Elijah had been acting at Thy word, even though we have no other record of the fact. He had no right to expect an answer unless he had been bidden to propose the test. God will honour the drafts which He bids us draw on Him; but to suspend our own or other people's faith in Him, on the issue of some experiment whether He will answer prayers, is not faith, but rash presumption, unless it is in obedience to a distinct command. Elijah had such a command, and therefore he could ask God to vindicate his action, and to prove that he was God's servant. His last petition is beautiful, both in its consciousness of power with God and recognition of his place as a prophet, and in its lowly subordination of all personal aims to the restoration of Israel to the true worship. He asks, with reiteration which is earnestness and faith, and therefore the sharpest contrast to the mechanical repetition by Baal's priests, that God would hear him; but his sole object in that prayer is, not that his name may be exalted as a prophet, or that any good may come to him, but that the blinded eyes may be opened, and the hearts, that have been so sadly led astray, be brought back to the worship of their fathers God.

The whole brief prayer, in its calm confidence; its adoring recognition of the name and past dealings of Jehovah as the ground of trust; its throbbing of earnest desire for the manifestation of His character before men; its consciousness of personal relation to God, which humbles rather than puffs up; its beseeching for an answer, and its closing petition, which comes round again to its first, that men may know God, and fasten their hearts on Him,--may well stand as a pattern of prayer for us.

The short prayer of faith does in a moment what all the long day of crying could not do. The language in which the answer is described emulates the rapidity of the swift tongues of fire which licked up sacrifice, altar, and water. They were the tokens of acceptance, reminding of the consuming of the first sacrifices in the Tabernacle, and, like them, inaugurating a new beginning of the worship of God. The burning of the altar, as well as of the sacrifice, expressed the acceptance of the people whom it, by its twelve stones, symbolised. And the people, on their part, were--for the time, at all events--swept away by the miracle, and by the force of the prophet's example and authority. Short-lived their faith may have been, as certainly it was superficial; but the fire had for the time melted their hearts, and set them flowing in the ancient channels of devotion. The faith that is founded on miracle may be deepened into something better; but unless it is, it speedily dies away. The faith that is due to the influence of some strong personality may lead on to an independent faith, based on personal experience; but, unless it does, it too will perish.

We may find a modern reproduction of the test of Carmel in the impotence of all other schemes and methods of social and spiritual reformation and the power of the Gospel. In it and its effects God answers by fire. Let the opposers, who are so glib in demonstrating the failure of Christianity, do the same with their enchantments, if they can.