Elijah and the Contest at Mt. Carmel



Scripture Reference: 1 Kings 18

Suggested Theme: God is real and not just something people have made up.

Memory Verse: “We are God’s children. So, you must not think that God is like something that people imagine or make. He is not like gold, silver, or rock.” Acts 17:29, ICB

Story Overview:

Elijah had been in hiding for the 3 years of the drought. The Lord now told him to reveal himself to King Ahab. Elijah bravely asked the king to gather all the people at Mount Carmel for a contest to see whose god was real. Priests of the false gods, Baal and Asherah, also attended. The priests prayed and chanted all day, but they could not get their “gods” to send fire down to burn the sacrifices on the altar they had built. Finally, Elijah had his altar doused in water and prayed to the Lord to send fire. Fire immediately consumed the sacrifice, the wood, stones, soil and even the water overflowing into the trenches around the altar. Everyone there now knew God was real. After this time, the rain came, and the long drought ended.

Background Study:

The actual contest between Elijah and the false prophets occurs in the middle of 1 Kings 18, but the verses before and after help set the story up and give context. It could be broken up as follows:

1 Kings 18:1-15

This gives the context of this being the third year with no rain. Earlier, Elijah had prophesied to King Ahab that there would be no rain until he (Elijah) asked God to bring it again. The meeting between Elijah and Obadiah in these verses reveals the reign of terror God’s people were living under. Ahab and Jezebel had led the people away from God and were destroying the prophets of God. You will want to be able to give a brief overview of this before you tell the story of the contest.

1 Kings 18:16-18

Elijah visits Ahab and lays down the challenge.

1 Kings 18:19-40

The contest.

1 Kings 18:41-46

God answers Elijah’s prayer for rain.

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Ahab was becoming desperate. He had sent people everywhere to find Elijah because he blamed Elijah for Israel's troubles (1 Kings 18:17). Ahab made neighbouring nations swear that they did not know where Elijah was.

Then God sent Elijah back to Ahab. Elijah told Ahab that it was Ahab who was to be blamed for the drought. As king of Israel, one of his responsibilities was to be an example to his people in the worship of God. Instead, Ahab had allowed his pagan wife to institute the worship of her false gods. Jezebel was an evil woman. She had even ordered the priests of the true God to be hunted down and killed.

Elijah offered Ahab a challenge – gather the Israelites to Mount Carmel. The Carmel mountain range runs from the Mediterranean coast inland for about thirteen miles. It divides the northern part of Israel. Exactly which mountain Elijah was referring to is unknown.

Elijah wanted the people to see this challenge. Having an evil king meant less chance that the people would worship God. He wanted all of them to see how mighty the Lord was. He wanted to make sure that they did not want to follow the false gods of Jezebel.

Along with the people, Elijah wanted the 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah brought to Mount Carmel. Baal was the chief male deity, and Asherah was his wife in this pantheon of gods and goddesses that Jezebel had popularised within the nation of Israel.

After Jezebel's blood-filled extermination of the prophets and priests of the Lord, Elijah was the only prophet left who would stand before all of these pagan priests. He challenged the prophets of Baal to prove that Baal was a god in front of the Israelite people.

For three hours, in the heat of the day, Baal's prophets cried, prayed, and carried on, but their god never answered. Then it was Elijah's turn. He first repaired the Lord's altar that had been neglected, dug a trench around it, prepared for the sacrifice, and then ordered that four large jars of water be poured over it. This must have seemed crazy to those who were watching. Baal and Asherah could not even light a spark, yet Elijah was challenging the Lord to set fire to an altar that was soaked in water! Elijah's prayer in 1 Kings 18:36-37 was only thirty-two words in Hebrew, but the power of these words showed as God's fire consumed the altar. The spectators must have been amazed as the fire consumed the sacrifice, the altar and the stones!

When the people saw this, they fell and proclaimed, "The Lord – He is God!" (1 Kings 18:39).

There is no record of protest, except from Queen Jezebel, when Elijah put the false prophets to death (1 Kings 19:1-3). As harsh as it might seem, Elijah was obeying what God had commanded hundreds of years earlier (Deuteronomy 13:1-5).

The powerful God that sent fire to Elijah's water-soaked altar is the same God we serve today. He is the one to follow and obey.

Additional background Information on the Divided Kingdom.

Way to Introduce the Story:

Light a candle and let it burn while you are talking. Talk about fire. What things burn? What should you do if you smell smoke or see a fire? What do firemen do to fires? When finished, pour water on the candle and douse the flame. In today's story, we are going to learn about a fire.

The Story:

Elijah was a prophet. A prophet is someone who gives special messages. Elijah was a prophet of God. He gave special messages from God to all of the people.

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King Ahab and Queen Jezebel did not like Elijah's messages. He told them it was bad and wrong to worship other gods besides the Lord. He told them that God would take away the rain so that they would learn that He was God. Ahab and Jezebel were so angry that they tried to kill Elijah and all of the other prophets.

The Lord hid Elijah and kept him safe… After three years of no rain, the Lord decided it was time for Elijah to talk to the King again. He told Elijah to find King Ahab and give him a message. Even though he was warned that the King would try to kill him, Elijah knew he must obey the Lord. God had taken care of him before. God would take care of him now!

Elijah met Ahab. Ahab was very angry with Elijah, "You are a troublemaker, Elijah. You caused the rain to go away. It is your fault that we have had a drought."

"No, King Ahab," said Elijah. "You caused the drought because you stopped worshipping the Lord. The Lord knows you and your wife, Jezebel, worship false gods. You make idols and bow down before them. You think that there are other gods named Baal and Asherah. You even believe the men who say they are false gods' prophets. But you are wrong!

There is only one God—the Lord God! He is the only real God. All the others are just made up. Gather all the people and the prophets of Baal and Asherah together at Mount Carmel. We will have a contest to see whose god is real!"

King Ahab did as Elijah said. People from all over Israel came to watch the contest. It didn't seem like a fair contest. Elijah was the only prophet of God there. There were 450 prophets of the false god, Baal, and 400 prophets of the false god, Asherah.

Elijah spoke to all of the people, "Everyone needs to make a decision today. If Baal is real, then you need to worship him. If the Lord God is real, then you need to worship Him!"

Elijah suggested that they should have a contest to prove who the real God was. The prophets of Baal could build an altar, and Elijah could. Each could place an animal sacrifice on their altar and then pray to their God to light a fire for the sacrifice. The God who could send fire for the sacrifice was the true God.

The prophets of Baal agreed to the contest. They made their altar, prayed, and cried out to Baal, but nothing happened to the sacrifice on the altar. They cried even louder and harder, but still, there was no answer.

The prophets of Baal tried everything, even cutting themselves and acting wild, but Baal still had no answer.

"Maybe Baal is asleep or maybe he is busy," said Elijah. Elijah knew Baal would never cause fire to come down because Baal was not real. Baal was just a god that someone made up.

Next, it was Elijah's turn. He built an altar to God. He used twelve stones to make it and placed the sacrifice on the altar. Then, Elijah did something very unusual! He dug a ditch around the altar he made. He asked for four large jars of water and had them poured over the altar. Then he did it again. And then again. There was so much water that it soaked the sacrifice and all of the wood on the altar. It even ran into the ditch around the altar. How would something soaked in water ever burn? This seemed impossible!

Then Elijah prayed to God. "I pray to you, Lord, because you are the only God. Please show all of these people here today that you are real. Please send down fire and burn this sacrifice."

Then, an amazing thing happened. Fire came down out of the sky and burned the sacrifice. But the amazing things did not stop there. The fire was so powerful that it burned the wood on the altar, the stones, and the dirt and even dried up all the water in the ditch around the altar. There was nothing left.

Now, everyone knew that the Lord was the only God. They bowed and kept saying, "The Lord – He is God! The Lord – He is God!"

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The prophets of Baal tried to run away, but they were caught and killed.

Remember that there had been a drought for three years? Elijah prayed again. He knew the Lord would end the drought, and the rain would come. His servant saw a cloud in the sky. The cloud was the size of a man's hand. Then it got bigger and bigger, and the sky became black.

Elijah told Ahab that the rain was coming. King Ahab rode his chariot, and Elijah ran to beat the storm. The drought was over.

Do you think King Ahab learned a lesson after the fire and the storm? No, he still did not obey the real God. He would rather worship made-up gods. When King Ahab told Queen Jezebel about what had happened, she was very angry. The King and Queen hated Elijah and the prophets of God. Queen Jezebel kept sending soldiers to try to kill Elijah as long as she lived.

top

Ways to Tell the Story:

This story can be told using various methods. Always remain true to the facts found in the Bible, but help children connect to its meaning by using drama, visual aids, voice inflection or other group participation.

Be selective. Each teacher is unique, so only use the illustrations that best relate to how YOU tell the story in THIS lesson. Too many illustrations can be confusing, so eliminate any that cover other stories or details you do not wish to emphasise in this lesson.

Click here for visual aids and more storytelling methods.

top

Review and Reflection Questions:

Review questions help children remember and know the facts of a story. Reflection questions encourage them to internalise the meaning and implications for their lives. Asking at least one of each type of question can help strengthen a child's spiritual development and help them connect to God. Click here to learn more about review and reflection questions.

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Review:

- Who was the contest on Mount Carmel between? (God and Baal (or Elijah and the prophets of Baal))
- What happened when the prophets of Baal prayed to Baal to send down fire? (Nothing)
- What did the prophets of Baal do to try to persuade Baal to send down fire? (prayed and shouted to Baal, worshipped, and danced around the altar)
- What did Elijah do to the altar of God before he prayed? (He had water poured all over it to soak it)
- What happened when Elijah prayed to God? (The fire burned the sacrifice, altar, stones, dirt, and water surrounding it)
- What did Elijah ask God to do after the contest? (He prayed for God to send rain, and He did)
- Did King Ahab and Queen Jezebel start following the Lord God after the contest? (No, they kept worshipping false gods)
- What did the prophets of Baal and the people watching the contest learn that day? (The Lord God is real, and Baal is not)

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- What did you learn about God from this story?

Reflection:

- What question do you have for God about this story?
- Imagine you are one of the Israelites who came to watch the contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal. What do you see? What do you hear?
- What do you think it sounded, smelled and looked like when the Lord God sent fire to the altar after Elijah prayed?
- Who do you think the Israelites thought would win the contest- the prophets of Baal and Baal, or Elijah and the Lord God?
- How do you think Elijah felt during the contest? Do you think he doubted God would send fire, or not?
- If you were Elijah, would you have believed God would send fire after you prayed?
- How long and hard do you think it rained when Elijah asked God to send rain?
- Have you ever been in a thunderstorm? Do you enjoy thunderstorms or find them scary?
- What are some reasons people believe in God? Do you believe in God? Why?
- God loves to hear us when we pray, and He loves to answer our prayers. What is something you want to pray about? Don't be afraid to pray big prayers! Have faith that God can do what you ask if it's in His will. (Suggestion: pray together or individually)

Prayer:

It is important to guide children in learning how to pray. In prayer, children can connect with God and learn that He hears and answers them. God can become a life-long friend who is with them every moment of their lives. Try using a variety of prayer methods from time to time so that the children can learn to connect with God in different ways. Note that you can pray at any time throughout your lesson. A variety of prayer methods are found here.

Song Suggestions:

- My God is So Big Song
- Our God is an Awesome God Song
- He's Got the Whole World in His Hands Song
- Rejoice in the Lord Always Song
- Refer to the Song Page on this website for more song options.

top

Activities and Crafts:

- How to choose the best learning activities for my teaching situation.
- Visit the activities and songs pages for additional activities and crafts.

Activities:

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- If you are in a suitable location, go outside, douse the wood with water, and try to light it. Talk about how amazing this miracle was. (Also, mention fire safety while you are at it!)
- Older children might create the front page of the “Mt. Carmel Times” newspaper for that day.
- Discuss how you would feel if there was a crowd of hundreds of people who hated God and you stood up, like Elijah, and said that you believed in God.
- Play a simple word game. Bible Wordz Game is an adaptable game in which children form words from letter tiles. The words relate to those in the Bible lesson.

Invite the children to respond to this story using the adaptable “God’s Story” printable reflection page. Free printables for this story.

Crafts:

- Make a thaumatrope on a stick with an altar on one side and fire on the other. Children can decorate the fire with orange, yellow, and red paper markers, glitter, or shiny sequins. Simple instructions for a thaumatrope are here.

Print and use these free bookmarks, trading cards or timelines. Free printables for this story.

top

Other Online Resources:

- Colouring page and puzzle worksheets (Calvary Curriculum)
- Craft: Cute stand-up puppets and figures made from cardboard tubes and craft sticks. The blog post is in Spanish, but you can use an online translator to read it. Even if you can’t read it, the photos are so good that you will be able to copy the idea easily. (EBD Criariva)
- Craft: Doorknob hanger (Sunday school crafts)

top

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