

## **GLORY DAYS? LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF FIRST KINGS**

### **Week One: A Crisis Averted (1 Kings 1)**

As the book of 1 Kings opens, King David is dying, and there is soon a crisis as his sons contend for leadership in Israel. By the end of 1 Kings, the nation has become hopelessly and permanently divided into two independent countries, neither of which can maintain spiritual stability for any period of time. In between comes the long and outwardly prosperous reign of Solomon, during which the king himself went through a long downward spiritual spiral.

Overall, the book of 1 Kings calls us to consider the difference between true glory and false glory, between true devotion to God and the mere use of God's name as a good luck charm. The book will describe some truly encouraging times in Israel, yet it will also show how even believers in God can sink to the depths of folly and spiritual blindness.

The David we meet in 1 Kings is little like the man we usually remember (1 Kings 1:1-10). His strength and health gone, his family splintered into factions, the king has become a non-factor in his country's affairs. His son Adonijah can't wait for his father to die, and arranges a conspiracy to make himself king when the time comes. A sad end in many ways, but a reminder that even the strongest and most faithful have mortal limits. And fortunately, David is not done just yet.

There were only a few Israelites who truly shared David's spiritual hopes for the future, and they realized that they needed to act quickly to avoid disaster both for themselves and for the nation (1:11-27). Adonijah has the support of the most vocal and aggressive Israelites, leaving the quietly faithful persons like Nathan, Zadok, and Benaiah badly outnumbered. But they are with God, and they do know how to rouse King David to action once more.

Despite his weariness and other limitations, David realizes the truth when they tell him about Adonijah's plot. He is stirred by his own promises to Solomon and to the nation, by God's promises to him, and by the simple appeal of faithful friends. There is, in a sense, no truly practical reason for the old king to exert himself for something he'll never see. But it shows us the powerful influence that truth and faith can have when we let them into our hearts.

And so, just in time, Solomon becomes recognized as David's successor (1:28-53). David's plan shows patience, wisdom, and faith. Instead of rushing off to deal with the rebels, first he calmly follows the proper procedures to have Solomon, his true heir, anointed as king. Only after fully committing Solomon, his reign, and the nation to God does David have Solomon presented publicly as king and put an end to the scheming.

When the rebels hear the simple report of Solomon's anointing, they quickly abandon Adonijah. Adonijah himself turns from boasting plotter to cringing coward, seeking sanctuary on the altar, and hanging on to his life only by Solomon's grace. This is a vivid reminder of the true nature of selfishness, fleshly ambition, and the cliques that result from such sins. They do not reflect talent or value or true importance, but are instead signs of weakness and smallness.

*- Mark Garner, December 2013*

## **GLORY DAYS? LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF FIRST KINGS**

### **Week Two: A Turbulent Transition (1 Kings 2)**

The book of 1 Kings opens with King David, near death, acting quickly to head off a deadly controversy over his successor as king of Israel. Now that Solomon has been designated and recognized as David's successor, some other things that need to be decided. David's final words to Solomon reflect his concern for the future, yet also remind us of his own imperfections. To solidify his position, Solomon acts with an awkward combination of wisdom and force.

David hopes for Solomon to be a wise, spiritual leader (2:1-4); and his words about God and God's ways are well-chosen and sincere. David himself has not always lived by them, but he has always retained his awareness of God and his love for God. And, as we see in 1 Chronicles 22-29, David did a great deal of patient work to lay the foundation for a successful reign by his son.

Yet David's final words also leave us with an element of sadness, for he leaves behind unfinished business (2:5-12). David urges Solomon to have Joab and Shimei killed, for they harmed David and might easily hurt Solomon. David had found Joab too useful, as a tool and a scapegoat, to discipline him earlier when it could have headed off more of Joab's violent misdeeds. Shimei's offense was to exploit the occasion when David's son Absalom rose against him - a situation that itself arose because of David's tangled family relationships.

Yet the new king's first challenge comes from his half-brother Adonijah (2:13-25). This rival asks for David's former companion Abishag to be his own wife, an act carrying powerful symbolism and an implicit threat to Solomon's throne. Until now, Solomon has been gracious to his untrustworthy brother, but now he has him executed. Yet the new king wisely refrains from other acts of personal vengeance, carrying out only the sentences David had requested of him,

Solomon now deals with the troublemaker Joab and his ally, the renegade priest Abiathar (2:26-35). Despite Abiathar's treachery, Solomon spares his life because he remembers better days in the past, when Abiathar had joyfully ministered and worshiped alongside David. Solomon's attitude reminds us of David's own graciousness in dealing with the mad, doomed king Saul.

Yet for Joab there is no mercy - even when he seeks sanctuary at the altar, Solomon orders him killed there. It is a shocking scene, for Solomon was placed in a no-win situation by David's reluctance to deal with the bloodthirsty Joab. Rather than judge Solomon for making a difficult choice, we might remember that if even the "man after God's own heart" could put his son in such difficulty, we too will make mistakes - and can count on God's grace just as David did.

Solomon next gives Shimei an extra chance to escape punishment, but this only delays Shimei's demise (2:36-46). Essentially a peaceful man, Solomon tells Shimei that he can live out his life if he stays in Jerusalem where he can be watched. Shimei, though, eventually takes Solomon's grace for granted - and learns, to his regret, why he shouldn't have.

These events will not be typical of Solomon's early reign - henceforth he will rule with wisdom rather than force. They did help solidify his throne. To us, they illustrate the tensions and hard choices the world holds for us, as we slowly learn to distinguish earthly glory from true glory.

*- Mark Garner, December 2013*

## **GLORY DAYS? LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF FIRST KINGS**

### **Week Three: A Wise New King (1 Kings 3 & 4)**

At first, it took an odd combination of wisdom and force for Solomon to secure his position as king of Israel. Yet once he had headed off the worst threats to his new reign, he was able to rule by wisdom alone. And indeed, even today the young king Solomon is a byword for the right kind of wisdom that is humble before God and eager to share with God's people.

In the peaceful period early in Solomon's reign, we can see the seeds both of great things and of spiritual tragedies to come (3:1-4). Solomon is eager to follow through on the temple building and the other civic and spiritual projects that David prepared for him; and the combination of David's foresight with Solomon's diligence will bring blessings to the people of Israel and glory to God. Yet at the same time there are some small things to be concerned about.

On an earthly level, marrying Pharaoh's daughter is a clever move; but it will be the seed of some serious problems later. Solomon would have done better to marry a humble Israelite with spiritual wisdom. Also, Solomon - like most of the Israelites - does not see the growing spiritual hazard of Israel's "high places", where the people mixed worship of the living God with other rituals that equally honored idols and false 'gods'. Neither of these is a serious problem right now - but by the time these problems became clearer, it will be much harder to do anything.

In a famous conversation with God, Solomon is called upon to make an important choice; and in doing so rightly he will bless himself and the nation (3:5-15). It's particularly worthwhile first to think about God's offer to Solomon, as he essentially gives Solomon the choice of anything in the world that he may ask for. Although God does not literally give us this kind of dream offer, in a sense he does allow us the same choice for ourselves.

We too can choose what the focus of our lives will be, because God gives us the free will to pursue whatever we prefer from among the options of careers, wealth, pleasure, spiritual growth, ministry, popularity, knowledge, compassion, family, friends, and so many other things. Solomon chose spiritual wisdom above all, accepting anything else as a secondary bonus.

The nature of Solomon's wisdom is both tested and revealed when he must judge a dispute between two women who each claim to be the mother of the same child (3:16-28). It is a well-known story, and straightforward enough in its way; yet Solomon's solution to the problem shows true wisdom, not mere factual knowledge or cleverness. He realized that a mother's love is ultimately more powerful than selfish desires - just as we become wiser whenever we remind ourselves that God's love is ultimately more powerful than anything else.

This is followed with a series of simple illustrations of Solomon's diligence and practical wisdom (4:1-34). The new king is organized and disciplined, while also making himself thoroughly familiar with all of the important aspects of life in Israel. It is no surprise that during this part of his reign he was a blessing to his people and a joy to God.

*- Mark Garner, December 2013*

## **GLORY DAYS? LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF FIRST KINGS**

### **Week Four: A Promise Fulfilled (1 Kings 5-7)**

Solomon's father David had longed to build a lavish temple as a place of worship and sacrifice. God would not allow David himself to do so, because David was a warrior who had killed too often - but God did not reject David's idea. Even then, he promised David that his son could build the temple, and now God's promise to David is fulfilled. Even when God will not give us what we desire at exactly the moment we desire it, he is always faithful to his own promises.

As we see Solomon make the final preparations for starting construction on the new temple, we notice his father's foresight along with Solomon's own diligence and diplomatic skill (5:1-18). The building of the temple required all of this, as well as the efforts and skills of many others who would become involved. Even the king of Tyre, an unbeliever, makes considerable contributions to the work of glorifying the living God.

This is the way God often works, and we should be ready for it too. Just as David would never live to see the temple, yet he still made the most important arrangements himself, so also we must be ready to devote our lives to whatever ministry God calls us to, even if we do not see any outward results. Likewise, just as Solomon was humble enough to build on the foundation his father had laid, so often we are called upon to support others and serve as part of their ministry.

The narrator then describes the construction and furnishings of the temple in considerable detail (6:1-38). Although the temple's center was based on the same dimensions as used for the old tabernacle, since the same sacrifices would be made, we can also see that the additional furnishings are considerably more expensive and intricate. This is both good and bad.

It is clear that Solomon has every desire to glorify God and give the best available materials to the temple of the Lord. But in years to come, it would be the temple's luxury and its impressive outward design, not its true purpose as a place of worship, that would make the biggest impression on the Israelites. These both can be lessons for our own ministries.

Alongside the temple construction, Solomon also initiates the building of a new royal palace (7:1-12). Although not bad in itself, this too reminds us of the inherent hazards in even a successful ministry. It would be years before any of these projects turned into stumbling blocks. But Solomon, like us, would have done well to ask himself all along whether God is more glorified by impressive earthly structures or by humble believers who give their hearts to him.

Returning to the temple itself, we read about the special furnishing and additions made possible by the skill of Hiram (or Hiram) of Tyre (7:13-51). This will complete the construction of the temple itself, and it brings the fulfillment of God's promise to David years earlier.

The temple was always David's dream, not God's. God did not need it, and he didn't want it for his own sake. Yet he worked through David, Solomon, and many others to bring it about, just to show his faithfulness to the promise he once made to the "man after God's own heart".

*- Mark Garner, January 2014*

## **GLORY DAYS? LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF FIRST KINGS**

### **Week Five: A Finished Project (1 Kings 8)**

After years of preparation and further years of work, the temple in Jerusalem is finally completed, and is ready to be opened and dedicated. The building itself was never meant to be the most important thing - it only mattered as a place of worship and as an example of God fulfilling his promises to David. For the time being, Solomon and most of the Israelites are able to see this.

Although the lavish building has already been completed, it is only when the ark of the covenant is brought inside that it has any real purpose (8:1-13). David and Solomon both understood that the temple, no matter how impressive it looked on the outside, had spiritual significance only insofar as it provided a home for the ark. And the ark itself had no meaning as a physical object, but rather was important only because it brought God's presence among the people.

So the ark is carefully installed in its new place, and God demonstrates his presence with a dark cloud - for even with all the careful preparations and sacrifices, not even the priests or the king could still be in God's direct presence. The way into God's direct presence would not be opened until the coming of Jesus, centuries later.

Solomon makes a point of reminding the people of all this (8:14-21). He reminds them that the temple is both the fulfillment of God's promises and also a visible reminder to them that God does live among them, even though they can never see him or live directly in his presence. The awareness of God's presence, too, is a way for the Israelites to tie together their past, their present, and their future.

The king then leads the assembly in a prayer of dedication for the new temple (8:22-53). In the first part of his prayer, he continues to dwell on the idea of God's presence being among them, and what a wondrous blessing it is. After that, Solomon prays for the people to take to heart the implications of God's presence when they live their daily lives.

Just as Solomon's prayer recognizes the ways that God's presence can affect everything we do, so also in Jesus the implications are even stronger, though on a more spiritual level. Someone's material well-being today often has little or no correlation with spiritual health, and so in Jesus we should look for God's presence to show itself through the fruits of the Spirit in our lives.

Solomon then leads the people in offering praise and worship at the newly dedicated temple (8:54-66). Notice that he does not treat worship as a matter of routine or obligation - the king emphasizes their relationship with God as the reason for their worship, and he also goes out of his way to offer God much more than would have been required by any regulation.

Although the outward forms of our worship in Jesus are much different, some key concepts are still the same. The mechanics of worship mean little compared with the awareness of God's presence, our appreciation for having a relationship with God, and our willingness to give from the heart and not as a matter of routine or obligation.

*- Mark Garner, January 2014*

## **GLORY DAYS? LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF FIRST KINGS**

### **Week Six: Solomon At His Peak (1 Kings 9-10)**

The period just after the completion of the temple sees Solomon at the height of his earthly glory, while still having a good relationship with God. Long afterwards, these years would be seen as Israel's glory days. Despite the tendency to distort the past, there were indeed many positive things about living in Israel during this brief era. Solomon still had much spiritual wisdom in spite of his wealth and fame, while the nation was as strong and secure as it would ever be.

As God speaks again to king Solomon, we can see the ways he loves and blesses the king, interspersed with some important cautions (9:1-9). God's promises will always stand, no matter whether we value them or not. It is the spiritual blessings we do or do not receive that are contingent on our faithfulness and perspective.

And it is with this in mind that we should interpret God's warnings about the consequences of unfaithfulness. When Israel became unfaithful, bad things often happened - but they were not direct 'punishment'. God is not a petulant authoritarian, but a loving Father. When we stray from his presence, it simply means that he cannot give us the love and protection that his presence usually confers on us - and this is very much true in Christ as well.

At the height of his power, Solomon generally acts with the best interests of the nation in mind, yet he also gives us an occasional cause for concern (9:10-28). The practical wisdom God gave him has made the king a skilled diplomat and administrator, which brings stability, safety, and material blessings to the nation.

But not all is completely well, either. Solomon has begun to resort to forced labor - one step removed from outright slavery - in order to accomplish some of his projects. And not all of these projects benefit everyone - some are very much for himself or his queen, Pharaoh's daughter. Right now, it is the neighboring nations who are paying the price for this, but later on Solomon's growing hardness will affect Israel too. There is an obvious spiritual warning for Christians here.

The visit from the glamorous queen of Sheba highlights Solomon's earthly renown and wealth (10:1-13). Herself one of the era's more renowned and powerful rulers, the queen is highly impressed by Solomon's practical intelligence, his power, and Israel's material prosperity. She and Solomon exchange lavish gifts as tokens of mutual esteem. Yet as famous as this incident still is, there is little true spiritual significance to it. Outwardly, God is given 'credit' for Solomon's splendor, but there is no real working of the Spirit - the focus is mostly outward.

True to his earlier promise, God does grant Solomon an endless supply of material wealth (10:14-29). The narrative goes into great detail about all the fabulous things Solomon collects, in order to emphasize that his future problems had nothing to do with a lack of outward blessing. For Christians, the lesson is emphatic: no matter how much material wealth we have, it can never make us happy or faithful. The only sure foundation is our relationship with God. Solomon would always have his wealth, but he was about to lose his spiritual peace and joy.

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### **Week Seven: The Sad Times Begin (1 Kings 11-13)**

Solomon's reign began well in every way, but it did not last. Solomon's very blessings made him complacent and restless, his relationship with God deteriorated, and his later years brought permanent division to the nation. Thus now begins the long, sad divided kingdom era - which would only end when an even worse fate overcame the Israelites.

Solomon's spiritual downfall starts with his intoxication with women, as his unwillingness to control his physical desires causes enormous harm (11:1-13). He does not love or care for any of these women - if he had, he would have put their spiritual needs ahead of his selfish desires. Instead of indulging their idol-worship, he could have taught them to know the living God.

Yet even Christians can have the same selfishness about their relationships, though on a smaller scale. With those we love, what do we care about most? Do we care about their spiritual needs, or would we rather control their behavior? Are we happiest when Jesus is the center of their focus, or do we need them to out us first instead?

All of this leads to further problems, as hostile neighbors destroy the peace and security Israel had enjoyed earlier in Solomon's reign (11:14-25). Solomon's selfish indulgence with women and his idolatry pushed God's presence away from him. So God no longer extends the protection that for so long had made Solomon's Israel an oasis of peace in a troubled region full of rivalries.

But the biggest problem is rebellion from within (11:26-40). God allows the talented but devious official Jeroboam to amass great influence, and even sends a prophet to Jeroboam to promise him that he will soon ten of the twelve tribes of Israel. Solomon recognizes the threat, but because he has pushed God's presence away from him, he can do nothing about his rival.

Solomon's son Rehoboam inherits the problems caused by Solomon's decline (11:41-12:5). This is a common scenario - many of our problems are not our fault, and their existence is beyond our control. Yet we still have a responsibility to deal with them in a godly way.

Though not initially at fault, Rehoboam handles the situation poorly and causes the nation to split in two (12:6-24). Given two contrasting pieces of advice, he chooses the one that most pleases his flesh - with disastrous but hardly surprising results, as Jeroboam immediately exploits his folly to lead ten tribes into forming a separate nation.

Jeroboam is even worse than the foolish Rehoboam (12:25-13:10). Determined to establish full independence, Jeroboam unveils new 'gods' for the Northern tribes to follow. Yet his blatant act of folly and idolatry is little different from our own persistence in relying on outward results to distinguish, us instead of putting all our hope in knowing God through the grace of Jesus.

The nation's division is oddly paralleled by the strange fate of the prophet who had pronounced God's disapproval of Jeroboam (13:11-34). This tragi-comical episode, in which no one comes off well, parallels the utter lack of spiritual leadership amongst God's people. Everyone is trying to find security in the words and actions of other humans, instead of turning to God. The parallel reminds us to rest our full faith in God and Jesus, not in humans or even in the church.

## **GLORY DAYS? LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF FIRST KINGS**

### **Week Eight: Recurring Cycles In Israel & Judah (1 Kings 14:1-16:20)**

Solomon's oppressive practices in his later years divided Israel internally, and after his death the nation split into two rival kingdoms. This situation lasted over 200 years, with each half of the nation enduring its own kind of spiritual illness. Conceived in rebellion and launched in idolatry, the Northern Kingdom, or Israel, was permanently troubled by rebellion, violence, and idolatry. The Southern Kingdom, or Judah, would go through a repeating cycle of spiritual struggle.

Having quickly strayed from God, Jeroboam of Northern Israel faces spiritual judgment and personal loss (14:1-20). God made Jeroboam a king and personally protected him from Solomon. But Jeroboam's heart is prideful - he has no gratitude, and feels that he deserves everything he possesses. Even the death of his son does not soften Jeroboam's hardened heart.

Jeroboam's senseless pride reminds us to keep our hearts soft and humble. Too often we also are convinced that we have earned our blessings, instead of gratefully accepting them by God's grace. Too many Christians are jealous of their own blessings and resent sharing them - this wouldn't happen if we truly understood grace.

Meanwhile, Judah is also in drastic spiritual decline under King Rehoboam and then his son and successor Abijah (14:21-15:8). Rehoboam has all the worst qualities of his father Solomon, without any of Solomon's faith in God. Just like Jeroboam, Rehoboam is jealous of his own kingdom, fully convinced that he deserves to be king and that he can do as he pleases.

Jeroboam and Rehoboam constantly war with each other - they hate each other because they see their own worst features in each other. And after Rehoboam's death, his son Abijah inherits everything - his father's kingdom, his father's idolatry, his father's foolish pride, and his father's hatred for Jeroboam. So the sad times in Judah continue, just as if Rehoboam were still king.

Judah, though, breaks from Israel's complete collapse, when the reformer king Asa leads the people in a return to God (15:9-24). Asa had the spiritual courage to go against the policies of his own father and grandfather; and he even disciplined his own grandmother for indulging in idolatry. Asa's example reminds us that our upbringing or culture never give us an excuse not to change - we are each called to seek God personally, not to follow our families or our culture.

During Asa's reign in the south, the Northern Kingdom of Israel is immersed in violence and constant rebellion (15:25-16:20). Jeroboam's son Nadab reigns only two years before the rebel Baasha kills him and seizes the kingdom. The pattern then repeats itself, as Baasha is prideful and jealous of his own power. His son Elah is briefly king, but is murdered by Zimri. Zimri is king for an entire week before he too dies in a rebellion, as violence and fear consume the north.

The sad histories of both kingdoms teach us some hard lessons. Selfish ambition and jealousy destroy relationships, marriages, families, and whole churches. Our persistence in worshiping idols like materialism and political power cause deep spiritual damage and create negative views of Christianity. These stories of Rehoboam, Jeroboam, and other sad, bad examples remind us constantly to look into our hearts and to purify ourselves, rather than judging others.

*- Mark Garner, February 2014*

## **GLORY DAYS? LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF FIRST KINGS**

### **Week Nine: Omri, Ahab, & Elijah (1 Kings 16:21-17:24)**

After alternating between events in Judah to the south and events in Israel to the north, the narrative in Kings now spends the next several chapters on developments in the north alone. During a time of great spiritual darkness, with the land full of idolatry and sin, God sends the prophet Elijah to proclaim his Word to the people and even to their cruel and sinful kings.

The Northern Kingdom suffered through a particularly violent period when two kings and one claimant to the throne were all killed within a short period (16:21-22, see also 16:10-19). This kind of violence will eventually break out whenever God is not honored. Sadly, today's Christians are usually too pre-occupied with 'moral' sin to realize how much violence there is around them, and to see how much it saddens God.

Many Christians even condone aggression and force when it protects their earthly interests. But violence and force, once let loose, cannot be contained. Christians would do well to consider the teachings of Jesus, who said, "if someone strike you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matthew 5:39) and, "all who draw the sword will die by the sword" (Matthew 26:52).

Finally, King Omri and then his son and successor Ahab would bring stability to Israel; but they would combine this with blatant and rampant idol worship (16:23-34). Omri was quite effective as a secular ruler, so much so that for some time afterwards foreign nations referred to Israel as "the land of Omri". But the Scriptures dismiss Omri with a concise assertion of his idolatry and faithlessness. We too would do well to remember that God takes little interest in our earthly achievements, even if we verbally give him 'credit'. What he wants and treasures are our hearts.

Ahab's long reign was particularly difficult for sincere believers in the living God, and so God sent the great prophet Elijah at this time (17:1-6). Because of the spiritual drought in Israel, God called his prophet to proclaim a literal drought too, making Elijah a target for the idolaters who ruled and populated the land. So God used nature itself to take care of Elijah, leading him to a brook for water and sending food to him by ravens - an illustration both of the loneliness of the faithful on earth and also of God's eagerness to provide for those who do trust him.

Elijah's personal hardships never stopped him from doing great miracles of mercy, as is exemplified by the touching story of the widow from Zarephath (17:7-24). This wonderful soul was full of genuine faith in God, yet desperately short of life's necessities. Elijah's miraculous power, which was used to discipline the rest of a faithless nation, was used to feed this faithful woman and to heal her son.

God blessed both the widow and Elijah by bringing together these two faithful, caring souls in the midst of a land filled with unbelief and hatred. God always searches for faithful hearts, to allow them the chance to encourage each other. We may find it hard to see faith on this earth, but God always knows who really trusts him and seeks him.

*- Mark Garner, February 2014*

## **GLORY DAYS? LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF FIRST KINGS**

### **Week Ten: If The Lord Is God, Follow Him (1 Kings 18)**

God sent the faithful prophet Elijah to Northern Israel during the long reign of the idolatrous king Ahab and his murderous queen Jezebel. As God finds refuge for Elijah, he is also protecting the few other faithful believers in Israel. Now things come to a head, as God calls Elijah to go to Ahab himself, to give the king and the Israelites another chance to know God.

In one of God's ironies, it is Ahab's own palace manager Obadiah who has been watching out for the few faithful prophets left (18:1-15). He has found caves for them to hide in, and arranged for food and water to be brought to them. So when Elijah goes to see Ahab, his path crosses with that of Obadiah, who at first is frightened. So Elijah reassures him, and helps him understand that God is directing him.

So the faithful Obadiah takes Elijah to meet with King Ahab, and the prophet suggests a face-to-face meeting between him and the prophets of Baal (18:16-24). This meeting takes place in front of a large crowd, and here Elijah calls the people no longer to waver between serving God and serving Baal. In his words that speak today, "If the Lord is God, follow him." Baal is not God and today's idols are not God, yet the Lord alone is God in heaven above and on the earth below.

When the people do not respond, Elijah suggests that he and the prophets of Baal each prepare a sacrifice to their own gods, without lighting the fire, to see which god will respond. This catches the people's attention; and since there is only Elijah compared with hundreds of prophets who worship Baal, they can hardly decline this offer.

The prophets of Baal prepare their sacrifice, and give their very best efforts to encourage Baal to accept it, to no avail (18:25-26). Then, Elijah's amusing banter highlights the uselessness of human efforts in trying to exalt our idols (18:27-29). When the idols of our wealth or earthly accomplishments do not make us feel as secure or as good as we hoped, it isn't because they are just sleeping or travelling; it is because they cannot ever satisfy our spirits.

So after Elijah goes to further steps to make it seem even more 'difficult' for the living God to accept the sacrifice prepared for him, God responds dramatically (18:30-38). God may not respond today with fire from heaven or other such visually spectacularly signs, yet he can give us the kind of reassurance and hope that endures even in troubled or sad times. He can show us his kindness even in our worst times, and he reminds us in his own way that he is with us.

As a result, the people have the sudden realization that the Lord alone is God; and at the same time, Elijah tells them that the rains in Israel will now resume (18:39-46). As the people turn back to God, he shows grace to them and even to Ahab, as Elijah encourages the nation that the drought will soon be over, just as there has been - at least for the time being - a spiritual renewal.

*- Mark Garner, February 2017*