

366 “Go up now, look toward the sea”

In I Kings 18 we read of the great clash between Elijah and Ahab king of Israel, who followed the lead of his dreadful wife Jezebel in taking the people away from the Lord and into the worship of the false god Baal. At the contest held on Mount Carmel, Elijah put his blunt question to the people, “How long will halt ye between two opinions? if the Lord be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him” (I Kings 18.21, KJV); to which - “the people answered him not a word”, for they surely knew the answer to that question in their hearts. Is that Carmel question of nearly 3000 years ago not still appropriate for this wayward world today?

After hours of the people praying uselessly to Baal, things suddenly changed. In answer to Elijah’s faithful prayers, “Hear me, O Lord, hear me, that the people may know that thou art the Lord God, and that thou hast turned their heart back again” (18.37), “Then the fire of the Lord fell ... 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” (from vv 38-39).

The Lord God had His way! He vindicated Elijah, His covenant people acknowledged Him as the true God, and the prophets of Baal were duly slain (v 40). We see in this incident a forerunner of the times of God’s promised mercies and judgments which are yet to come, and which are surely now not that far ahead (egs., Isaiah 29.22-24 / Matthew 24.21,29-31 / Philippians 2.9-11 / Revelation 5 / ...).

The Lord and His servant Elijah were not finished with Ahab. The drought proclaimed in faith by Elijah to Ahab still continued (17.1,7; 18.5), but now Elijah, again in faith, proclaimed to Ahab – “there is a sound of abundance of rain” (18.41). Elijah’s faith was about to be tested once more.

We read that Elijah “went up to the top of Carmel; and he cast himself down on his knees, and put his face between his knees, and said to his servant, Go up now, look toward the sea” (from 18.42-43). The servant came back, “There is nothing” – an empty, hard, blue sky stretched over the sea and away to the horizon.

Faith! Elijah told him, “Go again seven times” (v 43b). We can imagine the hours ticking by under the hot sun while Elijah bowed and prayed. Another six times the servant returned with the same answer – nothing.

And then – “it came to pass at the seventh time, that he said, Behold, there ariseth a little cloud out of the sea, like a man’s hand” (18.44).

That was enough for Elijah. He now knew that once again the Lord was honouring his faith and was answering his prayer. Soon “the heaven was black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain” (18.45). Centuries later the Holy Spirit, through James, used Elijah’s faith and prayer on this occasion to emphasise that “the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much” (James 5.16b-18) – and it still does.

As we enter this “year of our Lord 2020”, the news bulletins report many ongoing miseries around the world, be these global or local, “natural”, man-made or both. Despite the high hopes of a New Year we can all see that the world remains in a deep and deepening mess.

We know from Scripture that God is well aware of this mess and allows it to occur in accord with His own gracious sovereign will. Through the many examples of “mess” around us today – the floods, droughts, famines, fires, crashes, earthquakes, volcanoes, hurricanes, wars, diseases and so on - in both His “allowing will”, (in which He lets bad things occur), and in His “directive will”, (in which He deliberately acts Himself), the Lord God is giving loud warnings: He seeks to bring people back to their senses and back to Himself through His only Son Jesus Christ (eg., John 14.6), before finally, at the time of His choosing, He will judge all unredeemed sinfulness (eg., Revelation 20.11-15).

So, when faced with grim events in the news reports, we do well to pray, “Please Lord, what are you saying to us through this, and what are you calling us to do?”. Had Ahab had the sense to do this when faced with that divinely-imposed drought, (a good example of God’s directive will), things would have turned out very differently and very quickly.

We are in times of many Ahabs, Jezebels and Baals, and in God’s hands each of us can be “a mini-Elijah” – as people of faith, courage, prayer and patience.

We too “look toward the sea” for God’s answering of our prayers and fulfilling of His promises; and we too may have to wait for six times - but the seventh shall surely come.