

The contest was a relatively simple one. The prophets of Baal would build an altar for their god and Elijah would build one for his. It would be a sort of clash of the titans. Elijah, Yahweh's prophet, and the priests of Baal would cut up a bull for sacrifice on each altar, but not put fire on it. They'd rely on their particular deity to do that: it would be a fire mission from heaven. The altar that got fired up first would be the winner and that god would be the god of the people (vv. 22-24).

The ensuing contest had everything that makes for good sport. There's *blood* as the prophets of Baal cut themselves with swords and lances while calling out to Baal. There's *trash talk* as Elijah taunts them mercilessly. "Cry aloud!" he shouts, "Surely he [Baal] is a god; either he is meditating [the Hebrew is more akin to "Maybe he's in the john"], or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened" (v. 27). But there was no fire. Despite all the hubbub, the writer of 1 Kings tells us: *There was no voice, no answer and no response* (v. 29).

Now it was Elijah's turn. He rebuilt the altar of the Lord that had been torn down for some time, taking 12 stones as a symbol for the 12 tribes of Israel. He dug a trench around it, and, after arranging the wood and the pieces of the bull, he had four jars of water poured over the altar three times, soaking everything thoroughly and even filling up the trench around the altar (vv. 30-35).

It's a pretty cocky move for a guy who doesn't have a flamethrower. What Elijah does have, however, is the one true God on his side. So Elijah prays: *O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your bidding. Answer me, Lord, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back* (vv. 36-37). Elijah knew what God was capable of doing, thus his prayer was the spiritual equivalent of shouting, "Fire in the hole!"

When U.S. troops are in need of fire to rain down from the sky via artillery or an airstrike, they call for a "fire mission." Elijah's call for a heavenly fire mission results in the ultimate pyromaniac fantasy. The altar, the stones, the wood, the bull and even the water are vaporized with a fire that makes a flamethrower look like a cheap cigarette lighter. It was an impressive display that seals the deal for the people of Israel, who fell on their faces repeating, *The LORD is indeed God!* (vv. 38-39). The people chased down the prophets of Baal, thus ending the contest and securing the faith of the people (v. 40).

Reading this story might cause us to wonder why God doesn't seem to do these kinds of impressive feats anymore. After all, it might strengthen the faith and resolve of people who *go limping with two different opinions* (v. 21). These are the people who seem to follow contemporary "gods" who compete for their loyalty. There are times when a flame-throwing God could be useful!

Elijah's call for fire stands out in the Bible, however, because it's the exception and not the rule. Remember when Jesus' disciples wanted to call their own fire mission down on a Samaritan village that refused to receive him? Jesus rebuked them (Luke 9:51-55). In fact, the only fire mission the disciples would ever receive was the one they called down on their own position as they prayed for the Holy Spirit, which came upon them as tongues of fire (Acts 2:3).

The real fire that we should be looking for is not the kind that we throw at others, the kind that vaporizes the altars or our enemies, but the kind of fire that God will rain down on us which enables us to spread the good news about the saving love of God. We don't need to talk trash to our critics or pray for impressive displays of power, nor do we need to hunt people down and beat them over the head with their sin. All we need do is share the fire of God's love, the lightness of God's grace, the power of God's forgiveness, and the simple, clear message that "The Lord is indeed God!"

Well, it's exactly what we've been trying to do in our visioning process this spring. We are, in effect, asking God's Spirit to rain down on us, to reignite our passion for God, to warm us to the work Christ sets us to, and to light our way as we move forward proclaiming, "The Lord is indeed God!" There are many false gods competing for our allegiance, our time, our money, our skills; but they care only for themselves, and their fire quickly sputters and dies.

Christian editor J. Lee Grady offers up six things that can block the Holy Spirit's Power:

- **Doubt or intellectual pride:** to receive the Spirit's infilling, we must let go of our intellectual arguments and display a childlike faith that trusts God to act on our behalf;
- **Religious Tradition:** if we get locked into "the way we've always done it," we'll find it hard to accept new ideas or receive new direction, and we'll block our anointing by the Spirit;
- **Fear of the Supernatural:** if we're afraid of what God will do or ask us to do, then we'll struggle to receive the Spirit;

- **Unconfessed Sin:** the Bible tells us that the Spirit can be “quenched” as well as “grieved” (1 Thess. 5:19); if we cling to past mistakes, we leave no room for the Spirit; but when we confess and repent, the Spirit is welcomed into our lives;
- **Emotional Wounds:** like unconfessed sin, emotional baggage leaves no room for the Spirit; healing is needed before there can be a healthy space in which the Spirit can work;
- **An Un-yielded Spirit:** you cannot be filled with the Spirit if you are full of yourself; if we are too willful, too concerned with our own plans, then we squeeze God out of life; but if we yield our spirit to God’s Spirit, we can experience the fullness of God’s power.

Does that sound impossible in a culture that seems to be going its own way? Well, if Elijah's win tells us anything, it's that God can make a way when there seems to be no way. It may not involve suspending the laws of physics or a pinpoint lightning strike like on Mount Carmel, but God is in the business of working in ways that often require the inner refining and strengthening fire of the Spirit to discern. It may not be as immediate as a heavenly fire mission, it might take hindsight to see it clearly; but we can be confident that, whatever the circumstances, God hears our prayers, just like God heard Elijah's, and that God will act on our behalf in ways that we may not even expect. Elijah was a prophet whom God used to turn God's people back. God can use us in the same way if we're willing to be fired up ourselves by God's Spirit. No flamethrower required.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help me to cultivate the simplicity of devotion to You. I want You to be my primary ambition in life. Let seeking Your heart be the goal of my life, even in busy and stressful times. Teach me how to align my heart with Your Spirit. I recommit myself as a person after Your heart. I choose to seek Your face. In difficult times, open my heart to receive Your revelation. Reveal deeply to my heart Your love for me. I choose to be confident in your love for me. In Jesus’ name I ask this. Amen

#### Sources:

- "Flamethrower." Wikipedia.com. Retrieved November 18, 2015.
- Gaurav. "7 flame-throwing inventions simply fun to own." Damngeeky.com. Retrieved November 18, 2015.
- J. Lee Grady. “6 Things That Block the Holy Spirit’s Power.” Retrieved May 24, 2016. <http://www.charismamag.com/blogs/fire-in-my-bones/23366-6-things-that-block-the-holy-spirit-s-power>

## Fire Mission

Sunday, May 29, 2016

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

1 Kings 18:20-21 (22-29), 30-39

Human beings are fascinated with fire. Since our Stone Age ancestors figured out how to make fire without requiring the pyrotechnics of lightning, we’ve been fascinated with the heat and light and power of fire. Witness the wild-eyed fascination of scouts poking at the fire on their first campout, or a 40-something dad attempting to detonate a small arsenal of fireworks on the Fourth of July, or the excess of lighter fluid doused on charcoal grills.

Humans love to play around with fire. Consider the flamethrower. Someone thought, "If fire is a good thing - and it is - then there should be a way to spread it around." No wonder, then, that we (and by "we," we mean adult, male pyromaniacs) decided that the following were great ideas:

- A wheelchair flamethrower designed by 52-year-old Lance Greathouse, in case you find yourself disabled and in a Mad Max movie.
- The Flame-nco guitar that shoots flames out of the neck, which puts a new meaning on campfire singing.
- How about a trombone that shoots flames? Or a bagpipe that shoots flames out of each of the pipes while you play it? Or a bicycle that shoots flames out of the rear of the seat?
- And then there's the first commercially available flamethrower: the XM42 Handheld Flamethrower that can fire 25-foot flames for use in a variety of contexts -- most of them eventually involving a trip to the emergency room.

It's little wonder, then, that when Elijah decided to go head-to-head with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, the testosterone-fueled contest would somehow involve fire and an audience. The audience in question was the people of the northern kingdom of Israel who'd been wavering in their dedication to Yahweh and looking to the pagan gods of their king, Ahab, and his devious pagan wife, a Sidonian Canaanite named Jezebel. The main god of the Canaanites was Baal, god of lightning, storms and fertility. Since the pagan gods were thought to be territorial, Mount Carmel was Baal's turf. In this contest, therefore, Elijah even gives the prophets of Baal the home field advantage (vv. 20-21).