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A DUEL ON A MOUNTAIN TOP

The International Sunday School Lesson for April 13th is: "Elijah and the Struggle With Baal"—I. Kings 16: 29—19:21; Chap 21; II. Kings 1:1—2:12.

By WILLIAM T. ELLIS

Crowded with personal memories is Mt. Carmel, which rises sheer from the Mediterranean Sea, at the northern end of Palestine's great Plain of Esdraelon. Once I traversed its brigand-infested heights, by night: It is twelve miles long, and is called locally "The mountain of a thousand valleys."

Last summer, after spending a night on the northern end of Mt. Carmel, I awoke to find all the roads leading to the top crowded with people—Jews, Christians, Moslems, all bent on a holiday. Crude merry-go-rounds had been erected during the night, and other catch-penny devices; and booths for the sale of refreshments. It was all like circus time in America. Some families had come very early and had pre-empted the shade of trees for picnic parties. As the morning grew on the throngs increased, and the gendarmes had great difficulty in controlling the traffic on the narrow roads. Everybody was in a good humor; for it was a festival crowd.

I had stumbled upon the Feast of Elijah, which is kept annually as a high holiday by the people dwelling on or near the mountain that is associated with the great prophet's name. For it was on Carmel's crest that the spectacular duel was staged between Elijah and four hundred and fifty priests of Baal, to determine religious supremacy in Israel. The story is one of the most familiar, and dramatic, in all literature. No one appreciates it fully, however, who does not know the local geography; and how the southern end of Mt. Carmel juts out upon the plain, through which runs the Brook Kishan. It is a noble stage for a sublime drama.

Memories of a Mountain. Travellers in the Holy Land usually visit Haifa, which nestles under the northern end of Mt. Carmel. The prospect from the heights is beautiful, commanding city, sea, strand and plain, with such memorials as the castle, which was the last stronghold of the crusaders. One stands by the huge gun which the Germans had planted on the crest to drive off British ships. Below in the city which is scheduled to be the great seaport of Palestine, puff the locomotives that go daily to Jerusalem and Egypt in one direction, and to Damascus and northern Syria in the other. The famous old mountain is still the scene of decisive political and economic struggles: It is one of the continuously strategic spots of history.

Few travellers ever visit what is called "The Place of Burning," on the southern end of the mountain, actual site of the duel between the prophet of Jehovah and the priests of Baal. The hospitable Carmelite monks there—my heart warms to them as brethren and as friends, even as I write—have a hard time getting along in their mesger monastery and school. What they lack of tourist gold, however, they make up in golden-hearted devotion to the place of their task. From the top of their monastery I once saw rising out of the Mediterranean a cloud the size of a man's hand. There, a short distance down the slope, flows a perennial spring that never dries up in even the severest drought. Below, like a vast auditorium, stretches the plain with the brook flowing through it, all as told in the Old Testament narrative.

This man Elijah was a mountain man. I treasure a vivid memory, as well as a successful photograph of the green spot in a cup-valley on Mt. Sinai, where he is traditionally reported to have dwelt in a cave, while a fugitive at Mt. Horeb. Repeated experiences on the majestic crags looking down into the Brook Cherith, between Jerusalem and

Jericho, which he was fed by the ravens, are also lively Elijah memories: Once, my horse nearly threw me down into the rocky ravine, hundreds of feet below, while I was musing upon Elijah and the scenery, heedless of the obligations of horsemanship. Stern, rugged, unshakable, steadfast—Elijah was a man naturally associated with the austere and sublimities of nature. A fierce defender of the faith, unafraid of the face of man, was this lonely hero soul.

Why Idolatry is Popular.

We are covering a long period of the history of the northern kingdom of Israel in this quarter's Sunday School Lessons. Last week we studied the division of the nation. Now, seventy-five years later, with King Ahab on the throne, we get a glimpse of national and religious conditions through this experience of Elijah. Like so many of the northern kings, Ahab was a bad egg. His heathen wife, Jezebel—whose name is a byword to this day—was a large factor in his undoing, as heathen wives had been in the failure of Solomon. Then, as now, the spiritual and social level of a man was usually determined by his wife.

Ahab and Jezebel had been fearlessly faced by this brave old wilderness prophet, Elijah, and they had pursued him into exile, seeking his life. But the primitive drought and famine which Elijah had prophesied lay sore upon the land. Baal, the Phoenician sun god, whom this Sidonian princess, Jezebel, had introduced into Israel, could not help.

Everybody has wondered, at some time or other, why the old Jews were continuously turning from the worship of Jehovah to the idolatry of the surrounding nations. The real answer is not often given. It is simply that the sensual rites and excesses practiced in connection with the worship of idols appealed to the people's lower natures. The reason is the same as that which explains why so many people today turn to fleshly worldliness instead of to Christianity. The stern code of the living God demands chastity and purity and spirituality. The altar of Baal made their way even into the Temple of Jerusalem when religion became corrupt. Isn't it strange that when the old, old heathen conception of self-indulgence, and of the exaltation of pleasure and materialism, has been tried-out to the limit, times without number, so much of the world should today be undergoing a period of Baal-worship?

A Challenge: Odds and the Duel. When Israel's plight of famine and distress was at its worst, Elijah audaciously appeared and challenged

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the priests of Baal to a contest staged on a high place, sacred to their God. He was only one and they were four hundred and fifty, but Jehovah recked not of odds. On the uppermost surface of the story lies the truth that "One with God is a majority," forever and everywhere. The essential issues of life are never settled by popular vote. Right is right and God is God, though all the massed multitudes of mankind should cast their ballots to the contrary. God is not whatever the vote of the majority decides him to be; although this is a popular fallacy of the time. God is Himself, and He will ultimately have His way, either through men or in spite of them. "One man of you shall chase a thousand," is the old promise fulfilled in the present lesson.

Always, the crowd loves a contest. Natural instincts, re-enforced by Israel's dire plight, led the people to acclaim Elijah's plucky proposal. The decision was to be by fire; so the altars were built, before the eyes of the assembled people, on the crest of Carmel. The priests of Baal used all their incantations. They cried and invoked and cut themselves—while the grimly humorous prophet of God gazed at them. The tale is told tremendously in the Bible.

After the failure of the Baal party Elijah's turn came. He laid his altar of twelve stones of remembrance, and he drenched sacrifice and fuel with water, to demonstrate the utterness of Jehovah's power. Then he prayed a majestic prayer, invoking past providences, and pleading the glory of the great name of the true God.

And the fire fell! Picture the frenzy of the scene; the awe-stricken, penitent people; the Baalites aghast; the prophet of God sublimely triumphant; the signs of the end of the drought, and then the grim punishment of the idolaters. Many artists have attempted to transfer that stupendous scene to canvas, but in vain. It remains one of the unportrayable triumphs of the Almighty.

Getting the One Big Idea.

Instead of following out the many incidental homilies of the Lesson text—a falling off all of us who deal with Scripture, with the results that our minds are scrappy, our religion disjointed, and our conceptions of God narrowed into favorite trivial cults or isms—let us get a firm grip on the big idea. This absorbing old story has one central, unmistakable meaning. It carries us out into the depths of essential faith, and far beyond the shallows of religious fads and fancifulness. What the duel on Carmel said to Israel is what the same overruling God is trying to say to our factious and pettifogging generation.

Here we have the message of the mountain, which is the truth for the times: "Jehovah, He is God." That was the decision of the duel. It conveyed the cardinal message of Elijah, and of the Old Testament. Instead of creating divisions about a whole host of minor matters, and subordinate teachings, we need to get a strong hold upon this one clear and basic truth, that Jehovah lives; that He is the one and only God; and that He is a moral Being, concerned about the conduct of mortals.

Angels must weep as they see good people squabbling over incidental points of theology, while vital religion languishes and hungry sheep are unfed and neglected. The one point of paramount importance

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is whether there really is a God; and whether He is such a one as cares about folks. Does He interest Himself in the affairs of men? Some persons, to whom a speculation means more than a reality, deny to God this moral quality, and, consequently, his Father-character. They cannot conceive of the Power that fed Elijah by the ravens, and that sent lightnings from heaven to consume his altar and give him victory over the false priests of Baal, as being one and the same Deity. Their intellectually-conceived God is too great to pay any attention to people. This means, frankly, the scrapping of the experience and faith of the ages, as well as a complete repudiation of the last vestige of Scripture. For if God has made any revelation of Himself at all, it is as the Friend of His friends; the powerful partner of Elijah and all other prophets of truth; the concerned Ruler of nations; the compassionate Father of His people in every one of their needs. He who stood with Elijah on Carmel still stands by every loyal follower in whatever tests and trials and needs arise. The God who vindicated Himself on the mountains, with fire in his fist, is the same yearning, loving God who revealed Himself in Christ, through whom He draws closest to us all. A supplemental talk on the lesson is given by Dr. Ellis over the radio every Saturday night at nine o'clock.

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Mrs. L. Whiting, 202 King St. West, Brockville, Ont., writes:

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