

## Noticing God's Gentle Whisper

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The Church of the Covenant

1 Kings 19:1-18

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### I. Intro

When is the last time you really *felt* God speaking directly to you? Were you able to recognize God's voice? How did you know it was God?

Today's scripture tells the story of the prophet Elijah noticing and recognizing God's still small voice.

### II. Context - 1 Kings 16:29 - 18:45

Elijah's adversaries, King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, were rulers of Israel from 874-853 B.C. King Ahab is described as "*doing more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of the kings before him.*" Queen Jezebel was a foreigner who worshipped the false god Baal and taught the Israelites to worship his idols.

Eventually Elijah confronted Ahab about worshipping Baal. He challenged the prophets of Baal to a contest. There were 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah. Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal to each build an altar and prepare their bulls for sacrifice. All day long the false prophets cried out to Baal to send fire from heaven and accept their sacrifice. Nothing happened. Then Elijah prayed to the one true God, and immediately lightning struck his altar with fire from heaven, and the bull, the wood and everything around it was completely consumed. The crowds executed the prophets of the false god Baal. When Elijah proclaimed that God would send rain again, God did.

### III. Examine

**Vs 19:1-4** After that spectacular showing of God's power, Elijah must have expected that Jezebel would abandon the Baals and worship the true God. But when she didn't repent, but instead threatened to kill him, Elijah forgot God's overwhelming display of power, and ran from the city of Jezreel all the way to Beersheba, about 100 miles south. After the exhilaration of the mighty battle and witnessing God sending fire from heaven to consume the sacrifice, Elijah's emotions came crashing down. All he could see was the major disconnect between what his faith told him about God, and the circumstances that appeared that Jezebel was still in control. He was discouraged, depressed and felt like a failure. He was so disheartened that he just wanted to lie down and die.

**Vs 19:5-7** God was gentle and merciful with Elijah. God knew he was exhausted after running such a long way. He knew that the long journey ahead would be too much for him. His physical need for food and rest was too high, so God provided nourishment for Elijah. Twice the angel of the Lord woke Elijah and gave him food and drink.

**Vs 19:8-11** Strengthened by God's provision, Elijah was able to travel for 40 days without needing any more food. God directed him to the sacred Mount Horeb where he could calm down, relax, and be refreshed. There God began to teach Elijah how to recognize God.

The Lord said, "*Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.*"

*"Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountain apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper."*

**Vs 19:12** This final Hebrew word is “notoriously difficult to translate.” Different versions have: *Still small voice / sound of sheer silence / gentle whisper / sound of a gentle breeze / low murmuring sound / a voice of gentle silence*. No one really knows what this particular word means!<sup>1</sup>

It was this gentle whisper that got Elijah’s attention. Somehow, deep within, Elijah knew that God was speaking to *him*. Although the thoughts were inside his head, Elijah could tell the thoughts were not his own. The voice drew him out of the cave.

**Vs 19:13-17** Now, looking at God is like looking directly at the solar eclipse, so Elijah pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. This time he was prepared to listen. God repeats his question: “*What are you doing here, Elijah?*” God gave him the opportunity to change his answer, but he didn’t take it. He complains that he is the only one in all of Israel who is faithful. And if God doesn’t do something fast, those people will kill *him* too.

God doesn’t scold Elijah, or belittle him. God affirms his worth by giving him a job to do. He doesn’t allow Elijah to take the easy way out, but sends him right back to the city of Jezreel, and instructs him to make changes that will affect international politics and national affairs. He is to go back to the place where he veered off track in his walk with the Lord, and start fresh. God instructs Elijah to appoint his spiritual successor, a faithful godly man who will be his companion and friend. God has shown him not to expect everything God does to be spectacular or extraordinary. Instead, in the quiet routine of everyday life, he is to remain alert for the unpredictable voice of God, whispering to him at unexpected moments.

**Vs 19:18** As a final kindness, God says, “oh, by the way, be encouraged - there are actually 7,000 Israelites who share your faith and have not bowed down to Baal. You are not alone.”

#### **IV. Interpretation**

What does Elijah’s story teach *us* about noticing the gentle whisper of God’s still small voice?

**First**, Elijah’s physical needs for food and rest needed to be met, so that he was revived and refreshed, able to carry on. It is important for us to take good care of the human bodies God created for us. Get enough rest, eat healthy foods, and exercise. When Elijah was exhausted, hungry and depressed, he felt alone and abandoned by God. Once his physical needs were cared for, he was able to notice God’s voice.

**Second**, Elijah left the place of stress, noise and distractions, and intentionally found a place of quiet solitude where he was able to relax and calm down without fearing for his life. Do you have a quiet place?

When I lived in Philly, I had a favorite Queen Anne style chair in a sunny corner of the living room. I kept my Bible and prayer journal on the end table. Every morning after my son left for school I had a time of quiet with the Lord to pray, to be nourished by the Bible, and to talk to God about life.

The great preacher Charles Spurgeon said, “*You cannot cause the still small voice to be heard, - but often, by making silence and sitting still in it, you may hear that call of tender love.*”<sup>2</sup>

These days I find that my quiet place is in the car driving to and from Washington. When I turn off the music, the news and the cell phone, I am able to open my mind to thinking my own thoughts and to be open to inspirations from the Lord.

**Third**, Elijah learned not to expect God to show up in a spectacular show of power all the time, but to notice God’s gentle whisper in the silence.

<sup>1</sup> *Noticing God*, by Dr. Richard Peace, p. 52. Inter Varsity Press

<sup>2</sup> Sermon #1668, “*The Still Small Voice*,” by C.H. Spurgeon. [www.spurgeongems.org](http://www.spurgeongems.org)

## V. Examples

God's 'still small voice' often comes in surprising unexpected ways. Dr. **Robertson McQuilken**, president of Columbia University, chose to resign from his position to care for his wife who was stricken with Alzheimer's. Most days his attitude was positive and joyful in caring for her. But occasionally he got impatient and complained to God. After a particularly rough week, he was walking in their neighborhood, his wife holding his arm and shuffling along, when a disheveled and intoxicated man stumbled towards them. The man looked at Dr. & Mrs. McQuilken, then said loudly, "I likes that! That's good! I likes that! That's good," and continued on his way. Dr. McQuilken reflected that he'd had the strongest sensation that *God* had just spoken those words of encouragement just for his benefit. He heard that gentle whisper and noticed God.<sup>3</sup>

This past Friday I had lunch with a friend who will be retiring next month. I asked her how long she had worked there, and she answered by telling this story.

**Mary Jane** had quite a variety of experience as a phlebotomist and other medical lab work. She was in a position of looking for a new job, with no thoughts about changing her career. She was doing chores at home one day when out of the blue a remarkable question just popped into her head. "Is that what you really want to do?" She was so startled that she answered the thought, "No, I'd really rather be a church secretary, but those positions are always part time, and I need full time work."

Another thought flashed through her mind: "Don't be so sure!"

Mary Jane listened to that still small voice, and prayed about the possibilities. Within a couple of weeks, a friend told her about a full-time position as church secretary and ministerial assistant. Our lunch together Friday was to celebrate her retirement from that position fifteen years later!

Looking back over **my own life** for examples to share with you, I remembered the year that the minister who taught the weekly Women's Bible study took another job. Late one night as I was thinking about the situation, an amazing idea popped into my head! *I* could teach a course on the Psalms! The entire plan and syllabus was laid out in my head! I dropped what I was doing and within an hour had the entire concept typed and printed to take with me to the Bible study the next morning.

Unbeknownst to me, the leadership team was meeting that very morning. They were excited by my idea and asked me to teach on the Psalms in the fall. That experience started me on the path to becoming a Director of Women's Ministries, which led me to ordination. I believe the idea for the course on the Psalms came from God's gentle whisper speaking to me late at night when my mind was unoccupied and receptive – and I *noticed!*

Yesterday morning I was working on this message when it occurred to me that I never mentioned WHY anyone would even *want* to hear God's voice. The answer to that question "Why bother?" is back in the story of Elijah.

## VI. Transformation

Elijah fled to the mountain where he heard the still small voice of God. Out of that noticing of God flowed transformation. Elijah was refreshed and restored. He was encouraged by time spent with the Lord and was no longer afraid. He found new purpose for his life. He had a new assignment from God to carry out. The voice of God told him to go back to the city of Jezreel so he did. He faced his fears and his enemies. He served as a prophet in Israel for many years. Eventually King Ahab and Queen Jezebel went too far in their wickedness, and were punished. God even provided a spiritual friend and ministry partner in Elisha. Elijah enjoyed a close relationship with God for the rest of his life.

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<sup>3</sup> *Living by Vows*, by Dr. Robertson McQuilken. Columbia University Press. Also in *Christianity Today*.

## ***VII. Conclusion.***

God is ready and waiting to have that close relationship with you, too. God created you in His image. He designed you with a particular purpose in mind. God sent His son Jesus Christ to die for you, to live for you, to cleanse you from sin, and to teach you how to live. During your lifetime, the Holy Spirit will continue to transform you to be more and more like Jesus Christ. At unexpected times in your life, God's still small voice may whisper to you, too. Notice God! Don't miss that blessing.

We as a church need to be listening, too, for God's still small voice, his gentle whisper, speaking to us as a congregation in this time of transition. Through the CAT surveys, during committee meetings, through circumstances, prayer, and Bible studies, God will be speaking to this congregation, to refresh us, to encourage us as a body, to give us a purpose and to assign to us the work he has planned for us to accomplish in this place. May you always be ready to notice God's still small voice speaking to you in a gentle whisper, and be blessed. Amen.