

Lessons from the life of Elijah

17. "A still small voice" (1 Kgs. 19:9-14)

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The prophet Elijah proceeds on his journey away from Jezebel to Mount Horeb (the scene of many incidents in the life of Moses), witnesses a manifestation of God's power and glory, and receives the comfort and assurance of a "still small voice".

THE PROPHET, now refreshed by the provision from angelic hands, journeyed onwards to Horeb, a place heavily associated with the glorious past of Moses. As Elijah traversed through the bleak wilderness he would have surely brought to mind the wandering Israelites, travelling under the pillar of cloud and fire (Ex. 13:21).

The prophet comes to a cave

The prophet finally rested from his great journey: "And he came thither unto a cave, and lodged there" (1 Kgs. 19:9). The original Hebrew renders the phrase "a cave" in the definitive sense: "the cave". Is this, then, the very same cave where God had manifested His glory to Moses (Ex. 33:22)?

What, then, must have been the feelings of the prophet as he first beheld this sacred height? Not only had God revealed Himself there, but He had also declared His Law (34:28), appeared to Moses in the burning bush (3:1,2), and brought forth a miraculous supply of water for the children of Israel (17:6). What is more, it was here that Joshua had gained a famous victory over Amalek (vv. 9, 10).

Did Elijah think that God would declare Himself again and renew His covenant with His people, provide refreshing water that would invigorate the spiritual soul of Israel and bring His armies against His enemies?

"The word of the LORD came to him"

There, alone in the cave, amidst such solitude, stood the prophet, a man who had hazarded his life for the Name of Yahweh (*cf.* Acts 15:26). Does not this entire scene bring to mind the words of the writer to the Hebrews regarding those "of whom the world was not worthy", that "they wandered in deserts, and in moun-

tains, and in dens and caves of the earth" (11:38)?

Again notice that "the word of the LORD came to him" (1 Kgs. 19:9), just as on previous occasions (17:2,8; 18:1). The prophet was being reminded of a sobering truth: "The eyes of the LORD are in every place, beholding the evil and the good" (Prov. 15:3). God's eyes were fixed on the prophet and surveyed his sorry situation.

What would God say to him now? The heavenly words were simple yet piercing, and they struck deep into the prophet's heart: "What doest thou here, Elijah?" (1 Kgs. 19:9). What did God mean by such a question? Was it a rebuke, a stern word directed to his conscience?

We do well to remember that God did not need to enquire of the prophet, for He knew that Elijah had fled from Jezebel and absented his post in Israel. Mercifully, the Almighty was giving Elijah the opportunity of speaking for himself and revealing his inner feelings to his God, just as a good father would do with his son.

"I have been very jealous"

Notice the frank and honest reply of the prophet to his God: "I have been very jealous for the LORD God of hosts" (v. 10). The prophet *had* been very jealous for the Lord. However, there is nothing arrogant or immodest in these words; the prophet simply informed God that he had tried his utmost. But in spite of these hearty efforts, the nation of Israel had remained unmoved and unrepentant.

The Hebrew for "jealous" (v. 10) can mean 'envious' or 'zealous'; he was fiercely protective of God's Word and His commandments. He had been prepared to place his life in peril in order to preserve the Truth. If only such righteous indignation governed our motivations today!

Observe that Elijah answered God by employing the title, "the LORD God of hosts [Yahweh Elohim of armies]" (1 Kgs. 19:10; *cf.* v. 14). This is the first time the prophet is recorded as having adopted this particular title of Deity, and interestingly it is only used once before in Scripture, and then only in the narrative (2 Sam. 5:10).

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The Sinai desert, near the traditional site of Mount Horeb

Why then did Elijah use this expression? Surely he believed that God's covenant with His people would be established via force, executed through the strength of His angelic hosts. Elijah would soon learn that God had a different method and a new means.

"I, even I only, am left"

Elijah continued, complaining to God, "I, even I only, am left" (1 Kgs. 19:10; *cf.* v. 14). Evidently on Carmel he had stood alone, and now he repeated the same words as when he stood at that place (18:22). But was the prophet speaking according to his own knowledge and understanding? Was Elijah simply mistaken, or was he overplaying his situation? Was he really the only one in Israel that served God "in sincerity and in truth" (Josh. 24:14; *cf.* 1 Cor. 5:8)?

What about Obadiah, who "feared the LORD greatly" (1 Kgs. 18:3)? And what of the "hundred prophets" (v. 4) who had hidden themselves in caves for fear of their lives? And what about "the prophets of the LORD" (v. 4) whom Jezebel had slain because of their faithful, godly stand? Was Elijah really the last devoted one standing in Israel?

The prophet now recalled his onerous griefs: "for the children of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant, thrown down Thine altars" (19:10). The prophet knew that the Law clearly stated, "Thou shalt have no other gods before Me" (Ex. 20:3). Elijah was deeply troubled because God had been rejected, His commandments broken and His Name dishonoured in the nation of Is-

rael. It is also apparent from what Elijah said that other altars similar to that which was on Carmel (1 Kgs. 18:30) had once stood, but had now been discarded.

Elijah continued by crying, "the children of Israel have . . . slain thy prophets with the sword" (19:10). They had persecuted their own! Though Jezebel had slain the faithful remnant (18:4), she was nevertheless a foreigner; this crime was being levied at the household of faith, the children of Israel. They had consented to the death of the prophets of God and delighted in their loss!

Till this point the prophet had been Israel's advocate, but now he turned into their accuser. The Apostle Paul described Elijah as one who "maketh intercession to God *against* Israel" (Rom. 11:2), whereas Moses, on the same mount, had interceded *on behalf of* Israel (Ex. 34:8,9). Surely Elijah should have brought to mind the words that God had spoken to Samuel—"they [Israel] have not rejected thee, but they have rejected Me" (1 Sam. 8:7)—and not have taken this disappointment so personally. However, this is easy for us to suggest, but in reality far more difficult to put into effect.

"Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD"

God listened attentively to His prophet and then firmly replied, "Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD" (19:11). Elijah was being commanded to witness a remarkable event, a marvellous demonstration of God's power and

might. Note that Moses had been placed *in* the cave when “the LORD passed by before him” (Ex. 33:22; 34:6), but now God called His prophet *out* of the cave.

The narrative now continues: “And, behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind” came (1 Kgs. 19:11). The first sign was a tremendous wind that produced a scene of utter destruction around Elijah; it “rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks”. Just moments before, the prophet had stood in the deepest silence, all was quiet in the bleak wilderness; but now, suddenly, everything changed. The hush was broken with a most terrible blast.

Notice the expression of the Spirit: the mountains broke in pieces “before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind”. Though God orchestrated this manifestation, He chose not to be “in the wind”. What is more, “after the wind an earthquake; but the LORD was not in the earthquake”. Thus around the prophet the very foundations of the mountains rumbled and quaked, hills collapsed and valleys rose, and then, to add to the unfolding drama, “a fire” (v. 12) scorched the rocks. But God was not there.

Elijah surely would have watched awe-struck as the natural elements affected his surroundings. He would have looked on at this inspiring display with an inner feeling of astonishment, along with unreserved terror. But, as the fire, the last of the dreadful demonstrations, disappeared, peace and tranquillity came, except for “a still small voice”.

“A still small voice”

The Hebrew for “still” conveys the idea of ‘silence’, ‘calm’, ‘whisper’; the word for “small” means ‘thin’ or ‘fine’. Rotherham thus translates this phrase, “the voice of a gentle whisper”, and the Septuagint, “a gentle breeze”. The emphasis is that this was indeed a quiet, calming sound, in contrast with the thundering, fear-inducing phenomena that preceded it.

But why was a “still small voice” necessary? Surely it was required to soothe the prophet’s searing spirits, to calm his hot temper, for “Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are” (Jas. 5:17). He desperately needed comfort and consolation, besides a new sense of direction, and the “still small voice” was the new vehicle of God’s instruction to the prophet.

This is certainly an important lesson for us. God is not always to be seen in great displays and wonders, as in the heavenly marvels revealed at

Carmel (1 Kgs. 18:38,45). Often God is revealed and known by His work with individual men and women, through His providential hand, such as was demonstrated with the widow woman at Zarephath and her son (17:16,22). Elijah was to be taught this lesson again.

“The bread of life” (Jno. 6:35,48)

Interestingly, the word ‘small’, in the phrase, “still small voice” (*daq* in the Hebrew), is also used to describe the manna in the wilderness: “a small round thing, as *small* as the hoar frost on the ground” (Ex. 16:14).

Figuratively, Elijah had previously received this bread from heaven, the manna, thrice before (1 Kgs. 17:6,16; 19:6). This “small voice” would, then, have reminded the prophet of God’s tenderness, of His continual mercy and grace. The Lord had sustained the children of Israel beforetime in the wilderness, and now, symbolically, He was preserving His prophet by the same means, in the very same desert. How wonderful are the ways of our God!

A beautiful exhortation is surely to be found here: God can only be understood and known through His Word, even “the bread of life” (Jno. 6:35,48), for “the bread of God is he which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world” (v. 33). And the lesson to be learned is: “if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever” (v. 51).

The shortfalls in the Law

These events at Horeb certainly bring to mind the solemnities of Sinai, with its “thunders and lightnings”, when God “descended upon it in fire” and the whole mount “quaked greatly” (Ex. 19:16,18). Yet the point of this comparison is overlooked if we do not observe that “the LORD was not in the wind”, neither was He “in the earthquake”, nor “in the fire” (1 Kgs. 19:11,12). Yahweh was not dealing with Elijah on the grounds of the legal covenant; this was something altogether different.

What was being demonstrated was the shortfalls in the Law, for what the rituals of the Mosaic order were incapable of doing, the new covenant, the gospel or good news, was able to deliver. The lesson is simply, “Not by might, nor by power, but by My spirit, saith the LORD of hosts” (Zech. 4:6). The raging wind, the trembling earthquake and the scorching fire all symbolised the terror-inducing Law; but, in sharp contrast, the “still small voice” is a quite beautiful symbol for the

gentleness of "the gospel of peace" (Rom. 10:15; Eph. 6:15), which calms and soothes troubled hearts.

Elijah had evidently "not come unto the mount . . . that burned with fire, nor unto blackness, and darkness, and tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and the *voice* of words", which the Israelites had previously been brought to under Moses, "which *voice* they that heard intreated that the word should not be spoken to them any more" (Heb. 12:18,19). But rather, Elijah had been addressed by the "still small *voice*", which was an indication that he had finally "come unto mount Sion" (v. 22), the mount of grace. And this *voice* was most inviting.

Foreshadowing the work of Christ

Observe also the sequence: the terrors came before the calm; the Law would come before the gospel was preached. This was God's ultimate design. Indeed, the Lord would employ His elements of wind, earthquake and fire before He would send His "King of peace" (7:2), who would then provide a "joyful sound" (Ps. 89:15) and would declare, "Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me" (Jno. 14:1; cf. v. 27).

Furthermore, the prophet Isaiah makes a distinction between such softly spoken words and those which were noisy and terrifying: "Behold My servant, whom I uphold; Mine elect, in whom My soul delighteth; I have put My spirit upon him: he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles. *He shall not cry, nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street.* A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench: he shall bring forth judgment unto truth" (42:1-3).

This speaks of the first advent of Christ, when the Lord Jesus preached the gospel, the good news, "concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 8:12). And the inviting words that Jesus spoke to those who would listen were simply "come, follow me" (Lk. 18:22; cf. 9:23).

However, Isaiah goes on to describe a time when Divine judgements will be poured out upon the earth: "The LORD shall go forth as a mighty man, He shall stir up jealousy like a man of war: *He shall cry, yea, roar;* He shall prevail against His enemies. I have long time holden My peace; I have been still, and refrained Myself: *now will I cry like*

a travailing woman; I will destroy and devour at once" (42:13,14).

This speaks directly about an era yet to come, which we all earnestly wait for, when the Lord Jesus returns to the earth as King. On his return he will no longer apply the "still small voice", but will "cry, yea, roar" (v. 13), even as "a lion roareth" (Rev. 10:3), when he brings judgement upon the nations.

"Behold, there came a voice unto him"

What was Elijah's response to such an awe-inspiring display? The prophet's feelings of trepidation are made apparent: "when Elijah heard it . . . he wrapped his face in his mantle" (1 Kgs. 19:13). He "heard" first, then he reacted. The prophet was simply too fearful to look upon God (cf. Ex. 3:6; Gen. 3:10, "I hid myself").

It is of note that Moses had been informed by God on the same mount, "Thou canst not see My face: for there shall no man see Me, and live" (Ex. 33:20). So Elijah, as if recalling this incident, covered his face. However, though he hid his face he still "went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave" (1 Kgs. 19:13). Although the elements had terrorised the prophet, the "still small voice" had drawn him, and brought him out of his feeling of self-pity and discouragement (cf. v. 4).

It was in this new-found openness that, "behold, there came a voice unto him" (v. 13). Perceive that Elijah experienced something altogether new; previously he had been visited by "the word of the LORD" (17:2,8; 18:1; cf. 21:17,28), but this was "a voice". Was this new means of instruction a way of preparing the prophet for a time when he would be sent forth "before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD" (Mal. 4:5)? This suggestion gains further credibility when we bring to mind the introductory words of Malachi on Elijah's future work: "Remember ye the law of Moses My servant, which I commanded unto him *in Horeb* for all Israel" (v. 4).

Finally, after witnessing the "still small voice" and hearing "a voice", it is enlightening that the prophet still responded with the words, "I, even I only, am left" (1 Kgs. 19:14; cf. v. 10). Again Elijah is overwhelmed by the feelings of loneliness and destitution. But Elijah was soon to learn the sobering truth, for God was about to inform him, "I have left Me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal" (v. 18). He was not alone.

(To be continued)