

REACHING OUT TO HEAR THE VOICE OF GOD

Personal Testimony

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Elijah looked out upon a cold, gray dawn. It had been a long, difficult journey to the mountain of God. Filled with anguish and dread, the aged prophet had been so exhausted during his journey that the Lord had sent angelic visitors to provide food and drink along the way. Having traveled for many days, Elijah had finally reached Mount Sinai, the place where God had given the Ten Commandments to Moses. Looking down upon the desert landscape, the weariness that Elijah felt was more than just physical exhaustion. He was worn out, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. He had been serving the Lord for many years. He had confronted a wicked king and his pagan wife, Jezebel. He had hidden from arrest because he was blamed for having caused the drought that had plagued the land. He had even led a religious revival on the slopes of Mount Carmel. Nothing, however, had really changed. The people were just as wayward and just as idolatrous as before. They gave lip service to the God of Israel while continuing to worship at the pagan altars of Baal and Asherah. Now Jezebel had put a price on his head. She said she was going to kill him and no one had come to his defense. He felt alone, isolated, separated from everything and everyone, even his God.

Having now returned to the place where the Lord had revealed Himself so powerfully to Moses and the people of Israel, would God once more speak to a weary old prophet in the same thunderous voice as He had centuries earlier? Elijah was accustomed to those kind of divine revelations. Had that not been true when he addressed God on Mount Carmel? He had asked God to send fire to consume the sacrificial offering and the Lord answered with a flame of fire from heaven that consumed not only the sacrifice, but even the rocks on which it had been placed. Now that he was at the holy mountain, perhaps the Lord would speak to him once more in that same way. He waited with heightened anticipation. A great wind began to whip across the slopes of the mountain, but Elijah could not sense a divine presence within that storm. Afterwards an earthquake shook the mountain, but God was not a part of that rocky upheaval either. Then a fire, a bolt of lightning came

crashing down out of the heavens just like it had at Mount Carmel. But God's voice was not evident even there. It was only after all of the uproar was over that Elijah heard a voice, a gentle whisper, an awareness of a divine presence in the quiet tranquility that followed the sound and fury of all of those natural phenomenon.

Gathering his cloak around himself, Elijah went out and stood at the mouth of the cave, waiting to hear what the Lord would say to him. It came in the form of a question, "Elijah, what are you doing here?" Elijah's answer revealed the depth of his despair, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left and now they are trying to kill me too" (1 Kings 19:14). Elijah was literally at the end of his rope and he didn't know how much longer he could hold on. It was evident, however, that the Lord thought he could handle one last assignment. He was to pick a successor who would take up the mantle of prophetic leadership and he was to appoint two new kings, one for Syria and one for Israel. Then the Lord shared one last thing with Elijah, "There were yet 7,000 people who had not bowed down to Baal, who had not abandoned the Lord" (1 Kings 19:18). God was telling Elijah, "You are not alone, even though you feel that way." He was also telling him that it was time to end his pity party and get back to work.

So what does this rather lengthy account about God speaking to an Old Testament prophet have to say to us today, especially with regards to hearing the voice of God? It tells us that God speaks to His people in a multitude of ways. The first way is through his creation. Psalm 19 says, "The heavens declare the glory of God and the skies proclaim the work of His hands" (Psalm 19:1). Elijah, of course, knew this to be true because he was a man who lived in the outdoors. God had spoken to him through the forces of nature and that had been his expectation when he arrived at Mount Sinai. But is the same true today? Years ago I met a young man who told me about meeting the Lord during a windstorm. Trying to find himself after a life of drugs and petty larceny, he was hiking the Appalachian Trail. Befriended by a group of Christians who had encouraged him to open his heart to Christ, he was still wrestling with that decision when the storm hit. The swirling winds on that mountain side were like the inner storm of feelings and emotions that were raging within him. The next morning the storm had calmed down and so had his anxieties. God had spoken to him during that stormy night and now He possessed the kind of inner peace that can only come from the Lord.

The Lord can also speak to us through His Word. Saint Paul wrote, "All Scripture is inspired, God-breathed, and is useful for teaching, rebuking,

correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). God's Word is like a winsome voice falling upon our ears.

Elijah, of course, knew that as well. After all he was a spokesman for God. He delivered divine messages from God for His people. That was his job. He was a prophet. Today, of course, we have the written Word of God, a message that covers a span of nearly 2,000 years and God still speaks very clearly to us through its pages. A young man had finally found a job during the Great Depression. He was hired to be a dishwasher in a large hotel. His payment was a room in the attic of the hotel and leftovers from meals in the establishment's restaurant. Arriving after his first day on the job, he walked into a little room late that night seeing nothing more than a bed and a small nightstand. On that nightstand was a Gideon Bible. Alone and not knowing what to do with himself before going to bed, he opened the Bible and began to read. On his knees later that night he met Jesus Christ and gave his life to Him. The Lord had most assuredly spoken to him.

Yes, God can speak to us through His creation and through His Word. There is, however, a third way in which He can speak to us, just like He did to Elijah. He can speak to us spiritually. Within each of us there is a second pair of ears, spiritual ears which are capable of hearing the voice of God. Unfortunately, sometimes we don't pay attention to what our spiritual ears are hearing. We're either not listening very carefully or we're letting a noisy world distract us. If we are really alert to what our spiritual ears are hearing, there will be times when we might actually hear God's voice, like the Old Testament story of Samuel hearing God calling his name. At other times God's voice may be more like an impression, a strong inclination to do this or that. Make no mistake, God does speak to His children. Years ago I was called to the home of one of our new Christians. She had just joined the church. When I arrived the police were just leaving. She had been mugged at a local shopping center. The thief had knocked her down and stolen her purse. Thankfully, except for a few bruises, she was okay. This is what she told me. She said, "Getting ready to go shopping, I had this strangest feeling. It was like someone whispering in my ear, 'Stay home. You shouldn't go shopping today.'" Unfortunately I didn't listen to that little voice inside of me and now this has happened." She was convinced that she had received a divine warning which she regretfully didn't obey.

Let me close with this illustration. A man started constructing a little building, not much bigger than a small room, in the backyard of his home. His neighbors were curious. Some thought it was going to be a tool shed. Others surmised it might be an exercise studio. They became so curious that one day they all got together and asked him, "What are you building in

your back yard?" The man replied, "This is going to be my listening room, the place I go to commune with God."

So let me ask you this morning, "Do you have a listening room, a place where you and the Lord can spend some time together?" I am reminded of what Jesus said on one occasion with regards to prayer. He told His followers that they should not be like the religious hypocrites who liked to be praised for their lengthy prayers. Instead He told them, "When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (Matthew 6:6). In the past, this kind of place for spending time with God was known as a "prayer closet." It might even be called a listening room, somewhere either inside or outside your home that is set aside for your time with the Lord. Wherever and whatever it is, what kind of reward do you suppose Jesus was talking about when He encouraged His followers to pray in secret? How about the inner joy and peace you'll experience, knowing that in this place of personal solitude you may not only feel God's presence, but also hear His voice speaking to you in the quiet stillness of that occasion.