

The Sound of Sheer Silence

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

4 of 7 in the Elijah series: *Truth and Life*

August 1, 2010

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1 Kings 19:1–18 (NRSV)

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. ² Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, “So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.” ³ Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there.

⁴ But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: “It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.” ⁵ Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, “Get up and eat.” ⁶ He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. ⁷ The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, “Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” ⁸ He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. ⁹ At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.

Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” ¹⁰ He answered, “I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.”

¹¹ He said, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; ¹² and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. ¹³ When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” ¹⁴ He answered, “I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.” ¹⁵ Then the LORD said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. ¹⁶ Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. ¹⁷ Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. ¹⁸ Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.”

Have you ever felt that you'd had enough? That you just couldn't go on, all while God seemed a million miles away? Surprisingly, given last week's story of Elijah's victory over the prophets of Baal, burn-out is just where Elijah finds himself.

It is hard not to enjoy the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18.¹ It is all about winning and triumph. Everyone can see that Elijah had been right all along. Not only was YHWH² strong and mighty, but Baal was a figment of his worshipper's collective imaginations. There couldn't be a bigger win. It's like watching the end of the movie *Rudy*; you want to jump and raise your arms in triumph.

But today's story, the “what happened next” story, is a different matter.

¹This story is the subject of last week's Bible study, the third in this series (July 25, 2010). It, and the entire collection of more than 400 Weekly Bible Studies, is available for download at www.scottengle.org.

²The name of God, usually rendered as LORD in English translation.

On the run . . . again

Elijah was worn out, exhausted. Such a long and emotional day. The triumph over the wicked prophets of that idol, Baal. And then the fight. So much blood. So much death.

Rain was about to arrive, sure. Elijah wasn't surprised by that. He knew the stakes and he knew what the outcome would be. Elijah had even warned Ahab to hurry up and get off the mountain, for the LORD God wasn't going to just make it rain. God was going to make it rain BIG. Flashing, slashing cascades of rain and runoff were about to swamp them all.

So Ahab climbed into his chariot and headed down the mountain. Elijah turned to head home, or at least his "home" for the night. At that moment, Elijah felt that God-thing again. He was never quite sure what to make of it; those moments when he experienced God's urgings quite clearly, almost as if YHWH was standing right there next to him. This time, YHWH wanted him to race Ahab's chariot to the town of Jezreel, where Jezebel was waiting. It seemed insane, but that is how it often seemed with the LORD. But Elijah knew that it was God urging him onward. So he gathered himself, breathed in some resolve, and headed off, running hard and running steady. This day was long from over.

Somehow, for it had to be a God thing, Elijah arrived at the city gates ahead of Ahab. Little good it seemed to do him. For when Ahab told Jezebel of YHWH's triumph and the killing of all Baal's prophets, the queen's rage flared like the birth of a new star. She yelled for a messenger and sent him running with a message for Elijah that read something like this:

Elijah,
You should have stayed with the widow. You know how quickly your bonfire consumed those cow parts? Well, may the same thing happen to me if you are not dead by this time tomorrow! Prepare to meet your god.

Jezebel

Not waiting to hear what God might have to say about this, Elijah took off. He ran, just as he had run after first coming to Ahab and announcing the drought. Of course, then it had been God who told him to run. Now, Elijah was just afraid.

So he ran and kept running, his servant with him. Pushing themselves to the limit, they headed south, through Samaria, and then even into Judah. Elijah wanted to get far beyond the powerful reach of Jezebel.

When they came to the town of Beer-sheba, southwest of Jerusalem, Elijah's servant stayed put, but Elijah pushed on alone. Further south, into the wilderness, the rough, nearly uninhabitable deserts to the east and south of Canaan.

After a day's travel across this desert, Elijah was done, cooked, spent in a way he had never imagined possible. So he found a lone tree and sat down under it, quietly telling God that he was ready to die. Then he stretched out and fell asleep.

Suddenly, an angel touched him and told him to eat. He opened his astonished eyes and right there, next to his head, was some bread that had been warmed on hot stones. Next to it was a jar of fresh, cooling water. The angel told him to eat

Then the angel touched him a second time, speaking again. Elijah better get up; he was going to need the nourishment for the journey ahead.

So Elijah, never one to be taken for a fool or to disobey an angel, ate and drank it all. In a desert wilderness, you never know when you might get food and water again.

As he ate, he contemplated this latest turn of events. He had been ready, even eager, to die and had told God as much. And what had he gotten in return? Food and water. I guess we'd say have to say his prayer was answered with what he needed, not what he wanted.

On the strength of that meal, Elijah pressed on. He traveled southward for the longest time, forty days and nights, all the way to Mt. Horeb, aka Mt. Sinai. It was the mountain of God where Moses had first met God at the burning bush and where God had first brought his people after redeeming them from slavery in Egypt.

Elijah found a cave at the base of the mountain and slept there for the night.

Soon, Elijah felt God with him again. That same urgent clarity. God asked him what he was doing at God's mountain. So Elijah, knowing full well that God already knew the answer, told God the story as briefly as he could.

Elijah heard God again. This time God told him to go stand outside so that he could experience directly the presence of God. But before he could even leave the cave, a

Jezebel

Google "jezebel" and you get nearly 5 million hits, most of which have nothing to do with the Phoenician princess who married King Ahab and became a symbol of apostasy (turning away from God). For example, www.ilovejezebel.com is a website that sells greeting cards for those who like gin . . . or something like that. You get my point.

Jezebel has long captured the popular imagination. In Revelation 20, the name Jezebel is given to a seductive prophetess who encouraged immorality and idolatry under the cloak of religion.

"Jezebel" came to be a symbol for evil women. A famous 1938 movie by that name starred Bette Davis and told the story of Julie woman, a calculating, perhaps promiscuous, young woman who proudly wore a braided red dress to an important ball. (Yes, it was a different age.)

In our day the name seems often co-opted by marketers trying to appeal to some secret (or perhaps not so secret) desire to be naughty. Check out www.jezebel.com and you'll see what I mean. The home page features an ad with the Old Spice guy!

In the Bible, Jezebel is portrayed as an evil woman who seduces the people of God away from God. Her power continued for a decade after the death of King Ahab. Jezebel became the powerful queen-mother to her son, Ahaziah.

mighty wind began to buffet the mountain that was unlike any storm Elijah had experienced. Remembering the stories of Moses at this very mountain, Elijah thought at first that God was in this unearthly wind. But God was not.

Then an earthquake shook the mountain to its core. Surely, Elijah thought, this had to be God. But it was not.

Then a fire came, much like the one that had burned but not consumed Moses' bush. This just had to be God. Elijah knew the stories well. God had always come to his people in this way. In thunder and wind and storms and fire. They all spoke powerfully of the powerful YHWH. . . . But even in the fire, there was no God.

Then there came only the sound of sheer silence.³ And in that exquisite calm, Elijah knew that God was present. So he covered his face with his mantle⁴ and stepped outside the cave. Then God asked exactly the same question he asked before. And Elijah gave exactly the same answer.

Elijah wondered where this was heading and he soon found out. God had more work for him yet. No rest for the weary and all that.

³The NRSV translates the Hebrew as "the sound of sheer silence." The KJV used the well-known phrase, "a still small voice," implying that God was now speaking quietly to Elijah. This way of reading the Hebrew survives in the NIV ("a quiet whisper") and some other translations. Perhaps disappointingly to some of us, the Hebrew here says nothing about God speaking, it simply is about silence or perhaps a hushed sound. How we wish the writer told us more!

⁴A mantle (v. 13) was a shawl-like outer garment. It is to Elijah what Moses' staff was to him. Elijah covers his face because he knows that God told Moses he could not see God's face and live.

Elijah is to head northward, anoint a couple of kings along the way and also anoint another prophet, a man with a confusingly similar name to Elijah's . . . Elisha.

The Lord God is going to cleanse the Baal worship from the northern kingdom of Israel once and for all. There will be seven thousand that will prove true to YHWH, God tells Elijah. There is hard work and hard times ahead.

So Elijah set out from the mountain, beginning the long trek northward.

Burned out and depressed . . . but not alone

Quite a story. By the time Elijah gets to the wilderness he is used up. But he presses on one more day. The wilderness, you see, is the place people go to die. And at the end of that day, he lays down to die. I'm sure the contrast of triumph and defeat all in one day are too much for him. There's just nothing left in his tank. He's been running on fumes and now even they fail him.

But God does not fail him. An angel brings him nourishment for another long journey, this time to God's mountain. And there, this burned out, depressed, ready-to-die man encounters God as no one before had, at least not as we get the story in Scripture. Elijah doesn't get any of the usual spectacular manifestations of God's presence, like thunder or a pillar of fire; he gets God in the sound of sheer silence.

It is striking that despite the angel's intervention, Elijah is burned out when he gets to God's mountain and is still burned out after God's visit. God's presence is no instant cure. Elijah responds to God with the exact same things-are-bleak words as before he experienced God's presence outside the cave.

Yet, God doesn't let him go, doesn't give him a pass. Perhaps it is this way for us as well. When we are used up and have had enough, God can see what we cannot, a future still filled with surprising possibilities. Elijah got through his crisis, but it was God who not only dragged him through it but refused to let go. God wouldn't let Elijah give up. It is as if God shoved him forward into his future. God still had work for Elijah. And God always has work for us as well, for, like Paul, we are ministers of the new covenant (2 Cor. 3:6), bearing witness to the Good News in all that we say and do.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Have you been through a time of burnout, when you felt used up, that you'd just had enough? Can you recall how you felt at the time? What was the state of your faith during that time? Did the difficulties make you feel closer to God or further away?

Certainly, in Elijah's case, the burnout and his relationship with God seem to have been intertwined. He stands in the presence of God just as Moses had, yet Elijah is so lost in his own malaise that he is unchanged by the encounter – the same response before and after. It is as if God is in the room and Elijah just sits there, staring blankly into the distance, lost in his own misery and emptiness.

Perhaps it was just as hard for Elijah to compartmentalize himself (burned out in one part, faith strong in the other) as it is for us. The reason we don't compartmentalize well is that God has created us as whole persons. We are to love God with our heart, our mind, our soul, and our strength. Every bit of ourselves. We are, each of us, a unity. We can't chop ourselves up into parts, or at least not for long. In good times and bad.

2. When have you personally experienced God's presence with you? How about those times when it seemed that God was somewhere else? Discuss how an affirmative core conviction of God's presence in the person of the Holy Spirit would help to reassure you that God is always present with you? Can our head really help us to overcome feelings of being separated from God? How do you strive to connect with God?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Exodus 3 Moses meets the LORD God at a burning bush at Mt. Sinai aka Mt. Horeb.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Exodus 33:17-23 Moses encounters God and must cover his face as God passes by.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Revelation 22:1-7 All God's people will one day see God's face (verse 4).</p>	<p>Thursday, Matthew 4:1-17 Jesus spends his own very difficult 40 days and nights in the wilderness.</p>
<p>Friday, Romans 8:31-39 Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. It was true for Elijah and it is true for you and me.</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

