

The Lord Teaches Elijah a Lesson

1 Kings 19:9-14

1 Kings 19:9-14 – *“And there he went into a cave, and spent the night in that place; and behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and He said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” So he said, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life.”*

Then He said, “Go out, and stand on the mountain before the LORD.” And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore into the mountains and broke the 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; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire a still small voice. So it was, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave. Suddenly a voice came to him, and said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

And he said, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God of hosts; because the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life.”

Background Notes

In this section of the chapter, we find Elijah hiding in a cave at Mount Sinai. He had run away in fear from wicked Queen Jezebel. At Mount Sinai God used an object lesson to teach His servant some valuable lessons.

After Elijah's great victory over the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel, and the return of the rains after Elijah's prayer, Elijah's faith took a nosedive. When Jezebel threatened to kill him within 24 hours, the great prophet Elijah ran for his life. He went all the way south to Mount Sinai, about 300 miles away from Jezebel. Mount Sinai is where the Lord gave His Law to Israel, more than 500 years before Elijah's time.

When he arrived at Mount Sinai, Elijah went into a cave and spent the night there. It's significant that the Hebrew text reads **“the cave”** - not just **“a cave.”** This cave **may** be the very cleft of the rock where God placed Moses, when the Lord showed Moses His glory. We can't be sure, but it's interesting that the Hebrew text says **“the cave”** - possibly the specific cleft in the rock where Moses saw God's glory.

In any case, Elijah probably went to Mount Sinai because he knew it was the mountain of God. He was hoping not only for protection, but also that God might possibly speak to him and explain what was going on. Why hadn't Ahab turned back to the Lord? Why was Jezebel still in power? Why didn't the Lord finish the job?

Well, God did speak to Elijah. He asked him a question: *“What are you doing here, Elijah?”* That reminds us of the question that God asked Adam in the Garden of Eden, *“Adam, where are you?”* If God had asked Elijah this question in English, on what word would He have put the emphasis? Maybe, *“Elijah what are **you** doing here? My great servant, my courageous prophet, what are **you** doing here?”* Or maybe He would have said it this way: *“Elijah, what are you doing **here**? What are you doing way down **here** at Mount Sinai, 300 miles from Jezreel, where you should be continuing your ministry?”*

Either way, it was a mild rebuke, and it indicated that Elijah was out of the will of the Lord at that time. Notice that Elijah didn't directly answer the question: *“I have been very zealous for the Lord God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life”(v10).* Elijah's answer showed that he felt sorry for himself. He was filled with self-pity, and somewhat bitter. He wanted to justify himself., and to have his service for the Lord acknowledged!

At this point God gave Elijah an object lesson: a great wind - a great earthquake - a fire - and then a “still small voice.” A gentle whisper. Instead of a reprimand (“Elijah, you should be ashamed of yourself”), God taught Elijah patiently and quietly. And that's the normal way God reprimands His children. He patiently teaches while He reprimands us.

God's patience with Elijah is seen after the object lesson of the wind, the earthquake, the fire. In the still small voice God again asked the same question: *“What are you doing here, Elijah?”* And Elijah gave the same answer. At least Elijah showed some reverence at this point, because he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out to stand at the entrance of the cave. But once again it was a self-centered answer (v14). Once again, rather than sternly reprimanding Elijah by saying, *“Haven't you learned anything from this object lesson, Elijah?”* God patiently dealt with His servant. God answered every point that Elijah made in the next few verses

What did this object lesson mean? Bible commentaries on 1 Kings have all kinds of explanations, but we'll look at two meanings. I believe both are correct.

Doctrinal Points

1. The ways of the Lord are more than spectacular.

Elijah had seen the Lord work in dramatic and spectacular ways. He had seen God turn the rains off. He had seen a 3 ½ year drought. He had seen the fire of the Lord fall from heaven at Mount Carmel. He had seen the rains suddenly return. He had seen dramatic and spectacular events. And perhaps Elijah was getting used to those spectacular ways! He may have been wondering now why God didn't finish the job He had begun at Mount Carmel, and send lightning down on wicked Ahab and Jezebel?

Through an object lesson, God wanted to teach Elijah that He can do the spectacular - but He also works in less spectacular ways. So God sent a strong wind that broke the rocks, and then a fearsome earthquake, and then a blazing fire - but God was not present in any of these. Then came a "still small voice." Through it God was saying, "Elijah, don't you see? I work in ways other than just the spectacular. I can work in spectacular ways, but I also work behind the scenes, in gentle ways, even in the nation of Israel."

We need to learn this truth as well. We love to see God do the spectacular, don't we? We love the dramatic stories about great answers to prayer and tremendous ministry events - the kinds of things that fill Christian books. We love that kind of stuff! But God works in quiet and less dramatic ways as well.

The ways of the Lord are more than spectacular. For example, at Christina camps God is working in the spectacular events, like how many kids came to know the Lord Jesus. He's also working in the less dramatic, less spectacular ways, like the faithful attitude of the kitchen staff! The ways of the Lord are more than spectacular.

2. The works of the Lord are more than judgment.

Elijah had seen the judgment of God upon Israel when God stopped the rains. Elijah had seen the judgment of God upon Israel in the confrontation with the false prophets of Baal. But Elijah had expected more of God's works of judgment. Ahab had not repented. Jezebel was still in power. "Come on Lord, where's the lightning?"

And the Lord said to Elijah, "Of course I can do great works of judgment - by wind, by earthquake, by fire. All of these things, by the way, can be seen not only as God's presence, but particularly of God's judgment. Elijah would have known this.

But the Lord was not in the wind, the earthquake, and the fire. He was in the still small voice. In essence God was saying, "Don't you see Elijah, I want more than just judgment. I want to speak to the people. I want to communicate with the people."

And we need to learn this lesson as well. So often we have an Elijah-like attitude when we see evil around us. "Why don't You zap them Lord? Look how everyone has broken Your laws, walked away from You, torn down altars and disrespected Your prophets. I'm the only faithful person left, and they'd even like to get rid of me! I want to give up. Just let me die. "

Sometimes we have that discouraged, bitter attitude. But just as He did with Elijah, the Lord tells us: "Sure, I can do works of judgment - and I will! But right now I want people to know Me - to hear the gospel!" And that's another part of the meaning to this lesson that we need to learn. The works of the Lord are more than judgment.

Practical Applications

1. What are you doing here?

Are you feeling sorry for yourself? Is it possible that you, today, are engaged in self-pity? Maybe you're even a little bitter, wanting to justify your service for the Lord. Maybe you don't exactly like what God is doing. "Lord I try to serve you but nobody appreciates me." Or, "Lord everybody's doing their own thing; they're all out to get me." Or, "Why don't you do something Lord? I've done everything I can."

What is the Lord's answer? "What are you doing here? A pity party is no place for you. I'm still at work in your life and in your ministry. Maybe not in spectacular ways, but certainly in a small, gentle way." That's certainly an application for us in this question.

Is it possible the Lord is asking you that question right now? What do **you** doing here? Maybe you're not walking with the Lord. Maybe you're involved in some things that you shouldn't be involved in, and the Lord would ask us that question: "What are you doing in that situation?" Let's all think about that question as a practical application in our own lives. What are you doing here?

2. Let's listen for God's still, small voice.

I don't mean this in a mystical way, like trying some form of meditation in an effort to hear a voice in a "spiritual experience." What I mean is, we all need to take time to let God speak to us. We need to take time to listen to God's "still, small voice."

Sometimes we get so busy that we don't take time to read God's Word, or we read it so quickly that we don't have time to reflect on what God is trying to tell us. Or we're so into the big dramatic things that God does, that we don't recognize or pay attention to God speaking in the small things. We like the big answers to prayer! We like what's going on in the big dramatic ministries! But what about God's still, small voice, speaking in the small ways that we overlook or forget?

What about the incremental growth in your life by the hard work of quietly memorizing Scripture? What about those small answers to prayers - not just the big ones, but the small ones, too? God is speaking in the "small" answers. That's His gentle voice. That's His still, small voice. God is at work in your life, and He is at work in the lives of others around you. Let's listen for God's still, small voice!