

3 June 2007

## “The Sound of a Gentle Quietness”

1 Kings 19:1-18

There are times in our lives when we are in particular need of encouragement and possibly redirection. God may need to rectify a cherished notion or to steer us on a new course, to enlarge our vision or to thrust us into uncharted territory. It may be that you are at such a point this morning. One way or the other, we can all learn something from the account before us. At first glance, it contains some real surprises. Even without the background information that helps us to understand its significance, we can sense that the events described here are of huge import. But we can only really understand the meaning of the encounter between God and his disconsolate prophet against the background of the preceding events. So let me briefly recount the events that led to God’s appearance to Elijah.

### **I THE ENCOUNTER WE ARE ABOUT TO WITNESS FOLLOWS ONE OF THE MOST DRAMATIC MOMENTS IN ISRAEL’S HISTORY.**

#### **A. The nation was in the grip of Baal worship.**

The writer of 1 Kings informs us that King Ahab “did more to provoke the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger than did all the kings of Israel before him” (1 Kings 16:33). He had married a Phoenician princess by the name of Jezebel. She was she a fanatical devotee of the Canaanite god, Baal Melqart and she actively promoted the worship of Baal in Israel, supporting eight hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and his consort Asherah and executing any of the prophets of Yahweh who stood in her way.

#### **B. But God appointed a prophet by the name of Elijah.**

His name means, “My God is Yahweh” and his entire ministry is contained in his name. He proclaimed a drought (1 Kings 17:1). Then, from the perspective of both the king and the nation, he seemed to disappear into thin air. We know that God preserved him in the most amazing way. We also know that after three and a half years, he confronted King Ahab (James 5:17).

#### **C There follows one of the most amazing showdowns of all time.**

I wish I could spend time on this confrontation this morning. But that is not where our focus is. Suffice it to say that, despite all their antics, the prophets of Baal were powerless and God sent fire at the simple request of Elijah. The false prophets were executed. Elijah then prayed that it would rain, and rain it did. Elijah had said, in the name of Yahweh, that there would be neither dew nor rain (*matar*, a drizzle) in the land except at his word. After he prayed he announced to Ahab that a deluge (*geshem*) was on its way and that he had better put his chariot

into top gear and speed to Jezreel before he got bogged down in the deluge. Elijah had laid his life on the line. In terms of prophets, he was outnumbered four and fifty to one; he had challenged an antagonistic king, and he had summoned a fickle and idolatrous nation.<sup>1</sup> And he had won!

Can you imagine how he felt? His audacious actions and his taunts were not the result of an adrenalin rush. He wanted to underline for the people the contrast between the impotence of Baal and the omnipotence of Yahweh. No doubt he would have felt exhilarated and vindicated. After three and a half years of lonely preparation, the victory had been won. The offending prophets were dead. The people had responded: “Yahweh – he is God! Yahweh – he is God!” King Ahab, who had compromised so badly, could be in no doubt regarding the powerlessness of Baal or the greatness of Yahweh. Baal worship was a thing of the past. *Or was it?*

## **II THERE IS AN ASONISHING REVERSAL AND WE CAN HARDLY BELIEVE OUR EARS.**

### **A. The man who seemed fearless is afraid and runs for his life (19:1-9).**

When Jezebel heard the news, and especially that Elijah had executed the false prophets, she sent him a curt message: “May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them” (2). The text tells us that “Elijah was afraid and ran for his life” (3). Some commentators argue that the Hebrew text could be understood differently.<sup>2</sup> Apparently they cannot credit the sudden change. The context, however, makes it clear that Elijah did not flee into the desert on a spiritual retreat (“for his soul”). Jezebel’s threat knocked the wind right out of his sails. It’s not hard to see why he would have imagined that he’d achieved victory in one fell swoop. Jezebel’s threat caught him off-guard. Apparently nothing had changed. Not only was he despondent; he became virtually suicidal. He sat down under a broom tree and prayed that he might die. “I have had enough LORD. Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors” (4).

### **B. We, too, may experience something similar.**

Have you never had a reversal something like this? Not as dramatic, perhaps and possibly less was at stake. But so often a spiritual victory is followed by a disheartening setback. At the end of what you thought was a breakthrough, there is a stark reminder that the battle is not over and the problem still exists. The let-down sends you plummeting.

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<sup>1</sup> Apparently the prophets of Asherah did not show up. Iain W. Provan, *New International Biblical Commentary*, 1 and 2 Kings (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 140.

<sup>2</sup> C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, no date, reprinted 1985), 253.

It is interesting to see how God dealt with Elijah, providing him with some food and water and sending him to Mount Horeb by a round-about route (“forty days and forty nights”; cf. Ex. 24:18; 34:28). Here the narrative is full of important clues. We hear echoes from the past.

### **III IF WE ARE TO UNDERSTAND WHAT GOD WAS SAYING TO ELIJAH AND HOW THIS APPLIES TO US TODAY, WE NEED TO SEE THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SINAI.**

Several important things had taken place at Mt. Horeb (or Mt. Sinai, as it is usually called).

#### **A. It was there that God “called to” Moses from within the burning bush.**

*There was fire!*

#### **B. It was there, at the same mountain, that God had entered into a covenant with his people and given them the law.**

Do you remember what happened? The people were instructed to wash their clothes and cut themselves off from all impurity. The mountain itself was cordoned off – they were not to come too close to it. On the third day there was awesome thunder and lightening. A thick cloud descended on the mountain. There was a deafening trumpet blast which grew louder and louder. Fire came down upon the mountain and smoke billowed from it. The mountain quaked and the nation trembled. In response they said to Moses, “You talk to us and we will listen, but don’t let God talk to us or we’ll die (Ex 19:14-20-21)! *There was fire and there was an earthquake.*

#### **C. It was there, on that mountain, that Moses interceded for the nation.**

God revealed that what they had done deserved his punishment and suggested that he would blot them out and start the nation afresh with Moses. But Moses prayed – “Please forgive their sin – but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.” The nation had turned to idols but Moses prayed for their forgiveness (Ex 32:9-10, 31-32). Once before, one man had stood out from an idolatrous nation, but, as a true priest, he identified with them and refused to contemplate a future without them. In view of Elijah’s situation, Moses’ prayer was highly significant.

#### **D. It was there that Moses prayed to the LORD: “Now show me your glory.”**

The LORD responded: I will cause all my goodness to pass before you, and I will declare my name, Yahweh, in your presence ... But you cannot see my face, for no-one can see my face and live ... When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by” (Ex 33:18-23).

#### **IV NOW LET’S SEE WHAT HAPPENS AND UNDERSTAND WHAT IT MEANS FOR US HERE AND NOW.**

##### **A. *The Cave (?)***

When Elijah eventually reached Horeb, the mountain of God, he went into a cave and spent the night there (9). Interestingly, the definite article (*hamm’arah* - the cave) is used. This, in itself, does not pin-point the cave as the ‘cleft in the rock’ where God had covered Moses with his hand, but the rest of the description leads us to believe that may well have been (Ex. 33:19-23).

##### **B. *The Interchange***

The LORD asks: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” In reply, Elijah says exactly what is on his heart: “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” (10). Literally this could read: “I am left, I, by myself.” Of course, we know that Elijah was wrong, and had Elijah been in a better frame of mind, he himself might have known better.<sup>3</sup> Notice also that it was Jezebel that had threatened to kill him, not the whole nation of Israel. But that’s where he was at the time and that was his perception of the situation. It was lop-sided but it is understandable even if it is not excusable.

Isn’t that what happens to us when we have suffered a setback? We lose sight of so much that God has done. Positive factors are filtered out and the negative looks large. The reversal colors our situation and distorts our perspective.

The LORD said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by” (11). Whatever we say about the cave, we can hardly miss the allusion here. Years before, when Moses was there, the LORD had passed by. Here is Elijah and the LORD is again about to pass by.

Before he could move, a mighty wind came shrieking up the mountain ravines, dislodging rocks and making it feel as though the mountain itself was being torn apart. But, despite the display of power, there was no sense of the presence of God. The LORD was not in the wind (11).

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<sup>3</sup> Consider what Obadiah had told to him (18:9-14).

An earthquake made the solid ground heave and reel but the Lord was not in the earthquake (11).

Fire glared from heaven like that which had fallen on Mount Carmel (and Mount Sinai centuries before). But this was nature's naked force – God was not in the fire (12).

After the fire came “a still, small voice,” as the KJV puts it. The term used here is extremely interesting. It could be translated, “The sound of a gentle silence (or whisper).” The wording is such as to indicate that had it been any softer it would have been completely inaudible.<sup>4</sup>

The atmosphere became charged with a sense of God's presence. (This is not explicitly stated, but it is a fair deduction given the express statements that the LORD was not in the wind, the earthquake and the fire, and Elijah's response). Elijah pulled his cloak over his face and went and stood at the mouth of the cave. Again a voice said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” And, believe it or not, Elijah gave exactly the same answer. At first this seems strange, almost anticlimactic. We might have expected something similar to what Job said: “My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:5-6). But no! He repeats exactly the same complaint: “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” (14).

There is an authenticity in the account. Elijah's *perception of the situation* had not changed at this point. **The importance is located not in what he said to God but in what God said to him:** “Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there anoint Hazael king over Aram. Also anoint Jehu, son of Nimshi, king over Israel, and anoint Elisha, son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel – all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him” (15-18).

### C. The Message

What was going on here? This is not just a character study of an enigmatic prophet. If we had only read the previous two chapters, we might have been

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Jeffrey J. Niehaus' argues that קוֹל דְּמַמְמָה דְּקוֹה can possibly be translated “thunderous voice”, and that this would be consistent with other theophanies. But the context here inclines me towards the traditional translation. If Niehaus is right, the inferences I have drawn in my application, while true in a general sense, would not be warranted by the exegesis of the passage. One would then have to confine the significance of the theophany to the reaffirmation of God's commitment to the covenant. Gary D. Pratico and Miles V. van Pelt, *Basics of Biblical Hebrew Grammar* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 412-3.

inclined to treat Elijah as an audacious hero who single-handedly defeated the prophets of Baal. *The point of the account is not the heroism of Elijah, but the sovereignty of God and his commitment to his own covenant.* To understand what God was saying to Elijah, we need to take the entire situation into account. His “appearance to Elijah was *similar* to his appearance to Moses but also *different* from it. In spelling this out to Elijah, God is, in effect, saying four crucial things. They are not articulated in these precise terms, but when you read the words in the light of the incident, the significance of the encounter is clear. Four important truths concerning God, the way he achieves his purpose in the world and the part we are privileged to play in it. And perhaps he is saying one or more of these things to you today.

1. “Be careful not to limit me to any of your stereotypes.”  
“There is a time for wind and earthquake and fire – and there is a time for a quiet whisper, a hush, the sound of a gentle quietness. I have demonstrated that Baal does not control the natural order.<sup>5</sup> That has been appropriate. I *can* do that. But I don’t have to. I’ll decide *what* and *how* and *when* and *who*.” And don’t we need to remember that too? How easily we allow our past experience to limit our expectations of God and dictate our view of what is appropriate.
2. “I am in complete control and I am perfectly capable of handling the situation.”  
For Baal worship to be eradicated, Ahab would have to go and so would Jezebel – but that’s not what God called *Elijah* to do! It’s important to remember that when your efforts don’t seem to be producing the desired results . . . God’s cause is not lost. Do what he has called *you* to do and realize that as important as your role is, it is part of a bigger picture. If we imagine that God’s cause is entirely dependent on us, we not only miss the plot, we assume a burden that is quite unbearable.
3. “I have any number of instruments.”  
“There is Jehu, who will become king of Israel. And there is Hazael, who will become king of Syria. And there is Elisha who will be your prophetic successor and will continue your ministry. And they will come into office through your instrumentality.” We only have to read on into 2 Kings to understand the role that each of these men played in the elimination of Baal worship (2 Kings 8:7-15; 9, 10).

There was even an anonymous Syria soldier. King Ahab was determined to side-step death so he deliberately disguised himself and kept out of harm’s way in a battle between Israel and Syria. But someone in the

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<sup>5</sup> Baal Melqart’s association was with fertility. His “portfolio” included control over the cycles of nature the weather, lightening, and ultimately life itself.

Syrian army drew his bow at random, shooting an arrow among the Israelite soldiers. It just happened to hit Ahab between the sections of his armor (I Kings 22:29-36). “Elijah, I have any number of instruments. And, by the way, you say, ‘I am left, I, I alone!’ I reserve seven thousand in Israel – all whose knees have not bowed to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him.”

This episode forms part of a much larger picture. God is committed to his plan and it will most certainly come to fruition. Seeming setbacks have to be seen in this light. The larger plan involves the salvation of the nations. You and I are part of a company that may be *unorganized from a human point of view* but is *intricately coordinated from a divine point of view*.

4. “Elijah, I am not finished with you yet.”  
“There will never be another ‘Mt. Carmel’ in your life. But the things you will do away from the crowds will be every bit as significant as what took place there. Your influence on Elisha will be profound. Through him I will complete what I started through you.” In terms of the kingdom, be careful how you evaluate your actions. It may be that the most important contribution you ever make is in the future - away from the crowds. I certainly hope that mine is.

### **Conclusion**

What a significant incident! It speaks, in the first place, of God’s commitment to his own covenant. Despite the unfaithfulness of the covenant people, the fickleness of a weak king and the murderous determination of an imported queen, he remains in control. Can *any* set of circumstances thwart his purpose? You are part of a kingdom that cannot fail. Perhaps God has a message for you today. You may not be as disconsolate as Elijah was. Your memory may not be as selective as his was. You may not doubt God’s greatness, but your expectations of him may be limited. And your assessment of the circumstances in which you find yourself may be jaundiced. You may even have said, “I have had enough! What’s the use?” He wants you to know that he is in absolute control. Whatever you do, don’t limit his future action in your life to your past experience of him! And perhaps he also wants to assure you that he is not finished with you yet.

Ellis André  
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