

God Listens and Whispers

SCOTT HOEZEE

In the movie *City Slickers*, a group of friends is riding on horseback as part of spending a week at a dude ranch out west. At one point, they decide to swap stories. Let's tell each other what was the best day of your life ever and what was the worst day of your life. Eventually one character says: My father used to beat up my mother. He would hit and whack and throw her around something awful. The best day of my life was when I was 14 and I stopped him and told him to never hit her again, and he never did. Wow, one of his friends replies, so what was the worst day of your life? The same day, the man says. Well, oddly enough, something like that happens to Elijah. The best day of his life came in I Kings 18 when his God, Yahweh, provided an enormous victory over the false god, Baal, after a huge showdown on Mount Carmel. A great day, maybe Elijah's best day, but next thing you know, that same day becomes Elijah's worst day ever. How so? Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee. Dave, we are welcoming people back to, now, this third in a four-part series looking at one of the Bible's biggest figures of all – the life and ministry of Elijah.

DAVE BAST

Elijah left no writings behind, so we don't really know what his sermons were like, or what his teaching was; but he spoke through his actions, as they say, and none of them were more dramatic than what happened on Mount Carmel, as we saw on last week's program.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; we started in I Kings 17 with Elijah kind of emerging from out of nowhere, and then a couple of small stories involving a widow and her son in a foreign town in Sidon called Zarephath, but then Elijah comes back to Israel, and he worked in the northern kingdom of Israel that was ruled in that day by King Ahab and Queen Jezebel; they had this big showdown: Who is the real god? You have to make up your minds, Israel. Stop limping between two opinions. Is it Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; or is it Baal? Whoever sends fire from heaven is the true God; and of course, Israel's true God, Yahweh, came through in a big way and Elijah won that contest...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That was I Kings 18, but then we get to I Kings 19 and things change in a hurry.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you would think he'd be on top of the world, really, because this whole story, as we have pointed out repeatedly, is set in the context of a confrontation, really between good and evil, between the true God – the

Lord, Yahweh – the God of Israel – and all these idolatrous gods, especially Baal, and their political supporters in Ahab and Jezebel; so they’ve got the power on their side, the army; and this whole second army, so to speak, of priests of Baal, or Baal’s devotees. So, it is a physical confrontation as well as a spiritual one, and in the physical fallout there is a fight that breaks out and the priests of Baal are killed; so there is Elijah triumphant; but what happens next might surprise you, although maybe it doesn’t if you think about human psychology.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So here it is from I Kings 19: ¹Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done, and how he had killed the prophets with a sword. ²So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, “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,” ³and Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there ⁴while he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. “I have had enough, Lord. Take my life. I am no better than my ancestors.” ^{5a}Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep.

DAVE BAST

^{5b}All at once, an angel touched him and said, “Get up and eat.” ⁶He looked around and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again. ⁷The angel of the Lord came back a second time and touched him and said, “Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you.” ⁸So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. ^{9a}There he went into a cave and spent the night.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, you asked a second ago, Dave, what a person’s reaction might be to this turn of events. My reaction is: Say what? What do you mean he ran away afraid? He just won. God is on his side. God is fighting for him. Jezebel sends him a note that says: I’ll get you. I’ll fix your little red wagon; and he runs away like some little school child who just saw a big, hairy spider land next to him or something. How could he go from that swaggering confidence we saw in the last chapter when he was even poking fun at the prophets of Baal, you know, who were getting ever more frenzied to get Baal’s attention. How could he go from that to this level of fear that he literally runs for his life?

DAVE BAST

Well, yes; I mean, it is a rollercoaster, certainly, his reaction. He is one minute on top of the mountain, literally on top of Mount Carmel; the next he is absolutely plunged into the depths of despair, discouragement, mixed with self pity, a sense of defeat. It is triggered, of course, as you said, Scott, by Jezebel’s threat: I am going to kill you. I mean, let the gods do whatever to me if I don’t make sure you are as dead as all those prophets of Baal by this time tomorrow. So he runs away. He actually ran the whole length of Israel into southern Judah, that is where Beersheba was; and he goes out into the bush and finds this broom tree or broom bush...I mean, not much of a shade, but sits down there and falls asleep. It is almost a classic case of depression.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; well, and before he falls asleep he says: Kill me Lord. I want to die.

DAVE BAST

Right, yes; but certainly, picking up on that, one of the things he says is he gives vent to his sense that he is a failure. What is the point of it all, I am just like all my ancestors. In other words, my life hasn’t really mattered; it hasn’t made a difference, because even this great victory... There is Jezebel. She is still in control and she has the power.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, he is; he is down. He is in a funk. He is depressed, maybe; and interestingly... Well, God is not going to kill him, for sure; but God also doesn't rebuke him. Instead he sends an angel and feeds him, twice. He wakes him up. There is some water, there is a cake of bread. He feeds him twice, and then the angel, who...

DAVE BAST

Angel food...angel food cake, we might say, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But then the angel very tenderly says to him: Look, you have got to eat. The journey is too much for you. I like that line. I preached on this recently and made that my sermon title. The journey is too much for you. God understands. He is not going to rebuke Elijah and say: What's wrong with you, man? Get up! Stop sniveling. I can handle Jezebel in a heartbeat; don't worry. No, we all get tired; we all get burned out; even the great servants of God such as Elijah get that way; and God understands: Yes, it is too much – it is too much. I have more to say to you, and you are going to have to go to the mountain of God, to Mount Sinai – Mount Horeb – which is a long trip – forty more days, actually – but God is going to get him there; but there is a gentleness to that line.

DAVE BAST

Very much so, and a tenderness almost. I mean, God knows us, I think, pretty well. He made us, after all, and he understands the interplay of physical and psychological and spiritual factors. We are not mere animals, we are not pure spirits. These things have an effect on one another; so he is going to strengthen Elijah physically. He knows he is hungry, he is tired, and he is also going to strengthen him spiritually and emotionally; and we will look at that as the story unfolds.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to Groundwork, and this third in a four-part series on the life of Elijah; and we are today in I Kings 19, and we have just seen that after a tremendous victory over the false god, Baal, Elijah got scared. He got burned out. He ran away and asked to die; but we also saw that God's love was greater than Elijah's fear; and so God strengthens him, nourishes him for the journey ahead, and eventually gets him all the way to the holy mountain, a forty-day journey – hard to imagine – but to Mount Sinai.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it is called Horeb in the text, but it is actually Mount Sinai – famous Mount Sinai – the place where the Law was given to Moses; and so we will pick up the reading with the intro to verse 10:

^{9b}And the word of the Lord came to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁰He replied, "I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn 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." ¹¹The Lord said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. ¹²After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire came a gentle whisper. ^{13a}When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

SCOTT HOEZEE

^{13b}And the voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" ¹⁴He replied, "I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn 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." ¹⁵And the Lord said to him, "Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus, and when you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. ¹⁶Anoint Jehu, son of Nimshi, king over Israel, and anoint Elisha, son of

Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. ¹⁷Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu; ¹⁸yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him.”

DAVE BAST

So the first thing, Elijah gets to Mount Horeb or Mount Sinai, and he finds a cave and he goes in and falls asleep, promptly...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

He has been traveling a long way; and maybe the food that sustained him is kind of used up – that energy; and God says to him: What are you doing here, Elijah; which seems like an odd question, since God had told him to go there; but really, it is not – as so often when God asks a question – it is not a request for information; it is an invitation to dialog – to communicate.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, and what we find out right away is that it has been forty days since he lay down under that broom tree on the day after Jezebel threatened Elijah’s life; so it has been a month and a week – five weeks – and guess what? His mood has not improved one bit. He is still as depressed as depressed can be, and he has this well-rehearsed line...he even says it twice, word for word, in this passage; basically saying: What am I doing here? I am at the end of my rope. Everything is done. Israel is completely lost. They have killed everybody. I am the only one left. They are going to kill me. So there, that is why I am here; you know, game over, God.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; in fact, he kind of almost is petulant...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Because he says: Hey, you know, look at what is going on here, God. This is what they’ve done, as if God doesn’t know, but the fact that God hasn’t responded to it might imply that he doesn’t really care that his prophets have been killed and his altars have been torn down. People have rejected God’s covenant: And I am the only one left and they are trying to kill me, too! In other words, God, hey, where have you been? Have you noticed you are a little bit behind things here – behind the curve? You’re falling down on the job?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And again, following how God had come through in such a huge way for Elijah on Mount Carmel, it is not only petulant, it seems a little ungrateful. You would expect God to say: What do you mean, where have I been? I just...I licked up the whole altar with my fire from heaven. You won; but God doesn’t. He just says: You know, just go stand by the mouth of the cave; which interestingly, Elijah...we always think he does, but he actually doesn’t. He stays in this cave, which has to be a symbol of depression, among other things...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He is in this cave – he is in the corner of the cave – cowering in the darkness. God says get up and go to the mouth of the cave, but he doesn’t do it. He stays there, and a powerful wind and a powerful earthquake and a powerful fire all sweep over the mountain, and it doesn’t even get Elijah’s attention. He is still in the corner of the cave; until he hears a whisper, or what we have often heard described as a still small voice; and only

then does the text say does he get up and put his cloak over his face and walk to the mouth of the cave. The big, powerful things didn't get his attention, but a whisper intrigued him, and that is when he gets up.

DAVE BAST

Intrigued...I like that word because it is such an intriguing story. The first time around when Israel came to Mount Sinai, all those big things happened, too. The earthquake and the fire; and they were so terrified...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Smoke on the mountain.

DAVE BAST

Smoke on the mountain, right. They said to Moses: Look, we don't want to get too close to this God. You go deal with him for us; and when Moses came back from the presence of God it was so awe inspiring that his face glowed; and now here with Elijah, the big things happen, but again and again and again we are told the Lord was not in the wind, he was not in the fire, he was not in the earthquake; but he came ever so gently with this whisper – with this still small voice; and we read Elijah puts his cloak over his face and... Like Moses did, you know, to hide the glory... and he comes out and meets God person to person.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And God asks him the question: What are you doing here? Elijah repeats his lament, and then God again, very gently, just says: Okay, I have heard you out. Thanks for being honest, but go back to work. Go back the way you came and here are several people I want you to anoint. There is going to be some renewal that is going to come to Israel. We are going to get a couple of good kings going here. I have a successor named Elisha for you...go back to work.

DAVE BAST

And by the way...by the way, you are not alone...

SCOTT HOEZEE

That's right.

DAVE BAST

I have seven thousand people who have stayed loyal to me. They have not – in this memorable phrase: They have not bowed the knee to Baal nor kissed his face. They haven't compromised their love for me. They haven't turned aside. They are still loyal; they are still faithful; Elijah, you are not alone; and I am going to do something. I am going to start by cleaning up the house of Ahab and deal with Jezebel; and meanwhile, my work goes on.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; so God had a lot to say to Elijah, the bottom line of which was indeed, go back to work. I am up to something; you are not alone. So that is all good news all by itself, of course, that God has a future planned and Elijah has more work to do, but there was something about that whisper – that still small voice – that got through to Elijah in the midst of great despair and depression; and what was it about that voice – that whisper – that really got to him? We will think about that next.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and we are looking at I Kings 19, Dave, and we just saw that Elijah was holed up in a cave on Mount Sinai, and that some powerful spectacles – earth, wind, and fire – swept over the mountain;

didn't do a thing for him. He stayed in the cave, but then he heard a whisper – a still small voice – and that is what got through to him.

DAVE BAST

You know, there are times I think probably one of the things we want to stress in this program and help bring out, if we haven't done it already, is that Elijah is somebody we can identify with.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

There is a kind of letdown that can happen, even after our biggest moments; maybe especially after our biggest moments; and there at times when we feel like everything we have done has kind of ended in failure, you know; sure, he had this great triumph on Mount Carmel, but what difference did it make in the long run? Jezebel was still in power. The situation hadn't really changed. So what is the point? I am a failure; my life has no meaning; my life has no purpose; and God, why don't you do something big in my life? Why don't you show yourself to me? Why don't you do a miracle – give me a miracle – let me know for sure; and generally, God does not do that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Not usually. It happens occasionally, but yes, you want the handwriting on the wall or skywriting or a message written in the stars or some big thunderclap or something big to show that God is there and reassure you; but mostly that does not happen; and mostly I think if we do identify with Elijah in the funk – sort of the despair, depression that he entered into – I think if we think about it, we may think that a big, powerful spectacle is what we need, but probably it isn't. Probably what we need is not so much for God to break the silence as to enter our silence, which he does. I mean, the whisper – the still small voice – that finally got Elijah's attention, and through which God then conveyed Elijah's ongoing assignment – that is kind of what he needed, because God kind of entered the silence gently. He sidled up alongside of Elijah instead of descending on him in power from above; and I think there is a lesson for that for all of us in terms of how we deal with friends or fellow members of a church or coworkers who are depressed; but also how God deals with us; that he enters into the brokenness – he enters into our disorientation; and from within reorients us and speaks to us.

DAVE BAST

I think that is a great point, too, especially if we apply it to our lives and those times or situations where a friend might be struggling, including perhaps struggling with depression or at least a real down time or a time of suffering – a time of loneliness – as Elijah was experiencing. It reminds us of the story of Job and his friends in the Bible. You know, the friends who are, in the book itself and by commentators, regularly criticized for their coldness and their callousness and their misunderstanding of Job...the first thing they did, the story says, is they sat with him in silence for seven days. It was when they opened their mouths that the trouble started...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

If they had just continued to be there, a ministry of presence, and not trying to explain things or to say: Well, this is what you need to do; or give advice. Just to be there, that is, I think, what the still small voice represents as well.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Again, you are right; Job's friends are a good example, and it is a good example for all of us. There is a very short video on the Internet that people can look up easy enough. It is called: *It's Not About the Nail*; and it is

a video of a young woman talking with her husband, I assume, talking to him about not being able to sleep well and how she has these piercing headaches and she has all kinds of problems and she is talking to him, and at one point she turns to him, and you see that she has a nail embedded in her forehead; and the guy says: Well, you know, you do have a nail in your head; and she says: It's not about the nail. Well, maybe if we just took that out. She said: Look, I don't want you to solve my problem for me. I just want you to listen. And it goes on very humorously from there, but we have all had those conversations, where we try to jump in sometimes with a solution when the other person just wants us to listen; and this is kind of in a way what God does with Elijah; he enters into his silence – he enters into his brokenness; there is not a hint of rebuke from God here. He doesn't scold him. He just very gently says: What are you doing here; and then when he spills his bilge again, God says: All right; here is what you have to do. Go back and go to work and I am going to do great things through you; and God will do great things through Elijah after this incident, too.

DAVE BAST

He reminds him he is not alone, and in doing so he tells him: Look, my work isn't finished; I am not through with Israel; I am going to continue to work my purposes out. You think of the whole story of salvation history in the Bible. I mean, this was a real crisis moment. It looked as though it was possible, at least, that God's people – his chosen people – would so completely compromise with their sinful and idolatrous culture that they would disappear, they would be absorbed; and then where would God's project be? But no, he is not finished. He is going to continue and bring renewal, in fact; and meanwhile, Elijah, here is something for you to do. So, maybe the best thing for you to do is not dwell on your problems and your emotional state, but get up and just start being obedient.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Do the things that God has set before you to do.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I go back to that phrase earlier in the story before he took the forty-day journey to Mount Sinai, when the angel says to Elijah: The journey is too much for you. God will get you there; God will strengthen you; and if we try to cross the finish line on our own strength in any project, any ministry we do for God's kingdom, if we try to do it on our own, the journey will always be too much for us. We cannot rely on our own strength. We have to rely on God's strength, and we have to rely on the knowledge that even as for Elijah here, even when we cannot see it, God is always bigger, God is always on the move, God has his people: Look, you are not alone, Elijah. There are lots of people in Israel who are on your side. Don't forget – don't forget; as long as God lives, as long as God is faithful, as long as God is loving, the story, the journey, goes on in God's strength; and ultimately, as you hinted at a minute ago, Dave, we see that with Jesus, who also entered our silences – entered our very world – in the incarnation.

DAVE BAST

Yes; he took a pretty long journey himself, didn't he, to come alongside us – to encourage us and give us hope. That is love, that is grace, that is God, that is the blessing it is to know it; and you know, if you are feeling discouraged right now and think you are all alone...you are the only one left who is faithful...come on, snap out of it; be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord; knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain, as the Apostle said.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well thank you for joining our Groundwork conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast. Please let us know how we can help you to dig deeper into scripture. We have a website, groundworkonline.com; visit it, and there is a place there for you to tell us topics and passages for future Groundwork programs.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/god-listens-and-whispers>

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