

The Gentle Whisper of God

1 Kings 19:1-21

Key Verse: 19:12

“After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.”

There is a great change from chapters 18 to 19, from a great victory to a seeming defeat, as though the stock market set a new high, only to crash in disaster. In chapter 18, Elijah was full of spirit and power like a roaring lion. But in chapter 19 he is scared, weak and exhausted like a cat caught in the rain. Moreover, the Lord revealed himself in a different aspect. In chapter 18 the God of Elijah is the God of almighty power through fire and thunder. But here in chapter 19 the God of Elijah is the God of comfort and grace who strengthened weak Elijah, and the God who speaks in a gentle whisper. Today we can learn another aspect of the God of Elijah. When we listen carefully, we can find out what God wants us to do.

I. The Lord strengthened Elijah (1-9a)

Look at verse 1. "Now Ahab told Jezebel everything that Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword." Ahab must have been greatly moved by the work of God he witnessed. When Elijah prayed, God answered by fire from heaven. When Elijah prayed again, God sent thunder and rain on a land parched by drought for over three years. Ahab told all these things to Jezebel, and concluded by describing how Elijah had put to death all the prophets of Baal and Asherah with the sword. God had proved himself the true God and that Elijah was his servant. Jezebel should have repented and surrendered. Instead, she 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" (2). Jezebel was out of her mind with rage on hearing that her beloved prophets has been killed. She was like a lioness robbed of her cubs. She burned with anger and decided to kill Elijah out of revenge. She sent a messenger to threaten him and plant fear in his heart. Elijah was caught off guard. He must have expected the dawning of a new day in Israel's history. He never expected to be threatened by Jezebel in such a way. On hearing Jezebel's threat, fear entered Elijah's heart and he ran for his life (3a).

What a surprise! Why did he do that? Elijah had just experienced the mighty work of God. He should have believed that the Lord would protect him. He should have challenged Jezebel to a duel with the spirit of power. However, to our surprise, he was afraid and ran for his life. We must understand Elijah. He had just fought a

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great spiritual battle against his nation's idol worship, standing alone as one man against 850. Then he outran a chariot in a 16 mile journey. He had not slept properly. He must have been exhausted spiritually, emotionally and physically. He was vulnerable to the devil's attack and the word of Jezebel hit him hard, like an arrow piercing his heart and spreading poison. Elijah was completely knocked out. So he ran away. We, too, are vulnerable to the devil's power after working hard for the Lord. We must know that the time of victory is the time we are vulnerable. When Elijah came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day's journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, Lord," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep (3-5). Elijah's prayer reveals that he did not want to fight anymore. He did not want to carry the mission of bringing spiritual revival to Israel any more. After hearing Jezebel's words, he felt a sudden and deep sense of failure. He wanted to resign as a prophet and go to heaven, if God allowed. After his resignation prayer, he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep.

How did the Lord treat Elijah? Did he say, "Why are you afraid? Get up you coward and go and fight!" No. Look at verses 5b-6. "All at once an angel touched him and said, 'Get up and eat.' He looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again." The Lord's touch upon Elijah through the angel was like the gentle touch of a mother to her young son. The angel had prepared a cake of bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. It was not cold rice, but a delicious and nutritious meal. The Lord understood Elijah deeply and bore his weaknesses and forgave his sins. The Lord is full of grace toward his servant. Our Lord Jesus Christ reveals this same compassion and grace. In John 21, when his disciples had come to Galilee with a sense of failure and on the verge of giving up their life of mission, the Risen Christ met them. He cooked a hearty breakfast for them and spoke kindly, restoring his love relationship with them. Then he renewed their mission, saying, "Feed my sheep." Many times we suffer from exhaustion or a sense of failure in the course of serving God's mission. We fall into fear of God's judgment due to our guilt feeling. We doubt God's love and forgiveness. But God is full of grace and compassion. Hebrews 4:15,16 say, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

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After being comforted and nurtured by the angel, Elijah lay down and went to sleep again. This shows us that he was really tired. Look at verse 7. "The 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.'" Many people think that when they are weak and seem to fail, that God will abandon them. So they fall into despair. But at precisely that time the Lord wants to touch us and express his understanding and love and to nurture us back to strength. When we are weak, God sends his angels to serve us in many ways. When we need rest and renewal, God gives us a chance to lay down and sleep. God provides food and drink and real rest for our souls. Our God is the God of grace and compassion who comes to us in our time of need. Thank God!

Look at verses 8-9a. "So 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. There he went into a cave and spent the night." Elijah was strengthened, not only by the food, but by the love of God who met him and nurtured him in his time of need. So he could travel forty days and forty nights all the way to Mt. Horeb. Why did he go there? It was an important place in Israel's history, for there Moses had met God in the burning bush (Ex 3:1). There, the Israelites received the Ten Commandments (Ex 3:14; Num 4:15). We can guess that he went there to meet the God of covenant with Israel (10,14). Elijah had expected to restore God's covenant with his people. But it did not happen. It seemed the covenant was completely broken. Elijah despaired so deeply that he wanted to die. But God did not let him die. So Elijah was compelled to seek God and to find out what God was doing. He went to Mt. Horeb, perhaps the cave where Moses had watched God's glory pass by him. He wanted to see God's glory. He wanted God to explain to him what was going on. Why was Jezebel still alive? When the Israelites rejected the covenant, why didn't God destroy them? In his deep despair, Elijah went to the mountain of God for an answer. When we are in despair, it is the time to come to God to find an answer, and to find the way.

II. The Lord came to Elijah in a gentle whisper (9b-21)

Look at verse 9b. "And the word of the Lord came to him: 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'" We can find in this verse the Lord's gentle rebuke for Elijah. Prior to this event, Elijah had moved from place to place according to the word of the Lord. But this time he ran for his life without any word from the Lord. So the Lord is asking him, "Are you doing the right thing? You are supposed to turn the hearts of the Israelites back to me. Why are you here in despair and fear?" How did Elijah answer?

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Look at verse 10. "He replied, '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.'" Elijah justified himself and appealed to God against Israel (Ro 11:2-3). It was true that he had been very zealous for the Lord. He stood on the Lord's side and challenged the Israelites to repent their idolatry, even at the risk of his life. However, things did not go as he had expected. Jezebel was breathing out murderous threats against him. The Israelites had not restored their covenant relationship with God. Now, Elijah felt defeated, isolated and alone. It seemed that his labor was in vain and there was no hope for Israel. How did God deal with Elijah?

God did not rebuke Elijah. Rather, he used audio and visual aids to educate Elijah. Look at verses 11-12. "The 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. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper." Here we learn two important things.

First, the Lord works in wind, earthquake and fire. The great and powerful wind, the earthquake, and the fire symbolize the Lord's power. God Almighty can work in awesome displays of power. In the time of Moses, such power was necessary. The Red Sea was divided; streams of water gushed out from a rock; Aaron's dry staff budded; an earthquake swallowed the rebel leader Korah and his followers. Jesus also did powerful miracles: crippled men walked, lepers were healed, blind men recovered their eyesight. At Pentecost the Holy Spirit came with a powerful wind and fire. Elijah, who had experienced God's awesome power, may have expected it continually. He might have wanted God's rule to come upon Israel miraculously, all at once. He might have hoped Jezebel would be swallowed by the earth. If the Lord wanted, he could do so. However, God did not do so. God does not work according to his servant's will and expectation. God works according to his own will. The Lord wanted to teach Elijah to respect and acknowledge his sovereignty. The work is the Lord's and he will do as he pleases.

Second, the Lord works in a gentle whisper. The Lord was not in the wind. The Lord was not in the earthquake. The Lord was not in the fire. The Lord was present in a gentle whisper. The Lord called Elijah in a gentle whisper, "Elijah, Elijah." God clothed his power with gentleness and expressed his power through a whisper, that is, through his word. Elijah could hear God's voice only when he gave his full

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attention. Otherwise, Elijah would miss it. Elijah had to listen to God's voice with a humble mind, and with a quiet and gentle heart. If his heart was busy and noisy, or if he was proud and full of his own ideas, he could not hear the gentle whisper. We can learn here that God works in many ways, freely intervening according to the situation and need. For example, God intervened in Paul's life through a bright light from heaven and changed him in a dramatic way. However, in Timothy's case, from his early childhood he heard the word of God through his mother's and grandmother's influence and believed. John Wesley's conversion is well known, but it was not dramatic. As he listened to someone reading Luther's commentary on Romans, he felt his heart strangely warmed and he had assurance that his sins were forgiven. Many people expect to be changed in a dramatic way by the fire of the Holy Spirit coming down to change their bad habits suddenly and give them new life. Sometimes God works like that. But in most cases, God works through a gentle whisper. Characteristically, the Holy Spirit comes down like a dove in a peaceful and gentle way. A gentle whisper is a symbol of the gospel of peace which pacifies the tormented soul of sinful man. God is very tender and compassionate and understanding toward sinful, wounded and broken people. He comforts us by giving us peace through his word.

Many people think that God's work is powerful when they pray loudly and move around busily. However, God often works very quietly: through quiet time of Bible reading, testimony writing and sharing, and small group Bible study. God changes a person, and a family, and a society, steadily and quietly. Still, there is one condition. We must give our hearts to listen to his voice. We need to give up our own ideas, prejudices, busy mind and proud thoughts, and listen to the gentle whisper very humbly. As we listen, we must accept the Lord's word and commit to his direction and guidance. Some people say a loud "yes" to the invitation to Bible study, but do not make a definite appointment. Some attend Bible study, but are distracted by other things and do not listen to the word of God. Some listen, but do not obey what they hear. With these kinds of attitudes, no one can expect to be blessed by God. The same is true in our prayer life. To hear the gentle whisper of God we must empty ourselves and listen to God, willing to obey. Then God will speak to us very clearly and show us the way.

The Lord wanted to teach Elijah in a gentle whisper. At last, Elijah heard the Lord's gentle whisper. He realized that he was nothing but a sinner before the Lord. He showed his awesome respect toward God by pulling his cloak over his face (13). Like Moses, he was afraid to look at God. Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" This means, "Why did you not remain with Ahab and carry out my mission?" In verse 14, Elijah replied with the same words he had

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spoken earlier. But this time his attitude was different. Now he was ready to listen. What did the Lord say?

Look at verses 15-18. "The Lord 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.'" God taught Elijah that he was raising up his own servants. God revealed that he is the Sovereign Lord who controls nations and carries out his redemptive history according to his own will and purpose. The Lord would destroy Baal worship--not through spectacular displays of his awesome power--but through the ordinary political process. Especially, Jehu would bring judgment upon the house of Ahab, who spread Baal worship all over Israel. God wanted to teach Elijah that God is the God of history. In his history, God had used Elijah, and after him the Lord would appoint someone else. Each of God's servants is used by God in a small part of his history. God's servants need to accept their limits. Elijah felt he had failed. But God never fails. God's history was going forward according to God's will and purpose. Many people feel that they have failed, even though they have been used by God. However, God never fails. When we see God's history from God's point of view, there is no failure.

The Lord wanted Elijah to anoint Elisha to succeed him as a prophet. God wanted to be the God of Elisha, as he had been the God of Elijah. To anoint and raise leaders, both politically and spiritually, was Elijah's remaining mission, though he would anoint Hazael and Jehu indirectly through Elisha. In the first part of Elijah's ministry he himself fought against Baal worship. In the latter part of his ministry, he focused on raising disciples for the future ministry. In this way, the school of prophets would be raised and established with Elisha as the spiritual leader. Furthermore, God would bring judgment upon the Israelites, who worshiped idols, through Hazael, Jehu and Elisha successively.

Look at verse 18. "Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel--all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him." Even though it seems that everyone deserted the Lord and worshiped Baal, God said that there were seven thousand who did not bow the knee to Baal. Elijah thought that only he was left. But the Lord said, "There are seven thousand." God preserved seven

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thousand people for his own glory and purpose, even in the darkest time of Israel's history.

In our times, it seems that the world is very corrupt and there is no one who seeks the Lord on our campuses. Sometimes we feel that, "I am the only one left." However, God preserves his own people here and there. The work of God is the work of a remnant. So we don't need to despair. Rather, we must seek the remnant of God on our campuses diligently. There are many people who do not kneel down before idols. There are many people who love the truth. But they are fearful. They live in caves and are afraid to come out. So we need to find them and encourage them to live for the truth.

Verses 19-21 show us how Elijah called Elisha as his successor. When Elijah met him, Elisha was plowing in his field. He was a farmer with twelve yoke of oxen. He seems rich. 2 Kings 2:23 tells us that he had a bald head; he was not a handsome man. Still, he was busy in his work. But it seems that he was not ready to follow Elijah. Also, it seems that he was not leadership material. But Elijah obeyed God's direction and went up to him and threw his cloak around him by faith. That means he invited Elisha to follow him to God and to God's work. Amazingly, Elisha left his oxen, went after Elijah and followed him. He became his attendant, saying "goodbye" to his parents. He committed himself to follow God's servant. In this way the work of God succeeded from Elijah to Elisha. Like Elijah, by faith we also should throw our cloak around those who are busy in their work. When we throw our cloak of the words of God and prayer, then God works in his own way.

Today we learned that God works in many ways. Sometimes God works by fire. Often, God works through a gentle whisper. God wants us to listen to his gentle whisper. So we must empty ourselves of all noisy and busy thoughts and give our hearts to his word very humbly. Then God will work in each of us to change us and to give us clear spiritual direction to serve him. Let's pray that we may listen to the gentle whisper of God.