

Have you ever been involved in a project that took months or years to complete, finished it, celebrated, and then wondered, “What’s next? All this time you have been working towards a goal, anticipated it, dreamed of finishing it and then suddenly, it’s done. You’ve accomplished something; you’ve had this victory, and suddenly you find yourself at a loss. What do I do now? What do I have to look forward to? Life just seems to move on. Today may even bring new problems that yesterday’s victory won’t change. We may go from feeling great to feeling sad or depressed. Why is it yesterday I felt God was with me, and today I feel alone and adrift?

It may surprise you that the prophet Elijah had these same types of thoughts. Part of what makes the Bible ring so true is how human God’s servants are. The people who did such great things for God were not spiritual superheroes—on the contrary—they complained, they fought amongst themselves, they try to handle things all by themselves, they very easily became depressed and discouraged. In other words, they’re just like us. In today’s Old Testament lesson, we find Elijah hiding out in a cave. How he got there is important for us to hear.

Elijah had just experienced an exhilarating victory. Yahweh, the God of Israel, had just proven his absolute power over the false god Baal—a contest that wasn’t even close. You may remember how fire came down from heaven and consumed Elijah’s waterlogged altar. Elijah had been given dramatic proof of God’s reality with all the pyrotechnics that a person could wish for. From a prophetic standpoint, Elijah was really rolling!

The very next day, the corrupt queen of Israel promises to put Elijah to death, and Elijah’s knees get weak. In light of what Elijah just experienced, you might expect him to say, “Bring it on. God is on my side.” But instead, the prospect of being labelled an Enemy of the State leads him to say: “I have had enough, Lord, take my life.” Now think about this: Elijah had the advantage of actually seeing fire come down from heaven in the LORD’s name...he had the advantage of being on the winning side in a battle of spiritual warfare...and his fear still got the best of him. Yesterday’s victory seemed like a distant memory. On one hand you might wonder how one of God’s prophets could be so fickle. On the other hand, you and I both know how, because we’re no different.

Some days the cross and what Jesus did for us gives us so much comfort and help...the next day we may feel nothing. Living in a sinful world and having sin in us can drag us down. What’s worse is we feel guilty for not feeling better about things or being able to find the peace we know we should find through Jesus. Yes, we’ve had some victories with God in the past, but today is a new day with its own problems. Like Elijah, our memories are short, and so we run and hide from our problems. We forget how God handled things for us in the past, and so we feel like giving up. Like Elijah, we want the God who sends down fire to burn up our problems, who hands us the victory each and every time. Elijah ran away and hid himself because he felt like his problem was too big for God, and you and I have crouched in that cave with Elijah more times than we would probably care to admit.

The thing with Elijah is that while he ran from his problems he didn't really run from God. He kept talking to Him, and that leads to an incredible conversation. Elijah doesn't pull any punches. He lets the Lord know right where he stands. He essentially tells God, "Lord, I've been faithful to you and look where it's gotten me. Yesterday I had this great victory, but today I'm all alone. Where are you for me when I need you?" Now that might seem a little too direct for your liking, but I tend to think God understands, and in a way, that kind of prayer honors him. Why? Because it shows that the person praying still believes that God has the ability and power to help. Elijah was upset and running scared, but he still managed to take his problem to God. We can do the exact same thing by talking to God in prayer. You can pour out your heart to God. You can be as direct with Him as you want to be, because he is big enough to handle it. In fact, he may be looking to see if there's some fight left in your faith.

In any case, he hears and he answers. And notice how he answers Elijah. First a great wind comes, then an earthquake, and then fire. Considering what Elijah had been through, he probably thought he was in deep trouble. Fire, earthquakes, strong winds, these were signs of God's wrath and judgment. Elijah, knowing his own cowardice, was probably bracing himself for punishment. But Scripture says God was not in those things. Instead, he communicates with Elijah with words, whispered into the prophet's ear.

There are two things about those whispered words that I find fascinating. The first is that God still loves his servant Elijah and still desires his services. He does not use his power over the elements to crush Elijah, but instead he comes to the depressed prophet quietly and gently, whispering words of instruction and encouragement. God kindly reveals that there are seven thousand people in Israel who have remained faithful to God. Elijah is not as alone as he thinks. The Lord whispers words of restoration to Elijah and urges him to get back in the game.

The second thing worth noting is the contrast between the dramatic display of wind, earthquake, and fire and the whispered word. At one time or another, all of us have probably wished that God would do dramatic things in our lives; that he would get our attention with an unmistakable display of divine power. We have craved seeing the types of things Elijah saw. Yet when it comes to restoring his servant, God does not do it with a roar or a rumble or a flash; he does it in a way that is utterly ordinary. He does it by speaking words. Boy, would we love it if God spoke to us from a glowing cloud and told us exactly what to do—but the truth is, God does speak to his people. He speaks to us from the pages of his Word. He speaks to us when we hear and repeat his Word in worship. God speaks when his people gather to study his Word. The question is, are we listening? Are we willing to believe that God comes to us and communicates with us in such an ordinary way? That's what sent Elijah on his way again. That's what got him out of the cave and down the mountain and back into a life of service—not the blinding, frightening fear of God's wrath, but words—words whispered by a God who loves us enough to lower his voice and talk to us in a way we can understand.

In our lives as Christians we are going to have highs and lows. We are going to face challenges that cause us to question just about everything we hold to be true. When those times come, we must not ignore the simple, ordinary words God speaks to us, for those words put us back in touch with the one thing that matters most.

A man in Dundee, Scotland was confined to a bed for forty years, having broken his neck in fall at age fifteen. But his spirit remained unbroken, and his cheer and courage so inspired people that he enjoyed a constant stream of guests. One day a visitor asked him, doesn't Satan ever tempt you to doubt God?

"Oh yes," replied the man. "He does try to tempt me. I lie here and see my old schoolmates driving along and Satan whispers, 'If God is so good, why does he keep you here all these years? Why did he permit your neck to be broken?'"

"What do you do when the devil whispers those things?" asked the guest.

"Ah," the man replied, "I take him to Calvary, show him Christ, and point to those deep wounds and say, 'You see, he does love me.' And Satan has no answer to that. He runs away every time."

You and I will have our down days as Christians—that's the price of living in a world ruined by sin. We're constantly battling our old ways, and that can bring us down, too. But we can take comfort in the fact that, like Elijah, we have direct access to God, who not only welcomes our prayers, but answers them in a way that's best for us. We have a God who speaks and who even now is whispering words of forgiveness and hope, calming words that give us Jesus, His Son. Words that point us to His cross. Words that bring us out of hiding, into the light.