

*After the earthquake came a fire,  
but the LORD was not in the fire.  
And after the fire came a gentle whisper.  
When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face  
and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.  
Then a voice said to him, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'*  
*1 Kings 19:12-13*

# CHAPTER EIGHT

## KNOWING AND OBEYING HIS PROMPTING

### *Listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit*

Elijah had just come off a great high. Living in a land that dismissed the God of creation, the people had turned to idols. The most popular one being Baal. Elijah, totally trusting God, had set up a bit of a circus display and he called on God to do his thing. And God did – with a bang. While Baal refused to set the sacrifice on fire no matter how loud the people called, God's voice thundered in the mountains. And he honoured Elijah's faith by consuming the sacrifice in a fire so hot that even the bricks burned.

Then Elijah had a bit of a downturn. He had just heard AND seen God. Then he ran. As he waited, he felt an earthquake. But it wasn't God. A fire came down. But that wasn't God either. Then, softly, a whisper of wind held the voice of God (1 Kings 19:11-13).

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In order for Elijah to hear God's voice, he had to shut out the noise around him and listen. He was away from the everyday, normal activities of his life. He was away from people. He was away from the things he knew. And he was a little scared.

While this story is only one way God speaks (after all, Balaam was stopped in the middle of a road and God spoke through his donkey – Numbers 22:28), I think we can learn a lot from it.

First of all, Elijah was able to discern God's voice. He was able to tell when God spoke. He didn't recognize the timbre or the format – that surprised him. But he knew God well enough to be able to discern when it was God who spoke. He was also discerning enough to listen.

Secondly, God is not predictable. Elijah expected God to speak in the earthquake and the fire. Those were ways in which he had spoken before. It was hard to understand God speaking in a still, small voice. God was always equated with loud, big, powerful. We need to be prepared for God to speak in ways that are unexpected. We need to know his voice so well, that whether he speaks in the fire or the earthquake or in a still, small voice, we are able to hear him.

Recently I was out in mid-western Canada working with a Discipleship School. God did some awesome things one evening with the students and leaders during a worship time.

We had an awesome worship and ministry time with a good number of the students experiencing a touch of God in a deeper way – praying for each other, confessing their sins and fears, etc.

One girl was looking completely lost and discouraged. I went and asked her how she was doing. She said, "I'm okay." I shook my head and said, "No, you're not!" and she welled up with tears.

The Lord gave me a bit of insight and three words that described her condition – fear, confusion and guilt. She broke down crying, saying that she didn't know how to hear God or feel him and that he just never seemed real to her at all. She also said that she was dealing with some personal issues that she just wasn't yet ready to talk to anyone about, but she really wanted to hear from God on it. I prayed with her and told her that sometimes we limit God's communication with us because we expect God to speak to us the same way he speaks to others. But sometimes God speaks to us through events and occurrences that might seem coincidental at first, when often it is God wanting to communicate with us and encourage us with his presence.

The following morning she went out for a run at 6:30 a.m. A deer fawn had run out onto the road, stopped, looked at her and then bounded off into the woods. She didn't think much about it initially but as she ran past the spot where the deer had stopped, she remembered our conversation the evening before. She stopped running and looked back to where the deer had entered the woods – hoping to perhaps get another look at it – perhaps to understand something of what God might be wanting to communicate to her through this incident. What she saw, at the side of the road where the deer had crossed, was a large sign made up of stones forming the word **FREEDOM** in bold letters. She broke down weeping, knowing that God had spoken to her through the deer and the sign – indicating that there was freedom that God wanted to bring to her. Later on, in Guatemala, I had the privilege of baptising her as she gave testimony to the reality of the Living Christ who speaks and leads today.

Awesome!

The ability to recognize God and to be open to the surprise of his voice comes when we are active worshippers. As we learn to know God, understand his ways and learn to quiet our own voice and the noise in our life – we can then start to hear God.

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It's easy to fake 'hearing' God, especially in the climate of expressive worship. Sometimes we make the mistake of thinking that God speaks in only one way and we wrongly assume that those who 'look' the part of a worshipper, are actually worshipping in response to the prompting of God.

I have a friend who is a well-known worship leader. A number of years ago he expressed his frustration at some people who come to worship services and seemingly give their all in a musical expression of worship of Jesus. Everything he observed from the front indicated that these people were enraptured with their Lord and Saviour. Their body language and tears gave evidence to all who observed them that they were in that special, intimate place with the Creator of the Universe. And many envied them for it.

And yet, what frustrated my friend was knowing that even though their Sunday morning worship was elegant and extravagant, their weekday worship was non-existent. One of the people was openly involved in sexual promiscuity. She had been approached by friends and pastoral staff, confronting her with her sin, but she remained belligerently unrepentant.

And so this worship leader looked upon their outward offerings of worship to God in much the same way as God did the people of Israel in Amos' day when he said to the people of Israel:

*I will not accept your burnt offerings and grain offerings. I won't even notice all your choice peace offerings. Away with your hymns of praise! They are only noise to my ears. I will not listen to your music, no matter how lovely it is. Instead, I want to see a mighty flood of justice, a river of righteous living that will never run dry. (Amos 5:22-24 – NLT)*

Our public worship means nothing if our private lives are out of sync with his desire for holiness and purity. Not that we have to be perfect in order to have our worship accepted. God accepts our imperfection

because he covered it and continues to cover it with the blood of Jesus. But we need to know and obey the prompting of the Holy Spirit as he brings things up in and about our lives that need to be addressed, that need to be changed.

The process of worship is simple: us to him, him to us, us to others. We give to God. He speaks to us – affirms us, corrects us, guides us, comforts us. As we give our worship to him he will begin to mould and shape us into his image. And from the overflow of our obedience in obeying his prompting, we spread the fragrance of his presence to others.

Listening to and obeying the Spirit saves our worship from being so personal that it never goes beyond *me*. While knowing and obeying his prompting often begins with me it also invites me to interact with others. Not only does our worship change us, it begins to impact others.

If our worship is only an outward display of expressive response in corporate worship and not easily seen in the way we live our life, we are not hearing God.

True worship opens us up to the needs of others. When we worship in truth and love, we become increasingly aware of his voice in our life – even when there is a lot of noise competing for our attention. When we worship, we begin to understand God's purpose in our lives. We become more and more sensitive to hearing God tell us where we need to change.

I wonder just how different one day in our communities would be if everyone who loved Jesus would wake up and, with all their heart, pray this prayer:

*Lord, in my worship of you today in whatever I am doing, help me to allow you to shape me in your image so that I might be an extension of your presence and an encouragement to one other person.*

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I believe our world would be revolutionized!

While I believe that the need for contemplative worship and inner healing is essential in a worshipper's life, we have to be very careful that we don't remain rooted in that introspection – that focus on *me*. Ultimately, our faith brings us to the place of sacrifice – giving all we are, all we have, all we will be, to serve Jesus.

If we are truly listening to God, we will hear things that apply to our personal life. God will expose the areas that are not pleasing to him. But more than that, as we learn to discern God's voice, even when it surprises us, we will become more and more aware of the needs of those around us.

When Jesus tells his disciples that he is leaving, they are shattered. Jesus has taken them on a journey that blew their understanding of God out of the water. When they came into a new town, people who couldn't hear suddenly were able to hear. A woman who simply brushed the hem of Jesus' clothes was suddenly healed. Ten men with leprosy who had been stigmatized and rejected by their families, friends and communities, were touched by Jesus and healed. A man with a severe demonic oppression that drove him crazy became whole.

But listen to what Jesus says in John 14:12-14:

*I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.*

Jesus changed the communities in which he lived.

What about us?

He told his disciples that whatever we ask in his name he will do. What would happen if our lives were so immersed in the worship of our Lord that we would live with the power of God in our lives? That is God's expectation – that his people on earth would live lives so powerful that the people who knew them would immediately give glory to God because of their lives.

Imagine what our community would be like if we truly lived as worshippers in the power of our God . . .

*Those discouraged would go away encouraged.*

*Those who had sinned would go away forgiven.*

*Those in broken relationships would find hope for reconciliation.*

*Those who were sick would be prayed for and begin to find healing.*

*Those who came burdened would leave  
with the weight taken off their shoulders.*

*Those who came to church to give would go away  
also having received.*

*And unbelievers would go away saying, "God is there!"*

Hearing the voice of the Spirit doesn't happen in just one way. God spoke to Elijah in a still, small voice. He spoke to Naaman through a little girl. He spoke to prophets in dreams and visions. He does speak. But we have to know him well enough to recognize his voice.

In John chapter ten, Jesus says five times that his 'sheep' will recognize his voice (John 10:3,4,5,16,27). Part of what we are given as creatures of God is the ability to hear the Creator's voice. Before we ever became believers, we already heard the prompting of his Spirit calling us to the Father's side (John 6:44). As we mature we must be very careful that we

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keep on hearing God. We cannot depend on our past experiences or knowledge. The acts of worship and listening are active.

As our faith grows, we will learn to hear God more clearly, more often. Gayle sometimes jokes around and says that she wishes God would just send her an email in the morning with the plan for the day and she would just follow the instructions.

That sounds convenient. But I know what would happen. First of all, it's likely that she would just think that it's spam. Secondly, there are times when the task would just seem too hard and it would be pretty tempting not to open the email at all that day. Other times, the message might be so weird that it just wouldn't make sense to consider it.

God is trustworthy and will not lead us down a wrong path. I believe that Jesus taught the disciples and us the importance of knowing the voice of the Holy Spirit. To attempt to live our lives without nurturing a growing desire and ability to hear and respond to the voice of the Holy Spirit is to invite defeat.

There are those who would argue that to attempt to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit is only to invite the enemy to lead us astray. But that is not what the Bible teaches. In John chapter ten, Jesus specifically says that his sheep *will* follow him because they recognize his voice. In fact, he says that his flock *will not* follow one whose voice they do not recognize. Jesus expects that his sheep, his followers, *will* hear his voice!

It's interesting that we sometimes have more faith that Satan can speak to us and lead us astray than we have faith that the Holy Spirit – whom Jesus sent – can speak to us and lead us in his ways. The Gospel of John records many of the reasons Jesus gave us for the necessity of the indwelling, speaking, prompting Holy Spirit:

*He will lead us into all truth. (John 16:13)*

*He will remind us of what Jesus said. (John 14:26)*

*He will help us to know the mind and will of the Father  
and do it just as Jesus did. (John 5:19-20; 8:28)*

*He will help to keep our worship real! (John 4:23)*

*He will raise our awareness of the needs of others and give us the  
power to meet those needs. Jesus said that we, also, would be able  
to do the things he did – and greater things as well. (John 14:12)*

*He will show others the kingdom of God by demonstrating  
his power in us who believe – just like Jesus did. (John 14:12)*

*He will lead us. By speaking to us, his flock  
will recognize his voice and follow. (John 10:3-5,16,27)*

A young woman I know knew her pastor well but he had disappointed her. It was perfectly clear to this woman's highly prophetic insight that the pastor was not following in God's way. She saw him as arrogant and proud – unwilling to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit.

Then, one day, in the stillness of her devotions, she heard God's voice telling her to go and tell this young pastor that she loved him and that she knew that he was chosen by God to lead his people.

Well, she really didn't want to go there! She really wanted to go and tell him he was proud and arrogant and that God would have his way with him. But that wasn't what God asked. Fortunately, God is patient and he spoke to her several times. Finally the prompting was so strong that she had to go. And so she did.

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As she prepared for the meeting, Satan spoke words of defeat and discouragement. He continued to taunt her, telling her that really what this pastor needed was rebuke, not love. But God's voice won out.

As she spoke, the anger that she had felt towards him fell away and she realized that it really wasn't her job to discipline and teach this young pastor. God had asked her to go and confirm to him that he was called. That confirmation opened the door in his life for the Holy Spirit to teach him.

God is speaking to us through his Holy Spirit. He wants us to learn to know his voice – to listen and to obey – so that his work can multiply throughout the earth.

Here are a few thoughts and some things to do to help in listening to the Spirit's prompting:

1. Make time in your week to spend time listening for the Spirit's voice. If you have a regular time of reading your Bible and praying, take one day a week where you come before the Lord and instead of reading Scripture, ask the Lord to speak to your heart. It may be a Scripture passage that he reminds you of (a good reason to make a habit of knowing his word). It may be an act of grace or mercy you observed in another person that you sense God encouraging you to respond to. It may be that you just hear his gentle words of affirmation and acceptance.
2. When you worship, individually or corporately, ask the Holy Spirit to open your ears to hear how he might want you to respond to him in your worship and in your relationships with others. He may remind you of an incident that needs to be corrected, forgiven or addressed in some manner. He may direct you to pray for another person – you may even receive some specific area to pray with them about. He may just want you to kneel even though everyone

else is standing, or to lift your hands and dance though no one else is – a true sacrifice of praise!

3. When the Holy Spirit prompts you to do or say something, be willing to obey. In some situations you will be able to obey immediately. But sometimes, in corporate worship, you may need to determine if it would be more appropriate to carry out the Spirit's prompting later so as not to interrupt what God is doing among others. If he reminds you of a relational conflict with someone who is not present at the time, determine to call or see that person as soon as possible following the service so that you might be able to have your worship of Jesus flow over into obedience to him as you reconcile yourself with others. There may be times when the prompting seems a little bit out of the ordinary, but if it does not contradict Scripture, follow through. Trust God to lead you in his love.

4. Be willing to fail.

Most often I don't follow the prompting of the Spirit because I don't want to be wrong – to fail. But we gain a better understanding of the Spirit's voice by testing it through obedience over time – even if we misunderstand at times and get it wrong – than if we ignore it altogether because we fear we might have heard wrong.

Encourage one another with these words given to each of the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. . ." (Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).