

## **THE CAVE WHISPERER**

**I Kings 19:1-18**

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Some of you might recall the 1995 novel by Nicholas Evans called *The Horse Whisperer*. The plot centered around Tom Booker who had an uncanny ability to communicate with horses. He is asked to get involved with Pilgrim, a horse that was severely traumatized in an accident . . . an accident which also traumatized the horse's young teenage owner, Grace.

The character of Tom Booker was loosely based on a real-life horse whisperer named Buck Brannaman. Buck works with the horse's nature, using an understanding of how horses think and communicate to train the horse to accept humans and to work confidently and responsively with them. One of Brannaman's stated goals is to make the animal feel safe and secure around humans so that the horse and rider can achieve a true union.

And not too long after we heard about horse whisperers, a book came out by Cesar Millan, *The Dog Whisperer*. I've yet to see one on cats. I don't know if that's because you can't whisper to cats, or that they just refuse to listen to you if you do.

People seemed to be fascinated by the idea that certain individuals are gifted to talk with animals in an intuitive, mysterious way. And although books have been written to help the ordinary person duplicate the process, I doubt many people have had the original success that Buck has had with horses and Cesar has had with dogs.

I draw your attention to this method of unusual communication because our text today is about God talking to the prophet Elijah through a whisper. God grabs Elijah's attention not through some show-stopping techniques, but through a gentle murmur. The story reveals an intuitive, mysterious God that desires to communicate with a depressed, desperate, despairing and traumatized human being. And in the end, through this conversation with God, Elijah is able to follow a new course of action.

Before we read the text together, let me set the stage.

The story of Elijah is pitted against King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. The Bible says that Ahab did evil in the sight of the Lord. He married a foreign princess and encouraged the worship of foreign idols, most specifically worship of the god Baal which fostered temple prostitution and child sacrifices.

Elijah comes to Ahab in a face-to-face confrontation, accusing him of forsaking Yahweh. He challenges Ahab and his 450 prophets of Baal and his 400 prophets of Asherah (Baal's consort), to a contest at the top of Mount Carmel. Elijah also challenges the people who gather to watch to decide which god they will follow: Baal or Yahweh.

Two altars were set up, firewood gathered, and two bulls slaughtered. The catch: human beings won't light the fire, God will. The God who answered with fire would be the one true God. Elijah graciously lets the other side go first.

All morning until noon the 850 prophets danced and called on Baal. Nothing happened. By noon, Elijah began taunting them. "Maybe you need to shout louder? Perhaps he is busy, traveling, deep in thought, or even sleeping?" So the Baal prophets tried harder, danced harder, yelled louder, slashed themselves in ritual cuttings. Still, nothing.

Close to sundown, Elijah called the people over to his side and said that it was now his turn. To make things even more dramatic, Elijah had his altar doused in water until the stones and the wood were dripping wet, and the trench surrounding the altar was filled with water. Then Elijah called on Yahweh to respond and show the people there that he was the one, true God.

And fire fell from heaven. It consumed the sacrificed bull, all the wood, all the water, even the altar itself. And then Elijah had all the other false prophets killed as was the custom when you lost this type of contest. If your god lost, you lost too.

Eventually, the news gets back to Ahab and Jezebel. Jezebel is furious. She issues a death threat against Elijah, a price is on his head. Within 24 hours he's going to be as dead as her prophets or may the Lord do worse to her.

In a panic, Elijah runs for his life.

### **Let's pick up the story in I Kings 19:1-9 . . .**

*1 Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. 2 So 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."*

*3 Elijah was afraid <sup>[a]</sup> and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, 4 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." 5 Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep.*

*All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." 6 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.*

*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." 8 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. 9 There he went into a cave and spent the night.*

What do we begin to learn about Elijah's predicament? First, he runs at least one day away. He wanted to run further, but he ran out of energy. So he collapses under a broom tree, a tree native to the area, and mutters to God: "Lord, take my life. I'm no better than my ancestors." Doesn't that seem rather strange? If he's running away from Jezebel in order to save his life, doesn't it seem odd to ask God to take his life? Which is it?

Then he comments that he's worthless. But later on, in verses we have yet to read, he's going to claim that he's the only righteous one left. So again, which is he: worthless or righteous?

Let's face it: Elijah is defeated and confused. Following one of the greatest God-victories of his career, he's now quagmired in doubt, discouragement and depression. Emotional stress, physical fatigue, and professional burn-out have brought on the blues. Notice, however, that Elijah hasn't given up on God. He's given up on himself. "I've had enough. I quit. Game over."

The Good News is that God does not give up on us nearly as easily as we give up on ourselves. Elijah was ready to curl up in the desert and die. But God intervened with an angel of the Lord to bring him food and drink. The Hebrew word for "angel" simply means messenger. Sometimes the Bible uses the word messenger as a way to describe the presence of God himself (Judges 2:1, Isaiah 63:9). Sometimes God's messengers are human beings who serve God's purposes. (2 Chronicles 36:15) Was the messenger that appeared to Elijah a winged heavenly being, or simply a faithful human servant that God led to minister to Elijah in that forsaken place? We don't know. We weren't there. But miracles are not measured by how fantastic, unexplainable, and supernatural they are. Sometimes the miracle is simply God meeting us at a moment of need. (God in the Quietness by Dennis Bratcher)

What I find important is that God showed up to take care of Elijah. Elijah wanted to die and God responded by giving him food and drink. He met his physical needs. And by sending an angel, he met his emotional need through the physical presence of another individual. If you've ever been deeply depressed and despondent, you realize how significant those two steps were.

Often people in deep depression don't want to see anyone. They send everyone away. They don't have the energy to ask for help. They might stop eating or drinking. They can stay in bed all day. They lack energy. But persistent friends will push through their despondency in order to make sure they're okay. Showing up with a home-cooked meal and an hour of conversation can literally save a person's sanity. It isn't the answer to their depression. It doesn't make the problems that caused their depression go away. But it can pull someone back from the edge of despair. "I care about you. Eat this soup. Tell me what's going on. Let me give you a hug." The beginning towards restoration.

This is what God did for Elijah.

Elijah is sufficiently restored to start moving again. His emotional baggage is still there, but he's restored enough to go a bit further. He travels 40 days and 40 nights to Mount Horeb. And there he takes shelter in a small cave.

Mount Horeb is the very mountain where Moses encountered God in the fire of the burning bush. Also called Mt. Sinai, this is the mountain where Moses received the 10 commandments amid fire, smoke and thunder. (Exodus 19) The very name Mount Horeb evoked images of a powerful and awesome God who strode boldly into history overthrowing kingdoms and working fantastic miracles before the people's eyes. Elijah is on the mountain of God. I'm sure his expectations were high. What would happen next?

## Let's pick up the story in 1 Kings 19:9-18 . . .

*9 Elijah went into a cave and spent the night.*

*And the word of the LORD came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?"*

*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."*

*11 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. 12 After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. 13 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?"*

*14 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."*

*15 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. 16 Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. 17 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. 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."*

Our story picks up in intensity. God actually comes and speaks to Elijah. In a dark cave. He asks him a question: What are you doing here, Elijah?"

What does that question imply?

1. God cared enough to ask.
2. Did Elijah need to be somewhere else?
3. God was right there in the cave with him. Didn't say "What are you doing *there*?" as if God was calling to him from a distance
4. God is in the dark.

By recording that God asked Elijah a question we learn that God is in the dark. In fact, God is bigger than the dark. That's the promise. The promise is that God will be present in the dark with you. Later on, Jesus said to his disciples, "I will be with you always." (Matthew 28:20) Do you think that meant, "I am with you in dark caves too"? I do. (Listening to the Dark by Eugene Lowry)

So how does Elijah answer God's question? He says this:

**“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.”**

Now, let's stop a moment. Have you ever imagined what Elijah sounded like when he said this? Do you think he was angry? Was he whining? Was he so tired that he simply stated it without a trace of emotion in his voice?

Regardless of how he said it, you can hear his complaint. “Look God, I've done all the right things a prophet should do. I'm out there on the front lines doing your dirty work, and for what? The people are still rejecting you, God. They're wiping out all us prophets. In fact, I'm the only one left and if you haven't noticed, there's a price on my head too!”

Elijah feels like it's him against the world. One good guy trying to stem the tide against all the bad guys. And it's not going in his favor. He feels totally rejected. Alone.

Have you ever felt like Elijah?

You're doing all the right things a Christian should do. You're praying, reading your Bible, going to church, participating in service projects, witnessing to your neighbors, teaching your kids about God, confessing your sins, taking a stand for your Christian principles . . . and it's all blowing up in your face.

Your boss taunts you every day at work, your kid is being picked on by the school bully while the other one thinks he might be an atheist, your neighbor chooses the Mormon church over Christianity, a friend at church is angry with you over a misunderstanding, your spouse looks at you like you're a stranger, the government decides to audit your bank account, and then your dog dies. Perhaps a bit overstated . . . but many of you have been there, are there.

One last Christian against the big, bad world. You're tired. You want to give up. You just want to stay in the dark, dark cave and forget about fighting for what is right, about being a warrior of the light.

You feel totally rejected. Alone. The Elijah complex.

So what happens after Elijah dumps his feelings in God's lap? God tells him to go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.

A powerful wind comes by that tears the mountain apart and shatters the rock. Hurricane force winds. But the Lord was not in the wind.

And earthquake comes and shakes the foundations. But the Lord was not in the earthquake.

Then a fire comes. But the Lord was not in the fire.

After the fire, comes a gentle whisper. When Elijah hears the whisper, he pulls his cloak over his face and goes out and stands at the mouth of the cave.

Now, pay attention for a moment. Do you see something odd about verse 11 and verse 13.

Elijah didn't do what God said. He did not go out and stand on the mountain. He stayed in the cave. Elijah was so physically, emotionally, and spiritually tired that he couldn't even get out of the cave. God told him to move, and he just sat there. Was he being stubborn? Maybe. But I think it would be more accurate to say that he just didn't see the point. "I don't have it in me to do any more, God. I really don't. Just let me rest in the dark for awhile. It's safer here. No one's bothering me in here. The phone isn't ringing. The fax isn't buzzing. I can't check my email. My cell phone can't get a signal. I'm just going to close out the world for awhile."

Elijah is tired of dealing not only with his own darkness, but also with the darkness in everybody else's life. He's tired of looking into people's eyes, expectant eyes, and noticing that they brought their caves with them. And when he tries to minister to them with God's Word, he sees his attempts fall on deaf ears. Oh, people change for a little while, but then, there they are again, sacrificing to idols, turning their backs on God. He's tired of re-lighting the candle to keep the dark at bay. He doesn't want to crawl out of the cave and be convinced to do otherwise.

So he sits through hurricane force winds, a powerful earthquake, and a raging fire, and apparently isn't fazed at all. After all, just days earlier, he saw God's fire come down from heaven and consume a water-soaked sacrifice. He's been dazzled by the power of God before. So the wind, the earthquake and the fire don't even register.

But then, a voice comes up close to his ear and whispers, **"What are you doing here, Elijah?"**

And that gets his attention. The fireworks show didn't cause him to bat an eye. But a whisper in his ear has him awe-struck, trembling, covering his face in humility. Elijah is confronted with the mystery of God.

"What are you doing here, Elijah?"

**And Elijah repeats his earlier words: "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."**

One might wonder at Elijah's audacity. Repeating his earlier words, tossing them back at God as if he didn't hear the first time. Such arrogance. But perhaps Elijah wasn't being arrogant at all. Maybe he was stuck. These are the words he's been rehearsing over and over in his head for hours. This is the story that has become the litany of his heart. He's doesn't have the energy to come up with a new story. This is the familiar one. This is the one that makes sense. He really can't see an alternative.

So how does God reply this time?

Well, he doesn't strike Elijah dead with a bolt of lightning. Nor does he waste time chewing out Elijah for his woe is me, pity-party attitude. Nor does he even say, "That's one way of looking at it but it's certainly not my way."

Instead, God patiently gives him a new directive.

**First, he says, "Go back the way you came."** In other words, you can't run away from your problems, Elijah. Jezebel will track you down wherever you try to hide. You're going to have to face your dilemma head on. You can't stay in this cave, in the dark, forever. I'm kicking you out. Go back the way you came.

**Second, God tells Elijah to anoint two kings: Hazael as king over Aram, and Jehu as king over Israel.** In other words, I still have work for you to do, Elijah. Work that only you can do. Work that you will accomplish despite Jezebel's best efforts to kill you. So trust in me and head back.

**Third, God tells Elijah to anoint Elisha to succeed him as prophet.** In other words, you *are not* the last prophet Elijah. You will live long enough to have a successor. Someone who needs you as a mentor. I am sending you help, Elijah. So that you won't feel so alone. Someone to walk with you on this part of the journey.

**And fourth, God tells Elijah that there are still 7000 believers of Yahweh in Israel, 7000 who have not bowed down to Baal.** In other words, there is still a community of faith that needs a prophet. There is still a purpose for your life. Your work thus far has not been in vain. Some people *are* listening to the voice of the Lord.

**What did God do? He gave Elijah hope. He nudged him to a new space. He gently pushed Elijah to move again.**

What is your cave this morning? Where do you feel trapped? Running for your life? Out of options? Tired of fighting? Alone in the dark?

There is chaos all around you. Violent winds of temper and rage. Crises and personal disasters are shaking the very foundations you stand on. Fires that you didn't start are out of control, but everyone expects you to put them out.

But . . . God is not in the wind. God is not in the earthquake. God is not in the fire.

Sit in the dark a while longer. Listen. God will come and whisper in your ear, "What are you doing here?" . . . What are you doing here?

Spill out your litany of complaints, the agony of your heart, the questions that never seem to get answered, the injustice that others have enacted against you. Give it all to God. In the dark. As he sits beside you. Listening. Holding. Weeping. Gathering you close.

Then, hear his voice as he replies:

1. **My child, go back the way you came.** Face your fears, your anxieties, your problems. Stop dragging this baggage with you. Stop running. I will go with you. You will walk with angels. The Ahabs and Jezebels of this life will not overtake you. You are mine. I will protect you.
2. **My child, I have work for you to do.** Work that only you can do. Work that I will make sure you accomplish. You are created in my image, for my glory. You are my son, my daughter. Nothing is impossible with me.
3. **My child, I will send someone to help you so that you won't be alone.** Someone to walk beside you, to be your companion on the journey. A friend to share the load.
4. **My child, there are others who are faithful like yourself.** There are others that have been called out of the darkness into the light. You have community. Take heart, you are not alone.

**Let God give you hope. Let God nudge you to a new space. Let God gently push you to move again. Let God be your steadfast lover.**

Let me close with these words by Thomas Merton, from his book *Thoughts in Solitude*:

**My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. Amen.**

### **Resources:**

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