

The Whisper at Horeb

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[0:00] And it's particularly verses 9 to 18, then, the second half of that reading that is our text that we're going to consider over the next few minutes.

So the prophet Elijah has just undertaken a huge journey, traveling for 40 days, verse 8. And he's now hundreds of miles from his native Israel.

He's at Horeb. Horeb is the place that you're perhaps more likely to know by its other name, Sinai. That's where Elijah is here, Mount Sinai. That's why it's described in verse 8 as the Mount of God. And once there, he finds some makeshift accommodation for himself in a cave. And while he's staying in this cave, then, at Horeb, something happens.

Yahweh reveals himself to Elijah. Of course, such an occurrence is not unheard of in the Old Testament. You get this sort of thing from time to time.

[1:08] Yahweh revealing himself in a special way to a particular individual. But although that's true, nowhere else does it take the form that it takes here.

This divine appearance is preceded by three phenomena that are not the divine appearance. The text is quite emphatic in distinguishing those three phenomena from the divine appearance.

So first, there's a strong wind. But the Lord was not in the wind, the narrator insists. Then there's an earthquake. But again, we're left in absolutely no doubt.

The Lord was not in the earthquake. The third phenomenon is fire. But there, too, we meet the same unequivocal refrain. The Lord was not in the fire.

And just as we're starting to wonder whether we're ever going to get out of this cycle that we're in, a fourth phenomenon occurs. And this time, the refrain is absent.

[2:11] There's no, the Lord was not. Because this time, it's finally the real thing. In this fourth phenomenon, Yahweh does come to his prophet there at the mountain.

So what is it? What is this thing in which, at last, Elijah does encounter God? Well, it's the sound of a low whisper, verse 12.

A still, small voice in the traditional rendering, which amounts to pretty much the same thing as what we have here in the ESV. And the question cannot but arise in our minds at this point.

Why? Why? Why does God reveal himself here in this way? Why in the form of a whisper? What's that saying to Elijah?

And indeed, what's it saying to us? What does this whisper signify? Well, I think it signifies two things. And first of all, then, this evening, God's stunning patience.

[3:13] That's the first thing it signifies. God's stunning patience. Often, it seems to me, the whole nature of this scene is misunderstood.

It's understood as though Elijah is on the run, at least from Jezebel, and perhaps also from his own prophetic ministry. He doesn't want to do it anymore.

And in this desperate flight, then, he just kind of ends up at Horeb. A few years ago, we were on holiday on the Isle of Lewis, and it was a Sunday, and we were going to church in Carloway.

And in UK terms, then, you couldn't really go to church in many remoter locations than that. And I was just parking the car and turning off the engine, when, to my great surprise, I saw amongst all the dark-suited men filing into the church building, a bloke wearing a Newcastle United top.

But my surprise was as nothing compared to my children's surprise. There were suddenly gasps from the back of the car. That man's a teacher at our school, they cried in panic.

[4:18] And they were right. The man was a teacher at their school. And so, even in a little village on the western tip of the Outer Hebrides, we couldn't get away.

And the common reading, I guess, of this passage, views Elijah having an experience at Horeb a bit like ours there at Carlway. There he is, his frantic escape, having brought him to one of the ancient world's most back-of-beyond places.

And he's thinking to himself that he must now have truly gotten away. And would you believe it? Just at that moment, Yahweh shows up at the mouth of the very cave that he's sleeping in.

But whereas in our case, that schoolteacher in Lewis did not become all stern with my children and insist they take the next ferry off the island and get back to Newcastle and back to school, Yahweh gets pretty stern with Elijah, asking him bluntly why he's there.

And in verse 15, telling him to go back. That, as I say, is how this passage is often read. And it's a misreading. It gets quite the wrong end of the stick.

[5:24] It's true that initially, Elijah is on the run from Jezebel. He flees from Hurbub-Eyesheba, verse 3, and then a further day's journey into the wilderness, verse 4.

Up until that point, he is indeed getting himself safely beyond the clutches of this bloodthirsty queen. The next stage of his journey, however, is different.

I mean, given that Horeb or Sinai is one of the most significant sites in the whole of biblical history, given that it is indeed the Mount of God where Yahweh established his covenant with Israel, it seems a wee bit unlikely that Elijah just kind of ends up there by chance.

No, Elijah goes to Horeb deliberately. And he goes there not for the purpose of escaping anything or fleeing anything.

He goes there precisely in order to experience there what he does experience there, an encounter with Yahweh. And not an informal encounter with Yahweh of purely personal significance because he's at a bit of a crisis point in his own career, and so he needs a meeting with God to iron things out.

[6:41] No, he goes to Horeb for a highly formal, even we might say judicial, encounter with Yahweh. Horeb, as I said, is where the covenant between Yahweh and Israel had been established.

And Elijah then is going there now to revoke it, to annul the covenant, to terminate it. He believes it's the only option.

Such is the grip that Baal worship has on Israel. Mount Carmel was meant to be this great game-changing moment when the Israelites would turn back from Baal to Yahweh.

It was meant to be the moment after which Jezebel would be the one going into hiding. But Carmel has been and gone, and nothing has changed.

Jezebel is still as powerful as ever, and it's he, the one who successfully called down fire from heaven. It's he who has to go into hiding. And so as far as Elijah is concerned, that's it now.

[7:46] Israel is beyond Carmel's last chance saloon. There's going to be no return to the Ten Commandments. There's going to be no living faithfully again as the people of Yahweh. The only option is to officially end the covenants.

And Yahweh seems to be of that mind too. Look at verse 7. The angel of the Lord came again a second time and touched him and said, Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you.

So he doesn't rebuke Elijah there concerning this journey to Horeb. He speaks favorably of it. He supports it. He supplies food and drink to Elijah to facilitate it, to enable him to get to the sacred mountain and participate in the covenant annulment there, even as Moses had once participated in the covenant inauguration there.

And when then Elijah does arrive at Horeb, and Yahweh asks him that introductory question, what are you doing here, Elijah?

That's not a thinly veiled rebuke. For goodness sake, Elijah, what are you doing here? You shouldn't be here. Get back to Israel. You've got no right to be here.

[9:02] That's not what this is about. It's a legal formality. Yahweh there is formally opening the proceedings and inviting Elijah to declare his business and bring his complaint against the people of Israel.

That's why Elijah has his carefully rehearsed answer that he's able to come out with in identical terms on the two occasions that he's asked. That's what happens at formal proceedings. It's like Ghislaine Maxwell at that hearing a couple of weeks ago saying over and over and over again, I invoke my Fifth Amendment right to silence. I invoke my Fifth Amendment right to silence. Over and over again, she said it. Elijah is similarly using repetition here because this scene too is formal and legal in its nature. And the crucial line in Elijah's repeated answer is that one, the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant.

The people of Israel have forsaken your covenant. That's the nub of the matter. That's it in a nutshell. And I'm saying then, this scene at Horeb is unfolding exactly as Elijah expected.

[10:13] He has gone there for formal covenant annulment proceedings. And sure enough, the covenant Lord has invited him to testify against Israel.

And sure enough, he has testified against Israel and plainly stated their abandonment of the covenant. Everything is following precisely the script Elijah anticipated.

And then in verse 11, he's told to go and stand in a certain place. This then will be the moment that Yahweh confirms to Elijah he has finished with Israel.

He'll show Elijah now his flaming wrath that he's about to unleash against his treacherous people.

Elijah stands there ready for it. But astonishingly, that doesn't happen.

To be sure, there's a strong wind and then there's an earthquake and then there's fire, all of which would be fitting displays of Yahweh's destructive intentions now towards Israel.

[11:16] But in some sense, that was presumably very obvious to Elijah as he stood there, Yahweh wasn't in the wind and he wasn't in the earthquake and he wasn't in the fire. As if to say to Elijah, those aren't fitting displays because I don't have destructive intentions toward Israel.

I'm not questioning your complaint against Israel, Elijah. I know full well that you're accurate. You're not remotely exaggerating the situation. Israel has indeed forsaken my covenant.

Israel has indeed tossed me aside and replaced me with other gods. I'm not denying that for a second, Elijah. But all the same, I'm not going to be a hurricane toward Israel and sweep my people into oblivion.

I'm not going to be an earthquake toward Israel and bury my people alive. I'm not going to be a fire toward Israel and reduce my people to ashes.

No, I'm going to be a whisper toward Israel. I'm going to spare my people the annihilation which they absolutely deserve and which you came here, Elijah, absolutely expecting.

[12:32] That's what Yahweh is saying here in this whisper. And you see what I mean then by my heading, God's stunning patience. And just in case you're in any doubt that that is what the whisper signifies.

If any of you are perhaps thinking I'm being a bit fanciful here, let me show you something else in the text. I've used the language this evening of Yahweh revealing himself to Elijah and that's appropriate but it's not actually the language that the text itself uses.

Look at the middle of verse 11. The Lord passed by. Not the Lord revealed himself. The Lord passed by. That's the language the narrator uses.

And that is unmistakably an allusion to Exodus 34. Exodus 34 is another moment where it looks like it's all over for Israel.

Another moment where it looks like the covenant just has to be revoked. In this case, actually, the covenant has only just been established. The Israelites haven't even left Sinai yet having established the covenant with Yahweh.

[13:42] But they've already violated it in the most outrageous manner creating that golden calf at the foot of the mountain and bowing down to it. Surely in those circumstances, Yahweh must pull the plug on this relationship that has barely begun.

Surely his commitment to Israel cannot survive such glaring apostasy on their part. And so, hanging over that whole section of Exodus is this huge question mark then.

It's far from certain that there is any future for Israel. But Yahweh then, in Exodus 34, does something to settle that question and to provide clarity.

As Moses stands on the mountain, Yahweh, Exodus 34, verse 6, passed before him and proclaimed, the Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in

steadfast love and faithfulness.

He's saying there, even for this calf-worshiping people, there is a future still. Not because calf-worship is excusable or defensible in the slightest.

[14:59] It's abhorrent. But because of my character, I am merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

And here, in our passage then, against a similarly dark backdrop to Exodus 34, Yahweh passes by Elijah, same word as in Exodus 34, in order to make the same point as in Exodus 34, in order to say to Elijah, even for this Baal-worshiping people, there is a future still.

Not because Baal-worship is excusable or defensible in the slightest. It's abhorrent. But because of my character, I am merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

Only this time, you see, instead of actually spelling that out verbally, as in Exodus 34, Yahweh conveys it by means of this beautiful little piece of drama, a whisper.

A whisper. One 18th century writer puts it like this. He says, the design of the vision, that's this vision Elijah experiences here, the design of the vision was to show to the prophet the gentle way which God pursues and to proclaim the long-suffering and mildness of his nature as the voice had already done to Moses on that very spot.

[16:34] Isn't that wonderful? This whisper conveys the long-suffering and mildness of God's nature. Now, don't get me wrong. Sin is enormously serious.

And some of you may not be treating it as such this evening. Repentance, perhaps, just isn't on your radar this evening.

And that's a dangerous situation to be in. And I have no words of comfort for you. Simply, you must repent. End of. It's as simple as that.

But it may be that you're a believer and there's some very serious sin that erupted in your life many years ago. Or there's some niggling, sinful habit, perhaps, that has resurfaced in your life very recently.

And you are repentant. You truly hate that thing, that past fall, that recent recurrence of the habit. You hate it. And you are repentant regarding it.

[17:39] But your conscience is ever so sensitive. And you wonder then sometimes, perhaps you've even come here tonight wondering if you've blown it and you've run out of mercy in God.

You've stepped beyond the edge of God's mercy. He's lost patience with you. He's got no more time for you. Perhaps you're worrying that this evening.

Well, I do have words of comfort for you. I can assure you of God's stunning patience this evening. I can assure you that He is a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

I can assure you of the long suffering and mildness of His nature. I can assure you God does not relate to you this evening, believer, as a raging wind or an explosive earthquake or a devouring fire all provoked and triggered by that past or present ugly thing in your life.

No, He relates to you, believer, as a whisper. As you shelter beneath the arms of the crucified Jesus tonight, He relates to you as a whisper, a gentle, forbearing, kind-hearted, amiable whisper.

[18:59] Please take heart from that, dear Christian. You can draw near to Him. You don't need to keep your distance from Him in case He erupts on you. There's no volatility in His stance toward you.

He's approachable. His disposition is settled and peaceful and warm. He is to you, believer, nothing frightening, nothing threatening.

He is to you a whisper. That's a beautiful thing. And some of you who perhaps imagine God is raging against you because of some sin in your past that you've repented of, some of you perhaps need to hear this.

Your God relates to you, not as the fire, not as the earthquake, not as the wind, but as the whisper. God's stunning patience.

But then the second thing that this whisper signifies, God's strange power. God's strange power. There's something odd about this whisper.

[20:02] And the thing that's odd about this whisper is the response that it produces in Elijah. Look at verse 13. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

So this whisper then, it seems in some way to unnerve Elijah. There's something about it that makes him feel vulnerable and unsafe.

He kind of cowers before this whisper. He hides himself behind his cloak. That's not at all the response that you would expect to a whisper. I mean, you'd expect Elijah here to be surprised because as we've been saying, he was anticipating a sight of God's flaming vengeance on this mountain.

You'd expect him to feel confused and puzzled perhaps, but not frightened, not deeply uneasy, not inclined suddenly to cover his face, not when all he's encountering here is a whisper for goodness sake.

What's going on? Well, presumably, for all its quietness and gentleness and understatedness, this whisper has a strange power to it.

[21:28] Now just hold that thought for a moment. There's something else about the situation in Israel in Elijah's day that we need to consider. We've said Israel deserves the covenant to be terminated.

Yahweh to just call it a day with his people. However, he's stunningly patient and so, as we've said, he's not going to do that and that's a large part of what this whisper signifies.

But this is the thing. You can imagine Elijah thinking to himself, well, that's all well and good, Yahweh. It's lovely that you're not minded to end your covenant relationship with Israel.

You truly have a beautiful heart, God. But actually, it's kind of irrelevant really. Because even if your wrath is removed from the equation, Israel is done for anyway.

Pagan religion has taken over the nation. The worship of Baal has won the day. There's only me left. That's what he keeps saying, isn't it? There's only me left. That slaughter of the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel barely scratched the surface, barely began the kind of purge of pagan religion that's necessary if there's to be any hope for Israel.

[22:43] And so, unless you're planning something spectacular, Yahweh, something on an almost apocalyptic scale to weed out all the proponents of Baal worship, I'm afraid Israel has had it.

You can imagine Elijah pessimistically thinking like that. But you see, by means of this whisper, yes, Yahweh is indicating his inclination to spare rather than destroy Israel.

We've talked about that. But he's also correcting that pessimistic train of thought that's probably in Elijah's head. The whisper, we said, is quiet yet strangely powerful.

And Yahweh is saying then, actually, Elijah, I'm not fazed by the apparent stranglehold that pagan religion has on Israel.

I can sort that out. And I can sort it out without any need for apocalyptic interventions. I can powerfully overwhelm you in this moment, Elijah, by just quietly whispering at you.

[23:55] And I can powerfully deal with the religion of Baal in a similarly quiet, unspectacular manner. That, too, is what Yahweh is saying in this whisper.

And again, let me prove this second significance of the whisper beyond any doubt in case, again, you think I'm being fanciful here. Notice the sequence of events in verses 9 through to the first half of verse 13.

We have three things, don't we? We have Yahweh's question, what are you doing here, Elijah? We have Elijah's response, I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts, et cetera. And then we have, thirdly, the powerful whisper.

And then what happens is that same sequence of events is repeated. So we have, again, the question, verse 13, what are you doing here, Elijah?

And then we have, secondly, Elijah's response. again, I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts, et cetera. And you might be thinking, ah, well, where do we have the third bit then of the sequence this time?

[25:05] There's no powerful whisper this time. Well, yes, there is. That's the significance of verses 15 to 18. Verses 15 to 18 is the equivalent the second time around of the powerful whisper the first time

around.

Let's read those verses. The Lord said to him, go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus and when you arrive you shall anoint Haziël to be king over Syria and Jehu, the son of Nimshi, you shall anoint to be king over Israel and Elisha, the son of Shaphat, of Abel-Meholah, you shall anoint to be prophet in your place and the one who escapes from the sword of Haziël shall Jehu put to death and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death yet I will leave 7,000 in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal and every mouth that has not kissed him.

That's the whisper. That's Yahweh saying the worship of Baal ain't going to triumph, Elijah. I'm going to make sure of that and I'm going to make sure of that by just doing a few quiet little things. A king here, another king over there, a prophet here, the preservation of a few thousand saints here and in that way, that quiet, low-key way that isn't spectacular and apocalyptic and that might not create fireworks.

In that quiet, low-key way, I'm going to put paid to Baal worship. A powerful whisper in other words. Now I know that we today are living in a very different era from Elijah's.

[26:36] We're the other side of the coming of Christ, the other side of the day of Pentecost. But all the same, doesn't that phrase powerful whisper actually still perfectly describe how God operates?

I mean, the church of Jesus Christ in our world today is huge, mind-bogglingly huge. For it to be so huge, clearly the power of God has been and is mightily at work.

And yet, in such a quiet, whisper-like way. It doesn't get reported in the news, does it? I mean, think of this Norwegian football club, Bodo Glimt.

I've used football analogies in my other two sermons, so I can't omit one this evening. Bodo Glimt are from a city in northern Norway that lies inside the Arctic Circle.

That city has a population half the size of Carlisle's population. The football club stadium is smaller than that of the football club that I support, York City.

[27:48] But Bodo Glimt have now qualified for the final stages of Europe's most prestigious competition, the Champions League, beating such giants as Manchester City and Inter Milan along the way.

And so everyone's talking about Bodo Glimt. The Church of Jesus Christ began with a handful of very ordinary folk sitting morosely behind locked doors in an upper room one Sunday evening.

That's how the Church of Jesus Christ began. And here we are now, and that church numbers millions and spans much of the globe and welcomes new converts into it every single day.

What a growth! What an expansion! No one's talking about that! Iran gets into the news when its regime is being battered by American and Israeli bombs.

But for years now, the regime has been quietly subverted from within by Iranian citizens in their thousands forsaking Islam for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[28:58] that never gets in the news. Nepal gets in the news when it's struck by earthquakes. But for years now, seismic activity has been taking place in the hearts and lives of Nepalese people as thousands have been converted from Hinduism to Jesus Christ.

That never gets in the news. But it's happening all the time. It's happening. God is doing these things underneath the radar.

I love that parable that our Lord tells in Mark chapter 4 verses 26 to 29. Let me read you those well-known words.

He said, The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day and the seed sprouts and grows. He knows not how.

Isn't that wonderful? This farmer here who just, he's scratching his head. He can't get his head around the growth of his crops. He's not doing anything. He's not developed some spectacular agricultural strategy.

[30:06] He goes to bed at night. He gets up in the morning. That's all he does. And yet the seed just quietly, inexorably, sprouts and grows. He knows not how. Isn't that how you and I often feel when we think about the progress of God's kingdom in this world?

I mean, the odds are so stacked up against it, aren't they? Everything seems to mitigate, militate against it. You've got Islam. You've got same-sex marriage. You've got the smartphone. You've got a pile of disgraced celebrity Christian pastors that seems to be getting higher by the day. And everything then seems to militate against the church of Jesus making any advance whatsoever in this world and yet it advances and it advances and it advances. I know not how as that farmer put it. So I cannot tell how he will win the nations, how he will claim his earthly heritage, how satisfy the needs and aspirations of east and west, of sinner and a sage. But this I know, all flesh will see his glory and he shall reap the harvest he has sown. It's this strange power of God, power operating in a whisper-like way.

[31:31] And so don't be pessimistic this evening, Christian believer. Don't gauge the health of God's kingdom in this world from what you read in the newspapers and what you see on the television.

God is at work. God is exerting his power across the nations. But he's doing it in the form of a whisper so that it largely goes unnoticed and unreported by the media. And one more thing as we close. We shouldn't be surprised. We shouldn't be surprised that God, both in Elijah's day and in our day, works through a powerful whisper. What did we do this morning? We ate bread and we drank wine. Bread that symbolizes a body which one Friday afternoon was hideously tortured and abused. Wine that symbolizes blood which one Friday afternoon dripped relentlessly into Golgotha's soil. There was never a more pathetic, fragile whisper than that man crucified naked between two criminals.

[33:01] But boy, what a powerful whisper. That man crucified naked between two criminals saved you and me and millions of others besides from our sins for all eternity.

We didn't eat and drink this morning sadly, did we? As though the cross were nothing more than a whisper. We ate and drank joyfully and triumphantly because the cross was a powerful whisper. A whisper that ransomed multitudes from the domain of darkness. a whisper that released the very cosmos itself from the ancient curse. And so let's go away this evening from this communion weekend celebrating anew the strange power of God displayed at Calvary.

The powerful whisper. It was a whisper alright but it was a powerful whisper when Jesus Christ the Son of God died in agony and in shame on that middle cross.

It was so fragile on the face of things so pathetic so flimsy so throwaway and yet it was an event that shook the universe and still today millions and millions are embracing it and throwing their lives upon the crucified Jesus Christ.

[34:38] Let's celebrate the powerful whisper to which you and I owe everything. Amen.