

This passage is one of the more important passages of the Bible. Of course, all of the Bible is important, but some parts are more important than others. There are quite a few passages of the Bible that stand out as being particularly important. The story of the creation and fall. The Exodus. The giving of the law on mount Sinai. Birth, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. The final 3 chapters of the Bible which speak of the final judgement and the new heavens and the new earth. Perhaps this story is not at the same level as most of those parts of the Bible that I have just mentioned, but it does stand out as one of the high points of the revelation of God and his plan that we have in the Bible.

One way of seeing that is by how it is clearly meant to be understood in the light of the story of God appearing to Moses centuries earlier at this same place. Seeing God's appearance to Elijah in this story in the light of God's appearance to Moses is one of the keys to understanding this story. And the fact that both Moses and Elijah appear together in the story of the transfiguration of Jesus highlights the significance of this story and alerts us to the fact that we are to understand, Moses, Elijah and Jesus in relationship to one another.

Another reason that this passage is particularly important is that it is about God revealing himself. That in itself is a huge emphasis in the Bible. There are many ways of summarizing what the Bible is all about. It is about the unfolding of God's purpose for the salvation of the world. It is about the conquest of God's kingdom over Satan's kingdom. But interwoven into all of that is God's revelation of himself. In the Bible, God reveals himself to man. The end goal of salvation is that we might know God. Indeed, Jesus goes further and teaches that the knowledge of God is salvation. In John 17:3, Jesus says, "And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."

So, any passage which is focused on God revealing himself to us is particularly important. And that is what this passage is about. Elijah felt that his ministry in Israel had been a failure. His perspective is expressed 1 Kings 19:10, where he says to the LORD, "I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars and killed your prophets with the sword, and I even I only, am left, and they seek my life to take it away."

This discouragement must be understood in the light of the whole story that the Bible tells up to this point. The whole story from Abraham on is driven by the promises that God made to Abraham and particularly God's promise first given in Genesis 12 that he was going to save the world through Abraham's offspring. Genesis 12:3b "[I]n you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." Through Abraham's descendants, God was planning to bring blessing to the whole world and in the light of the storyline of the Bible that is a reference to salvation from sin and death.

So what Elijah is saying to God is that that plan had come to a dead end. God's purpose of salvation for the world had been thwarted by the sinfulness of Israel. As Elijah sees it at that moment, he is the only God-follower left and the rejectors of God are seeking his life. This has to do with the unfolding of God's plan of salvation. God's plan has to do with bringing about a whole creation full of people who know him and love him

and are blessed in knowing and loving him and as Elijah sees it, that plan is going nowhere. It has failed. The anti-God forces in Israel have won the day.

If that were so, it would be the ultimate disaster. The biblical message is that sin and death are what is wrong with life on earth and that all hope is tied to God's plan to overcome sin and death. If God's plan would not succeed, it means that this life is all that there is, and sin and death are the most powerful forces in the universe. Sin makes this life empty and futile and painful and death wins in the end. The future of our lives is death and then nothing. And the future of the whole world is death and then nothing. Paul expresses this idea in 1 Corinthians 15:32 where he writes, "If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.'" If Jesus did not rise from the dead, there is no hope in the face of death – life has no more meaning than a few momentary pleasures and then death conquers all.

The Christian message is that there is more to life than a party – than the momentary pleasures of this life. True life as the Bible describes it has to do with knowing and loving God and other people and living in relationship with God – living in God's favor and love and living in order to please God and then then entering a sinless and fully satisfying existence in the presence of God in a renewed creation forever. All of that disappears if God's purposes are brought to a standstill by the incorrigible sinfulness of God's chosen people.

This is the context in which we must understand Elijah's despair. If he would have been right, there would be no salvation. There would be no hope.

So how does God answer Elijah. He answers him by revealing more of himself to Elijah. And before we even consider what God actually reveals about himself to Elijah, it is worthwhile for us to dwell a moment on this key biblical truth that the most important insight in any problem or dilemma or discouragement is insight into the character of God. There is nothing that is more practical in both the ups and the downs of the Christian life than the knowledge of God. The ultimate fact in any situation is God. And what God is truly like is the most practical knowledge to give perspective in any situation with which we are faced.

One of the places in the Bible where this is most evident is the book of Job. Job suffered horribly. He was a rich man with a happy family and then over the course of a few days or weeks, all of his children and all of his possessions and then his health were all taken away from him. Job wants to know why. Job expresses his anguish to God in his suffering. Job wants answers from God concerning the reasons for his suffering. When God finally responds to Job, he does not answer his questions. Rather he reveals to Job something of his greatness and his glory. And here is part of Job's response. Job 42:5-6, "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."

There are many times in the Bible and in the Christian life, where we wonder about God's ways with us and with his church and with the world. The Bible answers many of the great questions of life, but it also leaves many of them unanswered. And in such cases, the solution is not an answer, but a person. The answer to

many of the dilemmas of life is that God's ways are higher than our ways and that we must worship him and trust him even in the face of situations in which it seems that things are not going the right way – when things seem to be falling apart – when things seem out of control. The answer that the Bible gives us in many situations in life is God pointing us to his glory and his mysterious ways that are so often the opposite of what we would expect.

So here in our text, God deals with Elijah's discouragement by revealing something of himself to Elijah. And in the end that will be the most encouraging thing of all.

So, God tells Elijah to get out of his cave and stand on the mount before the Lord. And then we read these fascinating words, "And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. And after the earth quake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper." And then God speaks to Elijah.

What is the Lord saying here? How does God address Elijah's discouragement by these signs? We have the dramatic signs of a great and strong wind, an earthquake and a fire, but each time we are told that the LORD was not in them. And then we have the sound of a low whisper and that is when the Lord speaks. The sound of a low whisper – is contrasted with the wind, earthquake and fire. God is not in them, but he is in the sound of a low whisper.

But we must understand that contrast carefully. During the time when Israel met before the Lord at this same place and when Moses had been the mediator between God and his people, God had spoken to Israel out of wind, and earthquake and fire. I won't take the time to quote verses here, but you will remember that the making of the covenant between God and Israel happened at this same place and God's law for Israel had been revealed by God speaking from the top of this mountain, from out of similar awe-inspiring signs.

But here God gives the signs, but we are told that he is not in them and when he does finally speak to Elijah it is in the context of a low whisper. There is a contrast here, but we must understand that God is not here abandoning the wind, earthquake and fire as signs of his awe-inspiring glory. There are many other passages where these kinds of signs reveal something of the awesome glory of God.

Psalm 104:3-4, "[H]e makes the clouds his chariot; he rides on the wings of the wind; he makes his messengers winds, his ministers a flaming fire." Psalm 50:3, "Our God comes; he does not keep silence; before him is a devouring fire, and around him a mighty tempest." And also the book of Revelation which records a vision that John saw includes this description, 4:5 "From the throne came flashes of lighting, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God...." And Hebrews 12:28-29, "Let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire."

We make a dreadful mistake if we think that our text is saying that God is no longer like the wind and the earthquake and the fire and now instead he is more like sound of a low whisper. That is definitely not the case. These signs definitely revealed the glory of the LORD to Elijah, but the LORD was saying to Elijah that there is more to God than the dramatic glory that is revealed by the signs of the wind, earthquake and fire. What God was saying to Elijah is that he is not always in the dramatic and the spectacular. He is also in the quiet and ordinary and barely noticeable. God can make himself known through sending fire from heaven as he had done on mount Carmel, but just because God is not spectacularly present does not mean that he is not there and working out his purposes on the earth and in our lives.

But Elijah did not get it. Notice that after the after the wind and the earthquake and the fire and the sound of a low whisper, God asks Elijah the same question he had asked him before, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” And Elijah’s answer did not change. “I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life to take it away.” The very same words that he had used before.

Somehow Elijah had sensed that God was not in the wind, earthquake and fire and that he was in the sound of a low whisper, but in spite of that Elijah’s perspective on the situation had not changed. The revelation of himself by God were intended to change Elijah’s perspective but clearly Elijah had not gotten the message.

Now we should not be too critical of Elijah for not getting the message. The people of God have had the opportunity to ponder this passage ever since it was first published and there are many different interpretations. The most helpful approach in my estimation comes from M.B Van’t Veer in his book called “My God is Yahweh” which is the most helpful book on the interpretation of the Elijah stories. Van’t Veer suggests that the words that God speaks next in this passage interpret the meaning of the signs – that the words that God speaks, and the signs must be taken together.

So, you have God bringing the signs of the wind, earthquake and fire, but he was not in those signs. Then the sound of a low whisper in connection with which God begins to speak. God asks Elijah what he is doing there on mount Horeb and Elijah gives the exact same answer as he gave before the signs. And then we read verses 15-18, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus. And when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael 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-melolah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place. And the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death. Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.”

What these verses mean is that God is not at a dead end as far as pursuing his purposes is concerned. Elijah thought that he had failed, that Israel was incorrigibly apostate, and that Baal had won. What God is saying to Elijah is that Elijah’s dismal perspective was wrong. And that God was continuing to pursue his agenda by

means of both judgment and grace. The judgment would come through the Syrian king Hazael who would put many of the Israelites to death. It would come through Jehu who would overthrow Ahab and become king in his place putting many people to death in the process and it would come through Elisha who would also bring the word of judgment upon Israel and that word of judgment would put many people to death in its fulfillment.

And in the midst of all this judgment and death, God would preserve a remnant who would remain faithful to him and not worship Baal. So, we have God continuing to pursue his goal in both judgment and grace.

But how God would do this is significant. It would not be obvious that God was in these things. When Hazael would fight against Israel, it would not be obvious that God was using a heathen king to punish his people. When Jehu overthrew Ahab, it would not be obvious that God was working out his purposes through another wicked king. From the perspective of your average Israelite, these historical events would not look different from any other historical event.

That is the meaning of the sound of a low whisper. In the earlier history of Israel God had often obviously been the one behind the pivotable events – like the Exodus and the conquest of Canaan. That was like God in the wind, earthquake and fire. But God is telling Elijah that his actions in history are not always obvious – often they are more like the sound of a low whisper in that they are not always loud and dramatic. God is making the point to Elijah that he is involved in the historical process even when his involvement is not obvious and spectacular.

Similarly, with the seven thousand that God would leave in Israel who would remain faithful to God. Seven thousand is a substantial number, but still a small number compared to the whole nation. They would be a minority. They would not dominate the political or social landscape. And yet in them and through them God would be keeping his promises and fulfilling his purpose to undo the curse of sin and bring blessing to the nations.

This was God's encouragement to Elijah. Elijah thought it was all over. And God was saying to Elijah, "My ways are not always dramatic and spectacular. I have been in the wind and the earthquake and the fire, and I will be again, but I am also in the sound of a low whisper – quiet and unspectacular working out my purposes in and through the historical process in ways that are invisible but can be known by faith.

And of course, this principle is seen in Jesus and in Jesus' teaching. Jesus himself was very different from what people expected. They expected the Saviour of Israel to come with spectacular military might to destroy Israel's enemies, but while he did do miracles, those miracles did not distinguish him from many of the OT prophets and so he was not obviously the promised Messiah. Jesus was so different from what Israel expected that even John the Baptist was confused. That is why we read in Matthew 11 that when John was in prison, he sent his disciples to Jesus to ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"

Certainly, Jesus is a fulfillment of the sound of a low whisper in that his way of bringing God's kingdom was very counter intuitive. This is especially seen in the fact that he conquered through suffering and death. He did not conquer sin and death and Satan by a great show of force, but through suffering for the sins of his people. It was a great victory, but it did not look like a victory.

And Jesus' teaching concerning the way that God's kingdom would come through history is also a fulfillment of this idea of the sound of a low whisper. Think of the parable of the leaven told in Matthew 13:33, "He told them another parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened."

God promises that his kingdom will one day fill the earth. Daniel 2:44 "And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed .... It shall break in pieces all these things and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever...." But Jesus tells us that the coming of this kingdom shall be like the action of yeast in a measure of flour. Quietly. Imperceptibly. Like the sound of a low whisper. There are times when God works in loud and dramatic ways, but much of the time he is working in ways that are not obvious or discernible.

And so, God tells Elijah to get back to work. Elijah had given up. He felt that there was nothing more for him to do. But God calls him back to his task. God was continuing to work out his plan for the history of Israel and Elijah still had work to do. That plan would involve God's judgment, but also God grace in preserving and maintaining a remnant – a faithful people who would be the bearers of the promises and claims of God in the midst of the general apostasy of the people.

And so, the signs that God showed to Elijah to encourage him are also a great encouragement for us. We need the signs of wind, earthquake and fire. God uses them to tell us important truths about his power and glory. But we also need the sign of the sound of a low whisper. The sound of a low whisper is something that you can barely hear, but you can hear it. And what it means for us is that God's way of working out his purposes in the world are often not loud and spectacular, but quiet and not obvious; but we can know that God is at work in history in both judgment and grace working towards the fulfillment his plan for the renewal of all things.

We are living in a time that is similar to that of Elijah in that the faithful people of God are small in number, at least in our society, compared with the number of the godless. And we may wonder about the future of the church. And just as Elijah was concerned for his own life, we seem to be heading towards persecution. God's encouragement to us is the same as his encouragement to Elijah and it has to do with God himself – what he is like and how he works to pursue his goals for his kingdom.

And the message to us is the same as it was to him – "Go return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus." "I have work for you to do. I am working out my purposes and you are to be part of what I am doing." We are called to continue to serve the Lord in whatever way that he has called us to serve him, seeking first the

kingdom of God, even though it may seem rather hopeless. We may feel that the radical left has won. They are clearly out to suppress all opposition to their cause.

But God will preserve his remnant. And he will continue to work in and through the historical process in ways that are not obvious but are certain and sure. And that is our hope. We walk by faith and not by sight. What we see going on around us seems discouraging. But what we know to be true is very encouraging. Things are not out of control. God is at work guiding all things to the end that he has ordained and if we are trusting in him that end will be wonderful indeed. And so, we live in hope – a hope that is rooted in the God who often works in a way that is like the sound of a low whisper.