

## Hearing God: Part Four

### The Still Small Voice

A few years ago a movie entitled *The Stepford Wives* hit the screen. It's about a couple in their early thirties who move into the upper-middle class community of Stepford, where the men are mostly high-tech professionals and the women are housewives.

The wife soon notices that most of the other Stepford wives uniformly exhibit very strange behavior patterns. They are continually ecstatic about sewing, cooking and baking, cleaning their houses, and manicuring their lawns. When they get together it is invariably to trade recipes, congratulate themselves regarding their clean floors, and celebrate their latest triumphs in making their husbands' lives more comfortable. They never fight, are never unpleasant to anyone – especially not to their husbands – and they have no opinions or interests that reach beyond their family, home, or social club.

Only a handful of the wives in Stepford could be described as feisty or individualistic. But these women eventually leave for a “vacation” with their husbands, and upon their return they too dwell on baking and clean floors just like the rest.

1

When this happens to the best friend of our most recent Stepford wife, who is already very suspicious about what is going on, she becomes desperate and stabs her friend with a knife to see if she will bleed. She does not! She merely repeats pathetic little maneuvers around her kitchen, mouthing the same inane niceties over and over, while her frightened friend backs away and runs out the door.

By this time, however, her own robot replacement is almost ready. At the end of the movie we see her (or it) with a placid robotic expression on her face, ready to wear frilly blouses and aprons, bake cakes, behave ecstatically over clean floors and be sickeningly sweet – a totally controlled robot wife!

The message of the movie is obvious and important. But it is a message that can easily be overlooked or forgotten:

In close personal relationships conformity to another's wishes is not desirable if it is mindless or mechanical, or if it is purchased at the expense of freedom and the destruction of personality.

2

In our most basic attempts to understand how God speaks to us and guides us, we must settle in our minds once and for all that our God wishes to speak to us and guide us only in the context of a certain kind of life, a life of loving fellowship with our Creator and Redeemer. We have already seen in this series that our God has no interest in communicating with us on the level of a master to his horse or mule, which have no understanding but only instinct. Nor is our God interested in guiding us in a mechanical way, as one might guide an automobile or a robot. And we must never lose sight of the fact that our God wants us to develop as intelligent, mature people who learn to freely offer ourselves to him in a cooperative relationship that deepens into one of genuine agapé love. Our primary goal, then, is not merely to “hear” God, but to experience and cultivate our relationship with Him. This is the only way we will learn to hear Him rightly.

Let me offer another analogy. We can either conceive of the Lord as our sheep-dog or as our shepherd. You know what a sheep-dog does. It controls the sheep by barking at them, by coercing them, by forcing them to go this way or that way. There is no understanding or cooperation between the sheep-dog and the sheep. The sheep merely react to the back and forth darting maneuvers of the dog until they are mindlessly herded to the target location.

3

But it is not so with the shepherd of the sheep. He neither barks at the sheep nor mindlessly herds them toward a desired goal. He calls to them. He leads the way. They know his voice and they follow him. They are in a vital relationship with the shepherd, one in which they are with him all the time and totally dependent on him: he makes them lie down in green pastures, he leads them beside quiet waters; should they have to go through the valley of the shadow of death, surrounded by ferocious predators, he is with them, guiding them and protecting them with his rod and staff. Our Shepherd does all this and more for us; he restores our soul, he guides us in paths of righteousness for his name's sake; he prepares a table before us in the presence of our enemies; he anoints our head with oil, and our cup overflows. Our God does all this and more. He even takes us into His confidence, for we read in Psalm 25:14 that, "The Lord confides in those who fear him; he makes his covenant known to them."

Here is where our friend Elijah can show us something vital to our spiritual development. Elijah stands as one of the greatest of the O.T. prophets. Think about what he accomplished on Mount Carmel (refer to chapter 18 which forms the backdrop for our lesson in chapter 19).

4

There he challenged Ahab and Jezebel – indeed all Israel – about their idolatrous Baal worship. And on that mount, Elijah invoked the power of the Living God to defeat the 450 false prophets of Baal and 400 false prophets of Asherah. This he had done single-handedly in spectacular fashion. It was an overwhelming victory for God and a devastating defeat for Satan, in whose unseen hand Baal was but a lifeless puppet. The episode ends with Elijah ordering the execution of the false prophets.

But this astonishing victory in chapter 18 is swiftly followed by Jezebel's threats in chapter 19. She virtually says to Elijah that what he has done to her prophets she will do to him. Elijah flees into the desert for his life, and there he laments, "*I have had enough, Lord. Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors*" (19:4). He lies down and goes to sleep.

There he is ministered to by an angel of the Lord. He must gather his strength, for he is to be sent on a forty-day journey to Mount Horeb (Sinai), the very place to which Moses had been drawn years earlier for a meeting with the Lord.

5

The lessons here are profound. We need to ask some serious questions about where Elijah was spiritually. Had his God-given successes fostered an inordinate pride that caused him to take his own importance too seriously? It seems more than likely. Moreover, it seems that Elijah had come to bask in the glow of the spectacular. He may have fully expected that because of what had been accomplished at Mount Carmel, Jezebel would capitulate and pagan worship would come to an end in Israel – all through his influence!

But whereas the great spectacle had failed to melt Jezebel's icy heart, and worse, she had even threatened his life, it was his pride that had been shattered. His confidence was now gone and he was a broken man. What Elijah needed to learn, God was about to show him. You see, God does not always move in the realm of the extraordinary. To live always seeking one "high experience" after another is to have a misdirected zeal. The fact is that the vast majority of life's service is in quiet, routine, humble obedience to God's call and His will.

Now, Elijah's forty day journey is not without significance. Indeed, a straight trip from Beersheba to Mount Horeb would require little more than a quarter of that time.

6

The forty days is designedly symbolic. Just as the children of Israel had experienced a notable spiritual failure and so were to wander for forty years in the wilderness, so a spiritually defeated Elijah would now spend forty days in the desert. And as Moses was to spend 40 days on the mountain without bread and water, sustained only by God while he awaited a new phase of service, so Elijah would now spend 40 days being sustained by God as he prepared for a recommissioning by the Lord.

Poor Elijah! He is so much like us. His soul was somewhat bitter at having served God so earnestly and spectacularly and yet having experienced rejection and solitary exile. But God does not comment on Elijah's self-justification. He merely tells the prophet to go and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by. Suddenly a rock-shattering tempest smites the mountain around Elijah. Surely this would announce the Divine presence! But the Lord was not in the wind. There follows a fearful earthquake, but still God was not there. A sudden fire followed, yet God had not come.

Now if you carefully track God's appearances in the O.T. you will discover that these kinds of physical phenomena were often the precursors of God's coming.

7

But not this time. There follows a gentle whisper, a still small voice, so faint as to be almost silence. Elijah knew it instantly. It was God! What a lesson for Elijah! Even God did not always operate in the realm of the spectacular.

Pulling his prophet's cloak over his face, Elijah made his way reverently out of the cave. The cloak was not protection against the wind, the earthquake, or the fire, for they had all subsided. Elijah does not wrap his mantle about him in worship on account of the dramatic natural phenomena, but because of the presence of the Lord in the faint whisper. And out of that memorable silence came a voice questioning, "*What are you doing here, Elijah?*"

The question is a direct challenge to Elijah's melancholy loneliness. You see, the prophet had become a self-imposed fugitive from the places where history was being made. The Hebrew concern for history is one of the outstanding contributions of the Jews. Elijah, standing tall in the line of Hebrew prophets concerned with the history of Israel, found Mount Horeb and the still small voice of God, that faint whisper, the occasion of his recommissioning. God was sending him back to the land where history was being made.

Do you see how profound all of this is? Elijah receives a Divine call to return to the mainstream of human living. And the call comes in quietness, in solitude, in the presence of the Living God who speaks with a still small voice, a faint whisper.

How tragic it is that so many followers of the Lord do not hear that still small voice. Every century has more than its share of professing Christians who flee from the responsibilities of grappling with the realities of history as it unfolds in every day life. They try to live cloistered lives, isolated and insulated from the harsh realities of life in a fallen and lost world. And often, at the same moment we stop listening to the still, small voice of God, we fail to hear the painful cries and agonized wails of those who are all around us. But the challenge of God, as well as the challenge of history, is to move out into the current of life and fulfill our God-given responsibilities in spite of the threats of suffering and martyrdom.

The question we must all ask ourselves is this: Am I humble, and am I listening to the still small voice, the gentle whisper of God? We must not look for God only in something big – church rallies, conferences, highly visible leaders – for if we do we run the terrible risk of missing the Lord because He is often found gently whispering in the quietness of a humbled heart. Are we listening?

Are we willing to step back from the noise and activity of our busy lives so that we can listen humbly and quietly for His guidance?

It is true that God can speak powerfully through a thunder storm as he did with Martin Luther (and that's an interesting story worth telling sometime) but most of the time God chooses to speak directly into our minds and thought processes and we humble ourselves, quiet ourselves, and spend time in the Word, in prayer and meditation.

So remember where we have been this month in our reflections on hearing God. We are not horses or mules which have no understanding; neither are we mechanical things; we are unique beings made in the image of the Living God. We are spiritual beings with whom the Lord wants to live in a conversational relationship, and if we will humble ourselves and truly listen, then we will surely hear the faint whisper, the still small voice of our Father and our God. If we soak our souls in such a prayerful, conversational relationship with our God, then we will walk in the power and authority of our Lord.