

Sometimes God's Answer is a Whisper

When certain things are happening, we expect a particular reaction to them. For example, when junior is about to attempt a triple backflip off of the top of the playset, you expect to hear his dad shout out, "What are you doing?! Get down from there before you break your arm!" If you're pulled over on 41...going eighty-five in a seventy...you expect the trooper to tap on the window ready to write a ticket. When your team gets the lead in a major game, perhaps one that they must win in order to keep their season alive, you expect them to fall apart and lose...just like they have so many times before.

The same is true with rather important things in our lives. When you plan out your finances...selecting high interest rates, finding successful investments, timing your pay raise requests, working your retirement accounts...you expect your hard work to create sustainability and profit, both now and for your future. If you invest in your health...having the right diet, getting your sleep, working out and keeping your body strong...you expect your body to react well to you treating it well. As you build relationships with your family and friends, you expect those connections to grow and last as long as possible...even better...for your whole life.

However, when certain things are happening, the reaction we expect is often not what happens. Rather, it's the opposite of our expectations. Well-planned finances crumble, good health deteriorates, treasured relationships vanish. Our wants, passions, and dreams are gone in a matter of weeks, days, or hours.

It's in moments like these where God receives from Christians the most questions and accusations. "God, why did you let this happen?" "God, why didn't you (fill in the blank)?" "God, do you really love me?" We go to our great and powerful God expecting a fix. Our questions and hurt are answered with silence.

Or so it seems. Might it be that the best thing God can do and is doing for us in those moments is reacting in a way we do not expect?

Elijah had some expectations with his life. Here in our reading from 1 Kings 19, Elijah has been the Lord's prophet for about three years. During this time, he had come to expect amazing and wonderful things from God. At one point, he was fed twice a day by ravens God sent. He witnessed a handful of flour and a little olive oil never run out as it supplied a widow and her son with bread through a drought. Later on, with the Lord's power, he raised that same widow's son from the dead.

Most recently, the Lord delivered on expectations on Mount Carmel. In a battle to prove who was the real God—the Lord or the false god Baal the Israelites started worshipping—Elijah watched the Lord's fire come down from heaven, burning up a sacrifice, the wood, the altar, everything. It gave absolute proof that, "The Lord, he is God!"

With all that is happening, Elijah expects more great things. "Maybe King Ahab and Queen Jezebel will get rid of all Baal worship. The Israelites will return to the Lord and his covenant agreement with him to be his people. It will be like it should be." Elijah saw the path, the trajectory, the future.

And none of it happened. Instead, he's on the run for his life. Ahab and Jezebel want to kill him. No spiritual renewal happened among the Israelites—still worshipping Baal. He's gone from victory on Mount Carmel to living in a cave. His expectations for a reality that seemed so sure are gone. His question..."God, what happened to you?"

I don't need to ask if those words sound familiar. They are familiar. They've been thought or said by everyone—maybe not as you were on the run for your life like Elijah...and if so I need to hear that story. But said at our own times in our own ways.

“God, what happened to you?”...as your finances crumbled...you got hacked, your business failed, you went bankrupt, you didn't receive the raises you needed and know you deserved, an unexpected disaster drained your savings. The way you envisioned your health in your old age is not what it's panned out to be. Or a sickness or cancer you believed you could only get in your old age is affecting you right now. Your hopes and dreams for a spouse...a family...a ton of friends and connections...are still hopes because you're lonelier than you've felt before.

When troubles are happening in our lives, we often feel a disconnect in what we expect from God to how it seems he's reacting to it. The more it happens or the longer a particular trouble goes on, the more we believe that disconnect to be true. Take just those examples. God says he'll provide for your daily needs. “But I am in need and it keeps getting worse.” God says to come to him in prayer when we or someone we love is sick. “But the cancer is getting worse not better. I'm closer to losing...mom... dad...grandma...my wife...my husband...my life!” God says to cast all our trouble on him because he cares for us. “I've gained a second, third, and fourth trouble before the first one is resolved.”

The questions, the wondering, the accusing begins. No one's excused. We all do it. “Is God the God I hope he is?” “Why isn't God the great God I thought he was?” “You're supposed to be in a great wind.” “You're supposed to be in an earthquake.” “You're supposed to be in a roaring fire.” “God, what happened to you?”

There's a problem with us thinking we bind God to our expectations of him. There's a problem with us thinking that we're in control over what the God of the universe should do. But there's also a problem with our thinking because God has proven, is proving, and will prove many more times that he is the Lord, our God, who loves us and cares for us.

What did Elijah get as he was wondering what happened to God? A great wind? An earthquake? A fire? Nope. A whisper. That's what Elijah got. A whisper. Elijah sits in the cave waiting for the Lord to pass by. A wind comes. You can hear the sound of it whipping off the rocks. No God. The earth shakes. Elijah can feel his body shaking along with the ground. No God. A bright orange fire makes Elijah back up because he's too close and it's too hot. No God. Then a whisper. A still, small voice of a great, powerful, and gracious God.

God proves to Elijah and to us that he has the power and ability to react to our troubles in ways we may not expect him to. He did it already with Jesus. Who would have expected a holy and righteous God to react to sinners with such grace in such a surprising way? He himself steps in with his still, small voice...a whisper...which came in the form of murmurs from baby Jesus in a manger...from a young boy as he grew and never did anything wrong...from a young man who spoke face-to-face with Satan and did not fall into temptation. Eventually, Jesus didn't whisper. He shouted, “It is finished!”

An unexpected reaction. The best of outcomes for you. If God took care of your greatest trouble in an unexpected way, what's to say that he won't be there for you in all your troubles?

Did you notice that Elijah says the exact same words twice? God finds him in the cave. “What are you doing here Elijah?” “I've been faithful to you. Israel has rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, put your prophets to death, and now they want to kill me, too!” He hears the Lord's whispering presence. Covers his face. Comes out to meet the Lord. “What are you doing here,

Elijah?” “I’ve been faithful to you. Israel has rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, put your prophets to death, and now they want to kill me, too.”

Same words. Different posture. God’s whisper changed Elijah’s posture from fear and frustration to confidence in the Lord to be there for him like he’s promised. He saw how God has the power to come in the great and powerful ways of a wind, earthquake, and fire. But in this instance he learned that sometimes God’s answer is a whisper.

You can see this posture change take place in your life. I can, too. We experience trouble. Initial reactions question God before hearts of faith remember Jesus and so also God’s love and care for us. Whether a trouble is ongoing or it’s concluded, we’re able to see how God was there for us in the best, unexpected, and sometimes quietest of ways.

A hurricane that was predicted to be bad turned out to be even worse. Floods washed away homes, cars, and people. Trees fell and crushed homes. Two struck this man’s house. No power for two weeks. No water for three. And no one else with him in the house to go through it. “God, I could really use you right now.” One day, this man got his car out of the garage after downed trees were cleared. The next, he made it through a five hour line to get into a store for food. The next began a stretch of breakfasts, lunches, and dinners with his neighbors as food was cooked on a grill before it went bad. The next a reflection on how God was there through the storm because living in a house surrounded by massive oak trees why did they fall where they did and not on him. He saw how God was there all along in ways he didn’t initially realize.

That man was me. Right now, maybe it’s you who’s has been affected by an unexpected powerful storm that two weeks ago changed lives in all of twenty-five minutes. Some kind of damage to your home or property, an effect on your work, the trauma of what you may have lived through, thinking about how close you were to a life-changing event, seeing all the damage that was caused. And if it’s not that storm, there is some other kind of storm you’re experiencing.

Jesus has made you and I different as we live through them. He has shown us his great love for us in every situation. That gives us thanks for what he has done and confidence that he will react to our present and future troubles for our good. We know he will!

God’s reaction to our troubles may not be what we want or expect. But God has been, is, and will always be there for us...even if his presence is as loud as a whisper.

Amen.