

God Heard in the Still Small Voice.

by Edward Payson

God manifests himself to men in a still small voice, a personal and direct communication from God that reprove sinners and leads them to repentance and salvation.

Scripture: 1 Kings 19:12, Zechariah 4:6, Matthew 18:3, John 16:8, Acts 2:37

Topics: "Still Small Voice", "True Repentance"

Description

Edward Payson preaches about the encounter of Elijah with God on Mount Horeb, highlighting how God often speaks to us in a still small voice, addressing us personally and turning our attention to ourselves, our conduct, and our situation. He emphasizes that true conversion and the effects of preaching come from the Spirit of God alone, not from powerful means or eloquent speeches. Payson urges listeners to reflect on God's questions to Elijah - 'What dost thou here?' - and apply them to their own lives, seeking genuine repentance and a deep relationship with God.

Transcript

"And behold the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake 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 earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. And it was so, when Elijah heard it that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out and stood in the entering in of the cave: and, behold, there came a voice unto him, and said, what dost thou here Elijah?"

1 Kings 19:12, 13

that part of Elijah's history, which is immediately connected with this passage, we have a striking exemplification of the great truth, that a good man, when God is with him, can do all things, and exhibit almost superhuman excellence; but that the same person, when God withdraws his secret influence, becomes weak like another man, and can do nothing. In the preceding chapter we see this prophet, unguarded and unassisted by any human power, fearlessly meeting an enraged monarch surrounded by his guards, reproving him for his sins, standing alone in the midst of thousands who thirsted for his blood, putting to death four hundred false prophets before the eyes of their idolatrous sovereign and protector, and with a voice, like the voice of omnipotence, calling down, first fire, and then water from heaven.

Thus he could act while God, by his secret influence, inspired him with faith and courage and zeal. But in this chapter we see the same prophet flying with trembling haste from the threatened vengeance of a woman, not venturing to think himself safe till he had fled a day's journey into the wilderness, and in a transport of peevishness and impatience wishing for death. Thus he acted when God, to humble him and show him his own weakness, left him to himself. The unbelief and pusillanimity which he exhibited on this occasion, deserved reproof and in our text we have an account of the manner in which God reproved him.

While he lay trembling and dispirited in a cave of Mount Horeb, he began to perceive the tokens of an approaching Deity. And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains and brake 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 earthquake, a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave.

And, behold, there came a voice to him which said, What dost thou here Elijah? My hearers, the manner in which God manifested himself to his prophet on this occasion, resembles, in many respects, the manner in which he now manifests himself to men, when he comes to reprove them for their sins, and thus prepare the way for their conversion and salvation. To trace this resemblance, is my design in the present discourse. I. When God comes to reprove men for their sins, he usually manifests himself to them, or addresses them, not by his works, either of creation or providence, but by a still small voice.

Thus it was in the instance before us. A tempestuous wind, an earthquake, and a fire were perceived by the prophet; but God was in neither of them. It is, however, necessary to explain this assertion, to show in what sense it is said that God was not in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire. It is certain that, in one sense, he was in each of them; for he is every where, working all in all. They were all the effect of his power; they were all proofs of his presence, and in all of them some of his natural perfections might be seen.

But in another sense he was in none of them. He was in none of them as a reprover or instructor. He spoke from none of them. Neither the wind, the earthquake, nor the fire, said any thing to the prophet respecting his situation, his errors, or his duty. They might all have passed by, and left him as they found him, uninstructed, unreprieved. In none of them did he find God, in none of them did he hear his voice. They were rather the precursors, the heralds of the approaching Deity, than the Deity himself.

And like heralds they proclaimed, though without a voice, the greatness, the majesty, and the power of him whose heralds they were. Or, like the trumpets which announce the approach of a monarch, they served to excite expectation, and awaken attention. But it was in the still small voice alone, that God manifested his presence to the prophet, as a reprover and instructor. In a similar manner does he still manifest himself to men when he comes to reprove and instruct them. His works continually pass before them, and in one sense he is in all his works.

He shines upon us in the sun, he breathes upon us in the air, he supports us in the earth, he stands up before us in every thing which he has made, in every change and event produced by his providence. But in another sense, in the sense of our text, he is in none of these things. He is not in them in such a sense that men perceive his presence. He is not in them in such a sense that men find him there, or hear him speak to them. In a word, he is not in them as an instructor or reprover.

For instance, the luminaries of heaven have a thousand times apparently passed over the face of the sky before your eyes; but with respect to you, God was not in them. You saw him not in the sun, you saw him not in the moon, in the stars. Again, you have all known something of the force of the winds; you have felt your habitations tremble before the fury of the blast. And not a few of you have witnessed more terrible proofs of its power on the ocean. You have seen the billows raised into mountains, and lashed into foam.

You have felt the laboring vessel reel under you, while tossed by a tempest which seemed sufficient to rend the mountains, and break in pieces the rocks; and you have seen the tempest become a calm. But as it respected you, God was not in the wind, nor in the calm which succeeded. You saw his hand, you heard his voice in neither. If you then heard him in any thing, it was in a still small voice within you. Further, the globe which we inhabit, though not this particular part of it, has often been convulsed by the most terrible and desolating earthquakes.

Even some parts of New England have been agitated in a degree sufficient to excite distressing apprehensions. But have the nations thus visited found God in the earthquake? Did our fathers find him there as an instructor and reprove? Far from it. Never have the survivors been reformed by such events. The earthquakes in New England did, indeed, occasion a kind of religious panic. A writer, who was then one of the ministers of Boston, informs us, that immediately after the great earthquake as it was called, a great number of his flock came and expressed a wish to unite themselves with the church.

But on conversing with them he could find no evidence of improvement in their religious views or feelings, no convictions of their own sinfulness; nothing, in short, but a kind of superstitious fear, occasioned by a belief that the end of the world was at hand. All their replies proved that they had not found God in the earthquake. Again, you have often heard the thunder bursting over your heads, and seen the fires of heaven flashing thick and dreadful around you. And more than once, or twice, or thrice, you have seen this town assailed by devouring flames, and in danger of a wide-wasting conflagration.

But the succeeding conduct of our citizens sufficiently proves that they did not find God in the fire. If he was there to scourge us, he was not there to instruct us, or convince us of our sins. And the same remark may be applied to numberless other places which have suffered in a far greater degree than this town by the ravages of fire. Once more, you have all, in a greater or less degree, been afflicted by the dispensations of God's providence. Some of you have lost property; some of you children and friends; some of you have been visited by dangerous diseases, which brought death near; but in none of these afflictions did you find God.

You saw not his hand, you heard not his voice. It was a chance that happened to you. I would not however be understood to mean, that the works of God and the dispensations of his providence are never made the occasion or means of leading men to serious reflection; for observation proves that they very often are so. Afflictions have led thousands to think of their ways; and, in consequence, they have turned their feet into God's testimonies. Still it is true that afflictions alone never produce this effect.

So far as they produce any effect, it is not in a direct, but an indirect manner. As the tempest, the earthquake, and the fire roused the prophet, and prepared him to attend to what God would say to him; so the works and dispensations of providence are used to rouse thoughtless sinners, and awaken their attention to the still small voice of Jehovah. But they communicate no specific instruction or reproof. They do not tell the sinner in what respect he has done wrong, nor what it is to do right.

They may amaze him, they may frighten him, they may plunge him into distress and despondency. But they leave him there. After they have done their utmost, the sinner is still left without God in the world, and without knowledge of the way in which God may be found. The same may be said of other means. Ministers may give voice and utterance to the Bible which is the word of God. Like James and John they may be sons of thunder to impenitent sinners. They may pour forth a tempest of impassioned, eloquent declamation.

They may proclaim all the terrors of the Lord; represent the earth as quaking and trembling under the footsteps of Jehovah; flash around them the lightnings of Sinai; borrow, as it were, the trump of the archangel, and summon the living and the dead to the bar of God; kindle before their hearers the conflagration of the last day and the fires of eternity, and show them the Judge descending, the heavens departing as a scroll, the elements melting, the earth with its works consuming, and all nature struggling in the agonies of dissolution; --and still God may not be there; his voice may not be heard either in the tempest, the earthquake, or the fire; and if so, the preacher will have labored but in vain; his hearers, though they may for the moment be affected, will receive no permanent salutary impressions.

Nothing effectual can be done unless God be there, unless he speaks with his still small voice. By this still, small voice we mean the voice of God's Spirit; the voice which speaks not only to man, but in man; the voice, which, in stillness and silence, whispers to the ear of the soul, and presses upon the conscience those great eternal truths, a knowledge and belief of which is connected with salvation. This voice almost every sinner sometimes hears. Most of you, my friends, have heard it.

Some of you have heard it in this house, seconding the efforts of your minister, urging home upon you the truths which he exhibited, and enforcing his endeavors to convince you of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment. Some of you have heard it in the still and solitary hours of night while musing by your firesides, or lying awake upon your beds. There it has spoken to you, reminding you of the truths which you had formerly heard or read; and of the sins which you had forgotten; it has whispered, You are an accountable creature; the eye of God is upon you; he has noticed all your sins, he will bring you into judgment; you must repent or perish.

Thus, while you alone could hear it, has the still silent voice admonished, warned, reproved and instructed you; and while you heard it God was there; there, as he was not in the tempest, the earthquake, or the fire; and you felt the truth of the apostle's assertion, God is not far from every one of us. Or perhaps you were constrained to say with the patriarch, Surely God is in this place and I knew it not. Such is the still small voice with which God speaks, probably to all sinners, certainly to all whom he convinces of sin, and brings to a knowledge of himself.

We remark, II. That when God speaks to men with this voice, he speaks to them personally, or does, as it were, call them by name. This he did in the case before us. He addressed the prophet by his name, Elijah. When he speaks to men in a general way only, by his written word, or by the voice of his ministers, he does not address them in this personal manner. He addresses characters and classes, not individuals. When this is the case no man hears for himself; no man feels that he is particularly addressed.

Hence large congregations often sit and hear a message from God, while perhaps not a single individual among them feels that the message is addressed to himself, or that he has any personal concern in it. But it is not so when God speaks with his still small voice. Every one, to whom God thus speaks, whether he be alone, or in the midst of a large assembly, feels that he is spoken to, that he is called, as it were, by

name. The message comes home to him, and says, as Nathan said to David, Thou art the man.

Hence, while multitudes are around him, he sits as if he were alone. At him alone the preacher seems to aim. On him alone his eye seems to be fixed. To him alone every word seems to come. Absorbed in the truths thus presented, in reflecting on his own conduct, guilt, and danger, and on the character and commands of God, he is almost unconscious of the presence of his fellow worshippers; his attention is chained to the subject by bonds which he cannot break, and sentence after sentence, truth after truth, falls upon his ear, and is impressed on his conscience with a weight, an energy, and an efficacy, which omnipotence alone can give.

And when God thus speaks to the whole or the greatest part of an assembly at once, as he sometimes does, when he comes to revive his work extensively, these effects are experienced, and these appearances exhibited by all. No scene, on this side the bar of God, can be more awfully, overpoweringly solemn, than the scene which such an assembly exhibits. Then the Father of spirits is present to the spirits he has made; present to each of them, and speaking to each. Each one feels that the eye of God is upon him, that the voice of God is speaking to him.

Each one therefore, though surrounded by numbers, mourns solitary and apart. The powers of the world to come are felt. Eternity, with all its crushing realities, opens to view, and descends upon the mind. The final sentence, though uttered by human lips, comes with scarcely less weight, than if pronounced by the Judge himself. All countenances gather blackness, and a stillness, solemn, profound, and awful, pervades the place, interrupted only by a stifled sob, or a half repressed sigh.

My hearers, such scenes have been witnessed. Within a very few years they have been witnessed in hundreds of places. Nor need we wonder that the still small voice of God should produce such effects. Look at Elijah. While a tempestuous wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before his eyes; while the earth quaked under his feet, and consuming fires blazed around him, he stood with uncovered face, undismayed, unmoved. But no sooner was the still small voice heard, than he covered his face, and put himself in the posture of reverent, waiting attention.

Look at Moses. When he saw miraculous tokens of God's presence in a burning, but unconsumed bush, he felt little other emotion than curiosity. But when a still small voice addressed him from that bush, he hid his face and was afraid. Look at Saul. When at midday a light suddenly shone around him, exceeding the brightness of the sun, it only surprised him. But when he heard a voice saying to him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? he trembled, he was confounded, he submitted.

So at the present day, thousands who have witnessed tempests, and earthquakes, and fire; who have passed through floods of affliction, and who have been brought by sickness to the very gates of death, have returned from all these scenes unaffected, unmoved. Yet afterwards the same persons have, by the still small voice of God, not only been deeply impressed but permanently transformed. Is not my word, saith Jehovah, as a fire, and a hammer, which breaketh the rock in pieces?

We remark, III. That, when God speaks to men in this still small voice, he usually begins by turning their attention upon themselves, their conduct, and situation. He said to the prophet, What dost thou here, Elijah? a question which was most admirably adapted to convince, reprove, and humble him. It was as if God had said to him, Is this the proper place for thee, a prophet, a reprover, a reformer? Is this thy proper, thine appointed sphere of action? Are the people here whom I sent thee to warn?

If not, why didst thou come here? what motive brought thee here? what art thou doing here? Similar questions in effect does God propose to men when he first speaks to them with his still small voice. Calling each one, as it were, by name, he says to him, What art thou doing in the world in which I have placed thee? what hast thou done? in what pursuits hast thou employed the time and the powers which I have given thee? And to these questions he constrains conscience to give a true, though reluctant answer.

He makes her the sinner's accuser, makes her accuse him to his face, of his numberless sins of omission and commission, of the misspent, of faculties misemployed, of privileges misimproved, and mercies abused. At the same time he refutes all the sinner's objections and arguments; shows him, as he did Elijah, the fallacy of his excuses; strips him of all his vain pleas, and lays him speechless and self-condemned at the footstool of sovereign mercy. O what a long train of self-accusing thoughts and reflections is put in motion by the short questions, What art thou doing? what hast thou done? when they are pressed upon a sinner's conscience by the still small voice of God.

And it is obvious to remark, that an attention to these questions is the first thing necessary to a careless sinner. Until he considers what he has been doing in the world, he will see nothing of his sinfulness, guilt and danger; he will not know of what to repent, he will not feel his need of a Savior. Hence our Divine Teacher informs us that, when the Spirit of God comes, he will reprove the world of sin; that is, he will make men see what they have been doing, he will show them what they ought to have done, and thus convince them how widely their temper and conduct have differed from the rule of rectitude, the will of their Maker.

And when they are brought to repentance, the same still small voice will whisper to them assurances of pardon and peace; for the Lord will speak peace to his people and his servants, and his Spirit shall witness with their spirits, that they are the children of God. A few reflections and inferences will conclude the discourse. 1. We may learn from this subject, my Christian friends, to expect the conversion of sinners, not from any means or instruments however apparently powerful, but from the Spirit of God alone.

I am indeed aware that your understandings are already perfectly convinced of this truth; but our feelings do not always correspond with it. We are sometimes ready to think that, if God would work miracles or send some extraordinary calamity, sinners would be converted, or at least convinced of their sins. But at such times we forget that God is not in the whirlwind, the earthquake, and the fire; that he usually speaks in a still small voice. At other times, after hearing a sermon which has appeared to them remarkably solemn and impressive, Christians will say, Certainly this sermon cannot fail of producing some salutary effects.

But they forget that, unless the still small voice of God has also spoken, no salutary effect will follow. Whenever the work is done, it is effected not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord of Hosts. Let us then, above all things, desire and pray, that the Spirit and the still small voice of God may accompany the preaching of the gospel. This will prove far more efficacious than tempest, and earthquakes, and fire; and without this, not only all the apostles but all the angels, would preach in vain. 2.

If the truth of the proceeding remarks be allowed, it will follow, that what we call conversion and the other effects produced by the preaching of the gospel are not a mere excitement of the passions or animal feelings. Some seem to suppose that this is the case, and that those whom we call converts have been merely terrified or agitated by addresses to their passions. But were this the case, the tempest, the earthquake and the fire would be the most effectual means of producing conversion, and the preacher,

who could most eloquently and powerfully address the passions of his audience, would always be the most successful preacher.

But this is by no means the fact. A plain simple exhibition of the truth by men of very moderate abilities and attainments has, in hundreds of instances, produced far greater effects, than the most impassioned and eloquent appeals which ever issued from mortal lips. The fact is, that when persons are converted, they are converted not because their passions have been addressed, not because they have been agitated or terrified, but because the still small voice of God has spoken to them, spoken within them, and taught them what they have been doing, what they are doing, and what they ought to have done.

It is this alone which has given to the preachers of the gospel all the success which they have ever met with. It was this which made the preaching of the apostles successful. They went forth and preached every where that men should repent, the Lord working with them. It was this which rendered the preaching of their immediate disciples successful. They spoke the word, and the hand of the Lord was with them, and much people were turned to the Lord. And St. Paul declares that though he planted and Apollos watered the churches, it was God alone who gave the increase.

Conversion then is, and always has been the work of God. It is not a delusion, a fancy, or an effect of human eloquence; but a necessary prerequisite to admission into heaven, and our Savior's declaration, Verily, verily, I say unto you, except ye be converted, ye shall in no wise enter the kingdom of God, is still as true as it is solemn and interesting. To conclude. Permit me now, my hearers, in God's name to press upon each of you the question in our text. In doing this I would not, if I could, surround you with tempests, and earthquakes, and fires; for God would not be in them.

Nor would I, were it in my power, pour forth a torrent of impassioned eloquence and tumultuously agitate your passions. On the contrary, I wish you to be cool, calm, collected, and self-possessed. I wish the voice of passion and every other voice to be hushed within you that the still small voice of God may speak and be heard. And nothing but a faint hope that he will speak, at least to some present, encourages me to address you. Hoping and praying that, while I address his question to your ears, his own still small voice may address it to each of your hearts, I ask every individual present in his name, What dost thou here?

What art thou doing, mortal and accountable creature, in the world wherever I have placed thee? Art thou performing the duty I have assigned thee? Art thou faithfully serving and glorifying me thy Creator? Art thou working out the salvation of thine immortal soul with fear and trembling? Or art thou living, hast thou lived only to gratify or enrich or exalt thyself, while me, the God in whose hand thy breath is. and whose are all thy ways, thou hast not glorified, art not glorifying?

Again: what dost thou, mortal, accountable creature, here in this house of thy God? Hast thou come here to worship me in spirit and in truth; to confess thy sins and obtain pardon; to offer supplication and thanksgiving and praise to me, and to learn thy duty with a determination to perform it? Or hast thou come, thou canst scarcely tell why, come to provoke me by formal and heartless services, to assume the posture of devotion, but to offer no prayer, to sit and hear my words, but do them not, and to cover wandering thoughts and an insensible heart with a serious countenance?

My hearers, the questions of your God and your Judge are before you. If you have heard my voice alone propose them, they will pass unheeded and soon be forgotten. But if the still small voice of God has pressed them upon your consciences, they cannot pass unheeded; they will be remembered, and they will be followed by effects which neither tempest, nor earthquake, nor fire could produce.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/edward-payson/god-heard-in-the-still-small-voice/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net