

*He came there to a cave, and lodged there; and behold, the word of Yahweh came to him, and he said to him, **What are you doing here**, Elijah? He said, I have been very jealous for Yahweh, the God of Armies; for the children of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and slain your prophets with the sword: and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away. He said, Go forth, and stand on the mountain before Yahweh. Behold, **Yahweh passed by**, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before Yahweh; **but Yahweh was not in the wind**: and after the wind an earthquake; **but Yahweh was not in the earthquake**: and after the earthquake a fire; **but Yahweh was not in the fire**: and after the fire a still small voice. It was so, **when Elijah heard it**, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entrance of the cave. Behold, **there came a voice to him**, and said, **What are you doing here**, Elijah? (1 Kings 19:9-13)*

There are several conundrums in this story I have mulled over in my mind most of my life. One is God's repeated question to Elijah asking why he is here instead of somewhere else. I feel this is a very important point to consider in this story and alerts us that something is amiss with Elijah that God wants to address. I also believe this is not just about Elijah but at times is something God repeats in my life, asking me why I am in the situation I am in which by inference prompts me to face a reality check. It also reminds me that this is something not uncommon for God to do but rather reveals something very important about His graciousness and kindness meant to lead us to repentance.

*They heard the voice of Yahweh God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife **hid themselves** from the presence of Yahweh God among the trees of the garden. **Yahweh God called to the man**, and said to him, **"Where are you?"** (Genesis 3:8-9)*

I've pondered this story of Elijah my whole life trying to grasp why it says God was not in the wind, the earthquake or the fire when it clearly states that these things all happened from Him passing by. Sort of remind me of Jesus saying 'I never knew you' when clearly God knows everything about everyone. What is the key element in this lesson for Elijah and for all of us that distinguishes God being in the still small voice but not in the spectacular displays of power that He clearly brought about?

This story is not in isolation from context. Elijah had just come from one of the most spectacular confrontations in Scripture, a showdown between himself as a faithful prophet representing Yahweh facing off against 400 prophets of Baal who enforced the authority of this false system inspired by the wicked queen Jezebel. Elijah had invoked a prophecy warning of famine as a result of Israel turning away from God to false gods, and for 3 years this famine had ravaged the country to awaken awareness that something was seriously wrong. No one could escape the effects of this consequence, yet everyone was too afraid of the tyrannical control and threats of Jezebel who was at the root of it all.

After three years of severe famine, Elijah demanded a direct confrontation between himself and the prophets of Baal who maintained complete control over the entire country in subjugation to the wicked queen manipulating Ahab the spineless king. They all assembled on Mt. Carmel as Elijah had directed for a contest to prove whose God was more powerful. Elijah proposed that both sides prepare a sacrifice but with no fire. The test would be that the god who could answer the prophet's request by providing fire should be the God Israel should acknowledge and worship (1Kings 18:24-25).

We know the story, but often we miss important clues in the details that affect how we think about God.

*So Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose one ox for yourselves and prepare it first for you are many, and **call on the name of your god**, but put no fire under it."*

*Then they took the ox which was given them and they prepared it and **called on the name of Baal** from morning until noon saying, "**O Baal, answer us.**" But there was **no voice** and **no one answered**. And **they leaped about the altar** which they made. (1 Kings 18:25-26 NAS95)*

Note that the issue was the name of God. This is at the heart of every aspect of the war between truth and deception, light and darkness, life and evil. What does our worship project about the kind of God we believe is in control? How are our beliefs about God reflected in the way we worship Him?

Note also that the lack of response in this story is not only about fire but about hearing an answer from God. There was no voice as well as no fire. After half a day of no response, the proponents of Baal start to become desperate as their authority and credibility starts to be questioned.

*It came about at noon, that **Elijah mocked them** and said, "**Call out with a loud voice**, for he is a god; either he is occupied or gone aside, or is on a journey, or **perhaps he is asleep** and needs to be awakened." So they **cried with a loud voice** and **cut themselves** according to their custom with swords and lances **until the blood gushed out** on them.*

*When midday was past, **they raved** until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice; but there was **no voice, no one answered, and no one paid attention**. (1 Kings 18:27-29 NAS95)*

- What is projected about god by prophets of Baal creating a great commotion and even resorting to cutting and self harm to get god's attention?
- Why does the story keep referring to an absence of a voice as well as no answer?
- This voice reference connects with God's lesson for Elijah later on when God seemed absent.

We know how this story ended, or do we? Elijah prays a simple prayer one time and immediately fire comes down from heaven and consumes not only the wood and sacrifice but incinerates everything including water, stones and even the dust. It sounds like an emphatic confirmation and endorsement of Elijah's claim that he serves the living God. And that was true. But what effect did that answer by fire have on Elijah, and how did his choices of what to do immediately in response to this affirmation result in him fleeing in terror only a few hours later?

The question I explore here is this: was God in the fire on Mt. Carmel or not? Was God in the fire a number of days later when Elijah stood outside the cave he was cowering in full of fear? And even more importantly, what is there to learn from this for us today?

*Therefore because the king's commandment was urgent, and the furnace exceeding hot, the flame of the fire killed those men who took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, **fell down bound into the midst of the burning fiery furnace**. Then Nebuchadnezzar the king was **astonished**, and rose up in haste: he spoke and said to his counselors, Didn't we cast three men bound into the midst of the fire? They answered the king, True, O king. He answered, Look, **I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire**, and they have no hurt; and the aspect of **the fourth is like a son of the gods**. (Daniel 3:22-25)*

Was God in the fire many years later when God's people were captives in Babylon? Clearly in this story it was obvious to even the heathen king that God was in the fire with His three loyal followers. This too is a popular and compelling story we love to tell our children. But my question takes on at this point maybe a more risky or probing nature. Why was God in this fire but was plainly stated to not be in the fire on Mt. Horeb for Elijah? And what does this say about the fire on Mt. Carmel? What about the incinerating fires Elijah used to protect himself from being arrested mentioned in 2 Kings 1? Was God in that fire too? And if so, why did Jesus rebuke His disciples for wanting to follow Elijah's example? What might we learn from all of these that might move us beyond the simplistic opinions usually bantered about when discussing how God is related to fire?

Today I received a fresh insight on this as I was waking up. What if we have misunderstood the statement made about God not being in the fire? I have learned for many years now how often our assumptions are the problem rather than the Scriptures. What if instead of trying to reconcile contradictions, we allow ourselves to view it from a completely different direction? That is what hit me this morning, and as soon as I saw it it was like light exploding in every direction and landing on stories and concepts that suddenly snapped into place in ways never considered before from beginning to end.

Let me start with the story where God was undeniably in the fire with His children. The three Hebrews were witnessed chatting with God amiably in the intense heat of a fire so hot the tough soldiers who threw them into the furnace instantly dropped dead. Yet the four people strolling around in front of the stunned crowds and infuriated king was obviously enjoying themselves immensely. This forces us to reconsider our many assumptions about God and fire, which is a very important challenge I have to say.

The following is what had just happened in the story that precipitated the attempted execution of these men. I believe this provides a key element that can unlock a deeper appreciation of how fire and God relate to each other.

*Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, **we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.**"*
(Daniel 3:16-18 NIV)

Did these three Hebrews meet up with God in the fire, or was God close with them all along and simply went with them when they entered the fire? This is not a trick question but is key to expanding our thinking about many other stories. Could it be that the difference, at least at times, has to do with whether or not we are staying connected and tuned to the still, small voice?

Why did God see a need to take Elijah through this retraining sequence after asking him why he was even there in the first place? Elijah found himself operating from fear, the very opposite from how he had lived for years previous to the Mt. Carmel showdown. Where did this fear suddenly come from, and how did it get access to take over Elijah's perspective suddenly when before that he was bold as a lion? What was God trying to get across to Elijah and to all of us concerning how we perceive God's presence, protection, guidance and disposition towards us? What happened that allowed fear to suddenly seize Elijah's disposition overnight after His amazing victory on Mt. Carmel?

*Then **the fire of Yahweh fell**, and consumed the burnt offering, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. When all the people saw it, **they fell on their faces**; and they said, **Yahweh, he is God; Yahweh, he is God.** and Elijah said to them, **Take the prophets of Baal; don't let one of them escape.** They took them; and **Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon, and killed them there.** (1 Kings 18:38-40)*

Here is my challenge. Was Elijah listening to the still small voice when he took control of the situation and commanded that all his opponents be rounded up so he could personally execute them violently? There is no hint in the narrative that God instructed Elijah to do this in God's name. Significantly it was after this that Elijah went to pray for rain and instead of an immediate answer he had to pray seven times before there was even a hint of an answer from God. Why once for the fire but seven times for rain? Is this not a warning to Elijah that something was off in his spirit and how he was portraying God before the world?

While fear did not immediately seize control of Elijah, the seeds had been planted and the fruit followed soon after. Elijah had indulged in mocking the prophets of Baal, jeering at them publicly and emphasizing the weakness of their false god to come through for them. While that may seem like a little thing to us, it also seemed like a little thing for Moses to strike the rock in anger instead of speaking to it like God had instructed. The result of that was God telling Moses he had misrepresented God before his people and thus could not lead them into the promised land. After Elijah received confirmation of God's power by fire, he too failed to remain listening to the inner voice he had obeyed up to that day. This spirit of force and domination is the essence of the beasts in Revelation 13.

Why was God not in the fire in Elijah's case but was in the fire with the three Hebrews? Those men remained tight to the quiet but steady inner voice of the Spirit all the way to the point of giving up their lives rather than to misrepresent their God. They were close with God so they had Him with them all along, whether in the fire or out.

In contrast, Elijah had God with him for most of his life. But in the head rush of victory after the fire fell and all Israel appeared to come to repentance in masse, he likely brushed past the quiet voice reminding him to let God handle the outcome. But adrenaline has a way of overwhelming our better senses and like Joshua heading off to take on the little city of Ai without checking with God first, likewise Elijah felt like he knew what was right. But in doing so he breached his protective shield allowing the spirit of fear to infiltrate and kidnap his imagination until he soon wanted to die.

*I saw **another beast** coming up out of the earth. He had two **horns like a lamb**, and he **spoke like a dragon**. He exercises all the **authority of the first beast in his presence**. He **makes the earth and those who dwell in it to worship the first beast**, whose fatal wound was healed. He **performs great signs**, even making fire come down out of the sky to the earth in the sight of people. He **deceives my own people who dwell on the earth because of the signs** he was granted to do in front of the beast; saying to those who dwell on the earth, that **they should make an image to the beast** who had the sword wound and lived. **It was given to him to give breath to it**, to the image of the beast, that **the image of the beast should both speak**, and cause as many as **wouldn't worship the image of the beast to be killed**. (Revelation 13:11-15)*

These beast powers represent the same disposition that defined Baal in ancient Israel. It was the same spirit that compelled Nebuchadnezzar to build an image and force everyone to worship it in compliance to his threats of death as the alternative. All these factors will coalesce in the end as a concentrated display of deceptive and coercive intimidation to compel the entire planet to bow in worship to the beast version of God which is inspired by the great dragon, that ancient serpent who began this chain of events in the Garden.

If Eve had chosen to remain cognizant of God's presence in her thinking, she could have simply turned to ask God's opinion about the serpent's accusing assertions. God had not commanded them to never touch the tree, though they had been warned of its danger. He said they were not to eat of it, to ingest it. That Tree symbolizes the disposition, the mindset, the perspective of those who view God after the patterns of this world. If Eve or Adam would have remained alert and tuned with God in that danger zone, that experience could have become a major advancement in their maturity and character development rather than the disastrous collapse of the whole planet and their loss of innocence.

Jesus is the only human to consistently keep God's Spirit present His entire life as a human reflector of His Father. As a result the universe witnessed the first full display of God's glory reflected and channeled through the mirror of a human being. The outcome was the solidification of a new identity for every human being, ready for all who are willing to believe and embrace it for themselves.

We are invited to follow His example by allowing His Spirit to remain in us just as it did in Him. In this way the righteousness and glory of God may be refracted to the watching world, inviting them to also participate in this great restoration of His image in redeemed humanity. By keeping His presence in and with us as our highest priority, seeking first His kingdom and His righteousness, He is given access to will and to work in and through each person to publicly display the glory of His beautiful, loving character and draw as many as possible to Himself.

*But now thus says the LORD, he who **created you**, O Jacob, he who **formed you**, O Israel: **Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.***

*When you pass through the **waters**, **I will be with you**; and through the **rivers**, **they shall not overwhelm you**; when you walk through **fire** you **shall not be burned**, and the **flame shall not consume you**. For **I am the LORD your God**, the Holy One of Israel, **your Savior**.*

*I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. Because **you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you**, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. **Do not fear, for I am with you**; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; I will say to the north, "Give them up," and to the south, "Do not withhold; **bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth-- everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.**" (Isaiah 43:1-7 NRSV)*

God never promised to keep us out of the fire, to escape every storm or avoid earth-shaking events. Rather He promises to go through these experiences with us, to support us, protect our hearts and minds from losing hope or peace. As we consent and choose to remain in Him and have Him inside us, we may defer every temptation, meet every crisis, take every fear or sorrow and give them all over to Him, for with God all things are possible. And He has promised to never leave or forsake us. This is the anchor in which we are to trust at all times and in all circumstances.

*Yahweh, he it is who does go before you; **he will be with you, he will not fail you, neither forsake you: don't be afraid, neither be dismayed.*** (Deuteronomy 31:8)

There is a very practical example of how this can be done in the life of Daniel. While Daniel did not have to face a literal fire like his three best friends, he lived most of his life in the intensity of intrigue and politics while remaining untouched in his soul by all the corruption swirling around him. His example is one worthy of strong consideration and emulation.

*When **Daniel knew** that the writing was signed, he went into his house (now his windows were open in his chamber toward Jerusalem) and **he kneeled on his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did before.*** (Daniel 6:10)

*Now to **Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory** blameless with **great joy**, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.* (Jude 1:24-25 NAS95)

*Having therefore, brothers, **boldness to enter into the holy place** by the blood of Jesus, by the way which he dedicated for us, **a new and living way**, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; and having a great priest over the house of God, **let's draw near with a true heart in fullness of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience**, and having our body washed with pure water; let us **hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering; for he who promised is faithful.** Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good works, not forsaking our own assembling together, as the custom of some is, but exhorting one another; and so much the more, as you see the Day approaching.* (Hebrews 10:19-25)

*Therefore **don't throw away your boldness**, which has a great reward. For you need endurance so that, having done the will of God, you may receive the promise. "In a very little while, he who comes will come, and will not wait. But the righteous will live by faith. If he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him." But we are **not of those who shrink back** to destruction, but of **those who have faith** to the saving of the soul.* (Hebrews 10:35-39)

The fire blanket of love covers and smothers the fires of sins.

*But the end of all things is near. Therefore **be of sound mind, self-controlled, and sober in prayer.** And above all things **be earnest in your love among yourselves, for love covers a multitude of sins.*** (1 Peter 4:7-8)

God was not in these spectacular displays of raw power, not because He had nothing to do with them but because Elijah had not made the distinction between power and communication #Zec 4:6|. God was in the fire with the three Hebrews #Da 3:25| because they had stayed tuned to the inner voice continuously, unlike Elijah had done on Mt. Carmel. God went with them into the fire because they remained with Him. The quiet inner voice of God through our conscience can easily be drowned out by excitement around us arousing our own strong emotions. We can become addicted to imagining God communicates through demonstrations of power. But this can blind us to discerning His glory is most readily displayed in weakness #2Co 12:9-10|.