



“Turn DOWN Noise. Turn UP Signal.”

1 Kings 19:1–18

***We can hear God best when we turn down
the static***

When I was a boy, I listened to the radio every night after going to bed. Baseball, talk, drama, even religious programming. I’d roll the dial around listening for something mildly interesting and a

good enough signal. Perfection was when I wanted to listen to one of those 50,000-watt clear channel stations. They’d come blasting through to my clock radio -- couldn’t miss it if you wanted to. But sometimes I wanted to hear a station that required a delicate job of tuning. I’d be very quiet as I slowly turned down the noise, turning up the just-right signal.

The story of Elijah and the priests of Baal in 1 Kings 18 is like a 50,000-watt station. God’s appearance comes through loud and clear. But in the aftermath of the great victory, there is another story, a story that asks us to quiet our souls so we can hear God well.

On the run . . . again

Elijah was worn out, exhausted. Such a long and emotional day. The triumph over the wicked prophets of that idol, Baal. And then the fight. So much blood. So much death. Rain was about to arrive, sure. Elijah wasn’t surprised by that. He knew the stakes and he knew what the outcome would be. Elijah had even warned Ahab to hurry up and get off the mountain, for YHWH wasn’t going to just make it rain. God was going to make it rain BIG. Flashing, slashing cascades of rain and runoff were about to swamp them all.

So Ahab climbed into his chariot and headed down the mountain. Elijah turned to head home, or at least his “home” for the night. At that moment, Elijah felt that *Godthing* again. He was never quite sure what to make of it; those moments when he experienced God’s urgings quite clearly, almost as if YHWH was standing right there next to him. This time, YHWH wanted him to race Ahab’s chariot to the town of Jezreel, where Jezebel was waiting. It seemed insane, but that is how it often seemed with YHWH. But Elijah knew that it was God urging him onward. So he gathered himself, breathed in some resolve, and headed off, running hard and running steady. This day was long from over.

Somehow, for it had to be a God thing, Elijah arrived at the city gates ahead of Ahab. Little good it seemed to do him. For when Ahab told Jezebel (see the page 3 text box) of YHWH’s triumph and the killing of all Baal’s prophets, the queen’s rage flared like the birth of a new star. She yelled for a messenger and sent him running with a message for Elijah that read something like this:

Elijah,

You should have stayed with the widow. You know how quickly your bonfire consumed those cow parts? Well, may the same thing happen to me if you are not dead by this time tomorrow! Prepare to meet your god.

Jezebel

Not waiting to hear what God might have to say about this, Elijah took off. He ran, just as he had run after first coming to Ahab and announcing the drought. Of course, then it had been God who told him to run. Now, Elijah was just afraid.

So he ran and kept running, his servant with him. Pushing themselves to the limit, they headed south, through Samaria, and then even into Judah. Elijah wanted to get far beyond the powerful reach of Jezebel.

When they came to the town of Beer-sheba, southwest of Jerusalem, Elijah's servant stayed put, but Elijah pushed on alone. Further south, into the wilderness, the rough, nearly uninhabitable deserts to the east and south of Canaan.

After a day's travel across this desert, Elijah was done, cooked, spent in a way he had never imagined possible. So he found a lone tree and sat down under it, quietly telling God that he was ready to die. Then he stretched out and fell asleep.

Suddenly, an angel touched him and told him to eat. He opened his astonished eyes and right there, next to his head, was some bread that had been warmed on hot stones. Next to it was a jar of fresh, cooling water. The angel told him to eat.

Then the angel touched him a second time, speaking again. Elijah better get up; he was going to need the nourishment for the journey ahead.

So Elijah, never one to be taken for a fool or to disobey an angel, ate and drank it all. In a desert wilderness, you never know when you might get food and water again.

As he ate, he contemplated this latest turn of events. He had been ready, even eager, to die and had told God as much. And what had he gotten in return? Food and water. I guess we'd have to say his prayer was answered with what he needed, not what he wanted.

On the strength of that meal, Elijah pressed on. He traveled southward for the longest time, forty days and nights, all the way to Mt. Horeb, aka Mt. Sinai. It was the mountain of God where Moses had first met God at the burning bush and where God had first brought his people after redeeming them from slavery in Egypt.

Elijah found a cave at the base of the mountain and slept there for the night.

Soon, Elijah felt God with him again. That same urgent clarity. God asked him what he was doing at God's mountain. So Elijah, knowing full well that God already knew the answer, told God the story as briefly as he could.

Elijah heard God again. This time God told him to go stand outside so that he could experience directly the presence of God. But before he could even leave the cave, a mighty wind began to buffet the mountain that was unlike any storm Elijah had experienced. Remembering the stories of Moses at this very mountain, Elijah thought at first that God was in this unearthly wind. But God was not.

Then an earthquake shook the mountain to its core. Surely, Elijah thought, this had to be God. But it was not.

Then a fire came, much like the one that had burned but not consumed Moses' bush. This just had to be God. Elijah knew the stories well. God had always come to his people in this way. In thunder and wind and storms and fire. They all spoke powerfully of the powerful YHWH. . . . But even in the fire, there was no God.

Then there came only the sound of sheer silence.¹ And in that exquisite calm, Elijah knew that God was present. So he covered his face with his mantle² and stepped outside the cave. Then God asked exactly the same question he asked before. And Elijah gave exactly the same answer.

Elijah wondered where this was heading and he soon found out. God had more work for him yet. No rest for the weary and all that.

Elijah is to head northward, anoint a couple of kings along the way and also anoint another prophet, a man with a confusingly similar name to Elijah's . . . Elisha.

¹ The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible translates the Hebrew as "the sound of sheer silence." The King James Version used the well-known phrase, "a still small voice," implying that God was now speaking quietly to Elijah. This way of reading the Hebrew survives in the New International Version ("a quiet whisper") and some other translations. Perhaps disappointingly to some of us, the Hebrew here actually says nothing about God speaking, it simply is about silence or perhaps a hushed sound. How we wish the writer told us more!

² A mantle (v. 13) was a shawl-like outer garment. It is to Elijah what Moses' staff was to him. Elijah covers his face because he knows that God told Moses he could not see God's face and live.

The Lord God is going to cleanse the Baal worship from the northern kingdom of Israel once and for all. There will be seven thousand that will prove true to YHWH, God tells Elijah. There is hard work and hard times ahead.

So Elijah set out from the mountain, beginning the long trek northward.

Burned out and depressed . . . but not alone

Quite a story. By the time Elijah gets to the wilderness he is used up. But he presses on one more day. The wilderness, you see, is the place people go to die. And at the end of that day, he lays down to die. I'm sure the contrast of triumph and defeat all in one day are too much for him. There's just nothing left in his tank. He's been running on fumes and now even they fail him.

But God does not fail him. An angel brings him nourishment for another long journey, this time to God's mountain. And there, this burned out, depressed, ready-to-die man encounters God as no one before had, at least not as we get the story in Scripture. Elijah doesn't get any of the usual spectacular manifestations of God's presence, like thunder or a pillar of fire; he gets God in the sound of sheer silence.

It is striking that despite the angel's intervention, Elijah is burned out when he gets to God's mountain and is still burned out after God's visit. God's presence is no instant cure. Elijah responds to God with the exact same things-are-bleak words as before he experienced God's presence outside the cave.

Yet, God doesn't let him go, doesn't give him a pass. Perhaps it is this way for us as well. When we are used up and have had enough, God can see what we cannot, a future still filled with surprising possibilities. Elijah got through his crisis, but it was God who not only dragged him through it but refused to let him go. God wouldn't let Elijah give up. It is as if God loved him forward into his future. God still had work for Elijah. And God always has work for us as well, for, like Paul, we are ministers of the new covenant (2 Cor. 3:6), bearing witness to the Good News in all that we say and do.



Jezebel

Google "jezebel" and you get over 35 million hits, most of which have nothing to do with the Phoenician princess who married King Ahab and became a symbol of apostasy (turning away from God). In fact, you get everything from the Biblical Jezebel to Jezebel Gin. You get my point.

Jezebel has long captured the popular imagination. In Revelation 20, the name Jezebel is given to a seductive propheticess who encouraged immorality and idolatry under the cloak of religion.

"Jezebel" came to be a symbol for evil women. A famous 1938 movie by that name starred Bette Davis and told the story of Julie, a calculating, perhaps promiscuous, young woman who proudly wore a brazen red dress to an important ball. (Yes, it was a different age.)

In our day the name seems often co-opted by marketers trying to appeal to some secret (or perhaps not so secret) desire to be naughty.

In the Bible, Jezebel is portrayed as an evil woman who seduces the people of God away from God. Her power continued for a decade after the death of King Ahab. Jezebel became the powerful queen-mother to her son, Ahaziah.

