

1 Kings 19:9-12 (New Revised Standard Version)

At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces 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 sound of sheer silence.

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18 (New Revised Standard Version)

As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

At my first defense no one came to my support, but all deserted me. May it not be counted against them! But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

How can someone be sure they are really and truly listening to God?

**How do we know that it's not just something we want and desire,
maybe a guilty conscience or an over-active imagination?**

People that ask that aren't looking for a feel-good churchy answer,
but for something real-world, clear, authentic and practical.

I haven't seen or nor do I know of

a good phone app for discerning God's will or hearing God's voice,
or spiritual GPS that will indicate when we're getting off track.

Sorry, but I've never found it to be that simple or easy.

In the movies and on TV they usually portray the voice of God

as very deep, thunderous and loud with lots of echo and reverb,

but the story we read from 1 Kings suggests otherwise.

The story actually begins a chapter before our text today, when

the prophet Elijah challenged the priests of Baal to a showdown,
to a mountaintop contest to discern whose God was the true god.

Each side was to call for their god to send fire & flame from the sky
that would light the appropriate altar and burn the sacrifice.

Simple, and the priests of Baal got to go first.

The priests of Baal prayed and shouted, even cut themselves all day,
but were not able to awaken or get their gods to respond in any way.

When it was Elijah's turn,
he poured on water to soak everything and make it more difficult,
and the God of Israel responded with a burst of fire
that burned & consumed even the stones & all the water.

It was a magnificent and powerful demonstration and victory,
and then the priests of Baal were seized so that none escaped.

Jezebel, the King's pagan wife heard about all that had happened,
and swore that she'd have Elijah killed before the sun went down.

It seems strange that even after that demonstration of God's power,
even after such a public and complete victory over Baal's priests,
Jezebel's threat threw Elijah into overwhelming fear & panic,
and so, feeling helpless he fled into the desert wilderness.

Our text finds Elijah feeling terrified, discouraged and depressed,
broken, hiding and sitting alone in the darkness of a cave, vs. 9,
when the Lord asked him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

The prophet answers God with a whiny stream of complaints,
and a rather pitiful litany about how he has been mistreated,
and how all was lost & defeated by powerful forces of evil, vs. 10

"I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

In patient response, God says, vs. 11, Go stand out on the mountain...
I want to show you something and I want to teach you something.

Surprisingly, God does not react harshly toward Elijah, vs. 12

Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces 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 sound of sheer silence.**

God doesn't rebuke Elijah for doubting or for not really trusting,
but in a gentle way **speaks to rekindle hope & encourage his faith.**

The point is, God isn't always in the loud, powerful and obvious,
but sometimes, it's in the quiet and reflective
that we can hear best and discern the will of God.

Our gracious God of mystery and mercy, is sometimes,
most visible in moments of deepest darkness and shadow,
most easily heard in the quiet stillness of solitude,
most comforting when we are in most desperate need,
most present at times when we feel we're all alone.

In Hebrew,
the phrase, *sheer silence* is literally, "a thin silence or whisper".

A thin silence or thin-place is where we are drawn nearer to God,
where God's gracious love and presence are felt most deeply,
as in that quiet stillness **God's grace speaks to the heart.**

Elijah had to stop and listen to hear the message of the Lord,
because sometimes in the glitz and razzle-dazzle of this world,
we don't recognize in the quiet and simple, and unadorned,
that which is truly meaningful, blessed and significant.

Sometimes we can get so caught up, busy, distracted and occupied
that we miss it when God is speaking, we may miss the true message.

**Yes we notice life's loud wind, the earthquake & fire,
but miss it, when God speaks in the sheer silence.**

The Lord often comes to us, speaking to us through the silence,

or in our own ordinary and everyday living, for **we too are given**

unexpected moments of God's loving and healing presence,

where and when God mightily & compassionately comes to us

and through which we can see the truth and glory of God...

... special moments filled with God's enduring love and amazing grace.

When we are aware and accept grace as God's promise and truth **for us,**

that truth of God's unrelenting love and desire to bless us,

that same grace has the power to grow and transform us

into living better, more joyful and meaningful lives.

I call these special events and experiences, "**sacramental moments**",

surprising and mysteriously wonderful moments of peace,

of blessed and divine inspiration, hopeful promise & joy.

A sacramental moment is when & how God's present & speaks grace to us.

They arrive unexpectedly & are not under our direction or control,

and always a blessing in God's perfect and loving timing.

There are probably

far more sacramental moments than we realize or recognize,

which we miss because we are too distracted and preoccupied

or because we are too busy speaking instead of listening,

and the answer is Psalm 46:10, *Be still, and know that I am God!*

Several months into my first call after completing seminary
I returned for some study leave in the seminary library.

While there I set up some meetings with a few favorite professors,
many of whom would be retiring in the next few months or years.

Our conversations were very different now that I was a pastor.

I was looking for practical and theological reflection
about real life situations I was experiencing in ministry.

My life as a pastor revealed how much more I needed to learn.

For the seminary professors, I think their impending retirement

was also creating an additional sense of urgency and focus,

knowing that their opportunity to teach, shape, train,

and influence new pastors would be coming to an end.

Our conversations were clearly focused on what they considered

to be the most important truths of their experience and expertise,

the lessons most critical to my future ministry as a pastor...

... **urging me**, don't let other voices break your focus or seduce you,
or dull your sense of hearing the Holy Spirit's presence,
or stray from the clear meaning and truth of Scripture.

You must be attentive to God. You must be attentive to God.

In the 2 Timothy text I sense that same attitude of urgency and focus
as Paul hopes to guide young Timothy along his pastoral journey.

The Apostle is nearing the end of his life and ministry,

probably in prison, and he wants to pass along to Timothy
the best of what long and faithful experience has taught him,
to guide & prepare Timothy for the challenges & rigors ahead.

So, what would be that final and most important lesson?

Paul explains what he knows to be most important, vs. 6-7

As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, **I have kept the faith.**

These are not words of sorrow or regret.

There's no sense of fear or dread, no bitterness or defeat.

Paul has given it his faithful best, he's given his all,
and in the end he can accept & live with what he has done,
his successes and failures, both the good and the bad.
It is from that perspective that Paul explains his final lesson
seeking to encourage Timothy to live out his own sense of call.

Looking back over his life, his accomplishments and ministry,

he's not troubled by his situation or afraid,

for he's been faithful and served with integrity...

...and in the end, may we too have lived faithfully and served well.

So what is this message that we too are being called to proclaim?

It is the truth of God's abundant grace in Jesus Christ,

the Good News that all are invited into a real and

transforming relationship of grace and assurance,

hope for healing the broken, God's love, joy and peace,

reconciliation and all the other promises of Scripture.

And how are we to proclaim this message?

by thought, our motivations and attitudes submitted to God,
so from the inside, that will guide all that we say and do.

by word, by all that we say, all submitted to the Lordship of God,
that our words declare grace, hope, joy and mercy in Christ.

by deed, by all that we do along this journey of faith we are on,
so everything we do is all under the rule and reign of God.

For Christians, every aspect of life is part of our journey of faith,
and at any moment, we're either moving toward God's will & purpose,
or we are choosing to stray and move further away?

The difference between faithful Christians and those who are not,
it's not in the difficulty or the severity of challenges we face,
but it's our response, our trust that God is always with us,
and that God will bring about good, even from our struggles.

The incredible truth of God's abiding love that is always with us,
is what we are called to live, reflect and proclaim to our world...
... so that as Paul wrote, vs. 7
I have kept the faith. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race.
In the end, that is what really matters.

When I was serving as a chaplain at VA hospital in Richmond,
the assigned nursing home wing was a most difficult ward.

It was the absolute bottom rung in the world of retirement care,
a terrible place to live, only if a veteran had nowhere else to go,
a warehouse of regret, sadness & suffering while waiting to die.

Some residents were very angry, hostile and bitter creatures,
incredibly difficult & who inflicted venom wherever possible.

They feared their impending death, yet hated life and the living,
as they were facing a desperate & uncertain end to a troubled life.

But others were delightful story tellers and purveyors of history,
their lives were about giving & sharing with interest & laughter,
and despite suffering and disappointment, overall life was good
with a sense of life's dignity, **"I am who I am and who I've become."**

Over the years I've sat with many nearing the end of their life,
and I've never, not even once have I ever heard someone say,
"I wish I'd worked more hours so I could have earned more money,
or could have had enough to have afforded
a bigger house, nicer car, more expensive vacation...
...none of that has seemed important at the end of their life's journey.

Our loving Creator blesses us and gives us these mortal lives
so that our trust, understanding, and faith **can grow deeper**
as the Holy Spirit inspires, teaches, guides & transforms us...
... because we are destined to be with and to enjoy the Lord forever.

Our goal is that when we look back over the life we've lived,
the truths, goals and values by which we lived, we can say:
**No regrets, I walked with God along the journey given me.
I enjoyed, I learned, I grew and I made a difference,
my life and living glorifies the One who created me.**

The questions we need to answer today are,

**am I living this life God gave me well and in the best possible way?
Does my life and living boldly proclaim God's grace,
God's goodness, joy, truth and my gratitude and hope?**

When my time of departure comes, will I be able say with Paul, (vs. 7)

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness.

So that when I arrive, Jesus will say, (Matthew 25:21)

"Well done, good and trustworthy servant; you have been trustworthy in a few things; enter into the joy of your master."