



Listening to God

Exodus 19:1-18

**Prov 3:5 (TEV) Trust in the LORD with all your heart. Never rely on what you think you know.
6 Remember the LORD in everything you do, and he will show you the right way.**

How could this happen? That is the question everyone in the church world (and even the non-church world) today after Ted Haggard, pastor of the enormous New Life Church; and president of the National Association of Evangelicals first denied the drug and sexual immorality allegations that were brought against him. Then he admitted to some indiscretions. Finally, his church and the board of overseers of the ministry concluded that he had, indeed, been guilty of sexual immorality of some kind and immediately accepted his resignation. Four days... going from being a national Christian leader to a disgraced man humiliated by an ugly and now-public secret life. "How could this happen?"...

How can it be that someone who is a great Christian leader can fall so far? You and I know that it's not an isolated case, we hear frequently of leaders that fall. In fact mature Christians are not immune from having a crisis of faith. The former athlete, Jonathan Edwards quit his job as a presenter of Songs of Praise because of a personal crisis of faith. He had such a reputation as someone who desired to witness for Christ - and now?

Why do I point this out? Because no believer, however mature in the faith they might be, is immune from having a crisis of faith. The great Puritan John Bradford used to look out at people being taken out to be executed and uttered the famous phrase "There but for the grace of God go I." What I have to say this morning is therefore not just for those of you who feel vulnerable in your faith and need encouragement, but it's for all of us: INCLUDING those who think that they are so mature in the faith that they are unassailable and can never fall as a believer - because you're not and you can.

Don't just take it from me, take it from the Word of God. Here we have a great prophet, Elijah. If you were to read back through chapters 17 and 18 of 1 Kings you would witness Elijah's finest hour. He humiliates the 400 prophets of Baal and the 450 prophets of Asherah as we see the power of God displayed on Mount Carmel. He was emboldened and had the false prophets seized and killed. He ordered King Ahab back home. Yet we turn to chapter 19 and we see him receive a threatening message from Jezebel and running. Why? He's seen the power of God. He'd acted on it. Surely Jezebel wasn't going to be a problem - he'd just sent Ahab home with a flea in his ear?

But we read how Elijah experiences a personal crisis of faith and we see on his journey south he leaves his servant behind and goes into the desert. Why go into the desert without food and water? To die. He lays under a broom tree and prays that he might die. He's serious about it too. How could that happen? One minute he's strong; the next he's weak and suicidal.

Some commentators suggest he may have been suffering from depression. That may be so; we don't know. But there is a simpler explanation. On Carmel he was operating in the Spirit and God mightily used him - but then he took his eyes and ears off God and started to think and act in the flesh.

Why didn't he pray as he'd done on Carmel - or for that matter when he called on God to raise the widow of Zarephath's son? He didn't. His mind was off God and wasn't listening to Him; just to his own fears and in such a sort time his faith was in crisis and he ran away.

If you want to know how believers fall - that's it. Look at the testimony of anyone who has fallen and you'll find that they have taken their eyes off God - and it's left a space of whatever else to come in and undermine their faith. Ted Haggard was a busy man. He worked zealously for the Lord. He spent time on business away from his family. He took his eyes and ears off God and found the world's solutions to dealing with stress. He took drugs to keep up the pace and sought refuge in others. For former athlete Jonathan Edwards, the story is much the same. He said that being a Christian energised his competitive spirit because he wanted to glorify God. But not having that challenge of his sport meant that he started to find meaning in life in other things. What a shame!

And when you stop listening to God you hear your own fears and prejudices. You'll hear satan's deceit and you are in danger of falling.

I think this is a situation we've all faced at some point. Something awful has happened and we have taken our eyes off God, have not been listening to Him and trusting Him and you'll know about the consequences - stress, upset, depression, wanting to run away, wanting to die.

And in a short time, Elijah went from a hero to a zero. The difference between being victorious and personal disaster is a thin one and it's by the grace of God that you're kept from the latter. And that's irrespective of how long you've been a believer. In fact I believe this message this morning is for believers who have been around for a while rather than young Christians. Listen for what God is saying to you. Keep listening.

I've been a believer for over 40 years and I'll tell you this - the longer I've been a Christian, the more I've understood the pressures there are that can make me fall. One of the worst is believing that we know so much and have so much experience that we are Teflon coated. We're strong. We can't fall. That's my flesh talking and pride like that does precede a fall. Take your eyes off Jesus and you'll fall quickly and it doesn't matter how long you've been a Christian!

I remember an incident where I tripped and fell over in a car park a couple of years ago. I was walking along, not looking where I was going and tripped. I didn't listen to my wife saying "watch where you're going". Nothing was broken but it took ages for the bruises to heal. It was never like that when I was a child. But as you get older, the damage gets worse and it hurts more - doesn't it? It's the same if you fall over spiritually.

There but by the grace of God go I. We may not shipwreck our faith; most people don't (Elijah didn't either), but we may end up looking rather foolish. But even in our foolishness, God is good. And He's so patient with us isn't He? Whatever our sin, God is ready and willing to forgive it and restore us when we come to Him in repentance. And He actually encourages His people to find forgiveness and restoration.

And into Elijah's misery, God spoke. But was Elijah listening? We have a God who desires to speak to us. But like Elijah, we have to listen to His voice. Listen for what God is saying to you. Keep listening. So what do we learn from Elijah

- God speaks - are we listening?

When Elijah did get to pray God answered. God always answers prayer - and often the answer is different to the one we were expecting - like "NO" or "not yet" or "in My time, in My way" or "My grace is sufficient for you". But when we speak to Him, are we listening? "It's too much, LORD," he prayed. "Take away my life; I might as well be dead!" *5 He lay down under the tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said, "Wake up and eat."* *6 He looked around and saw a loaf of bread and a jar of water near his head. He ate and drank, and lay down again.* An angel! Wow! What a privilege. You don't get angels that often in response to prayer. Think about how others in the Bible responded to Angels. Abraham, Gideon, the shepherds. And Elijah? He barely noticed.

When we pray, are we listening? We don't have angels prompting us, but the very Spirit of God. When we are in our most spiritual mind, we reverence God in worship. When we are down He's still there. But it's easy to be like Elijah and just not notice Him. If Elijah had been listening, he would have known that God had a purpose for him.

Sometimes its easier to speak than to listen. It's true of prayer. But in our own time with God and in our prayer meetings and in our worship, we need to hear the voice of God. Whether that's in what we sing, or what we read in the bible, what others share with us or just in the prompting of God' Spirit -

we need to be prepared to listen.

- When we listen, do we hear what we want to?

Obvious you may think. You know how these days that scientists can perform all sorts of strange genetic experiments. It's worrying isn't it. *I heard last week that scientists are planning to cross a parrot with a black panther. I'm not quite sure what they are going to end up with but if it starts to talk, people had better listen!*

The second time the Lord's angel visits, Elijah listens. He's to go on a journey. And so he takes a 40 day hike to Sinai the mountain of God. What's clear from the passage is that God wanted him to take a journey to Damascus - 40 days in the other direction. He listened to God but followed his own agenda.

One of the biggest challenges for us as a church right now I believe is that God wants to lead us into new challenges that will bring glory to Him. The church in this country has been in huge decline over the last 30 years or so. People have moved on and too often God has moved on too and like Elijah, the church has remained asleep under a broom tree. And if we wake up we think that if we do worship and mission like we did 30 years ago or for that matter even 5 years ago and that will be fine.

We have a challenge of reaping a harvest but to do that, we need to listen for the voice of God for the journey ahead of us.

- When we listen, we find the unexpected

I don't have time to go into Elijah's Sinai experience today. His intention I think was to find God in the mountain of God. And he did but not in the way he expected. God was gracious to him again. When God did speak to him, he must of thought he was going to get the same glorious vision that Moses had. He was in the cleft of the rock like Moses. If you remember Moses asked to see God. He wasn't allowed to see anything but a little of the glory of God as He passed by. God hid him in the cleft of the rock for his own safety.

I think Elijah was trying to look for God in the same way. He got the wind, earthquake and fire - but God was not in them. Elijah experienced all the noise and power of creation but God wasn't in any of it. And then God give him the reverse of Moses - the still small voice.

Sometimes we look to what we did, or someone else did in he way we worship, in the way we do church, in the way we seek to reach those who are without Christ. On a personal level, we even try to look to solutions we had in the past to our spiritual problems.

And all God wants us to do is listen to Him. To shut out the clamour of the world, the clamour of our lives and even the clamour of our church - and listen for His voice - and obey Him.

Of course Elijah in his depression thought that in his battle against Ahab and Jezebel he was alone. If he'd bothered to ask God when he got Jezebel's letter he would have found he wasn't and all his adventures in the wilderness would have been unnecessary. God had a new plan for Elijah and he had to go through an unnecessary trauma all because he didn't listen.

How much do we listen to the voice of God?

- going though some difficulty in life
- feel we are OK - take care and listen
- as a church - need to learn the discipline of listening together - vision- listen to the voice of God, keep listening – obey
- sometimes it involves doing new things, or taking steps of faith - just obey.