

## The Spiritual Practice of Praise, Thanksgiving, and Song

Praise, thanksgiving, and song are all acts of worship. Worship is our natural response to our Creator. Richard Foster, in his book *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, writes, "It is God who seeks, draws, persuades. Worship is human response to divine initiative."<sup>1</sup>

First John 4:19 says, "We love because God first loved us" (1 John 4:19). We respond to God's love for us with love for God. Our response to God's presence, goodness, and grace in our lives is praise, thanksgiving, and song.

Sometimes we practice praise, thanksgiving, and song in community with other believers. We raise our voices together in praise. We offer corporate prayers of thanksgiving. We join our voices with others and sing hymns and worship songs. At other times, we practice these disciplines when we are alone.

As we seek to live as holy people in God's new creation, we want to be intentional about observing spiritual practices. It is helpful to set aside specific times to observe those practices that are meaningful for us, for example, prayer, Bible study, service, fasting, and sabbath. During the five lessons of this unit, you will be invited to set aside time to offer your praise, thanksgiving, and song to God.

You may also find that you are offering your praise and thanksgiving to God spontaneously throughout your day. When we notice sunlight suddenly breaking through the clouds or see colorful blossoms in a garden, we are moved to praise our Creator. We may find ourselves singing hymns and praise songs as we go about our daily work.

As we study the five lessons in this unit, we will discover numerous ways that God expresses love for us. How will you offer your praise, thanksgiving, and song to God for this amazing love?

<sup>1</sup>From *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*; page 138.

May 9

Lesson 10

## God in the Quiet Sound

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**Focal Passage:** 1 Kings 19:9-18

**Background Text:** 1 Kings 19:1-18

**Purpose Statement:** To explore the different ways God speaks to us

**1 Kings 19:9-18**

**<sup>9</sup>There he went into a cave and spent the night.**

**The LORD's word came to him and said, "Why are you here, Elijah?"**

**<sup>10</sup>Elijah replied, "I've been very passionate for the LORD God of heavenly forces because the Israelites have abandoned your covenant. They have torn down your altars, and they have murdered your prophets with the sword. I'm the only one left, and now they want to take my life too!"**

**<sup>11</sup>The LORD said, "Go out and stand at the mountain before the LORD. The LORD is passing by." A very strong wind tore through the mountains and broke apart the stones before the LORD. But the LORD wasn't in the wind. After the wind, there was an earthquake. But the LORD wasn't in the earthquake. <sup>12</sup>After the earthquake, there was a fire. But the LORD wasn't in the fire. After the fire, there was a sound. Thin. Quiet. <sup>13</sup>When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his coat. He went out and stood at the cave's entrance. A voice came to him and said, "Why are you here, Elijah?"**

**<sup>14</sup>He said, "I've been very passionate for the LORD God of heavenly forces because the Israelites have abandoned your covenant. They have torn down your altars, and they have murdered your prophets with the sword. I'm the only one left, and now they want to take my life too."**

**<sup>15</sup>The LORD said to him, "Go back through the desert to Damascus and anoint Hazeal as king of Aram. <sup>16</sup>Also anoint Jehu, Nimshi's son, as king of Israel; and anoint Elisha from Abel-**

**meholah, Shaphat's son, to succeed you as prophet. <sup>17</sup>Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazeal, Jehu will kill. Whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha will kill. <sup>18</sup>But I have preserved those who remain in Israel, totaling seven thousand—all those whose knees haven't bowed down to Baal and whose mouths haven't kissed him."**

**Key Verse: "The LORD said, 'Go out and stand at the mountain before the LORD. The LORD is passing by' " (1 Kings 19:11).**

One of the most pitiful pictures in the Bible to me is the image of Elijah sitting alone "under a solitary broom bush" (1 Kings 19:4). He had served God as a faithful prophet, but now King Ahab's wife Jezebel had threatened to take his life. In an effort to escape Jezebel, Elijah literally "ran for his life" (verse 3). When he grew tired of running, he sat down. He said to God, "It's more than enough, LORD!" (verse 4). Finally, dejected, he went to sleep "under the solitary broom bush" (verse 5).

Have there been times in your life when you wanted to run off by yourself? Have your concerns felt so overwhelming at times that you just said to God, "It's more than enough!"?

In the previous lesson, we affirmed God's enduring promise of faithful presence. God said to Moses, "I'll go myself, and I'll help you. . . . I'll make all my goodness pass in front of you (Exodus 33:14, 19). Just as God did not abandon Moses and the Israelites at Mount Sinai, God did not abandon the prophet Elijah, and God does not abandon us. In this lesson, we will discover how God spoke to the dejected prophet sleeping under the broom tree and explore the different ways God speaks to us.

### A Meal

One year, my husband had surgery a few days before Christmas. He was discharged from the hospital on Christmas Day. Our daughter was home from college for winter break, and we went to the Christmas Eve service together after visiting my husband in the hospital.

We had decided to wait to exchange presents until he came home, so Christmas morning felt like any other morning, until the telephone rang. It was a friend from church calling to offer us Christmas dinner. She gave us three choices: We could join her family at her home; she could take dinner to the hospital; or she could bring dinner to our home.

I thought it was significant that she did not ask me *if* I wanted Christmas dinner but *when* I wanted Christmas dinner. That evening, she and her husband and their friend brought dinner to our home. I remember standing on the front porch watching the three of them bring the meal

to us. I was reminded of the magi taking gifts to the Christ Child. God remembered us on that lonely and uncertain Christmas Day.

God's goodness passed in front of us as our friends set a turkey tenderloin, a congealed salad shaped as a Christmas tree, and vegetables on our counter. As our daughter commented, these were not the leftovers from their own Christmas dinner, but dishes prepared especially for us.

The first way God responded to the depressed and exhausted prophet Elijah was with the offer of food. When Elijah was awakened by God's messenger, he saw baked flatbread and water already prepared for him (1 Kings 19:5-6).

Jesus makes his presence known to us in the bread and the cup of Holy Communion. We share Christ's love when we share food with others: serving in a soup kitchen, donating to a food pantry, and taking meals to neighbors who have experienced a crisis.

***When have you felt God speaking to you through the gift of a meal? When have you felt God calling you to speak on God's behalf by sharing a meal with someone else?***

#### **A Messenger**

God's messenger came to Elijah a second time with the same message, "Get up! . . . Eat something!" (1 Kings 19:7). This second time, however, the messenger added the reason: "You have a difficult road ahead of you" (verse 7). Elijah ate, and then, instead of falling asleep as he did after his first meal, he set off for Mount Horeb "refreshed by that food" (verse 8).

God does not promise any of us an easy road, but God does promise to sustain and guide us on the various roads we travel. Elijah's journey to Mount Horeb may have covered a distance "as long as 250 miles."<sup>1</sup> God provided the sustenance Elijah needed for that trip.

Mount Horeb is also called Mount Sinai and was known as "God's mountain" (verse 8). Moses received his call to lead the Israelites out of Egypt to the Land of Promise at "God's mountain called Horeb" (Exodus 3:1). This mountain is also the place where God gave Moses and the Israelites the Ten Commandments.

The author of Exodus reports, "On exactly the third-month anniversary of the Israelites' leaving the land of Egypt, they came into the Sinai desert. . . . The LORD came down on Mount Sinai to the top of the mountain. The LORD called Moses to come up to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up" (Exodus 19:1, 20). The author of Deuteronomy records that "the LORD our God made a covenant with us at Mount Horeb" (Deuteronomy 5:2).

We see two other parallels between the prophets Moses and Elijah in this story. It took Elijah "forty days and nights until he arrived at Horeb, God's mountain" (1 Kings 19:8). When God made the covenant with Moses and the Israelites, "Moses stayed on the mountain for forty days and forty nights" (Exodus 24:18).

In the previous lesson, we considered Moses' request to God: "Please show me your glorious presence" (Exodus 33:18). The Lord granted Moses' request but said, "As my glorious presence passes by, I'll set you in a gap in the rock, and I'll cover you with my hand until I've passed by. Then I'll take away my hand, and you will see my back, but my face won't be visible" (Exodus 33:22-23). When Elijah arrived at Mount Horeb, he also found "a gap in the rock" or "a cave and spent the night" (1 Kings 19:9).

When Elijah was sleeping under the broom tree, God spoke to him through a messenger who brought refreshing food and the encouragement to "get up! Eat something!" (verse 5). This was exactly the message he needed to hear at this time in his life.

Who have been messengers of God for you, people who have spoken words of encouragement or guidance at just the right time? When my husband was laid off from his job and I wanted to help supplement our income, someone suggested I teach piano lessons at our church for children in the afterschool program.

I hesitated because someone was already teaching piano lessons there. I called her to ask if there were enough students for two teachers; and, to my surprise, she told me I was an answer to her prayer. She said she needed to move away to care for her mother, but she was concerned about leaving her students without a teacher! As I talked with her, I felt an overwhelming sense of God's presence as I realized God had spoken to both of us at these turning points in our lives.

***Who have been God's messengers in your life? What words of encouragement and guidance did they speak to you?***

#### **A Mountain**

Elijah prophesied in Israel during the time of King Ahab. King Ahab "ruled over Israel in Samaria for twenty-two years and did evil in the LORD's eyes, more than anyone who preceded him . . . He served and worshipped Baal" (1 Kings 16:29, 31).

Baal was known as the storm god. His worshipers believed he was responsible for providing the spring rains that watered their crops. Elijah told Ahab to "gather all Israel to me at Mount Carmel. Gather the four hundred fifty prophets of Baal" (1 Kings 18:19).

The people of Israel were guilty of idolatry because they had turned away from faithful worship of the Lord and were worshiping pagan gods. After the people gathered at Mount Carmel, Elijah asked them to choose between serving the Lord and serving Baal.

When they gave no response, Elijah suggested a contest to determine the "real God." He and the prophets of Baal would each prepare a bull and wood for a sacrifice, but they would not set the wood on fire. Elijah declared, "The god who answers with fire—that's the real God!" (18:24). This contest appealed to Baal's prophets because they believed Baal as the storm god could produce "fire in the form of lightning."<sup>2</sup>

Of course, the pagan god Baal had no power to send fire. When it was Elijah's turn to call upon God to produce fire, he first doused his altar with water! When "the LORD's fire fell; it consumed the sacrifice, the wood, the stones, and the dust. It even licked up the water in the trench!" (18:38). Elijah then killed Baal's prophets who happened to be supported by Ahab's wife Jezebel (18:19). That is why Jezebel had threatened to take Elijah's life (19:2) and why Elijah had taken refuge under the broom tree.

After Elijah spent the night in the cave on Mount Horeb, the Lord asked him a question: "Why are you here, Elijah?" (verse 9). Elijah 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" (verse 10, NRSV).

The Lord responded with a promise of presence and said to Elijah, "The LORD is passing by" (verse 11). We imagine that Elijah expected to sense God's presence in the powerful wind, the earthquake, and the fire (verses 11-12). The pagan worshipers attributed these phenomena to their storm god, Baal. Elijah knew, however, that only the Lord has power and authority over the universe.

But God did not make the divine presence known to Elijah in the noise and the activity of wind, earthquake, and fire. Instead, Elijah experienced God's presence in the "sound" of the "Thin" and "Quiet" (verse 12). One commentator writes, "In this context, since fire on Mount Carmel was from the Lord, it could be expected that the third of these natural phenomena might symbolize God's presence. . . . On this occasion, however, God's comforting and empowering presence comes in the nearly imperceptible."<sup>3</sup>

When have you experienced God's presence "in the nearly imperceptible"? Perhaps a slight breeze brushed your face and reminded you of the presence of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps you saw a tiny crocus peeping up through brown winter grass.

After my college graduation, when I first arrived at Red Bird Mission to serve as a music teacher, I began to wonder if I was where God wanted me to be. On the first day, I went to the school to make arrangements for my classes. I was driving along a winding Kentucky mountain road when a coal truck passed me and the driver waved. In that quiet gesture, I heard God speaking to me, saying, "Yes, this is where I want you to be."

***When has God made the divine presence known to you in loud and dramatic ways? When have you experienced God's presence in the quiet?***

#### **A Mission**

The Lord asked Elijah a second time, "Why are you here, Elijah?" (1 Kings 19:13). Elijah offered the same answer as before, again revealing his discouragement about his work as a

prophet and concern that people were seeking his life. God did not address Elijah's vocational concerns directly but showed confidence in Elijah by sending him on another mission. There was still work to do, and Elijah was part of God's plan to accomplish this work.

God did respond directly to Elijah's lament ("I'm the only one left," verse 10) by telling Elijah that those faithful ones in Israel who had not worshiped Baal, 7,000 in all, had been preserved (verse 18). Elijah was not alone.

It is an awesome truth that the almighty God who has power and authority over all creation comes to us and speaks to us. God did not forsake Elijah as he lay sleeping "under the solitary broom bush" (verse 5), and God does not forsake us. God said to Elijah, "Go out and stand at the mountain before the LORD. The LORD is passing by" (verse 11).

The good news is that the Lord is still passing by, coming into our lives wherever we are and speaking the words of encouragement, hope, guidance, and reassurance we need to hear. Are you listening?

***When you have felt alone, when has God reassured you through the presence of other of God's people?***

#### **Praise, Thanksgiving, and Song**

As I was writing this lesson, I was thinking about the numerous ways God speaks to us: through a trusted friend or the wave of a stranger; in a majestic mountain vista or a tiny flower; in the words of Scripture; in a contemporary praise song and an old gospel hymn; in the music of a symphony; through a painting or a photograph; or in a "sound" that is "Thin. Quiet" (1 Kings 19:12).

As you practice the spiritual disciplines of praise, thanksgiving, and song this week, spend time remembering the ways God has spoken to you in the past. Offer your praise, thanksgiving, and songs for God's faithful and sustaining presence.

Also be mindful of the ways you are listening for God to speak in your life today. Even in the midst of hardship and crisis, we can know God's peace because "the Lord is passing by" (verse 11).

***How will you offer praise, thanksgiving, and song as you wait with expectation for God to speak?***

**Holy and loving God, thank you for your faithful and sustaining presence. Thank you for all the ways you speak your words of guidance, hope, peace, joy, and love into our lives. Use us to serve as your messengers to share your love and faithfulness with others; in Jesus' name we pray, Amen.**