



## THE HOLY SPIRIT PART III: LISTENING FOR WHISPERS

*Jeff Peabody  
New Day Church  
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We're already at week three in our study of the Holy Spirit. We spent the first Sunday looking at his nature as God and a personal being rather than a force. Last week we examined what are called the fruit of the Spirit – the evidence of his life that shows up in the way we see the world, the way we interact with other people and the character of Christ that he's forming in us.

This morning I'd like to take us to a somewhat unusual starting point for our discussion, a story in the Old Testament about the prophet Elijah. Elijah has recently seen God do some incredible things in his life, sending fire down from heaven, sending rain when Elijah prayed for it. But when we meet him, he's on the run for his life.

### **1 Kings 19:11-13**

*The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by."*

*Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.*

Some day, we'll come back to this story in its entirety, because it's a great one. There's a lot to explore in God's dealing with Elijah in this instance. But it's that gentle whisper – the "still small voice" as older Bibles put it – that caught my attention for this morning, because it gives us a picture of the way we look for the Holy Spirit and where we find him. Somehow, Elijah knew God was in that whisper, and he's still whispering to us today through the Holy Spirit.

We have been saying for the past two weeks that the Spirit enters our lives in a personal way at the point where we put our faith in Christ. That's when he places his Spirit in our hearts.

So let's say we have a friend we'll call Browns Point Betsy. Betsy is in her mid 30s. She's a stay at home mom with two kids and a husband who is in sales so he's gone a lot

of weekends. She was raised Catholic, but she hasn't gone to church since Jr. High, and her husband isn't interested. But she sees the sign every week for New Day, so one Sunday when her husband is out of town, she comes and checks out New Day.

Betsy really likes it. She meets some people she can relate to, and she knows in her heart that she's missing something with God. And finally she comes to a point where she's ready to commit her life to him. So she prays and asks Jesus to come into her life and forgive her. And at that moment, the Holy Spirit enters her heart and changes her forever.

Thanks to the wonders of modern technology and some sophisticated cameras we have had installed here at Meeker, we were able to catch a photo of Betsy right before she prayed that prayer, as well as right after. Let's take a look...

As you can see, there's nothing to see. There is no outward sign of any Holy Spirit activity happening in her life.

My question is this: If something really truly happens when you become a Christian, what is it that we expect to see from the Holy Spirit? When we stand with Elijah on the mountain of our lives, looking for God, what will we really see?

What do we mean about him being in our lives? Are we saying that we have the Spirit of Christ with us the way we talk about anyone who has died – "He's with us in spirit?" If that's all we mean, then there's not much specific to talk about.

The bottom line is that the Almighty God of the Universe has planted himself in our hearts. We read last week that it is the same Holy Spirit in us that raised Christ from the dead. Think about that. If you've put your faith in Christ, all the energy and authority behind the greatest miracle of history is now focused on you.

So what is he doing in there? What is the Holy Spirit up to on a daily basis in our lives? We need to know so we can recognize him more easily and respond to him more quickly.

Because that's the goal, isn't it? Ultimately we want to be growing in our faith. The Bible talks about people being "led" by the Spirit. We want to know how to be better followers who can be led, who are more sensitive to him.

And what kept coming to mind for me was the fact that the Holy Spirit speaks. But he speaks rather quietly most of the time. Like Elijah, we expect what he does to be accompanied by an earthquake or a fire or a storm. We want big signs. We think of the Holy Spirit doing large scale, spectacular things if he's such a powerful God. Instead, he just whispers to us in a voice so small we have to strain to hear it. And that raises several questions. How do we recognize his voice? What is he saying? How can get better at hearing him?

I believe nearly all the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives ties in to the fact that he is a God who speaks. I see him speaking on three levels in Scripture. First, when he moves into our lives,

### **He speaks TO us.**

A dialogue starts taking place in our hearts that continues for the rest of our lives. It isn't like we become a Christian and once the decision is made we're done with it. That's really just when the conversation starts.

When Karin and I bought our last house, it was a bit of a fixer upper. When it was on the market, it sat for months half painted, half not, so it looked terrible. When we got the keys to the house, we discovered that the people who lived there hadn't really cleaned up very well before they left. You may have had similar move-in experiences, where you have to do some deep cleaning before you'd even think of moving in.

Then once we were in the house, we still had a lot of work to do to make it truly ours. There was yardwork. There was painting. It needed carpet and flooring and basic repairs. We lived in that house six years, and it took us nearly that entire time to get it to a place where we felt like it was the way we wanted it. And we still weren't done when we sold it.

When the Holy Spirit moves into our hearts, it's like he's taking ownership of a new house. And one of the first things he has to do is some deep cleaning.

### **1 Corinthians 6:19**

*Or didn't you realize that your body is a sacred place, the place of the Holy Spirit? Don't you see that you can't live however you please, squandering what God paid such a high price for?*

But then once he's cleaned out enough to move in, he's still got work to do. He continues to remodel us for the rest of our lives, turning us more and more into a home that really reflects who he is.

### **Philippians 1:6**

*...he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*

The way that work takes place is through what he speaks to us. He speaks to us about many things.

*First, he speaks to us about God.*

### **John 14:26-27**

*But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.*

He speaks to us about God not just like we'd learn about him from a textbook. It is experiential knowledge, because he's God's spirit. He impresses things on our hearts that come from direct, first-hand understanding.

### **1 Corinthians 2:10-12**

*The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us.*

God wants us to understand him. If you're feeling like God is mysterious and distant, you can ask the Holy Spirit to teach you more about who God is. Nobody can do that better. He will demonstrate God's love and power and holiness in ways that are undeniable. It is one of his primary roles to speak to us about God. He is often called the Comforter, because he reminds us that God's with us. We're not alone in the world.

### **Romans 8:16**

*The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.*

So he speaks to us about God. The Holy Spirit *also speaks to us about us.*

When we talked about the remodeling analogy, that suggested there is a lot of change that the Holy Spirit wants to bring.

### **John 16:8**

*When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment.*

When he sees things he doesn't like, he points them out and asks you to get rid of them. Things you may have been comfortable with before suddenly look different when he's speaking to you. You might never have noticed an area of your life where you have a huge amount of pride, and suddenly it's glaring at you in the face and you have to deal with it. Or you might suddenly feel convicted about the way you treated someone yesterday, and you feel like you need to apologize.

That's when the wrestling match begins. Will you listen to the little whisper, or the loud voice that yells back how stupid it is to want to change?

I know I quote Jim Cymbala frequently, but he's just got such perfect stories. In one of his books, he tells about a time when he and his wife Carol were newly married. She made him his favorite dinner -- steak and potatoes. But she overcooked the steak, and he described it as tasting like shoe leather. He was not just disappointed by it -- he was mad. They got in a big argument, and he stormed out of the house, saying that he was going to the Wednesday night church service to make himself sound like the one who was doing the right thing.

He says, “I listened as best I could to the sermon, but then the pastor called the few believers present to come to the altar for prayer. That’s when my dilemma came to a head. Almost immediately, I sensed God speaking deep within me: “Get up, go home, tell her you were wrong, and say you’re sorry!” Didn’t God understand the extreme cruelty of a burned-up piece of meat? Was this really the Holy Spirit speaking to me, or a false spirit from the pit of hell? How could anyone who loved me ask me to say “I’m wrong” and “I’m sorry” all in the same night?” He said, “My proud and sensitive soul could not accept why I had to be the one to come crawling.”

Eventually, he gave in to that voice and reconciled with his wife, and it was a significant moment in their relationship. But something as simple as a bad dinner gives a practical example of what Paul pointed out to the Galatians.

### **Galatians 5:17**

*For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.*

The voice is there, telling us about ourselves, and we don’t always like it.

I moved offices recently to a new space where I’m close to a loud phone talker. I had been in a very isolated corner that was quiet. After I moved, it was hard to get away from the voice. So my boss bought me a white noise machine that creates interference that helps at least to not notice the voice so much even though it’s still there.

We can surround ourselves with white noise to override the Holy Spirit’s voice. People do it all the time by staying busy, watching TV, getting drunk. If we don’t want to listen to him, if we don’t want to change, we can tune him out, until that little whisper is barely noticeable.

But if we turn off the noise and listen, we’ll find that he’s speaking to us about a number of things that need repair. And the more we respond to what he’s saying, the more clearly we’ll hear him.

The good news is that he’s not just pointing fingers at us and telling us what’s wrong and how much we need to change. In addition to speaking to us,

### **He speaks FOR us.**

The Holy Spirit is our friend, and he is carrying on a dialogue with God the Father about us. He doesn’t just tell us about God – he communicates to God about us.

## **2 Corinthians 1:21-22**

*Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.*

The Holy Spirit reminds God that he chose us. With the Holy Spirit in our lives, we will never have to know what God's anger feels like. Beyond that, even, the Spirit takes the needs in our lives and prays for us.

## **Romans 8:26-27**

*In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.*

That's an enormous comfort in itself. Seeing my prayers answered doesn't depend on me getting the words just right. I don't even have to worry if I wasn't very clear in what I was trying to say, because the Holy Spirit is praying on a deeper level for me than I ever could. He knows us and he knows God the Father, and nobody could do a better job speaking FOR us.

One final way he speaks is **THROUGH us**.

This is almost unbelievable to me sometimes -- that the Holy Spirit could actually talk to someone else through me. But he does that all the time.

If you want to see some great examples of this, read through the book of Acts. The disciples regularly received messages they were supposed to pass on. Here's one story where Peter gives us a glimpse into his own thought process while this happened. He had just had a strange vision, when there was a knock at the door.

## **Acts 11:11-17**

*"Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man's house. He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.'*

*"As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?"*

Peter had no idea that the Holy Spirit was going to do that. He said what was on his heart, and the Holy Spirit did his own thing.

One of the first times I preached at our old church, I had a man come up to me afterwards and tell me how much he appreciated my message. I was feeling pretty good about myself and was glad to have confirmed what I already knew -- that my strong delivery and well-crafted sermon had had a powerful effect on my listeners.

Then he told me what he had taken from my message. It wasn't even CLOSE to one of my main points! He had heard something entirely different that had moved him. And I realized then and there that the Holy Spirit speaks through me, but it is independently of my words. Since that time, there have been other sermons where the same thing has happened – people have thanked me for a message I didn't know I preached.

It isn't something that just happens in sermons. Every single Christian is used by the Holy Spirit to speak to other people. It doesn't depend on your education, it doesn't depend on how long you've been a Christian. If the Holy Spirit is in you, the Holy Spirit will speak through you. Not because of who you are – but because of who he is and the fact that THAT'S WHAT HE DOES – He speaks through us.

He's designed the body to work together, to depend on those messages that we share with each other. We can sound very modest and say, "Oh I don't really think God could speak through me," and at the same time really be too proud to risk looking foolish by sharing what we're supposed to share.

I could tell you stories about many of you in this group who have been used by the Holy Spirit to talk to me. I shared the story this summer of how Tom Parks had a word from God for me about taking a break – and I knew when I heard it that it was the Holy Spirit.

I wanted to wrap up with something a little different this morning, and I've asked Tom if he'd be willing to help. We can talk all day about listening for the Holy Spirit, but I knew Tom had a couple of very direct examples where the Holy Spirit had spoken to him, and I thought we could talk for a few minutes about what that looked like and felt like.

#### [INTERVIEW WITH TOM PARKS]

God invited Elijah to come and experience his presence. He invites us to do the same. As you reflect on what that means in your life, ask yourself:

1. Am I listening or trying to drown out the whisper? Am I creating noise to block his voice? Instead, how can I cultivate more opportunities to listen for the Holy Spirit?
2. What is the Holy Spirit speaking to me right now about myself? What do I need him to remind me about God?
3. Is God wanting to speak through me to someone else? Do I have the courage to let him?

Paul wrote these words to the Galatians:

**Galatians 5:25**

*Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.*

My prayer would be that as individuals and as a congregation, we would choose to keep in step with the Spirit, to be a people who can hear his whispers above the roar, and who let him speak his message of hope through us to whoever he wants to reach.