

What is the Still, Small Voice?

Manufacturing Mystics Young and Old

by G. Richard Fisher



Dave Breese's book, *Know the Marks of Cults*, contains a chapter on what he called "segmented biblical attention." He writes of those who ignore the wide scope of Scripture to focus on a tiny aspect — an obscure verse or a phrase — that usually is taken out of context. In addition, such teachers ignore passages that might correct the error. A major distinctive grows from a minor error and often becomes a test of fellowship, and a criterion for judging salvation.

Many modern mystics who advocate medieval contemplative prayer practices and mystical exercises such as *lectio divina*,¹ Taize,² and labyrinths,³ say they are seeking the "still, small voice" (a phrase from 1 Kings 19:12). This means that people must try to hear God's voice from inside themselves through the practice of centering and emptying the mind. There is, as well, a latent pantheism and universalism beneath the surface. Rather than people praying — talking to God — this distorted teaching instead has God talking to people.

Even children are being taught this. A publication from NavPress called *PrayKids!* contains lessons on "hearing God" and "contemplative prayer." Youngsters are enticed into this movement with bait such as, "If you like to play video games, you know that it's all about getting to the next level! Prayer is like that too — only much better than any video

game!"⁴ They are further told that through contemplative prayer, God "reveals Himself in a new way."⁵ Our children are also told that "Prayer is also listening, because God loves to talk to you, too"⁶ and "When we hear like this from God, it is called the 'still, small voice of God.'"⁷

When Jesus gave what is called the Lord's Prayer, there was a lot about praying outward and upward to "Our Father in heaven" (Matthew 6:9), but absolutely nothing about listening because people are to listen to God in Scripture (Matthew 22:31). The words "pray" and "listen" are not even remotely connected. Prayer is prayer and listening is listening. All of the Greek words translated "prayer" refer to talking to God, not God talking to us.

A Youth Specialties writer, Steve Case, says in his article, "Listening for God's Still, Small Voice":

"The Bible says there was an earthquake but God wasn't in the earthquake. There was a fire but God wasn't in the fire. There was a tornado but God wasn't in the tornado. Then there was a still, small voice. ... I have a friend named Al who frequently reminds me that God will speak to me in one of two ways. God will whisper in my ear, or hit me on the head with a brick. ... God is still speaking. God is speaking volumes to us. Sometime we

have to shut up long enough to hear what we are being told. The choice is ours; we can listen for the whisper, or we can wait for the brick. Trust me. The brick hurts. Listen for the whisper."⁸

There is no dispute that God is speaking today. It is His method that is in question. The practice described above brings to mind the primitive American Indian "vision quest," where an individual seeks contact with the spirit world to receive guidance.⁹

This teaching comes from one phrase pulled out of context from 1 Kings 19:12 that has been invested with all kinds of meaning.

IT IS ONLY AS GOOD AS ITS SOURCE

To paraphrase a Bible verse, "Can anything good come out of the Middle Ages?" The Middle Ages was filled with religious craziness and chicanery:

"The arrival of some of Christ's blood in England, Oct. 13, 1247, was solemnized by royalty and furnishes one of the strange and picturesque religious scenes of English medieval history. ... Its genuineness was vouched for by the Masters of the Templars and the Hospitallers, and by the seals of the patriarch of Jerusalem, and the archbishops and other prelates of the Holy Land. After

fasting and keeping watch the night before, the king, Henry III., accompanied by the priests of London in full canonicals and with tapers burning, carried the vase containing the holy liquid from St. Paul's to Westminster."¹⁰

First the phrase "still, small voice" is not phrased "the still, small voice of God" as stated in NavPress' *PrayKids!* material. The words, "of God" are slipped in and added. It literally reads, "and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice."

The Hebrew phrase is not easy to translate. Translators and commentators have struggled with its precise

- The *New International Version* translates it "a gentle whisper."
- The *Amplified Bible* has "[a sound of gentle stillness and] a still, small voice."
- Gerhard Kittel suggests "the soft 'rustle' of a slight breath of air" and the "sound of a still, small blowing."¹²
- Hebrew linguists Johann Keil and Franz Delitzsch render it "a still, gentle rustling ... literally the tone of a gentle blowing ... a soft, gentle rustling."¹³

Thus, the exact wording is by no means certain. However, the general idea is apparent from these various

The English word "voice" is the Hebrew word *qol* (pronounced "coal"). Israel Radio is called "Kol Israel" or the "Voice of Israel." Thus the Hebrew word *qol* can mean "voice," that is, someone speaking. When used in that way it is quite easy to translate. However, *qol* is a generic word and can mean just about any noise at anytime and anywhere.

So *qol* can mean a voice, a sound, or just noise as in Exodus 32:17. The context determines what kind of noise it is. This is true of many Hebrew words. In Genesis 3:8, Adam heard the sound — *qol* — of God walking. At times the word is used in a covenantal context and speaks of God being on the scene. This lends a layer of meaning in the Genesis 3:8 passage that can easily be missed. *Qol* is also used of crying as in Isaiah 65:19. In Exodus 9:12, it is used of thunder. Usually the context makes word meanings easy to translate. An exception is 1 Kings 19:12. There translators gave ranges of meanings for what the King James Version calls "a still small voice."

NOW IT GETS INTERESTING

When the words "still" and "small" are added to *qol*, which also have primary and secondary, and possibly more meanings, it is easy to see why translators struggle in a quest for precision. Perhaps, in this case, absolute precision is not necessary because a major doctrinal issue is not at stake. What all of them seem to agree on, however, is that whatever is going on, it is something very gentle or peaceful.

First Kings 19:13 says Elijah heard *it* — whatever *it* was. He heard a still, small *qol*. The text does not say he heard it inside or within himself, and the normal word for hearing is used. There is nothing in 1 Kings 19 that would lead the reader to believe this had anything to do with monastic practices that were invented more than 1,900 years later. Also, it was only *after* the experience of verse 12 that it says he began to converse with God outside of himself (vv. 13-14).

No one can be absolutely certain what a still, small *qol* was, but that is



Cultivating young mystics:

The *PrayKids!* newsletter, a publication by The Navigators, is aimed at children (ages 7 to 12) and lures them into emotionalism, subjectivism, and mysticism.

meaning. Mystical practitioners should at least be honest enough to admit that. Doctrine and practice should be built on clear and redundant teachings of Scripture and not on a single obscure and difficult phrase. Unclear passages should be translated in the light of clear ones.

The difficulty of the Hebrew term "a still, small voice" is clear when considering the following:

- J.R. Dummelow's *Commentary on the Holy Bible* translates it as "the peaceful calm that followed the tempest."¹¹
- The Septuagint and the *Jerusalem Bible* both translate it "sound of a gentle breeze."

renderings. Keil and Delitzsch are to a great degree in sync with Kittel.

Adam Clarke refers to it as a "gentle breeze" and says, "that is, a sound with which no other sound was mingled."¹⁴ Clarke does not even hint that this passage is about us, our feelings, and our experiences, but rather he says throughout that God is displaying Himself in various ways to Elijah.

WHEN IS A VOICE A VOICE?

It is easier to understand this passage when it is also understood that Hebrew words can have primary and secondary meanings, and at other times — depending on context — even other levels of meaning.

not the point. The contrast between a still, small *qol* and loud noises of thunder, fire, and earthquake is the point. The contrast is between the loud and the soft, the noisy and the gentle. This particular *qol* was a huge contrast to the roar and din of the other noises. When all the noise died away, everything went still. Elijah stayed alert and ready for God's new revelation and it must be remembered that these were days of direct, divine revelation. There is no evidence that Elijah went mindless and vacant and centered down within himself. That is foreign to the context. He is not in a mindless altered state, but in a state of keen awareness as God gives him teaching and new marching orders in verses 15-18.

GOD CAN DO AS HE PLEASES

Elijah learned that whether God works in earthquake, fire, and thunder as at Mount Sinai, or if He thunders through the prophets, or whether He works quietly and unnoticed, God is still God. He can display Himself in judgment or in mercy. He can display Himself in justice or in grace. The thunder of Ahab and Jezebel's secular policies and threats were not bigger than God. God is at work even when it is not apparent.

Even if the KJV rendering of "a still small voice" is used, there is no basis on which to build a theology and major practice. To then impose these false and potentially harmful practices on gullible children is mindless, manipulative, and almost abusive. Jesus gave strong warnings about those who would mislead children (Matthew 18:6).

As far as Elijah was concerned, it was probably simply a sudden quietness. Earlier, Elijah had run from Jezebel, fearing for his life. More importantly, he was running from the call of God and obedience. The earthquake, wind, and fire — reminiscent of Sinai and the Law — were not what pulled Elijah back into God's will, but rather God revealing Himself in gentleness. David must have experienced something like that when he proclaimed, "Your gentleness has made me great" (Psalm 18:35). Perhaps the contrast between thunder

and stillness could be applied to the dispensations of Law and Grace.

AN OLD BUT QUESTIONABLE ROOT SYSTEM

Historians trace the introduction of mystical practices into Catholicism and the mania of seeking the voice of God apart from Scripture via the Greek or Eastern Church in the 9th-10th centuries A.D.:

"Since God is a mystery beyond words and understanding, Evagrius Ponticus (the most influential spiritual writer in the Greek East) taught that the human mind has to rise above concepts, words, and images and above discursive thinking in order to apprehend and gaze upon God intuitively."¹⁵

This practice may also have had a boost from Talmudic Judaism. The Roman Catholic Church, in its effort to be the New Israel, clearly borrowed elements of Judaism. One instance is the repository of the consecrated host being called a tabernacle, a new Holy of Holies.¹⁶

Rabbis of the early Talmudic period (4th-12th centuries) spoke of the *Bath-Qol*, literally the "daughter voice" or the echo of God's voice. Jews after the time of Christ sought this voice of God in bizarre ways. Alfred Ederheim writes that eventually the *Bath-Qol* fell into disfavor. "Indeed, so strong became the feeling against this superstition, that the more rational Rabbis protested against any appeal to the *Bath-Qol*."¹⁷

LESSONS LEARNED

Beware of biblical phrases taken out of context and segmented biblical attention. Beware of persons and groups that build theology and practice on an obscure word or group of words. To impose error on the Church straight from the monasteries and superstition of the Dark Ages should be unthinkable. Test all things and hold fast to that which is true.

We have come fairly close to knowing to a great degree what "a still, small voice" is really all about. We certainly know what it isn't.

Endnotes:

1. The mystical practice of *lectio divina* is called the ancient art of sacred reading and includes reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation. For more information, see the accompanying article, "The New Mystic Youth: No Longer Just Pulp Fiction," in this issue of the *Journal*.
2. Taize is a meditative style of worship which blends together music, words, and silence.
3. Labyrinths are said to be a tool to move the worshiper into a mystical union with God.
4. Kim Butts, "Going to the Next Level," *PrayKids!*. Colorado Springs, Colo.: Nav-Press, 2005, "Contemplative Prayer" issue, pg. 1.
5. *Ibid.*, no author given, "The Word On... Contemplative Prayer," *PrayKids!*, "Contemplative Prayer" issue, pg. 1.
6. Cheri Fuller, "Hotline from Heaven," *PrayKids!*. Colorado Springs, Colo.: Nav-Press, 2006, "Hearing God" issue, pg. 1.
7. *Ibid.*, Dick Eastman, "The Word On ... Hearing God," *PrayKids!*, "Hearing God" issue, pg. 1.
8. Steve Case, "Listening for God's Still, Small Voice," (originally titled: "Waiting for the Brick"). Article available on the Youth Specialties web site (www.youthspecialties.com).
9. Leonard George, *Alternative Realities*. New York: Facts on File, 1995, pg. 301.
10. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1907, Vol. V, pg. 847.
11. J.R. Dummelow, *Commentary on the Holy Bible*. New York: Macmillan, 1958, pg. 225.
12. Gerhard Kittel, Editor, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974, Vol. IX, pg. 281, 284.
13. Johann Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984, Vol. III, pg. 258.
14. Adam Clarke, *The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments*. New York: Abingdon Press, no date, Vol. II, pg. 462, italics in original.
15. J.D. Douglas, General Editor, *New 20th Century Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1991, "Contemplation," pg. 234.
16. See, Ronald E. Diprose, *Israel and the Church: The Origins and Effects of Replacement Theology*. Waynesboro, Ga.: Authentic Media, 2004, for detailed historical documentation of Roman Catholicism's borrowing of numerous elements of Judaism.
17. Alfred Ederheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965, Vol. I, pg. 286, note 2.