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God's Presence or God's Presents?

1 Kings 19:1-14

Prayer: *Father, we just again thank you and praise you for who you are, we thank you and praise you for your grace and your goodness, we thank you for your word, we thank you for this corporate worship that we're able to enjoy. And Father today, this morning at this time as we're opening up your word, as we're about to again look into it, we pray for the presence of your Holy Spirit. May you accompany us, may you enable us to enter into your word and take out of it something of lasting value. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, we are picking up on the story of Elijah right where we left off last week, and right after Elijah's spectacular success on Mount Carmel is you remember he gets threatened by Jezebel and then he takes off. He goes hundreds and hundreds of miles into the wilderness where he is depressed, he's at the point where he just wants to die and there he's ministered to by an angel and directed to go to the cave at Mount Horeb where he meets with God himself. Well not once but twice God asks Elijah, "What are you doing here,

Elijah?" God asks him that question two times, once before he does a series of great miracles and then once again immediately after. And God chose this series of miracles, it was a set of miracles that mirrored the spectacular miracles that Elijah had done but there was something unique about this set of miracles that God is going to do. These miracles have none of God's presence. We pick up on 1 Kings 19 at verse 11, it says this, this is God and he says to Elijah: *And he said, "Go out and stand on the mount before the LORD." And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks 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 the sound of a low whisper. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and he went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"*

Well, it seems like God is giving Elijah an object lesson in how limited a resource miracles actually are. It's a lesson that God states repeatedly and one that Jesus himself spoke of in the gospel of Luke. In Luke 16 Jesus is telling us a story, and the story's about a rich man and a poor man named Lazarus. You remember Lazarus is the one who begged the crumbs that fell from his table,

they both die and Lazarus goes to Abraham's bosom while the rich man goes to hell. And while he's in hell he begs Abraham to send Lazarus to rise from the dead and warn his brothers of this terrible fate that is about to befall them if they don't repent. Well, the rich men figured if there's a miracle spectacular enough, well the effect would be to drive his brothers into the kingdom. And this is what *Luke 16:27* says about that. This is him speaking, this is the rich man speaking. He says, "*Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.*" Abraham replied, *'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.'* 'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'" Jesus is quoting Abraham to say that the power of salvation is not in the signs and the wonders that raising Lazarus from the dead would represent; no, the power is in Moses and the Prophets. That's the scriptures themselves. The power's in Moses and the Prophets and God's Holy Spirit himself. Again, verse 29: *Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them. If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."* So God is telling us, Jesus is telling us that miracles alone will never convince us.

That Jesus quoted Moses in that text is of particular interest in our discussion of Elijah because Moses seems to have gotten that lesson while Elijah seems to be still in this learning process. So God does these three spectacular but empty miracles, and then he asks him, *"What are you doing here, Elijah?"* If you recall, Elijah gives God the exact same answer he had given before the miracles. He says in *1 Kings 19*: *He says, "I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away."* We pointed this out last week, this is an answer that is self-serving and highly inaccurate. I mean, we know there were others in Israel who had not bowed the knee to Baal. And we also know that after the mighty miracle on Mount Carmel, all of the people of Israel shouted out, *"The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God."* We also know that Elijah was out in the wilderness not because of a failure of Israel or of a failure of God but of a failure of Elijah, and yet God was incredibly gentle and gracious with him. Elijah's ministry had been tied to the miraculous for years now, I mean, the drought -- if you recall the drought that he initiated was in itself a miracle, and all of what happened subsequent to that, he gets taken out into the wilderness and he gets fed by ravens, then he comes into the town and he meets a widow there and he's miraculously fed by the widow, and then we

have this raising of a little boy from the dead. So we see that Elijah is in a position where he's so used to a miraculous intervention that he's really ill-prepared for Jezebel's resistance. I mean, he thought revival was just going to come down from Mount Carmel and everybody would be on board. And when Jezebel threatened to kill him, in spite of all the miraculous things that had happened, well, he basically just collapsed. And so Elijah needed to learn that the power of God's presence was far more effective than the power of miracles. This is a lesson that Moses well understood even though he, too, had had his share of spectacular miracles and he, like Elijah, had seen that these miracles themselves had this limited value. I mean, the Jews when they were in Egypt, we saw the ten plagues, they saw the parting of the Red Sea, they saw the pillar of fire by night, the cloud by day, they had the manna feeding them every single day, and Moses saw all of those spectacular miracles; but he also saw the unbelief and the rebellion that persisted in the face of those miracles. In fact, the rebellion had grown so pervasive that God had finally reached a tipping point of sorts and he tells Moses that his people, they could have the promised land but they could no longer have his presence lest he destroy them. This is what God said in *Exodus 33*. It says: *The LORD said to Moses, "Depart; go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt, to the land which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,*

saying, 'To your offspring I will give it.' I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people." When the people heard this disastrous word, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments.

You see in a sense, God is offering Moses what he had also offered to Elijah, he's offering him miracles without his presence. He'd send an angel who would drive out all of their enemies but God says I will no longer be present with you. Well, John Piper once asked a question that really gets to the heart of that issue. He asked it this way, he said, "If you could go to a heaven in which the presence of God was missing, how much of a problem would that be?" I mean, if you could get to a heaven in which everything you've ever dreamed of being able to have or do, it would all come true, how long do you think it would take before that heaven would lose its luster? I mean, it's a question you might never have considered before. I remember once a long time ago there was a Twilight Zone -- I'm really dating myself when I start talking about The Twilight Zone, that's the '60s, it was a show that always had some kind of a weird ending, it was kind of supernaturally inclined but it was kind of a mystery show and there was a twilight

zone and twilight zone, this guy dies and he goes to this place where every wish is instantly granted. And at first it's terrific, you know, he has a desire for food and they said, "What do you like," whatever you like, instantly it just appears in front of him. He decides he needs a house and whatever house he wants, boom! It's right there. He decides he'd like some women. There they are. He decides he'd like some sports and some entertainment, whatever he wants it's there. And after a while of having every single wish instantly granted, he starts to get a little irritated. Then he starts to grow annoyed. And finally he gets infuriated and he finally explodes and he says to the attendant, "This place is driving me nuts." He says, "There's no point, there's no purpose, there's no meaning in all of this, I tell you, it almost makes me long for the other place." And the attendant looks at him and he looks shocked and he says, "Sir, this is the other place." That's the kind of thing that you would get with that kind of show. But the question is, how long would it take for a heaven without the presence of God to seem like hell itself? I mean, ask yourself how long before you would grow tired of even the most amazing of secular blessings? You know, if you love to go fishing, how many times would it take after you've caught your 500 or 5,000th ten-pound small mouth bass or Tarpon or swordfish or whatever it is before you finally lost the thrill of fishing? Or if you love fine food, I mean, after you've dined on the most amazing food in the

universe for 500 years, after you've tasted every single thing there is to taste 10,000 times, do you think you'd grow tired? What about physical pleasure, I mean, after you've experienced every kind of physical pleasure a human body can experience not for a day, not for a week, give it 500 years, give it 5,000 years, do you think you'd ever grow tired of it? I think you would. See, the point is we were designed for something far more than a heaven without God. And the reason why God removing his presence is so devastating is because we at our core are designed to be completed only in him. How long before a Godless heaven would seem like hell? I -- my answer is no time at all because none of those things that that heaven offers can ultimately satisfy us. In fact in a limited way it's happening right now. I saw an amazing YouTube clip of a TV commentator, and he was on a show and he opened up his comments by making one simple observation. He was comparing the advances that modern science has made with how unhappy people are in spite of them. He entitled his piece "Everything is Amazing Now and Nobody's Happy." And he started out, he was talking about the telephone. He said most of you people who have telephones, you have cell phones, you're not aware when we first got telephones, they had ring dials. They said they were so primitive, you'd take this thing and little sparks would come, and everybody hated telephone numbers that had zeroes in them, because you had to go like that and wait for the thing to go "ch-ch-ch-ch-ch-ch" all the

way back. He says now, he says, you pick up a phone you go bup-bup-bup-bup-bup, you sit there and you go, "What's..." he goes, you know, give it a rest! It's going up to outer space, it's going up to a satellite. You can't even wait. He said, and you talk about planes, there's so many typical conversations "How was your flight?" "Oh, it was awful. It took us over 20 minutes to board, and we sat on the tarmac for 40 minutes, 60 minutes." He said you can go from New York to California in six hours. He said you know, a hundred years ago that would take a year or two years or maybe twenty years. He described an in-flight Internet experience that he had, he said, you know, they now have Internet that you can get on the plane, and they were explaining that, you know, it's a satellite connection, you have this Internet thing, the guy sitting next to him and the thing went down and he goes, "Oh, this stinks." He said, understand something, he said, you're sitting in a chair six miles up in the sky going faster than the bullet that killed Lincoln, and all you can think about is that your chair doesn't tip back far enough and you don't have Internet. He said this is the way it is. Everything is amazing now and nobody's happy. Why is that? Well, the reason is simple, I mean, if what would appear absolutely miraculous only a few years ago is now mundane and even annoying, what does that say about anything that we think of as miraculous today? You see, there's only one thing that is limitless. There's only one thing that is infinite and

continuously able to satisfy, and that is the presence of God. If you don't have that, it doesn't matter how spectacular or miraculous the gifts or the toys that you have, eventually you're going to grow tired of them, annoyed at them, and irritated with them. Saint Augustine said, "Thou hast created us for Thyself, and our heart is not quiet until it rests in Thee." He got that right.

I got a phone call last Saturday night. Actually I should say it was very early Saturday morning. It was about 4:30 in the morning. You know, I heard my house phone ringing and sometimes we get calls in the middle of the night and it just stops. And I heard my house phone ringing, that thing, ran out, I couldn't get to it in time. So my other phone started ringing, so immediately I'm thinking, oh, that's a kid. And you get a phone call at 4:30 in the morning, that's usually not a good thing. So I go staggering to the phone, I pick up the phone, it was my son Seth on the phone. He says, "Look, I've been up all night talking to this guy about God, and he's got a bunch of questions that I can't answer. Would you talk to him? I said, "Sure," I said, doesn't matter to me if it's 4:00 o'clock in the morning, that's music to my ears. I said, "Oh, yeah, I'd love to talk to him." So he got on the phone. Turns out this guy, he's a climate scientist, he works for NOAA, he's an unbeliever, he's always been an unbeliever. I started giving him some biblical references, and he said, "Wait a minute, please," he

said, "Look, I'm an atheist. I was raised an atheist. I have no idea what these Bible references have to do with anything, so don't use any Bible on me, please." All right. So I said, I asked him, I said, "Well, maybe you can tell me," I said, "Why do you think you're here?" He couldn't give me an answer. I mean, I would imagine if you believe that you evolved from slime and that kind of stuff you don't have much of an answer. I asked him, "What do you love about life? What is it that you enjoy about living your life?" And he said he loved sports, he loved working out, he loved snow boarding. I said, "if you could have the best snow boarding you could ever imagine, if you could have the best gym with the best workouts and the best sports you could ever want in unlimited quantities," I said, "how long do you think it would take before you would grow absolutely tired of them?" He said, "I can't say." And he couldn't because he probably never gave it a moment's thought. So I said to him, I said, "What if you were designed for something other than doing stuff or having stuff?" I don't think he knew of any other category. You know, if so many people -- for so many people, life itself consists of three categories: Doing stuff, getting stuff, and having stuff. That's it. That's what their life consists of, and that's not nearly enough to sustain a human being. But very few people spend the time to think through what it would be like to be given everything they could ever want, because so few people get there. I mean, it's only when you're in

a position that you have everything you could possibly want that you're in a position to realize how empty existence without God really is. Our practical God is the American dream. The American dream says you can have it all. A vast majority of Americans spend their lives pursuing that dream even though less than one-tenth of one percent actually get to realize it, and it's only when you have it all that you realize that it's not even remotely enough. And the answer to why that is is because we were designed by a God who designed us only to be satisfied with God. And only when we are filled up and fed up and through with being semi satisfied with all of those things that are not God will we ever come to the realization that God and God alone can ultimately satisfy. And so doing stuff and getting stuff and having stuff, that can't define our purpose but for most people, it does. So I told my friend on the phone I knew exactly why we're here. I told him that man was the only creature that was ever created specifically by God, designed by God to offer up praise. That's why we're here. I told him no other creature has his pleasure and enjoyment of something fulfilled and completed by his ability to praise it. It's not an original thought, I mean, C.S. Lewis, the one who first pointed it out, whether it's a gorgeous sunset or a great meal or great performance, if we partake in it, only human beings have a need to praise it. You know, dolphins and eagles and whales not so much, they don't care about that kind of stuff. I asked him, I said, why

do you suppose when you see a spectacular play -- let's say you're watching a football game, and you see a spectacular play, you see Odell Beckham make that catch, why is it that my kids from Colorado would call me on the phone? Is he looking for more information, is he looking to confirm something or is his pleasure at seeing a spectacular play completed by saying, "Did you see that, Dad?"

Well, that's uniquely human. There's no other creature that needs to praise something in order to complete his enjoyment of it. And I pointed out that we were designed to find completeness and meaning only in that which is ultimately praiseworthy and the only thing that's ultimately praiseworthy is God. And until we understand that, we're going to spend the rest of our life chasing after the stuff of this world rather than the Spirit of God which alone can satisfy. Now, I know countless people who have spent their entire lives doggedly chasing after the stuff of this world. And I know a few that to some extent you could say have found it, but I've never known any of them to even remotely say that they're completely and ultimately satisfied; not even close. But on the other hand I know a handful of people who have doggedly pursued the Spirit of God and I can say with absolute certainty that regardless of their health which sometimes is there, sometimes is not or their wealth or prosperity, which may or may not exist, they alone are the people that I know that have absolutely no regrets.

Moses understood that the presence of God was the most important and satisfying thing he could ever long for. For Elijah, this is a lesson that he's in the process of learning. Moses had seen literally dozens of spectacular miracles but he had also had this taste of God and this taste of God left him with an insatiable desire. God said in *Exodus 33:11*, it says: *Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.* Now Moses actually understood that there was a huge difference between the presence of God and the presents of God. There's only two difference -- the difference between the two words is only two letters, there's P-R-E-S-E-N-C-E and P-R-E-S-E-N-T-S, but they're two vastly different things. You see, we all start out preferring the presents, T-S, over the presence, C-E. See, almost all of us are attracted to God initially because we find him useful. And the more we grow, the more we are sanctified, the more we begin to be attracted to a God who is not just useful but lovely. I pointed this out before. God even acknowledges in *1 John 4:19*, he says: *We love him because He first loved us.* Well, that may be where we all start but by God's grace hopefully that's not where we end.

We have a family tradition that we've had for years and years at our birthday celebrations, always consists of going around the table and having every one of the kids say what they like about the birthday person. I'm sure many of you do that as well. But for me

it's interesting to note how as you move from younger to older children how those perceptions change. See, as you go around the table, the younger ones almost always say they like the birthday person for what he does for them or she does for them. I like Sarah because she makes cookies for me or I like Elisa because she takes me places. I mean, that's the kind of stuff that they say. In other words, the little ones love their siblings because they're useful. That's just what you would expect from little ones, from infants. But as you go up in age, what starts to matter more to the siblings is character. You know, I like Dan because he always looks out for people who are getting picked on or I like Luke because he never brags about how good he is in sports. See, that's a character issue. As kids get older and older they start seeing the difference. And what really is going on there is that the older siblings are starting to realize that they start out loving their siblings because they're useful and they end up loving them because they're lovely. Well, not quite that far if you know siblings. It only goes so far. But now expand that notion upward and consider that you're considering God himself. We start out loving God for what he's done for us, and we are amazed that God himself would leave heaven itself, that he would come to earth, that he would live a perfect life and go to the cross and exchange his righteousness for our sin, and so we love God for what he's done for us. Like I say, it's okay to start there but it's very

unhealthy to stay there. And so many Christians get stuck at the Christ as useful stage. And when they think of Christ, all they can think of is Christ's presents, T-S. Jesus saved me. Jesus gave meaning to my life, Jesus makes me happy. That's fine. That's Jesus as useful. Some folks even expand to that to include Jesus gives me health, he gives me wealth, and he gives me prosperity and we call that the prosperity gospel. And I think that's something that's permanently stuck on the God as useful stage. It's not much different than the crowd that surrounded Jesus's miracles looking at free food and a magic show. This is what Jesus said in *John 6:26*, he's addressing that crowd: *Jesus answered them and said, "Most assuredly, I say to you, you seek me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him."* Jesus is going to go on to tell them exactly what that food was. He says: *"For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. Then they said to Him, "Lord, give us this bread always." And Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst."* You see, they wanted the presents, T-S, of Jesus and Jesus is offering them his presence, C-E. They had to choose between the presents and the presence, between the Spirit

and the stuff. And over and over and over again they chose the stuff.

Moses was given the very same choice and yet he instantly chose the Spirit. You know, when God offered to miraculously send an angel into the promised land, God also told them he wasn't going to accompany them but this is what Moses said in reply. This is *Exodus 33:15*, he says: *"If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?"* Consider what Moses is offered. He's offered a land flowing with milk and honey, the land that God has promised to the Jewish people, they could have it; they just couldn't have him. Moses instantly says no thanks, because he had tasted the presence of God and he knew that anything less than that would never be satisfying. You see, God alone is the most powerful, the most glorious, the most satisfying addiction a human being could ever have because the presence of God is specifically what you and I were designed for. Moses discovered that. Again, *Exodus 33*, he says: *Then he said to Him, "If Your Presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, except You go with us? So we shall be separate, Your people and I, from*

all the people who are upon the face of the earth." So the LORD said to Moses, "I will also do this thing that you have spoken; for you have found grace in My sight and I know you by name." And he said, "Please show me Your glory." You see, Moses got a taste for God's glory and all it did was fuel a desire for more and more. In verse 19 it says: Then He said, "I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before you. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." But he said, "You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live." And the LORD said, "Here is a place by Me, and you shall stand on the rock. So it shall be, while My glory passes by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with My hand while I pass by. Then I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen." By the way, if you ever need a reminder about how different, fallen and sinful we are compared to God's perfection, this is it. I mean God tells Moses to be fully exposed to My presence will kill you. Instantly you will die. He says: "You cannot see My face; for no man can see Me, and live." However he grants Moses a passing glance at his back while he's partially protected by the cleft of the rock and his hand, and the encounter with the presence of God leaves Moses with a face that glowed so intently that Exodus 34 says: When he came down from the mountain Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone while

he talked with Him. So when Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him.

It's been many, many centuries since Moses had encountered God's presence and found it far more compelling than his miraculous power. So now some seven centuries later God is meeting with Elijah out in the wilderness and his goal is to give him the very same gift that Moses got. Elijah's spectacular miracles seems to have collapsed on him and he appears to be ready to learn the difference between God's presence, T-S, or gifts, and his presence, C-E, or Spirit. So God grants Elijah these three spectacular miracles: A windstorm without his presence, an earthquake without his presence, and a fire without his presence. And in the aftermath of the spectacular presents of God, clinging to the silence is the presence of God. But by all appearances, Elijah's not buying it. *1 Kings 19* he says: *And behold, there came a voice to him, and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"* You're familiar by now with this. *He said, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God of hosts; because the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life."* As I said last week, Elijah appears to have simply doubled down on what he thinks a relationship with God consists of. And what he's

saying here is he sees God as absolutely useful to him and to the nation of Israel as a whole but he still doesn't see God in his loveliness. And because he's still seeing God as useful, he can't help but see his collapse at Jezebel's hand through any other lens than his own personal tragedy. So once again he reminds God that the failure belongs to Israel and to a lesser extent to God's sovereignty, but certainly not to himself. Again, *1 Kings 19:14*:
"I alone am left; and they seek to take my life."

Well at this point God does something extraordinary. In *1 Kings 19:15*, it says: *And the LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus. And when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Syria. And Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be the king over Israel, and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place. And the who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death. Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."*

See, God immediately gives an assignment to Elijah. Wicked Israel is going to be punished by a series of wicked kings who Elijah is going to be tasked to anoint, but not before God reminds him that

his statement "I alone am left" was incorrect. In fact God says seven thousand in Israel have not bowed the knee to Baal. Now there's a lot of other things that God could have pointed out. Number one, he could have pointed out the hundred prophets that Obadiah had hidden that Elijah had obviously ignored when he said he was all alone, he could have asked Elijah why he said he was alone when the entire nation of Israel had shouted as one: "The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God." He could have pointed out that Elijah was there in the wilderness only because he had deserted his post, that he had turned tail and run, but he didn't. Instead in an amazing display of grace, God simply gives him his next new assignment. See, Elijah still had much to learn, and God was by no means finished with him. So God gives him these assignments and then as Ligon Duncan points out, he just kind of fades off the scene. I mean, he does have a spectacular ascent into heaven without dying and we'll see him come back a number of places, but basically his influence begins to end at this moment, until. And the next time you really hear from Elijah, he's in the New Testament, and once again he is up on a mountain. And now he's with someone who knew all about the value of the presence of God. *Luke 9:28* says this: *Now about eight days after these sayings he (Jesus) took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray. And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white. And*

behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

This is perhaps the most important assignment Elijah would ever have. He and Moses were to give aid and comfort to Jesus. They were to speak with him about his departure. That's a euphemism for the cross. I mean, they knew it was looming every and ever closer, and they also knew that the one thing that Jesus needed more than anything was going to be taken away, and that was God's presence. God's presence was going to be removed. The spotless Son of God would have to stand before his own Father clad only with the filth of our sin. Jesus was about to be hurled into an abyss of absolute desolation, denied the one thing of supreme value that Jesus had repeatedly offered to us, and that's the presence of God. And who's there to comfort Jesus? Who is there to encourage him about his departure? Who is there representing the still small voice of the presence of God? It's Elijah. Moses and Elijah. Who better to encourage Jesus with a lesson learned than Elijah?

So what is our takeaway from all of this? What is the lesson that Moses had gotten that Elijah was learning and that we need to learn from all of this as well? Here's the lesson. The lesson is that the most powerful part of the gospel is the power not of miracles,

but of the presence of God and that the spectacular miracles such as Elijah and Moses partook of were of very limited value compared to the still small voice of God's presence that often speaks in silence. Francis Schaeffer said, "God is here and he's not silent." He was correct. See, God's silence is a voice that speaks to every one of us who has ears to hear, and here is some of the ways that it silently speaks. First, God speaks his presence to us through prayer. You know, God emphatically tells us either "yes" or "no" or "wait" when we bring our prayer requests directly to him, and God speaks and sometimes he shouts in the silence of answered prayer. I know I've had that in my life. I've had amazing answers to prayer that I knew right then and there was God speaking specifically to me without any audible words. You know, I often say to people do you have a prayer notebook, do you have something that you can write these things down in? Because what happens is, you know, good things we tend to just say that's great and then they go by the wayside; bad things we tend to dwell on. But if you had a prayer notebook, you could look back over the years on the amount of things God has done in your life, the amount of answers to prayer that you've had, you would hear his voice speaking to you through answered prayer.

And secondly he speaks his presence through proclamation. You know, it's my job to proclaim his word, and what I find amazing

from my perspective is how many different ways it is heard. Lots and lots of times I've had people come up to me and say, you know, I heard what you were saying and God was speaking directly to me when you said X, Y, and Z, I heard God say this to me and while they're saying that, I said, gee, I never even thought of that, that never entered into my mind. The meaning that they derived from what I was saying was not something I intended at all but God is taking his word proclaimed and he's applying it uniquely and individually to each one of us. So God is speaking silently, he's giving us his presence through proclamation.

Thirdly, he speaks his presence through people. You know, I think one of the great tragedies of the contemporary church is that it's lost this sense of the importance of community in speaking God's voice to us. You know, when someone is hurting in this body, folks rally around them just like the healing parts of the body rally around the sick part. That's God speaking in silence. And this church does a wonderful job of speaking that to those who are hurting. And when someone grows wobbly in his faith or his practice, this community also serves as the still small voice of God encouraging, correcting and challenging. Again, understand, this is God speaking to you. This is the presence of God here.

God also speaks his presence to this world through petition as

well. You know, you probably all have heard that recently our president met with Saeed Abedini's wife Naghmeh and they had a wonderful meeting. He spoke about it at the prayer breakfast. I don't know that our president would have ever met with Saeed Abedini's wife if it hadn't been for the hundreds of thousands of protest signatures that arrived at the White House that told him that the church had no intention of remaining silent about this. You see, we have an obligation to speak to our government. We have an obligation to petition and protest when it turns a blind eye and a deaf ear toward persecution. You know, when Paul was actively persecuting the church, he actually heard the voice of Jesus one day to say to him in Acts 9:3: "*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*" Now this is unique. Paul actually heard these, not only Paul but the people all around him heard it as well. This just goes to how rare it is that the words of God actually become audible. And Paul said, says in verse 5, and he said, "*Who are you, Lord?*" And he said, "*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.*" Well, Paul certainly couldn't be attacking Jesus. Jesus had already been crucified, resurrected and ascended. What he was attacking was Christ's church. And Christ told him in no uncertain terms you attack them, you are attacking me. The body of Christ is seen by Jesus as Jesus. So God speaks to the world silently as we speak to the world about the persecution of our brothers and sisters.

And finally, God speaks personally to us through his word. How many times have you sought God's will and found him speaking to you not in English or your native language but through the language of chapter and verse? You know, time and time again God has communicated explicitly and directly to me by bringing a verse of his word into my mind precisely at the moment that I needed it. I mean, it may not have been an audible voice, but boy, I heard God speaking as clearly as you possibly can. Well, that's just five different ways that God speaks to us in the silence and none of them involve words. He speaks through prayer and proclamation and people and petition and he also speaks personally through his word. But here's the deal. James says in *James 4:8*: *Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.* You see, all of the different ways that God uses to speak with us, all of the ways that he has to bestow on us his presence as opposed to his presents, they all require some effort on our part. You see, if we're not willing to put ourselves in a position to hear God, then we can't complain when we don't. If your relationship with God is priority three or four as opposed to priority one, it's very doubtful you're ever going to hear God's voice. Just understand, God gives us the freedom to decide whether we want the presents, T-S, or the presence, C-E. God wants more than anything to give us the greatest gift a human being could ever receive, that's the gift of his presence. Elijah's first response to the offer of that gift

was to blame shift and wallow in self-pity. His last response was to comfort the Lord Jesus and prepare him for the loss of God's presence. So God clearly had not given up on him and he will never give up on you. So let me end this morning by telling us, all of us, to ask him for the grace to seek his presence. Let's pray.

Father, I do again, I thank you for the lessons that you've given us in the earthquake and the fire, again and again, Lord, when you've spoken to us in the wind, each of those did not have your presence, and what were they, they were just light shows, they were just displays of power. Lord, that's not enough. Lord, Moses understood it, we need your presence. Father, we need your presence in our day and we have seen it, there's so many different ways that you will supply that to us through prayer, through petition, through your word. Lord, again, I thank you again and again and again, you have given us the opportunity to experience your presence. I pray that you would give us, like you gave Moses, an ever increasing hunger for that; and I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.