

Clear Truths
A Sermon by Theolog Thomas J Jackson
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Have you ever thought it might be nice to just escape from everything wrong with the world and go live in a cabin in the woods, or a mountain somewhere, or maybe even a cave, like Elijah? Or, a little more reasonably, have you ever felt like everything was going wrong and you just needed to escape from your life? Maybe go to the beach for a few days and forget about your cares? We have all probably felt that, or something similar. Life can be overwhelming sometimes. It is easy to find ourselves overrun with just our mundane day-to-day tasks, and when you try to add being a good person on top of that, life can seem insurmountable.

When we find ourselves in that state, where everything is piling up, and its all just too much to handle, one of the solutions we might fantasize about, is some kind of big fundamental change. One grand action or decision that solves all our problems. Maybe we think, “If I just spent the weekend cleaning every corner of the house, I’ll finally have some peace of mind and can get my work done.” Maybe we’re frustrated with a coworker making mistake after mistake, and we think “Oh they should just be fired, and then we won’t have to worry about them messing up this project.” It could be any number of things, but we often look for some big sweeping change to come along and set things straight. We feel the same in our spiritual lives, when we’ve tried to do good and to shun evil time and time again, but it just keeps coming back. When we have tried to change ourselves day after day week after week, and maybe year after year. We wish the Lord would just cut out every evil desire in us. We want that desire, or feeling, or reaction to be ripped out, and replaced with something good from the Lord.

Our story of Elijah is about our lives in this state. When we come to Elijah in his cave, we find him at the end of his rope. He has done his best. He’s done all that the Lord asked him

to, but it hasn't been enough. It doesn't matter how many altars he has torn down, or how many priests of Baal he has killed, the Children of Israel just won't obey the Lord. To top it all off, Jezebel, the King of Israel's wife, is now looking for Elijah to execute him. Overcome by all this, Elijah goes to hide in a cave in mount Horeb, which it just so happens, is another name for mount Sinai, where Moses received the ten commandments. In our spiritual lives, we also have times like this, where we feel like we have tried *so hard* to be good people, but we keep messing it up, and those prophets of Baal just keep popping up as we find that we are focusing on ourselves and the world, instead of the neighbor and the Lord. And what's more, we probably enjoy it. It's fun to focus on what makes you feel good. It's satisfying to get more and more things. But that delight can Jezebel, and it can threaten to kill the part of us that wants to do what is right and wants to love the Lord and the neighbor above ourselves and the world.

So, there we are. Hiding in a cave. When life gets so overwhelming, we want to hide ourselves from it all. But when we escape from the world, we hide ourselves from the bad *and* the good. It's good that Elijah hid himself in the cave and kept himself safe, but it would be a problem if he had just stayed there. Taking shelter is important, but it is meant to be temporary. As Elijah is hiding in the cave, the Lord asks him, "What are you doing here?" The Lord is asking us that same question. We might not hear it at first, but if we listen it will come to us. It might be a passing remark in conversation, or some seemingly random thought that enters our head, or it might come more directly by means of some story from the Lord's Word. "What am I doing here?" The Lord in His providence is asking us to evaluate ourselves. What did we do that led us here? Why haven't we moved on? What is keeping us here? When we are overwhelmed and hiding from the world, the first thing the Lord wants is for us to pause and look at ourselves. Then, when we have taken the time to look, He tells us what to do next.

The Lord says, “Go out and stand on the mountain before Jehovah.” Now that we have figured out where we are, we have our goal. In the story, Mount Horeb, which is Mount Sinai, is the place where the Lord gave Moses the ten commandments. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it represents the Divine Law, or Divine Truth, the Word itself, and that is the key to how we move forward. We need to stand on what is true and look to the Lord, to what is good. By making that truth our foundation in pursuit of what is good, we can make our way out of our hiding place and back into the light. However, we see that Elijah doesn’t immediately go out onto the mountain when he hears this command. If we, like Elijah, want to go stand before the Lord on the mountain, there are three things we need to let pass before us, the wind, the earthquake, and the fire.

First, we see the wind. The story describes a wind so strong that it cuts through the mountains and bursts apart rocks. We can see this as a vision of our own fantasy of what the Lord’s presence ought to look like in our lives. The wind represents some truth which is so powerful that it tears into the mountain, which is the Lord’s Word, and bursts apart rocks which are other truths in our lives. This is a fantasy where one ruling truth destroys or casts aside other truths that get in its way. It rips up the truths of the Lord’s Word if they oppose it.

This plays out in our lives when we let what we think is right overrule everything else. We think that some person is doing something wrong, or saying something false and so how we treat them doesn’t matter because we have the truth, and they don’t. But when we do that, we destroy all of the other truths we have been given, like “Love your neighbor as yourself,” or “Whatever you do to the least of my children, you have done to me.” Sometimes we want that truth that blows through and leaves nothing in its wake to contest it. But the Lord is not in that

wind. If we want to stand on the mountain before the Lord, we need to leave behind the fantasy of that single overpowering truth that overrules anything else.

Our next challenge may be even harder to face. The earthquake that follows the wind represents changes of state. A change of state is what we want most when we are stuck in hiding. Maybe it is the state of the world and the church that has led us to be trapped in our cave, or maybe it is our own spiritual state, where we can see our own selfish actions and evil desires. If we see evil around us in the world, in our church, in our community, or in ourselves, surely the Lord's presence is in changing that, right? But the Lord was not in the earthquake. The Lord does not just tear apart the ground to change things. The Lord does not see evil in the world and then force all the people doing evil to do good instead, that is not how He works. He doesn't work like that in our spiritual lives either. When we see evil desires in us cropping up, the Lord does not just come by and rip them all up. He provides us the power to choose whether we embrace or reject them, and we need to be the ones to make that choice. There is no earthquake to uproot them for us.

Standing before us is our final preconception that is keeping us from approaching the Lord. The burning fire that we next see is a tricky thing to overcome. That fire that we see is punishment. At first it might seem easy to ignore that fire, because we know the Lord is not about punishment. However, that punishment is punishment for evil desires. It is retributive justice; it is judgement for those who commit evils. We want the Lord to uphold what we think is right. Even the disciples felt this way. We see this in Luke 9, as they are travelling with the Lord they go on ahead to ask for shelter in a Samaritan village, and we read "They did not receive Him, because His face was set for the journey to Jerusalem. And when His disciples James and John saw this, they said, "Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and

consume them, just as Elijah did?” But He turned and rebuked them, and said, ‘You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives but to save them.’” We can be just like James and John here. We want good people to be rewarded for the good they do and for bad people to bear the consequences of their evil actions. We know that in the end this will happen, and we want that justice to be enacted now! But the Lord is not in the fire. The Lord is leading each of us on our own path so that everyone might have the opportunity to choose to follow Him, and to so choose whether or not we find a place in heaven. We can have faith that the Lord is just and does not punish goodness or encourage people to do harm to others. But searching for that is not how we approach the Lord. We do not find truth by looking for condemnation.

If we can move past these fantasies, if we can let go of our false ideas about how the Lord should appear in our lives, then we finally are able to hear a still small voice. At last, we can hear the Lord speaking to us, and we can step out onto the mountain before Him. We see this still small voice in clear, pure truths from the Word. Love your neighbor as yourself. Remember the sabbath day. You shall forgive your brother not seven times, but seventy times seven. What you have done to the least of My brothers you have done to Me. There are so many clear truths in the Word we can hear when we take the time to listen for them. Like the sound of trickling water that we follow to a clear brook. The Lord gives us these simple, gentle, pure truths and we follow them forward. We need not get bogged down in dense theology right now, we just need to keep following these still small truths. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. You shall not steal. These give us a path forward.

And then, in light of these truths, we can evaluate ourselves again. “What are you doing here?” I’m here because I feel the temptation to mistreat my neighbor. I am here because I see

the delight in myself when I covet or take what's not mine and I want to reject it. When we examine ourselves now, that still small voice tells us what to do next. In the story, the Lord tells Elijah to go anoint new kings and to find his successor, Elisha. Those clear truths highlight what needs to be done. "Today I need to not lose my temper while driving. Today I need to be patient when someone asks me a stupid question. Today I need to be polite to everyone at the office even at 7am before I have had my coffee. Let the truth reflect what we need to do. We shouldn't be looking for a raging wind, or an earthquake, or a fire. We shouldn't seek some dramatic external change to spur our own internal change. We start by examining ourselves, and then we let the truth shine its light to show us where we need to change.

Our lives can be hard. It is all too easy to get caught up in the chaos of our daily routines and domestic stresses, and when that happens, we often find ourselves hiding away from the world. We don't want to face the important things in life because we feel that we have tried to no avail, or that we are fighting a losing battle and things will only get worse. When life gets like this it's alright to withdraw for a bit. Rest from the chaos. As you rest, however, be listening. At some point you will hear the question, what are you doing here? Answering this question is the first step to getting back on your feet. Identify what is going wrong in your life and look to the Lord for a solution. Do not fall for the temptation to look for dramatic change, be it some revolutionary truth, or some forced change of state, or justice for some perceived wrongdoing. Look for the solution in the simple truths from the Word. Find something clear and pure and use it to figure out what you might have been doing wrong. Reflect on what neighbor you have not forgiven, or who you need to apologize to for a rude comment you made. Find that small next step and use it to move forward. Come out of the cave and stand on the mountain before Jehovah. Amen

Lessons:

1 Kings 19:9-18

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