



*Like many in these days of spiritual drought, I began my Christian life with a vibrant sense of God's presence, but that presence waned as I succumbed to the present day evangelical view of the Bible as a guidebook providing us with life application insights. In recent years, I have rediscovered the living presence and voice of God. Through this study, I hope to help you reconnect with the Living Word.*

## ***Signs of the Times***

*In Ahab's time, Hiel of Bethel rebuilt Jericho. He laid its foundations at the cost of his firstborn son Abiram, and he set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son Segub, in accordance with the word of the LORD spoken by Joshua son of Nun.*

*(1 Kings 16:34, NIV)*

There is no book better qualified to guide our lives than the Bible. Even those who are not Christians can apply its many principles, truths, and teachings to their lives with great success. But the Bible is more than a guidebook. In its pages we encounter God himself.

## **Signs of Spiritual Drought**

Jesus chastised the religious leaders in his day for their spiritual sluggishness in understanding the times in which they lived. Looking at the colors in the sky enabled them to adjust to changes in the weather, but they were blind when it came to the signs of the times. (See Matthew 16:2-3) In the same way, they diligently studied the Scriptures, but were unable to hear God's speaking voice in his written word. This is one of the greatest signs of spiritual drought – *The written word, which is the Bible, takes the place of the Living Word, which is the speaking voice of God.* This error is commonly referred to as *bibliolatry*.

Bibliolatry results in the inability of God's people to hear God's voice. It as if God has taken a long vacation and said, "Until I return, just read the book. Everything you need to know is in the book." This, however, is not the kind of relationship our heavenly father wants to have with his children. He longs to walk with us and talk with us even as he did with Adam and Eve in the garden. He wants us to hear his voice as he addresses the times in which we live, and as he helps us with personal life issues, giving us daily bread to feed our souls.

### **Elijah and the Speaking Voice**

The Scriptures were for Elijah more than a set of principles and truths. It was God's living voice that came to him through the written word that filled him with passion and courage and led him out of his desert home into the crowded streets of Israel's capital, Samaria. The fire of God's presence burned in his heart as he passed by the newly built temple of the pagan God, Baal. As he walked into the king's palace and stood before the throne of wicked Ahab himself, the fire of God's living word for the times in which he lived was fanned into flame. Certainly others had read the same Scriptures as Elijah, and in some sense, they understood what they meant. But Elijah heard more than the words of Scripture, he heard the voice of God himself.

The preamble to Elijah's ministry is found in 1 Kings 16:29-34. Here we read about Ahab's ascension to the throne, his marriage to the pagan Sidonian princess, Jezebel, and his construction of the temple of Baal which his bride seduced him into building (more about Jezebel later). We also read about another building project. A man by the name of Hiel rebuilt the fallen walls of the ancient and wicked city of Jericho. It was a building project that cost Hiel the lives of his first born and youngest sons. This tragic loss was the fulfillment of a prophecy spoken centuries before by Joshua. (See Joshua 6:26) Jericho represented the temptations in the land of Canaan that constantly seduced the people of Israel away from God. To rebuild this idolatrous city was tantamount to returning to the sinful lifestyle from which God had delivered his people. Before they ever entered this Promised Land, Moses warned Israel about this very thing. (See Deuteronomy 11:16-17) If they were faithful to love God and his word (notice the relational emphasis on "loving God") the result would be the early and latter rains. But if God's people turned away from him, the result would be heavens like brass, and no rain or dew would fall on the land; drought was inevitable.

These were the words of Scripture that God used to speak to Elijah. More than recognizing the truth in these words, Elijah heard the voice of God speaking to him personally. He heard God directing him. His journey to King Ahab's court room was nothing less than obedience to the living word of God spoken directly to his heart. This is why he could announce to Ahab that he was standing not in the presence of an earthly king, but in the presence of the King of Kings; Elijah experienced God's presence and power in the palace court room that day. (See I Kings 17:1)

### God's Living Presence

Large numbers of Christians in our day are finding encouragement and help through the words of the Bible. They are learning that it is indeed a wonderful guidebook. At the same time, they sense that something is missing. That *something* is God's presence. It is a growing intimacy with our creator whose relationship to us is both father and brother. His Spirit lives in our hearts and cries *Abba, Father*. But we are like Saul's companions on the road to Damascus, we see the light, but don't hear the voice. How tragic this is! We are no longer taught so we no longer believe that we can hear God's voice speaking directly to us. We have left our first love. The joy of our salvation in those early days of faith is a faint memory. We revere the Bible, as we should, but we have traded our relationship with a Living God for a relationship with a book he authored. We are content to read about the experiences of others with God, but believe that in our present day such encounters with the Holy One have ceased. The results are devastating. The fruit withers and dies, because the branches no longer abide in the vine. Reading a book about vineyards and fine wines is a far cry from experiencing the richness of the soil, the ripeness of the grapes, and the joy of the wine itself.

It doesn't have to be that way. Like Elijah and so many others described in Scripture, we can learn to hear God's living voice in his written word. We don't have to settle for life principles. We can experience clear and personal direction for our lives. Yes, it takes time. In the gospels, our Lord Jesus Christ constantly urges us to develop ears that hear and eyes that see. He challenges us to confess the reality of our spiritually dull hearts and ask God to give us new ones.

I won't lie to you. This is a lifelong process. Don't expect a one-time experience that solves the problem of your spiritual lethargy. In fact, what you can expect is a series of trials and

tests which God graciously allows into your life to encourage you to turn to him. You may be saying, “Dan, I don’t want any more trials in my life. I’ve had more than my fair share, and they are killing me.” I understand that. But I want you to understand something as well. Understand that there is a huge difference between encountering trials with the Living God by our side instead of just a guide book in our hands. It is the difference between night and day, sorrow and joy, anxiety and peace, drought and rain.

God desires to bring the rain in your life more than you do. There is a whole new life waiting for you. So, open your Bible. Recognize it for what it is – a luscious garden filled with choice fruit where we walk and talk with God in the cool of the day.

## Think About It

I have been guilty of simply reading questions at the end of chapters without taking the time to really reflect on what I've read and what God is saying. This is typical of most of us in these days of spiritual drought. We gather the information, but never take time to process it, allowing God to do the real and lasting work of change and spiritual growth in our lives. Let me challenge you to set aside some time for solitude, reflection, and prayer as you ponder the reality of the Living Word.

1. Is it fair to say that much of the church today is engaged in the practice of bibliolatry? Why or why not?
2. Do you value the Bible and yet struggle with experiencing God's presence and hearing his voice in your life?
3. What are some things you can do to learn to hear God's Living Word in his written word?
4. As you continue to read through the story of Elijah (as well as other Bible reading in which you are engaged) ask God to speak directly to you through the Scriptures. Ask for specific advice for those important life issues and challenges you face.
5. Go back and reread the journal you began a few weeks ago. Are there prayer requests that have been answered? Are you finding direction for your life? If not, be patient, you will.