

The Hidden Way:  
Elijah and Authentic Worship  
By Emilie Griffin

Elijah is a stirring figure. His name, which means “Yahweh is my God,” says much about his character. Some of us, like Eugene Peterson, were influenced by Elijah from childhood and youth. Others discovered him later. Either way, he has something vital to give to us.

Elijah teaches us about the undivided heart. He is all about being God’s person, God’s servant, completely obedient to him. This single-minded character is the governing quality of Elijah’s life, and it should be ours as well.

In his book *The Jesus Way*, one thing that drives Peterson’s discussion of Elijah has to do with worship. Worship, it seems, is one of the ways we may lose focus in our service to God. Distracted by pomp and circumstances, we fall in with false expectations of worship. We think large congregations are more impressive than small ones. We think renowned preachers are more important than simple ones. We plan our worship to impress others and to impress God. Most of all, we fall into ways of manipulating God. We judge the worth of our worship by what we “get from God” rather than how we give ourselves to God. Yes, this is a problem today, but it was also a problem in Elijah’s time. We want to take God captive, to put him in service to our needs and wants, when in fact it should be the other way around. We should be completely surrendered to God, completely attentive to him. That is Elijah’s message. That is the Elijah way.

Elijah challenges us to think about worship in these ways. First, we should consider worship as the praise and proclamation of the gathered community. Second, we must think of worship as a kind of awe and adoration, focused on God. Third, we must include our worshipping attitude before God at all times, wherever we are, whatever we are doing. As Christians and believers, we are worshipping people, and we want to give ourselves to God, to surrender ourselves to the Almighty and live according to his word. All three of these ways we think about worship *are* worship, and they are undivided. The spiritual life flows from the depths of the heart, whether we are worshipping in community or praying in solitude, whether we are comfortably settled or on the run, living on the margins of life.

Elijah shows us this essential unity in our worshipping lives. Peterson writes: “Authentic worship means being present to the living God who penetrates the whole of human life.”<sup>1</sup> This is a parallel to what Jesus teaches from Deuteronomy: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>2</sup>

### **THE TEMPTATION OF “EXPERIENCE” MAY GET IN OUR WAY**

Almost everyone who worships or prays has had an experience of God. By this I mean a sense of exaltation in prayer, a sense of elation or intimacy, a warming of the heart, a sense of blessedness; and this experience has been a clue to the power, splendor, and inexhaustible beauty of God’s love. How, exactly, might such a good thing get in our way?

We need to remember that such an experience—whether we call it a hint, or a clue, or an intimation—is never within our grasp. It is not ours for the asking. It is a gift of grace, or as C. S. Lewis would say, a plain bounty, something never guaranteed, always elusive, bestowed by the hand of God, but not something we can summon up at will.

One of the stories that illustrate this was told by C. S. Lewis. He tells how, as a young man, he set himself up for experiments, exercises in prayer, in which he judged the validity of his prayer by the emotional jolt of the experience: “My reaction was... the most foolish I could have adopted. I set myself a standard. No clause of my prayer was to be allowed to pass muster unless it was accompanied by what I called ‘a realization,’ by which I meant a certain vividness of the imagination and the affections.”<sup>3</sup>

But this kind of emotion seeking is misguided. In Lewis’s case, it turned him against prayer and religion for some time. The issue was one of control. Lewis was the one attempting to control the “experience of God.”

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Jesus Way*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007, 110.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 10:27, NRSV.

<sup>3</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*.

In short, our yearning for “experience” is no guarantee of sensible consolation. The sense of God, which we sometimes have at worship and sometimes outside of it, is not ours to command. There is no way we can tap into and out of it on our schedule, at our convenience. (And even when we do have such experiences, we must not think that the experience is the thing itself.)

We must cling to God himself, not to the “experience” of God. We are guaranteed the love and sustaining power of God’s grace. Jesus has promised us that. But nowhere have we been promised that feelings or experiences—a sense of exaltation or a feeling of the mountaintop or the dark night of the soul—would predictably be ours in worship or in prayer. If there is one thing we can learn from the Elijah Way and the Jesus Way, it is this. We cannot package or control God. But we can depend on him, and we should depend on him, for everything.

That is part of what Elijah the Tishbite comes to teach us. He comes from the mountains in his hairy coat and with his unruly hair and his leather belt around his waist, to tell us by his life and example what it is to live entirely for God. It is rather like that text in the New Testament: “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything to the glory of God.”<sup>4</sup>

### **THE ELIJAH STORIES**

There are nine principal Elijah stories. Eugene Peterson helps us to see these stories all together, all of a piece—as part of a single pattern of living for God.

From start to finish, Elijah is subject to God, and listens to him. That is what makes him effective in sensing future events, as when he warns Ahab and Jezebel that there will be a long period of drought.<sup>5</sup> Ahab and Jezebel are worshipping Baal, who is a false God. Elijah tells them this won’t work, since Yahweh alone is the true and authentic God. Needless to say, Ahab and Jezebel are angered by his opposition.

Elijah receives a divine warning, and escapes to the Brook Cherith, where he is to be fed by the ravens.<sup>6</sup> This is a lovely parallel to the manna that fed the Israelites, a sign that God provides for his faithful ones, even in the worst circumstances.

But then the brook goes dry! Again, Elijah is guided by God. He takes refuge with the widow and her son, who hardly have enough for themselves. Again, God provides for all of them in a miraculous way. More than that, Elijah also raises the widow’s son from the dead.

In 1 Kings 18:1–46 is the account we all remember, Elijah building an altar to Yahweh and asking him to set the sacrifice alight, while 450 priests of Baal troop up and down the mountain but fail to get the attention of a living, active deity. They are praying for fire with no result, but Elijah’s faithful worship is rewarded. The fire falls and consumes his sacrifice.

Then follows the story in 1 Kings 19:1–7. Elijah had called for the death of the priests of Baal. Retaliating, Jezebel orders the death of Elijah. Elijah flees to Beersheba in Judah, continues into the wilderness, and sits down under a broom tree. He is fed by angels. The second one tells him to eat and drink because he has a long journey ahead of him. Have you noticed that Elijah is a man of the wilderness, always on the run, making a back-roads journey? He is a man on the margins, but always willing to move into the center of things when the time is right.

So Elijah travels for forty days and nights to Mount Horeb and takes shelter in a cave. Elijah hears the “still, small voice.” (In the NRSV, this is translated as “a sound of sheer silence.”) Also, Elijah receives direct guidance from God and returns to anoint Elisha as his disciple and successor.<sup>7</sup>

As all the Elijah stories unfold, they show us Elijah’s undivided allegiance to Yahweh, until the moment when he passes his mantle to Elisha and is taken to his God by a chariot of fire.

### **TRANSFIGURATION: LEARNING FROM THE VISION**

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<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:31, NRSV.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Kings 17:1.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Kings 17:1–7.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Kings 19:8–21.

Why is it that when Jesus prays in the incident we call the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:2; Mark 9:2), the disciples see him conversing with Moses and Elijah? Eugene Peterson illuminates this for us.

Moses is the one to whom the Almighty first disclosed his name: Yahweh. Elijah is the one who—four hundred years later—defends and protects the Yahwist tradition, the living God of Israel, who hears and responds. Elijah is Yahweh’s person, his chosen prophet. Jesus is the fulfillment of their prophetic tradition.

But how do Peter and the others respond? “Why don’t we put a tent right here? Why don’t we plan a tabernacle for each one of these major prophets? Where will we situate the tabernacles so we can revisit them and recapture this amazing experience?”

As so often happens in the Gospel stories, the disciples understand only in part. Their understanding falls short. Think of Paul’s words to the Athenians: “The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.”<sup>8</sup>

No. Worship is not to be caught and captured in temples made by human hands. Worship is not merely the experience in which we gather in community. It is not only a time of worshipping sacrifice. In fact, worship is the interior and intimate character of our awestruck relationship with the Almighty, which sometimes makes itself known in secret, and sometimes in an overflow of praise, proclamation, and dance and song.

### **THE HIDDEN WAY OF THE SOUL**

There are centuries and huge cultural differences between Elijah and us. There are gaps between his story and our stories. But in some ways, the essentials of the spiritual life are the same.

How do we keep things simple, as Elijah does? How do we center our lives on God without relying on exaggerated hopes and false promises of ecstasy? What do we learn from Elijah about the hidden way of the soul?

Unlike Elijah, most of us don’t actually get stranded in caves. But for our relationship with God to grow, we need such desert places. For us to find solitude, we have to develop opportunities for solitude. A wise teacher of prayer, Henri Nouwen, tells us: “We are responsible for our own solitude. Precisely because our secular milieu offers us so few spiritual disciplines, we have to develop our own.”<sup>9</sup>

Carlo Carretto, a writer and teacher who actually spent time in the deserts of North Africa, gave us this counsel: “If you cannot go into the desert, you must nonetheless ‘make some desert’ in your life. Every now and then leaving... and looking for solitude to restore, in prolonged silence and prayer, the stuff of your soul.”<sup>10</sup>

We have to “make some desert” in our lives. Or maybe we need to find the desert spaces that already exist in our lives: difficult situations and relationships we have failed to embrace or accept, with God’s help. Maybe we find a desert space in the blank page of a journal, on a day that is spiritually dry and thirsty, when we don’t know what to say to God or how to be fully attentive to him. Yet, when we are willing to listen, to hear the still, small voice, we are following Elijah’s way.

### **CARMEL: FOLLOWERS OF THE ELIJAH AND JESUS WAY**

Some later followers of Elijah’s way called themselves Carmelites. What is striking about this to me is that almost every religious order is named for its founder or its source of inspiration: the Jesuits are the Society of Jesus; the Dominicans and Franciscans are named for their founders, St. Dominic and St. Francis; the Benedictines model their lives on the Rule of St. Benedict. The Carmelites, inspired by Elijah, have chosen the name of a mountain to convey that inspiration. Among themselves the members refer to themselves as Carmel. The name of a mountain has become the name for a community and a spiritual state of being: Carmel, the mountain where Elijah offered his sacrifice to the living God.

Throughout the centuries, many Carmelites have taught us a single-minded, single-hearted way of following God. They, too, were following the Jesus Way.

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<sup>8</sup> Acts 17: 24, 25, NRSV.

<sup>9</sup> Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart: Desert Spirituality and Contemporary Ministry*. New York: HarperCollins, 1991, 30.

<sup>10</sup> Carlo Carretto, *Letters from the Desert*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002, 67, 68.

Consider Teresa of Avila: Her great maxim, “God alone is enough,” reminds us of what Jesus says. “Seek first the kingdom of God, and all these things will be added...”<sup>11</sup>

Her younger colleague, John of the Cross, is also a spiritual giant. Peterson notices the resemblance between the “still, small voice” that Elijah heard and what John of the Cross calls “silent music.” “*Musica Callada*,” silent music, is music “hushed and still.” These are poetic ways of suggesting that we must be fully attentive and quiet to hear the voice of God.

Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection is another Carmelite who inspires us. A cook and a sandal-maker, Brother Lawrence shows us how to cling to the Lord in the middle of everyday tensions and anxieties.

Thérèse of Lisieux is known for simplicity; “The Little Way” is stitched together from small acts of charity and kindness. She reminds us of Psalm 131: “My heart has no lofty ambitions, my eyes are not raised too high.”

Edith Stein, closer in time, is a twentieth-century Carmelite. Though she was a Roman Catholic contemplative nun, she was put to death by the Nazis as a Jew. Her spiritual and philosophical writings continue to inspire us in the way of Elijah.

The influence of Elijah is clear among those who are practicing the Carmelite tradition today. It isn’t just that they like country places, mountain retreats, and such. They want simplicity of life. They want to depend on God. Like Teresa of Avila, they want to take off their sandals and walk barefoot—it’s a metaphor for a way of living without guile. And we, too, can be followers of Elijah the Tishbite, our own sort of Carmelites, not putting on airs, but clinging to God anonymously, avoiding false teachings and promises.

## HOW SHOULD WE WORSHIP?

I pondered this question recently. And soon a kind of answer came back to me: “Authenticity.”

What does it mean to be authentically at worship? During a recent Sunday service in my own Catholic parish church, I tried to pin this down. In my parish church, the congregation isn’t very large. And the choir is small. They’re well rehearsed, very sincere. They sing out. Sometimes they even boom out. But I don’t suspect they’ll be invited to sing in Rome anytime soon.

The song leader, who is named David Brook, has a fine voice and a warm personality. He brings the congregation together in song even when we don’t know the words.

Sometimes there aren’t enough hymnals to go around. Or by the time we find the page, we’re already on verse three. Sometimes the words of the responsorial psalm, the ones printed in the songbook, don’t exactly match the ones the song leader is singing. We just have to follow along.

It’s a Catholic church, so everyone knows the spoken responses by heart. The people chime in, just when they should, right on cue. Everyone knows when to stand up, when to kneel, when to sit down. There are also lovely stretches of silence for thanksgiving and gratitude.

Well rehearsed or not, *this* is authentic worship, worship that flows from the heart.

The formal, familiar liturgy becomes a frame, a mold into which we pour the intentions of our hearts. Even when babies start to cry, they can’t fully disturb our reverence.

Everyone is thinking, “Why doesn’t that woman take her baby outside so the rest of us can concentrate?” Then we remember: the woman also wants to be inside and part of the congregation. It’s her worship time also.

Who is it that knows when worship is authentic and true? Only God fully knows. Authenticity is judged by the Almighty. There are no external measures for authentic worship. We can make educated guesses, but God is the only one who knows the desire of our hearts.

Jesus has something to teach us about this authentic worship. When you pray, don’t be like the hypocrites. When you fast, don’t fast “for show.” Don’t pray for show. Don’t stand on the street corners and try to get attention for your prayer. Don’t imitate the Pharisee who thought he was so good at praying. Be more like the tax collector who felt unworthy in God’s sight. Jesus also reminds us to pray in secret so that God, who sees in secret, may reward us openly.

Where worship is concerned, all these teachings apply. They make sense.

Even when we’re gathered with dozens of fellow believers or with hundreds of fellow believers

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<sup>11</sup>. Matthew 6:33.

praying and worshipping together, our prayer should follow a hidden way. The Elijah Way. The Jesus Way.

This deep inward formation makes itself known outwardly—in praise, in proclamation, in fellowship and celebration.

When Jesus teaches us about the hidden way, he's not telling us to avoid the life of the community. He wants us to worship and pray authentically—together or one by one. He wants us to gather around, to celebrate, and to find God's presence in the world of everyday. And Jesus wants us to see God's presence in our neighbors.

As C. S. Lewis said, "Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses."<sup>12</sup>

Hiddenness. Neighborliness. Friendship. Community. Authenticity. These qualities are not separate, but all of a piece. They are one. They are the Jesus Way. When we embrace them, our lives will speak. We will know, with that great follower of Elijah, Teresa of Avila, that God alone is enough.

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<sup>12</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory: And Other Addresses*, New York: HarperCollins, 1980, 49.