

Felix Mendelssohn

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by John VanSloten



[Anjanette's Piano Piece]... That was a piece called, "Song without Words".. written by a man named **Felix Mendelssohn**. Today we're going to talk a bit about how his faith in God inspired his both his life and compositions.

Mendelssohn was born into a Jewish family in 1809 in Hamburg, Germany. Because of the ethnic prejudices of that time, his father had each of his children baptized as Christians. Even though his conversion was coerced, Felix took to his faith with a genuine passion and sincere commitment. Most of those who knew him well would attest to this fact.



When he was a young prodigy, he often penned prayerful exclamations onto his manuscripts, phrases like, "**Lass es gelingen, Gott!**"⁷ (Let it succeed God!) or "**Hilf du mit**" (Help along). (And that will be the extent of my German this sermon!) Obviously he went about his work with a keen

awareness of his dependence on the inspiration of God. And he most often saw the biblical text as the best source of material for his works... for his works and his life. A friend who knew him well once wrote, "**He felt that all faith must be based on Holy Writ.**"⁸ Mendelssohn in Elise Polko, *Reminiscences of Felix Mendelssohn* ... If someone were to alter the biblical text in one of his compositions, he would change it back! "**I have time after time had to restore the precise text of the Bible. It is best in the end.**"

Mendelssohn in W.F. Alexander, *Selected Letters of Mendelssohn*

So, divine inspiration was huge to Mendelssohn, but he also knew that he had to work hard to achieve his goals. "**I know perfectly well that no musician**

can make his thoughts or his talents different to what Heaven has made them; but I also know that if Heaven had given him good ones, he must also be able to develop them properly.” Mendelssohn in Ferdinand Hiller, Mendelssohn

Felix had both... he had huge ‘God given’ talent and he had a strong work ethic and passion to steward that talent... and as a result he was a huge success in life... a composer, a pianist, a conductor, founder of the Leipzig Conservatory of Music... He had it all. And unlike most composers, he knew it. Because he was a positive upbeat person, not the depressive that many of his ilk can often be, he was satisfied for most of his life. And failure, for the most part, was not part of his repertoire.

PAUSE... [EXCURSUS TONE]... Nice to have that kind of a life eh? Enjoy it while you live it and experience success after success after success. Then to produce works so magnificent that they go on for hundreds of years beyond you. Oh to make that kind of mark. [NORMAL TONE]... Now life was not perfect for this man, his Father died young, as did his sister, as did he himself at 38. But even in his death, he remained positive and faithful, “A great chapter is now ended, and neither the title nor even the first word of the next is yet written. But God will make it all right one day; this suits the beginning and the end of all chapters.” Mendelssohn in Kauffman, Mendelssohn, a Second Elijah

Today we’re going to focus on one of M’s more famous compositions, maybe the pinnacle of his works, an oratorio (define term), created during the last year of his life, called Elijah. Elijah, the person, was an OT biblical prophet, one who heard and spoke the words of God. Elijah was very much **unlike** Mendelssohn, in that he had both ups and downs in his career. (Probably a little bit closer to the reality of our lives!) Mendelssohn wrote of his protagonist in this way, “I imagined Elijah as a real prophet through and through, of the kind we could really do with today; Strong, zealous and yes, even bad tempered, angry and brooding – in contrast to the riff raff, whether at court or of the people, and indeed at odds with almost the whole world – and yet borne aloft as if on

angel's wings." Mendelssohn in a letter to his friend Schubring

When M's words there, it made me think that we could use that same Elijah today. Someone who can bring us a word from God... Who can speak a prophetic truth into our messed up reality... Say something truly profound. Even if he were bad tempered or angry... It sure would beat all the politically spun mis- truth, half truth, untruth we constantly have to listen to. Oh to hear a word from God ... One that would bring perspective to our pains... Clarity to our confusion and healing to our wounds. Oh to hear a word from God, that when it enters our ears and then touches our souls, we might filled with the excited sense that it was "borne aloft as if on angel's wings!"

This week, as I listened to the Elijah oratorio, I heard a word like that... I heard it in a piece found in the middle of the composition... a piece entitled, "Behold God the Lord passed by." We're going to play it for you in a few minutes, but before we do that, let me tell you the story that leads up to it.

Elijah the prophet lived in a time of severe drought.... severe spiritual drought. The people of his day, right up to the king, King Ahab and queen, Queen Jezebel (Makes me want to break out into a Frankie Lane song), were all living life as though God did not even exist. They ignored him, turned their backs toward him instead of their faces. Instead of focussing on the real God, they focussed on idols... Not American or Canadian Idols, but ancient middle eastern pagan idols... Baal... And Asherah ... Both were fertility type gods, Baal was the god of rain and thunder, Asherah the goddess of the sea. Both were seen a providers of essential elements for human survival, both were, in a sense, 'economic gods'. So there was a spiritual drought, people trusted the gods of the natural economy instead of the real true God.

God's reaction, when people get far away from him, is to send a messenger. Enter Elijah. And his first message was to the king. "Hey Ahab... You're misleading the people... God is going to send a drought on the land."

PAUSE... Needless to say, Elijah did not endear himself to the king. He had to go into hiding. But then years later he returns... He returns to bring a message to King Ahab, that rain will soon be coming... but before that's going to happen he challenges the king by inviting him into a contest.

[TELL MOUNT CARMEL STORY - IMAGE? - God's word as FIRE!]... God proved who he was... the real God stood up and spoke a fiery word... and all



the people fell on their faces and cried, "The Lord is God... the Lord is God!" And then all the false prophets were killed.

Then God went on to speak another miraculous word. **[RAIN STORY - God's word in the tempest]** God again showed his face...he spoke through a powerful storm... and the people were drenched by the reality of it all.

Meanwhile, back at the royal palace, Queen Jezebel heard that all of her prophets had died, and she cursed the name of Elijah and vowed to kill him.



Elijah fled into hiding again. And this time of exile ended up being a very tough one for him. Yes, he had these huge God successes in his life... God did come through big time! But now he's fallen into the ditch of life. He ends up in some **cave** in the southern part of the country and there bemoans his life, his calling and even his very existence. I imagine he was depressed... Tired... And totally demotivated. The tone of his life was more like, **"What's the use?"** **"Here I've obeyed you and done all the right things... and yet it seems I'm**

the only prophet that's left. Jezebel has killed all the rest of them and now she's trying to kill me too!" He just wanted to give up.

PAUSE... Ever been there? Not as a prophet... but as a person living life before God. Been in that place where you're so spiritually dry that you'd rather just blow away in the breeze... like dust in the wind? **PAUSE...** Maybe you're "what's the use" place is a relational one... you've tried to do your best... but this relationship is going to break and you just don't have the gas to keep it going any more. **PAUSE...** Or maybe your despondency is more just a matter of mental fatigue. "God I am so tired I just cannot keep going at this pace... In fact it feels like I'm about to crash... and it scares the life out of me." **PAUSE...** Maybe you're 'What's the use place' lies right smack dab in the middle of a life that never really got anywhere... Sure there were some small successes, but certainly not of Mendelssohnian proportion. What difference is my life really making anyway? **PAUSE...** Maybe you're still tracking with the dissolution over the fact that humanity is engaged in yet another, blood letting, life taking, grief giving war... "WHAT'S THE USE?"

Well its in times like that we need to hear a word from God... Not the normal riff raff we get from our riff raff filled world... But a true word from God... One that brings hope and a future...

Elijah got that word ... When Mendelssohn read of it, he was so inspired he puts it to music... His favourite piece of the entire oratorio... **PAUSE...** There's a quote from a book I want to read to you... it describes what that scene of Mendelssohn's inspiration looked like... **[READ P 75 - SPIRITUAL LIVES]** Listen to this one piece as it paints a picture of God's word to his prophet... Elijah has been asked to step out of his cave and stand on the face of the mountain before God... he is told that God is going to pass by and show himself to him... And then this happens... **[SLIDESHOW- SONG]**

Elijah reacts by covering his face with his cloak and stands shocked and

awed at the entrance to his cave... **PAUSE...** Mendelssohn reacts by covering his face in reverence as well, moved and inspired at the beauty and majesty of the story, moved to put it to music... **PAUSE...** And we, listening to the story retold, can now taste of the power, majesty and humility of God as we've heard it here.

God voice was not in the earthquake or in the tempest or in the fire... God spoke in a 'still small voice'... A whisper... The voice of a child... in gentleness And in the speaking God's word brought peace. Peace to Elijah's heart... God encouraged him, reinstated his calling, told him there were 7000 supporters of



his cause still out there. And Elijah went out and finished his calling, did his job. Peace to Mendelssohn's heart, enough for him to trust God and be optimistic in life and love his God even in death... and M finished well his prophetic call. And Peace to you... in whatever you're facing right now... Whatever it is, hear this **word from God** ... his still small

loving voice.... The whisper of a humble God... The voice of a child. ... so that you can finish well the prophetic call that God has given you.

You can mysteriously hear that voice right now... Through the person of Jesus Christ... And then one day fully, as you see the face of God. **"Then the righteous shall shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen."** Matthew 13:43 (from Elijah Oratorio)