

## Listening to God

Most of you have heard the story about how God got my attention in a sermon where I heard for the first time that I was a sinner. I left church that day challenging God that if that was really true about me that he would have to show me.

At the time I was a part-time social worker for Reading Hospital doing discharge planning. I got off work at 1:30 everyday but would leave over lunch and move the kids from a pre-school to home daycare. When I would finish work they would be sleeping at the sitters so I would go to the YMCA to swim.

I was covering for the hospice social worker one day shortly after I prayed that prayer for God to show me my sin. A man came in wanting to see someone just as I was getting ready to leave to transport the kids. He had a son on hospice who was literally dying that day. I called Bing to see if he could get the kids and I stayed to meet with this man. This would have been about 1989, we didn't know then what we do now about AIDS. He had eaten off of his son's fork, he had used his shaver, he was not only losing a son but was afraid he also had contracted the disease.

I met with him and left work to go swim. Swimming gives a person time to think and I was thinking, "I changed my whole schedule for that guy and he didn't even thank me." The sin of that thought hit me before the thought was finished. What a selfish thing to think of a man who had far bigger worries than my schedule.

Interestingly, the sin of my selfishness didn't surprise me. The fact that God had clearly answered my prayer rocked my world! He was there, and he had not only heard me but had answered in a way that I understood loud and clear that it was Him speaking to me – not audibly but clearly! I felt like Adam when he tried to hide from God. God had

spoken and I had heard HIM! It was a scary thing. I was now sure He existed and I had some work to do.

For me that was the first step. I had such pride that I hadn't even a thought about sin or judgment. It took about ten years for me to actually commit my life to Christ, which for the purposes of this class we're considering the bottom rung of the ladder. Hearing God, actively listening to Him is another step that we have to take if we're to follow and serve the Lord. Surely if God can make an unbeliever hear Him on her sin, then He can clearly speak to His children, those who have His Holy Spirit in them.

Hear, listen, heed, these are words that we find repeatedly given to us with regard to the words, the voice, and especially to the instruction in God's word. We can gain both guidance and support from God when we are willing, not just to hear but to listen and heed what he says.

Perhaps we need to look at why God wants to communicate with us. Psalm 25: 8-15 is one place we can look.

*Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in the way. He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way. All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his testimonies. For your name's sake, O LORD, pardon my guilt, for it is great. Who is the man who fears the LORD? Him will he instruct in the way that he should choose. His soul shall abide in well-being, and his offspring shall inherit the land. The friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him, and he makes known to them his covenant. My eyes are ever toward the LORD, for he will pluck my feet out of the net.*

So, when we're listening the Lord will instruct, lead, teach, and make known to us what He has for us. Look at the verses closely and you even see who it is that will receive this instruction. Sinners in verse 8, the humble in verse 9, those who keep the demands of His covenant in verse 10, the one who fears the Lord in verse 14. He even tells us why He makes these efforts on our behalf. In verse 10 he says it's because of the Lord's steadfast love and faithfulness – because God loves us He will communicate with us to achieve HIS purposes in our lives. In verse 11 David, who wrote the Psalm, says that it's also for the sake of God's name that he does this for us.

If you look one more time you see what it is He will communicate to us. Verse 8 - His ways, verse 9 - what's right, verse 11 - forgiveness. According to verse 12 God instructs us in the way that is right *for us*. God makes it personal, He speaks to me about me and to you about you! He makes His covenant known to us verse 14 says.

Verse 14 also says that the Lord, "*confides in those who fear Him.*" To fear Him is to know Him, to be one of His children, born again. He is going to teach you and instruct you and tell you confidential things. To confide in us means He trusts us with what He gives us. Shouldn't that make us want to sit up and pay attention to whatever He might say to us?

I wish we had time to look closely at how God spoke to people in the Bible we'd find several different methods. Early on He clearly spoke to Moses and to Abraham by a direct revelation. His Spirit spoke to their spirits and they had no doubt that it was God communicating with them. It seems for these men God spoke in an audible voice as He did for Saul on the road to Damascus. .

The Bible says that God spoke to people through dreams or visions – like Daniel. Now, the Bible doesn't say that we should seek the mind of God in our dreams. He CAN speak to us anyway He'd like but we aren't specifically told to look for dreams. I imagine the Pastor who dreams that no one shows up to church so he just stays home while a whole congregation sits in the sanctuary wondering where he is!

God has spoken through angels and prophets and circumstances like He did with Gideon and the fleeces, making it first wet and then the next time, dry. It gave Gideon the assurance he needed to lead Israel.

And, of course He's spoken through His written Word, even giving Moses the Ten Commandments that he could then teach to Israel.

So, does God still speak in all of those ways today? You know I just can't put God in a box. The truth is that He can speak to any one of us any way He chooses to. Nothing is impossible. I *do* think that there are ways that he uses that are far more prevalent.

The primary method He uses is His Word, the Bible. But He also uses the Holy Spirit – who we know has the job of teaching us and reminding us of everything that God teaches us. He is to be our Counselor, it's His job to communicate with us. I also think that God can use other people and He uses circumstances to speak to us.

A couple of years ago when I was sure that God was calling me out of the teaching role in BSF I was all confused about why He would do that. It seemed like such a great place to be. I kept praying, "What Lord, where to, what I am to do?" A Sunday school class in my church was beginning to teach Jeremiah and the first week as it was being taught the teacher included Jeremiah 1:7 and it stood out to me. I realized God was

giving me some indication – was He confiding in me (?) that I would continue to teach but in a different place. The verse says, “for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak.” I knew it was for me. That was enough for me. God had a plan.

Every time we sit down to hear a sermon or to read God’s Word in our own devotional time or study in a Bible Study we need to ask God to show us what He has for us that day. Sometimes He may address a specific “need to know” like He did for me or He may give us a principle that addresses some issue in our lives.

Another way that God speaks to us today is through His Holy Spirit. In fact, if we’re walking with the Lord, surrendered to His power, obeying His commands, then we can expect the Holy Spirit to lead and guide us as a regular part of our day to day lives. When we live for Christ, fearing Him and obeying His commands, the Holy Spirit can be expected to actively guide us.

This kind of speaking that God does through His Word and the Holy Spirit is not often audible. He impresses His will onto our Spirits or minds and we hear Him in our inner being. Though we don’t audibly hear Him, usually we know He’s spoken – especially if we’re in His Word and closely walking with Him every day. (I Dared to Call Him Father)

Another way God speaks to us is through other people – almost always other believers. God can really use the brother or sister in Christ who’s willing to admonish or encourage us. He can often use the one we go to for godly counsel – but we have to choose carefully who that is. I think we make a mistake when we don’t go to our spouses

- who probably know us better than anyone else. We should go to those who pray for us the most often.

Once, when I was making a big decision and someone didn't really like my decision – that I assured them had been confirmed by God, they suggested that I was listening to Satan and not God. Well, Bing and I went to some Christian friends because – quite frankly – that possibility had never even occurred to me! God used that couple to confirm for us what we already had heard clearly from God. They didn't give us anything we didn't already know but in the heat of a decision like that we sometimes don't think as clearly as someone completely uninvolved will. (Satan will not suggest anything that confirms or supports scripture).

The last way that God consistently speaks to us is through circumstances that He brings into our lives. When I look back at my own salvation I can see that God had been trying to get my attention for quite awhile. I was not listening. So, a car ran over my left foot and I was stuck in chair in my own house without anyone during the day for about six weeks. I had visitors but pretty much it was God and me. One Christian friend was bringing me books by Chuck Swindoll. I didn't pay a lot of attention but that was certainly a time when He made me look to Him. Five years later I still wasn't saved and our son was on the receiving end of a fork to the left eye that left him blind for several years. He's had corrective surgery that has – for the most part – resolved the problem. And, then, God worked through my husband to get us to homeschool our kids. THAT will make you rely on the Lord after 5 and 6 years in the public school!

God used all of those circumstances to bring me to saving faith and then – during the homeschool years He gave me the time and the solitude to study His word and lead us to a good, Bible preaching, church.

I don't know where God has you right now but you need to look at your circumstances as orchestrated by God. What is He showing you in His word? If you see the study questions as a waste of time you may be denying an opportunity to hear from God. What is He teaching you through the Holy Spirit or other people? Where is He calling you? What does He want you to do?

If you are in a time of loneliness – is it because God is trying to say, “Hey, listen to me. I'm what you need. I can fulfill your desires”? Get into His Word, listen to it taught on Sunday mornings, seek godly counsel. Ask Him and He will tell you what He wants you to know about His plan for you.

Let me just say again that I am not saying that God does not speak through dreams, visions, or angels. He can even speak to you audibly if He chooses to. He's God, He will do what He will do. I am just saying that primarily, when we hear Christian testimonies today God has spoken through His Word, the Holy Spirit, other people, or their circumstances.

One of the important things about listening to God is to know that He will never tell us anything that isn't important or worth remembering. He doesn't preface His remarks with anything, He's always to the point. He doesn't get involved in idle chatter. When He has something to say to you or to me, He will just say it. It would seem that His purposes in speaking to us fall into three categories.

First he wants us to understand the Truth. He doesn't want to leave any confusion. If we speak English He isn't going to speak to us in Russian so that we have to look for an interpreter. If we know He's speaking but we're not getting what He says it's because there's something in our lives hindering the message. I was sure of what God had told me but I allowed someone else's doubt to cause me to doubt. God clarified it through another person and I was sure again. The problem was my doubt not God's clarity.

Look at 1 Corinthians 2:9-10. But, as it is written, "*What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him*" When we stop here we think we can't know what God has for us but look at verse 10. -- *these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. (1Co 2:9-10)*

We can know what God is saying, even the deepest of truths, and what He has in store for us because He has left us with His Holy Spirit. Jesus said in John 14:26, "**But the helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.**"

God has not left us unable to understand but has given us all we need to comprehend what He tells us.

It may go without saying but I think we need to remember that the unbeliever does not have the privilege of this understanding. As it was with me, God can and does clearly speak to unbelievers at His will but they do not have the Holy Spirit so they don't have the advantage. God let me know I was a sinner and I went to work to try to balance the scales. I didn't understand the full message until the Holy Spirit showed me the Truth.

God's second purpose in communicating with us is to conform us to the Truth, understanding it is not enough. How do I know? Romans 8:29 clearly tells us that it is God's purpose for us to be conformed to the image of His Son. When He speaks to us, the understanding that He wants us to gain will help to conform us to the Truth. So, we have to listen to understand and to understand in order to be conformed. James said that if anyone is a hearer of the Word but not a doer he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was (James 1:23-24). We're not just to listen but to obey, not just to glance at it and forget it. We're either going to resist God's truth or be shaped or conformed by it because we do what it says.

God's third purpose in speaking to us is that we might communicate with others. What God gives us isn't for us to keep to ourselves. Money, spiritual gifts, wisdom, insight, and truth are all to be shared with others. In the Great Commission and to the witnesses of His ascension Jesus said that they were to go and tell, to be His witnesses. They were to give away all that they had received. In 2 Corinthians 5:20 Paul said that we're to be ambassadors for Christ.

I think that we often hear this kind of teaching and relate it only to sharing the gospel – and we do need to share the gospel. But what about the Father whose son comes to him and says, “Dad, do we tithe?” And the Father responds that they can't afford to tithe, they don't have enough money to tithe. What has that father just taught that son? We can't trust God to provide. We can't trust God to keep His promises.

When we take the kids to church and guide them in the ways of the Lord and then go to the movies and have them lie about their age to the cashier, what are we communicating to that child?

If we go out to dinner with friends and we're impatient or unkind with a waitress – what are we communicating about the work that God has done in us?

You see my point that we communicate God's truths in the way we live as well as the words we use to share the gospel. If we are hearing from God it will be evident in our behavior. What do your and my actions communicate to others that God has told us?

Are we being conformed by the understanding He's giving us, are we even listening to Him when He speaks?

It seems that there are two kinds of listeners to God. The passive and the active. The passive rarely hear God. They come to church and to Bible Study so everyone will know that they're spiritual. They aren't really expecting to hear from God and they don't engage in the service. They aren't involved in the hearing process. The active listener gets to the service, prepares to hear from God expecting that He will say something through the sermon or the study. They have their Bible out and a pen in the other hand to write down whatever God reveals to them. They are looking for teaching to apply to their lives.

*James said in 1:25, "But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing."*

In a perfect Christian world every Christian would walk in the Spirit, alert and attentive to God's communication with us. He would speak and we would respond

immediately and obediently every time. But, we know this is not a perfect world nor are we perfect beings. So, sometimes we're *not* walking closely with God, worldly matters like business and family get in between us and God and he has to do something to get our attention. He has several ways that he does this and sometimes we're so dull about it that we force Him to use two or three or five of them before we actually go, "OH, that's You God. Okay, I'm listening now!"

So, what does God use to get our attention in those times when we're not paying attention to His efforts to speak to us? Sometimes He just stirs our spirit, gives us a restlessness that feels awful and we know something is out of whack spiritually.

This is a simple thing He does as we go about our daily lives. Often we can't really identify it, we know something is wrong, there's an uneasiness in our hearts. For most of us this drives us to prayer, "What Lord? What is it that you want me to see or know?" God has used this with me when I'm thinking about something that He doesn't want me to do. The minute I decide not to do it, I have peace again. Other people say they have this uneasiness for weeks before God showed them that He was going to move them to a new place.

Another thing God will use to get our attention is a word from another person. This is why admonishing and speaking to one another in love is so important. When the Holy Spirit is nudging you to speak to someone about something then you have to assume that God is about to use you as a part of His plan for that person. When David sinned against God with Bathsheba and Uriah the Lord gave Nathan insight and sent him to tell David what he desperately needed to hear.

This is why we can't let pride or our egos get in the way of what a brother or sister has to say to us. We have to have open hearts so we hear God when He speaks through others. In the book of Proverbs were reminded repeatedly that the man who can't take correction is destined for failure. Would you be able to hear God if He spoke a word of correction to you through another person?

Now, anytime another person, even another Christian, rebukes, advises or corrects us it's important that we pray. Thank them for their concern and then take it to the Lord and ask Him if they're right. Sometimes other people, no matter how well intentioned they are, can lead us astray.

When Solomons 's son, Rehoboam became King the people asked him to lighten the load of labor they had under Solomon. Rehoboam sought the counsel of the elders who told him to agree to the people's request and reap the rewards of Kingly kindness. Rather than listen to them he went to his own cronies for further counsel and they recommended that he give the people an even greater workload. He listened to them and as a result, the nation of Israel was split in two. It was a tragic decision based in the counsel of men who were not in a right relationship with God. It cost him dearly (2 Chronicles 10).

So, while we know that God does speak through other people, we have to examine both the message and messenger before we act on it. Always compare what people say by the scriptures.

God also speaks to us through blessings. Most of us love it when He gets our attention this way! This may be a spiritual blessing or a financial or material blessing, or an abundant combination. I thought it was interesting as I was studying for this Charles

Stanley said that God doesn't use this method with everyone because selfish people would get more independent, self-centered, and more self seeking so that they totally ignore God if the blessings were too generous. But, He does use blessings to get our attention.

Remember that God's motive is always His love for us and His own glory.

Another attention grabber that the Lord uses is unanswered prayer. Often, if we're cruising along and God is answering our prayers sufficiently, we'll just enjoy His provision and blessing. We're grateful but we also tend to start taking Him for granted. But, if a really urgent need comes along and God is silent, He will have our complete attention. "Why God?" "Where are You God?" "Can You hear me God?"

The Bible tells us that God has reasons why He doesn't answer prayer. This is good time for self-examination with the help of the Holy Spirit. Is there sin separating us from God (Isaiah 59:2)? Are we asking for something with the wrong reasons (James 4:3)? Do we have an area of disobedience (1 John 3:22)? Are we asking outside of the will of God (1 John 5:14)? Are we acting properly in our marriages (1 Peter 3:7)? Do you realize that God says a man's prayers can be hindered because of disrespectful behavior toward his wife? What does this say for us if we are not obedient to respect our husbands (Ephesians 5:33)?

Of course, it may be that God isn't answering our prayers because He wants to redirect us in some way. Whatever the reason it is clear that God wants us to draw a little closer to Him, to look for His purposes and be more dependent on Him.

With the unanswered prayer is often disappointment. Sometimes we actually blame God or get angry with Him over disappointments. Job's wife asked him if he was

still holding fast to his integrity. She said “Curse God and die!” Satan obviously wanted to distort Job’s view of God.

Job’s response was wonderful, his attitude amazing. He said, “*Shall we receive good from God and shall we not receive evil?*” The verse goes on to say, “*In all this Job did not sin with his lips.*”

When we are sincerely disappointed in what God gives us, or, in our estimation, fails to give us, do we keep from sinning with our lips or are we whining and complaining?

The last of the attention getters has several ways that God may bring it into our lives. It is the broad category of “unusual circumstances.” There are no such things as accidents in the life of a child of God. There are some things that God may allow and there are some things that He may send. They are attention getters – not accidents!

The first example of this is failure. We see God use this in scripture. I don’t have time to really go into it but Israel had come to the Promised Land and were told to take the city of Jericho, which they did with the Lord’s help. Their next challenge was Ai – it seemed like a piece of cake compared to Jericho so they were a little cocky and went in without a real military strategy and without direction from God. They were overconfident and Joshua 7:5 describes the result, “The men of Ai struck down about thirty six men, for they chased them from before the gate....and struck them down on the descent; therefore the hearts of the people melted and became like water.” The mighty Israelites had been defeated. This news would spread, they would be humiliated.

Joshua’s response was to tear his clothing along with the elders and they fell on their faces before the Lord. God got Joshua’s attention with failure.

These failures often come after a victory, especially a spiritual victory, but maybe a financial blessing or God has just done some super thing in our lives and we become proud and have ruined God's purposes in the blessing. In those days of great blessing – remember Ai!! Be ultra sensitive to the voice of God. Offer praise and thanksgiving when things are good and give the glory to the one who gives good to us.

Other attention getters are financial collapse, tragedy, illness,

We have to adopt the practice of looking at all of these events in our lives through our spiritual filter. They are not curses from God but attention getters, things He uses to reset our focus on HIM. We can see it right away or wait for God to have to raise the stakes a little until He's slamming us in between the eyes with a two by four!

Whatever the circumstances, please remember that it's because of God's love and mercy that these things come into our lives. He's trying to get us to stop and pay attention to what He has for us. He won't let us walk over the edge of a cliff without proper warning. He is trying to give us specific guidance and help us move on with His perfect plan for our lives!

Are you facing unusual circumstances right now? Will you ask God to show you what He wants from it?

One more thing and that is how we discern the voice of God. Ladies used to ask me "How do I know if it's God or if it's Satan?" It's the same dilemma I had after someone suggested that I might be listening to him instead of God.

Let me just say that the most important thing I learned from that incident was that the natural walk of the Spirit-filled, committed Christian is such that when God speaks, we know His voice (John 10:4-5). It may be more of a problem for young Christians than

for the more mature. A sheep who's been with their Shepherd for a number of years is going to be better able to discern His voice than the baby,

Scripture teaches us what we need to know so let's look at what it says that will help us determine the mind of God as we hear different voices and try to discern one from another.

The first and the easiest is that God's voice will never tell us to do anything or be in any relationship that is inconsistent with the holy scriptures. For instance, ladies used to tell me all the time of the guilt they lived in from past sin (some of them pretty bad). They believe that God is condemning them and they can't do enough to make it to Him so they don't pray because it reminds them that God is still pointing His finger at them.

We know their guilt is not the voice of God. Romans 8:1 says, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." The accusing voice is inconsistent with the written Word of God. That makes it Satan's attempt at false guilt. If the sin is confessed, our lives are clean – as far as we know. The scripture will lead us about relationships, finances, jobs. Whatever you and I need we can go to the scriptures to get godly guidance.

Other than consistency with God's Word we can expect to speak things that will clash with the flesh. He will not tell us to do things that gratify the flesh – not that He doesn't like a little fun – He created fun – but He will lead us to wholesome fun and not the instantaneous gratification of the flesh.

He will often challenge our faith with what He tells us to do. This is how He builds a relationship with us. Jesus rewarded those who acted in faith.

God often calls us to an act of courage. He doesn't just want us to do what's comfortable, He wants to grow our faith in Him and so He expects that we'll do what requires courage for Him.

If what we hear will hurt someone else in a crass or crude way it's not from God. Though Satan may try to influence us to whatever we want and not to worry about the ripple effect, God cares about others and will have the good of everyone in mind.

God will never tell us to rush into anything blindly. He isn't the present day salesman, "To get this great offer you need to make a decision right now. Tomorrow it will be gone." We may have to move swiftly sometimes but that's different than rushing in without thought. Satan will give us a sense of the urgency of something that isn't urgent. Psalm 27: 14 exhorts us to Wait on the Lord. Be of good courage and He shall strengthen your heart. If you think it feels like you're moving too fast – you probably are!

We need to take enough time to consider the consequences when we have heard something new from God. He isn't going to be insulted that we took the time to get godly counsel or to consider the consequences. Often that's what godly counsel does for us – helps us consider the consequences.

God has told us that He has ordained and predestined us to be conformed to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29). So, whatever God says to us will stimulate spiritual growth. That means that God will never tell us to do anything that sets us back spiritually. I talked to many women who either wanted a divorce for no reason or they wanted to marry an unbeliever. Would either of those things produce spiritual growth? No, they are not of God, not to mention that they are not consistent with scripture.

The last way we have of knowing if something is of God is peace. When God speaks one of the most prevalent signs is that there is a calmness in our spirit. Paul calls it the peace that surpasses understanding. It is a peace that surrounds us like a fortress. It keeps us from being overwhelmed with worry, doubt, or frustration.

At the end of that time when my decision about leaving BSF had been questioned and I finally just said, "I'm sure this is what I'm supposed to do." I KNEW I was right, I had the peace that passes understanding. All the turmoil in my mind and heart subsided. And then God confirmed it again through His Word.

To hear God speak we have to quietly spend time with Him. We have to expect Him to speak. We have to patiently wait for Him to speak, confidently knowing that we can totally depend on Him to lead and guide us. We need to be submissive to His will for us and finally we need to be grateful that the God of the universe wants to communicate to you and me. Grateful that He loves us so much that He would send His Son to die to pluck the likes of you and me out of the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of light.

It should humble us that the Omnipotent God, the Most High, the Lord God Almighty will not only listen to us but He will respond in a way that we will clearly hear Him!

