

CHIEF MINISTRIES

December 2015

How can we better learn to abide in His presence? There is no better way to learn than to practice. The question I want to be able to help you answer is. “Do I have what it takes to hear from God?” Yes, He most certainly is speaking today. He loves us just as much as He loved the saints described in the Bible, and He wants us to know Him as they did.

There are four primary ways God speaks to His people today. First and foremost, He speaks through His word, the Bible. Paul urged Timothy to listen to God by studying His word when he wrote, “*All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives*” (2 Timothy 3:16 a). Of all the ways God might choose to communicate, the Bible is the final authority.

A second way, God speaks to us is through other Christians. Proverbs 11:14 tells us, “*There is safety in having many advisors. The Lord often uses God focused men and women to encourage us and counsel us and sometimes even chasten us!*” (2 Samuel 2:12).

A third way, God communicates with us is through our circumstances. As someone wisely said, “Circumstances drive us to our knees so the only way to look, is up.” The three armies headed to Jerusalem were enough to drive the children of Judah to their knees. The circumstances don’t have to be bad - sometimes He bring great blessings to get our attention. Paul did say, “*The goodness of God leads us to repentance*” (Romans 2:4b).

One other channel through which our Lord speaks today is his Holy Spirit. Paul certainly knew this. “*This is what we speak, not in words taught by human wisdom but in words taught by the spirit expressing spiritual truth and spiritual words*” (1 Corinthians 2:13). “Ok” you might say, “I know God spoke through His Spirit back then, while the Bible was being written, but what about now? Is His Spirit speaking to us now?”

John 14:16 and 16:13 says; *v16 “And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, to be with you forever” v13 “When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth, for He will not speak on his own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak, and He will declare to you the things that are to come”.* (John 14:16, 16:13 ESV) It’s pretty obvious Jesus wanted us to know that the Holy Spirit will most assuredly keep on speaking as long as we’re in this world. All right, now that we know God still speaks today, let’s tackle the question, “can I hear God speak? Thankfully the answer is a resounding, yes! No matter where you are in life, you can hear Him as He draws you to Himself. Even as He did with Saul on the road to Damascus. (Acts 9) God can break through even the hardest hearts and reveal Himself to individuals. However, for God to lead us and guide us with His still small voice, there are certain conditions we must meet.

Let’s look at John 10. First we must accept Christ. I pray all of you reading this have done just that. We must be saved. We have to be in His sheepfold. Read John 10:11. When we place our faith in the One who laid down His life for us. He becomes our shepherd and we become His sheep.

Now read verse three. In order for sheep to listen, they must have ears, right? The glorious fact is that all sheep have ears. The day you and I trusted Jesus as our Savior and became His sheep, we grew some spiritual ears that we could clearly hear His voice.

You might be thinking, “Yes, but I don’t feel worthy enough for God to speak to me so directly.” Remember, worthiness has nothing to do with it. None of us are worthy of anything but death; yet, by His grace, God has given you a good and perfect gift: you have ears.

To consistently hear from God, however, it is not enough just to have ears; these ears must be sensitive to His voice.

Now look at verse four of John 10. The last part of this verse says, “*His sheep follow Him...*” But how do the sheep know to follow Him? The sheep know His voice because they’ve heard it before. They’ve learned to recognize it.

We all know that the Pharisees were “*dull of hearing*” (Matthew 13:15). But did you know that the disciples also had a hearing problem? In Mark 8:14-21, the disciples failed to see and failed to hear that they had all of the bread they needed. They had missed the point their Lord was making because they were insensitive to spiritual matters. As ministers and leaders in His kingdom we cannot afford to miss such things. We must learn to look a little bit deeper beyond the surface of what we can see and hear with our physical senses. We must discern what God is up to. That kind of spiritual sensitivity takes time to develop.

Just a day after they failed their first hearing exam, Jesus gave His disciples another opportunity. This time they passed. When Jesus asked, “*Who do you say I am?*” Peter answered, “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*”. Jesus blessed Peter and said man had not revealed that to him. Only the Father in heaven could have shown him such a deep spiritual truth. (See Matthew 16:15-17) Likewise, only the Spirit of God can open up God’s Word to us and make us understand what the Lord wants to say to and through us. Therefore, we must constantly stay sensitive to the Spirit’s instructing.

Even with ears open to listen, it’s still possible we could miss God’s voice. There is one final condition that we must meet in order to be certain we can hear from God. We must surrender. The idea here is that we have not only open, sensitive ears, but bended ears wanting to receive whatever words of instruction God has for us. Our attitude must be “Lord, counsel me, correct to me, teach me, direct me, rebuke me, just please talk to me!”

Look at John 10 verse 3 again, it says, “*He calls His own sheep by name and leads them out.*” Being able to hear from God should be at the top of our priorities as worshipers and leaders for this simple reason: If we don’t hear from God, we don’t know what to do. He is our leader, our Shepherd. We are a dumb sheep that need Him to lead us. I sometimes wonder why there are so many “leaders” who have never “followed”? We have to lay down our pride and self-will and allow Him to direct us.

Jehoshaphat and the children of Judah met all three conditions that assured them they could hear from their God. They were saved, in that they were His people. Thus, they had ears to hear and they opened their ears to listen. They also showed they were sensitive to His voice when they said “*We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you.*” (2 Chronicles 20:12) Finally, they were obviously surrendered because they ignored all human logic. (What’s logical about sending out the choir in front of the army?) They didn’t even question God’s wisdom. They willingly did exactly what God had told them to do. Considering their victorious outcomes, I’d say surrendering to His voice was a wise choice for them. It always pays to obey. Just ask Judah!

At this point, I hope we have settled in our own minds that God can and must be heard by His sheep. But what exactly does His voice sound like? How can we know when God is speaking to us?

One of my fondest memories is of my mom’s distinct voice calling me to come inside for dinner or in from playing basketball or being at my best friends’ house – ¼ mile away! Her high-pitched yell got my attention: “Bobby! Come on in now!”

How did I know that it was my mom’s voice? Well the obvious question may have some not-so-obvious answers.

First of all my mom’s voice was familiar to me I’d heard it many times before and could distinguish it from everyone else’s. The Shepherds voice is also a familiar voice.

Let’s return to John 10. Read verse four and five. The sheep follow the Shepherds voice because they’ve heard His voice before, and they’ve learned to recognize it. Even a newborn baby will sometimes turn toward its mother when she speaks because the baby has heard her familiar voice so many times before birth.

Second, my mom’s voice was not only familiar, it was also personal. She clearly said my name: “Bobby!” (Only my mom called me that by the way). Likewise, when God speaks to us He wants us to know exactly who He’s talking to so He calls us by name. I remember Him clearly addressing me: “*Robert, when are you going to accomplish something worthy of my calling and full of excellence for me?!*” I thought “that’s a crazy sounding question.” Kind of blew it off and the next day saw my name on one of those “your name means” plaques at a Christian Bookstore and it said: Robert: Excellent Worth. Confirmation that I had heard from God! I didn’t know my name meant that, but He did!

Read the last part of John 10:3. Jesus said the Shepherd calls His sheep by name.

Third, my mom’s voice was easy to recognize because it was simple and clear. What if she had said, “Bobby, I implore thee to make haste and move in the general direction of thy homestead dwelling with the express purpose of finding adequate sustenance and renewed energy for your physical well-being”. I would have said, “Do what?” I’m thankful that God knows our level of understanding, aren’t you? He willingly puts His words in a language even I can comprehend!

Now read John 10:9. How much simpler can words be? Anyone can comprehend them.

There is one other characteristic I could always count on in my mother's voice: It was loving. I knew that behind her words was a pure love and commitment to nurture me. Even when her voice was raised in correction or frustration, her words ultimately served to make me better. (Of course, the sticks and belts did their part, too!)

Notice the love and grace in Jesus's words in John 10:10-11. The thief (Satan) wants only to steal, kill and destroy us. But Jesus' goal for us is to live fully.

Many walk around feeling guilty and condemned for sins we've already confessed to God. Despite our attempts to believe God has forgiven us (as He promises He does), something inside us keeps recalling those sins and shortcomings, pushing us down even further. That "something" is actually "someone". His name is Satan, the "*accuser of the brethren*" (Revelation 12:10). He seeks to condemn us with his words. The Lord, by contrast, will never speak to us to condemn us. He only wants to give us abundant life. Even when He's rebuking us, His purpose is still ultimately to make us more like His son. (Romans 8:29)

I realize that some of you reading this right now actually grew up hearing condemning and hateful words from those you respected and cared for the most. You find it particularly difficult to imagine a God who's every word to us is motivated by pure, selfless love. I encourage you to allow those words in John 10:10-11 to pour over you at this moment. *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. v11 I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. (ESV)* Allow the good Shepherd to speak words of encouragement to your soul. Imagine Him speaking those words to you right now! Actually, He really is speaking to you in His amazing language of love.

To be sure we are discerning God's voice, we need to examine the content of His words.

1. God's voice is always consistent with the Bible. He won't tell us to contradict His Word.
2. God's voice will most likely clash with our fleshly, carnal nature.
3. God's voice may not make sense to us and conflict with our own human wisdom.
4. God's voice may challenge our faith - He will consistently stretch us to higher levels of belief
5. God's voice will require us to be courageous - Doing His will is not for wimps. It requires bold action.

Now read Jehaziel's words in 2 Chronicles 20:14-17 in light of this; *And the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jahaziel the son of Zechariah, son of Benaiah, son of Jeiel, son of Mattaniah, a Levite of the sons of Asaph, in the midst of the assembly. v15 And he said, "Listen, all Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem and King Jehoshaphat: Thus says the LORD to you, 'Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed at this great horde, for the battle is not yours but God's. v16 Tomorrow go down against them. Behold, they will come up by the ascent of Ziz. You will find them at the end of the valley, east of the wilderness of Jeruel. v17 You will not need to fight in this battle. Stand firm, hold your position, and see the salvation of the LORD on your behalf, O Judah and Jerusalem.' Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed. Tomorrow go out against them, and the LORD will be with you."* (ESV)

It's clear that the words the people of Judah received that evening were most certainly God's specific instruction to them in their situation. After hearing from the prophet they were to go back home and rest in preparation for the battle. Even so, I'm fairly sure some of them tossed and turned that night on the every possible circumstance. They needed more than a "check off list" assuring them that what they had heard was indeed God's direction to them. Intellectual confirmation wasn't enough. Their hearts still lacked a necessity - Faith.

Jehoshaphat realized that missing element when he said to them the next morning. "*Have faith in the Lord your God and you will be upheld, have faith in His prophets and you will be successful*" (2 Chronicles 20:20). No matter how much we reason in our heads about God's voice, we still have to make the decision in our hearts to trust Him.

As a thinker, I remember at times trying to discern God's will. It seems the more I prayed about what He wanted me to do, the more confused I became. I thought, "What if the voice I hear is really Satan's disguise to make me think it's God's. Or, what if it is in fact God's voice, but Satan wants me to think it's his voice, so I won't obey it. Or, what if God is speaking to me, but somehow I am misunderstanding what He is saying and Satan is using my confusion against me?" Whew! What a mess I was in!

A few days after these thoughts I was reading Philippians 3:7-14. *But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. v8 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ v9 and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—v10 that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and may share His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, v11 that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. v12 Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me His own. v13 Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, v14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:7-14 ESV)* That's when I saw a principal that has had a profound effect on my life and fellowship with the Lord over the years. Notice what Paul is pressing toward.

As I read those, I found myself saying, “Yes, God, that’s what I’m trying to do, too. I so want to win the prize of knowing You and doing Your will in my life!” I had read up through verse 14 many times and stopped there for some reason. However, this time, my desperation pushed me forward. It was actually the very next verse, verse 15 that set me free from my turmoil. What I read there almost made my heart leap from my chest. Reread 14 and then verse 15. Did you catch it? Did you feel the impact of those words: “if on some point you think differently, that too, God will make clear to you!” What exactly did Paul mean? He meant just what he said: if you and I are pressing toward the mark “with a maturing heart determined to please God, He will not allow us to make a mistake or misunderstand His leading. I will hear and know His voice. He will make absolutely sure of it! He loves me so much He won’t let me go astray. What an awesome God we serve!

What evidence in your life shows you are “pressing on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus”? Ask God for a greater passion to press in! Then ask Him to tell you when you are thinking is wrong or you’re heading in the wrong direction.

I am thankful to God that He will find a way to speak to me as I determine to live for Him. But to what length must He go to get my attention. Will it require diversity or trauma or prison? God has been known to speak through a burning bush, or a donkey when necessary. I’ve heard people say, “I guess I just had to learn the hard way.” But did they? Could their stress and turmoil have been avoided had they been listening more closely at the onset? That’s why it’s not enough for us to have ears that will eventually hear God’s voice. We must have ears that can most easily hear His voice and respond to it.

Turn to 2 Chronicles 20:13-15. *Meanwhile all Judah stood before the LORD, with their little ones, their wives, and their children. ^{v14}And the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jahaziel the son of Zechariah, son of Benaiah, son of Jeiel, son of Mattaniah, a Levite of the sons of Asaph, in the midst of the assembly. ^{v15}And he said, "Listen, all Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem and King Jehoshaphat: Thus says the LORD to you, 'Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed at this great horde, for the battle is not yours but God's. (2 Chronicles 20:13-15 ESV)* Notice how quickly and confidently Jahaziel responded to the Spirit’s leading. Such ability to listen didn’t come naturally to Jahaziel. It came because he had trained or “fine-tuned” his spiritual ears. As a musician, I’ve had to fine tune my ears and develop “perfect pitch”. Many piano tuners today use electronic devices, but I’ve always preferred tuning the old fashion way, with just an Allen wrench, a tuning fork and some well-honed eardrums. With training you can develop your hearing to even sense the slightest variation in pitch. In the same way, we must sensitize our spiritual ears to hear every prompting by the Holy Spirit. There are three basic disciplines that we, like piano tuners, have to develop in order to do this.

First, we must *practice listening*. This may seem obvious, but how much effort do we actually put into expectantly listening for and discerning God’s voice? How many mornings do we wake up ready to listen in case our Lord wants to speak to us? How often do we lie awake at night and remember God and think of Him “in the night watches” (Psalms 63:6). Think about yesterday. How many times did you deliberately listen for God or ask Him to speak to you? Was it once, twice, 10 times or *not-a-all*. Practice makes perfect - or, at least, better! We can’t expect to grow in our sensitivity to God’s speaking if we’re not constantly listening.

Even prophets had to learn to recognize God’s voice. Samuel was one of the greatest prophets in the Old Testament. The Lord spoke to him often. In fact, passages like 1 Samuel 16, in which God tells Samuel whom to reject and whom to anoint as the new King of Israel, might lead some to the wrong conclusion. From those accounts, they may assume that Samuel naturally recognized God’s voice from the beginning of his ministry, but that’s not the case. Read about that in 1 Samuel 3.

When God first called Samuel by name, Samuel thought His voice was Eli’s. It’s important to note that Samuel heard a voice but could not yet discern whose voice it was. That would take time to learn and practice.

Here are two important instructions to help you practice listening.

1. Be consistent - Decide now to “*pray without ceasing*” (1 *Thessalonians 5:13*) stay attentive to the Lord every day. Like Samuel, learn to say, “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.” Create habits like addressing the Lord, or the Holy Spirit as the first thing you do when waking up. It can take years to develop one’s hearing so as to properly tune a piano. That represents many days and many hours of intense listening to notes and pitches as they ring out through the air. Likewise, it will take hours of listening with your heart to learn how to most easily and quickly recognize the voice of our God. So be patient with yourself! God is!
2. Be careful. Do not ignore the scriptural characteristics of His voice and the necessary contents of His words. Before you respond in any way, run that checklist in your mind. Take the time necessary to be sure. God will wait on you. Remember, the powers of darkness will seek to deceive you. That’s why as Christians we must never abandon the fundamental disciplines needed to discern God’s voice.

The second fundamental discipline in fine tuning our spiritual ears is to *focus our thoughts*. To tune a piano by ear requires total concentration on the sounds being produced. Jehoshaphat and the people of Judah understood that as well. They focused on God - “*our eyes are upon You*” (2 *Chronicles 20:12b*)

Remember Jesus getting after the disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane? “*Could you not watch for one hour?*” To us today, He’d probably knock it down to one minute. Try doing that for just one minute and see how you do.

Paul said we are to “*take every thought to make it obedient to Christ.*” (2 Corinthians 10:5) Notice Paul didn’t say that every thought had to be Christ-like. That is impossible because of all the junk we have allowed in our eye-gate and ear-gate. But if a thought enters that’s rogue or evil, seize it and check it. If it’s God-honoring, it stays. We have to discipline our minds this way or we’ll find ourselves constantly tormented by conflicting ideas and distracted by devilish notions. Any of that improper thinking is like a CD playing while the piano’s trying to be tuned. It’s noise. Too often we allow the noise to crowd out the “*still small voice*” of God (1 Kings 19:12).

The third and final discipline is we must *respond* to every impulse from the Holy Spirit. 2 Chronicles 20 is full of examples of this - When Jehoshaphat heard that the enemy armies were coming, he *responded* by saying “*Let’s seek God.*” When the people of Judah and Jerusalem got the call to fast and pray, they *responded* by coming “from every town in Judah.” When Jehoshaphat prayed, every man, woman and child *responded* by standing and waiting before God. When the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jahaziel, he *responded* by speaking what he was told. When Jehoshaphat and the people of Judah heard God’s message to them through His prophet, they *responded* in praise.

Likewise, as we respond to every prompting from God we will sensitize our spiritual ears to His voice. We’ll learn to recognize even the gentlest whisper from His Spirit. Oh God, give us responsive ears that hear You easily and quickly.

Our goal should not be to just have a “quiet time” that we can check off our list of things to do. Our goal is to connect with Almighty God. Learn to bend your knee and bow your mind, your emotions and your heart before the Lord. Listen. Surrender.

Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.....

Chief

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Christ’s

Heart

In

Every

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