

Why Can't I Hear God's Voice?

“Today, if only you would hear his voice, Do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the wilderness, (Psalm 95:8-9)

The psalmist warns us of a problem. The problem is not that God is not speaking. The problem is that we are not listening. 15 years ago, I was going through a six-month discipleship training with a team of 4 people from four different countries, led by two people from two more countries, and it seemed like everybody was hearing God speak except for me! The topic this week was “being filled with the Spirit.” It hurt so bad to think that I might have lost the Holy Spirit somewhere along no way. I was tempted to think that everybody else was faking it. But I had no good reason to believe that, except for that it wasn't working for me. I told my leaders that I was struggling with this, and he arranged to have my whole class gather around me in prayer.

The class ended. The lunch bell rang, and we sat there still, waiting and praying for an entire hour. I was desperately calling out to God, asking for a sign of his presence. I was laying my life down on the altar, and expressing my willingness to do anything and to go anywhere. All I wanted was a sign that I had not been forsaken. Even the slightest nudge would have knocked me to the ground. But nothing happened. And I would not fake it. And so, one by one, my teammates left. And I sat next to my leader, feeling utterly dejected. Things got worse before they got any better. But I will come back to this in a little bit.

This topic has been a great source of sorrow in my life, and perhaps in yours also. For a long time, it seems to me that listening to God was something enjoyed only by people more intuitive personality types. But what about the rest of us? What about the logical personality types? What about the person with a learning disability? What about the times that I am tired or stressed out? Do we have to be intuitive? Do the rest of us have to settle for indirect communication with God? Or is it possible that God speaks to every kind of of personal in ways that are accessible to each person? Is there any method to the madness?

On the one hand, there is a degree of inaccessibility that makes sense. Listening to God engages us in a process that renews our minds and rewires our brains. It promotes growth in a way that also empowers deeper human relationships. A child hears his parents speak, and yet his frame of reference is much smaller, and so its meaning is limited. God's thoughts about us are infinitely beyond our grasping, as the psalmist declares “How precious to me are your thoughts, God! How vast is the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand— when I awake, I am still with you.” (Psalm 139:18). And yet fully grasping each one of them is not the final goal, the end goal is to still be with him.

On the other hand, accessibility is necessary for intimacy. If God is speaking to us, it would be utterly tragic if we had no opportunity to hear it. Just as a parent simplifies his wording, and lowers himself to the eye-level of their child, I believe God patiently lowers himself to each one of us. Certainly, our unwillingness to follow his direction will prevent us hearing him, just as my children can hear me say “ice cream” and not hear me say “bedtime”. But for those who are willing, and even listening with all their

heart, why is it still so hard? Perhaps it is because the most common ways we are told to listen to God do not align with the most common ways that he is speaking to us!

Communication with people requires the translation of thoughts into sound waves, projected by vocal chords across a physical spaces and then collected by eardrums and carried by auditory nerves into our minds, where they are translated again into meaningful messages. God is spirit, and is not limited by any of these methods! He can use these methods, and has done so many times throughout history. Although he can also speak directly into our minds, and I believe this is much more common. So then why do we insist on something from the outside? Maybe you are a little worried, like I am, that your are just making it up in your mind, and maybe you are getting a little tired of hearing yourself talking?

If you are struggling to hear God and if you are trying to avoid pretending about your spirituality, I would encourage you to find some structure and support in the book of Psalms. There are six psalms I have noticed that give us a practical process of listening to God. These psalms serve as templates to guide us in this process. The wording of these prayer specifically addresses areas of need for us to hear God. They are not incantations that somehow summon God's voice! They are simply patterns of thinking provided by God, that offer to guide us into a recognition of his voice. The more familiar you become with this process, the less you will depend on the exact wording, and the more naturally you will walk through this process. This process spells the word LISTEN, and it involves leaving the noise, inclining your heart, submitting your thoughts, turning from sin, engaging with scripture, and noticing his nudging.

(L)EAVE THE NOISE

“My heart is not proud, Lord, my eyes are not haughty; I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me. But I have calmed and quieted myself, I am like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child I am content.” (Psalm 131:1-2)

The first Psalm guides us to quiet down and calm down. Sit still and take a deep breath! Remove yourself from technology and visual distractions. Remove yourself from your endless responsibilities. Remove yourself from delusions of grandeur. We are his children, and that is enough. We only understand one percent of one percent of reality. The limits of our mind do not limit us from hearing God. Quieting yourself down is not complicated. But it is certainly not easy. Stillness is harder and harder in this fast paced world. It will not happen by accident. Sit still for a few minutes and content yourself with the simple truth that He is here with you.

(I)NCLINE YOUR HEART

“You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water.” (Psalm 61:1)

When I listen to God I often feel homesick. It wakes me up again to the reality of what is still not good in the world and in me. I would even go so far as to say it hurts. It is bitter sweet. It is not a groan of despair but a groan of hope. We have hardly allowed ourselves to listen to the groan. It scares us. But this too, is the voice of God. The deep chasm between heaven and earth is bridged by the Holy Spirit

dwelling within each of us who are willing. The deep within us cries out to the deep within God, and it will not be content until the promise becomes reality. He does not withhold his goodness from us, but he does not whisk us away as soon as we believe. Long stretches of time sometimes separate us from the felt presence of God. This is why we must record and remember the personal expression of his kindness to us. A pilgrimage is driven by the promise of a better land. When we forget, we settle down.

(S)UBMIT YOUR THOUGHTS

“Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” (Psalm 139:23-24)

The next Psalm is so refreshingly realistic about the way our minds work. All day long we are triggered by notifications, reminders of obligations, new pieces of information, and new requests for attention. Most of these are buzzing around in the back of our mind, waiting to take the next moment of undistracted calm to take the wheel. All of my most brilliant thinking happens during the daily routines like driving or taking a shower, because they don't consume as much space in my mind. Ironically, these are the places where I am least able to act on these thoughts. The same goes for quieting ourselves before God. Every random thought will try to seize this golden opportunity for action. For this reason, many people short-change their quiet time with God. They rush off to the next thing before God can get a word in edgewise! This is why I strongly recommend keeping a pen and paper nearby. Write down these thoughts. Some of them are important. When you write them down, you will begin to feel more comfortable in this place in time. “Today” is the only place in time that we can hear his voice.

(T)URN FROM SIN

“Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.” (Psalm 51:10-12)

The next Psalm invites us to the most beautiful welcome mat that we could ever imagine. God does not meet us at our highest point of goodness, but rather at our lowest point of badness. This is the real place of our intersection. We resist hearing God when we resist acknowledging the depth of darkness that is within each one of us. His kindness leads us to repentance. When we confess our sin, we are acknowledging the reality of our moral failures, and inviting the forgiveness of God to meet us where we really are, and not where we pretend to be around others. How incredible is the hospitality of God to create a place where we can safely set ourselves down in his presence! How humble and gentle is the approach of God towards those who come in with their own dirt. He does not turn them away, but showers them with grace.

(E)NGAGE WITH SCRIPTURE

“Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law. I am a stranger on earth; do not hide your commands from me.” (Psalm 119:18-19)

Now let us acknowledge the obvious. All of matter, space and time were created by the voice of God. Every element on the periodic table. Every color within and without of our range of sight. Every sound below and beyond our range of hearing. Every flavor from pizza to chocolate. Every smell from lavender to sandal-wood. Every physical sensation from a gulp of ice tea to the warmth of human embrace. All of them have one thing in common. They carry the voice of God to us. In the most tangible of all ways, on a continual basis, they are speaking to us about his power and his creativity. In this way it is safe to say that you have never NOT heard the voice of God! Theologians have described all of creation as “general revelation” . This just means basic communication. Theologians have also coined the term “special revelation” which means specific communication. The 66 books of the bible are the specific communication of God to us. They hold all of the most necessary information for each of us to recognize God’s voice and live. When we read scripture, we are reading the mind of God! When we listen to scripture we are hearing the voice of God!

(N)OTICE HIS NUDGING

“Show me your ways, Lord, teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long.” (Psalm 25:6-7)

God created people to be people, not robots. He gave us free will so that we can make free choices. His purpose for us is not an invisible tight-rope that we can accidentally slip off of. It is a green pasture where there are many different options, for which we are empowered to choose with both wisdom and personal preference. This pasture has clear boundaries, and like sheep we will often wander past them, and provoke his discipline. Even this, his rod and his staff, are comforting. God’s will is not a mystery. However, it is a story. God does not tell us everything at once, and ruin the surprise. We could hardly believe him anyway. When we have looked at the obvious and responded with obedience, we are ready to listen to his subtle suggestions and to respond with thankfulness. Again it becomes apparent that God’s desire is not to control us, but that we would come to him.

While sitting with my leader, tears streaming down my face, I determined something with myself. Not only that I would not fake the voice of God, but that I would allow that voice to speak to me in any way he chooses, even if it was not charismatic. Every day we would spend an entire hour in quiet time with God. Every day I would pray and study the scriptures, and sing and wait. My question about losing the Holy Spirit was answered by the simple promise of scripture, that if we confess our sin, he will forgive us and cleanse us. My question about discerning my calling was answered by the simple promise that everything I need to fulfill my calling would be provided by the Holy Spirit.

Then came the breakthrough, memories of people I had wronged, not condemning me, but prompting me to make things right. I let the spirit jog my memory, and wrote down all that he was calling me to do. I committed to make restitution as soon as I returned home. At this point you might be wondering if you still want to hear God's voice. To hear his voice is to truly live! Since then, I have been walking with a freedom that money can’t buy and driven by a hope that even death itself can’t touch. The powerful voice that created the universe, is the same gentle voice stirring your heart to “seek his face!” there are many other voices whooping and hollering for your attention, but none that deserve it more!