

The Sound Of His Voice

Is God speaking to you?

- Discipleship Journal Feature Article
- Published in the November | December 1998 issue
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What does God's voice sound like?

As a young Christian, I asked this question many times, and I seldom received a workable answer. In the Bible, God's voice traveled a range of volumes and intensities, depending on the situation. He thundered when defending His people (Ps. 18:13). After a windstorm, earthquake, and fire, He whispered to Elijah at the mouth of an isolated cave (1 K.19:11–13). But what would be the nature of His voice if He spoke to me personally, in the recesses of my heart? I've had to answer that question myself, being willing to wait, listen, and, more often than not, learn from my blunders.

In one sense, we all have to identify God's voice by ourselves. He speaks uniquely to each of us, and from experience we learn whether we're hearing our own imagination or even the devil's deceptive voice. At the same time, it helps to learn how other believers discern His voice and what prompts them to act on what they've heard. So in the past few months I've conducted an experiment. When people have said, "God told me," I've asked, "How do you know He told you?" The answers have varied. Some people sputtered vague explanations and couldn't offer concrete descriptions. Others described specific signposts and feelings that identified God's voice to them.

Heart and Mind

Collectively, though, from my experience and theirs, a two-pronged pattern seems common. Sometimes the Holy Spirit impresses a thought upon our minds; sometimes He stirs our hearts. If He speaks to the mind, it's usually a thought that intrudes upon the brain and is markedly different from what we've been thinking about. It possesses a distinct quality that causes us to say, "I wouldn't have considered that myself!" and suddenly gives us enlightenment into people or situations. If the Spirit speaks to the heart, it's often through a nudge that compels us to action, or a sense of restraint that warns us not to move forward. The mind and heart can also sync, with a thought that agrees with an inner impression. Lest this still sounds too ethereal, I'll share some personal examples.

After 15 years of hardy service, my Ford Escort finally needed to retire. I sold it for a pittance and purchased a new Kia Sportage, a sports-utility vehicle. What a change! I hadn't realized how smoothly and swiftly a vehicle could travel.

In the first month, however, the "swiftly" aspect got me into trouble. In a hurry to attend a meeting at my publisher's office, I picked up speed on a stretch near my home, and a policeman's radar clocked me at 10 miles an hour over the limit.

I'm not a speeder, I thought. But the ticket and a \$75 fine disagreed with me. For the next two months I carefully monitored my speedometer.

One day, I decided to stop by the publisher's office again. As I drove toward that neighborhood, a voice inside said, *Go home*. "That's a weird thought," I muttered to myself. *Go home*, it said again, but I didn't listen and proceeded.

An hour later, after finishing up some minor business (which I really didn't need to stop at the office to do), I turned a corner and headed down the same infamous stretch toward my house. Within moments I heard the siren and spotted the flashing lights. It was the same policeman who'd caught me before, lurking on the same side street with his radar. Once again I was driving 10 miles an hour over the limit, but this time the ticket doubled to \$150.

I felt both numb and irked. If I'd listened to that inner voice and gone home, I would have driven to my house from a different direction.

"Oh, Lord," I sighed, "what are You trying to teach me?" I expected an intensely spiritual answer like "absolute obedience" or "continual brokenness."

Instead, these words crossed my brain: *Slow down*.

At times, God's messages can be annoyingly pragmatic. Monitoring my driving since then, I've realized that yes, I do tend to speed. The vehicle wasn't to blame; I was, and I needed to change.

Another incident, still fresh in my mind after 18 years, first taught me about God's warnings expressed as inner reservations. At the time, a man moved into an apartment across the hall from me. He was amiable, spiritually inclined, and we often talked in the stairwell. "You ought to visit my church sometime," he told me.

"OK," I said without thinking. But internally I felt as though an alarm had sounded. After that, each time we chatted I felt a jarring within, or what some people call a "check" in my spirit.

I never attended church with the man, and later I discovered that he belonged to a cult. When I found out, I immediately recognized that God had warned and most likely protected me from something spiritually harmful.

Discerning His Voice

However God speaks to our souls—in our quiet times of reading and prayer, in the hum of a scheduled day—there are some guiding characteristics by which we can discern whether an inner message is from Him. Keep in mind, though, that we can't fit God into a formula and always predict how He will communicate with us. Consequently, these guidelines are not etched-in-stone rules.

God speaks with clarity. "His sheep follow him because they know his voice" (Jn. 10:4). Over time we learn to recognize the quality of God's voice and how He sounds to us. We can be assured, though, that He doesn't speak in fuzzy generalities. If the message is muddled, we probably need to wait until the communication clarifies. God's voice and messages are clear. Though we may need to wait for the Lord's confirmation, often when He speaks, we know He has spoken to us.

For example, my friend Joan has been seeking God about a direction for her life. Several months ago while driving to the airport, her car was hit from behind by another vehicle. As she and her friend spun out of control, they yelled, "Jesus! Jesus, help us!" Astonishingly, the two women weren't hurt. When Joan stepped out of the car, she said, "I'm supposed to be in ministry." Though human error caused the accident, God used the circumstances to speak to her, and without question, she knew it. The risk of losing her life made His voice very clear.

For a time, God may stir our hearts with a general sense that "something's up" and a change of direction is forthcoming. This holy restlessness causes us to seek God's will and prepares our hearts for His message. When He finally speaks, it's with clarity. We transition from, "I think God might be speaking to me" to, "I know that He spoke to me."

God's voice is specific. "Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it'" (Is. 30:21). The specificity of God's message relates closely to the clarity of His voice, and often the two characteristics are so intertwined they can't be separated. We may receive only one-step-at-a-time direction. But the guidance is still specific.

Last year my sister called to say Mom needed \$100 to help purchase new glasses. Could I contribute that amount?

"Yes," I said, without considering my financial status. "I'll be glad to help." At the time I didn't have enough money to pay my own bills. I felt God wanted me to mail the money to Mom. Yet I still asked the Lord, "How are You going to pull off this one?"

A few days later a friend stopped by the house and handed me a check for \$100. "I thought you could use this," she smiled, explaining that God had asked her to give me that amount.

The next day my friend left for a trip to visit her aging aunt in another state. Not long after she walked into her aunt's house, an uncle said to her, "I know it's expensive to travel, so here's \$100 to defray your costs."

Isn't that like God? Specific, with dashes of surprise and humor tucked in.

God is not in a hurry. "But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day" (2 Pet. 3:8).

A bit of spiritual wisdom claims that God never runs, He walks. And like Enoch who "walked with God" (Gen. 5:22), He invites us to plod along with Him.

God also has been described as a "slow and certain light." If we're in a hurry to do what we think He's telling us, we need to check our sources. God may quietly urge us along, but He doesn't cause compulsiveness. This behavior emerges from fleshly desires or devilish influences. If we're intent on doing something "this minute, and I'm not willing to wait," unless it's a true emergency, the voice we're listening to probably isn't God's. A general rule of thumb is this: God prompts, but the devil pushes.

On the other hand, there are times God asks us to operate quickly. But these are still acts of obedience, not obsessiveness. Many Christians tell stories of waiting on God for an extended time, asking Him to move His hand or reveal His will. Then, from what seems like out of nowhere, God acts, and they scramble to follow. Note, however, that these incidences occur after a preamble of waiting on the Lord.

I can think of several women who prayed and pleaded with God for years to bring them husbands. Then, when they'd almost given up hope, the future spouse appeared unexpectedly, and the romance progressed quickly. For them, getting married meant waiting for God's timing.

God confirms His message. "For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promises made to the

patriarchs" (Ro. 15:8). If the Lord is leading us to move toward action, He usually speaks through several mouthpieces. For example, we may hear His voice within. Then someone delivers an unmistakably similar message to us. In our Bible reading, certain verses confirm what we've heard, and when we flip on the radio, a preacher is using that same passage as his text! Finally, when we explain the concept to trusted advisers, they agree that the message sounds like God's voice. In other words, when He's guiding us, God usually doesn't speak in a vacuum. He confirms His words so we're certain of His directive.

If we're not sure whether God has spoken or precisely what He's saying, it's wise to wait for confirmation. We can even ask Him to confirm His words through additional methods and messengers. My advice, however, is to wait for God's messages to flow toward us naturally, in the course of our days, rather than inventing a prefabricated sign as a measuring stick. A man once told me that he challenged God, "If I'm to marry this woman, please have that streetlight turn off." Suddenly the light switched off, and he decided to propose. I shuddered. If we test God with ridiculous requests, He may allow us to suffer the consequences.

God never contradicts His Word. "The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy. They are steadfast for ever and ever, done in faithfulness and uprightness" (Ps. 111:7–8). Whatever God speaks to us, He will never contradict the truth of His precepts found in the Bible. Friends have said to me, "I have perfect peace about this," when their course of action obviously violated God's Word. (To be fair, I confess I've done this myself.) Peace is not an indicator of the Lord's approval or guidance if the underlying motive or action contradicts the Scriptures or leads us into sin. When we're seeking guidance or making a decision, nothing can supersede the Bible's holiness and authority.

So the guideline is simple: If the message runs contrary to the Scriptures, it's not God's voice. He will confirm with His Word, but never will He contradict it.

God's voice corrects instead of accuses. "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Ro. 8:1). If we're walking with God, when the Holy Spirit speaks, He may reveal our sin, but He doesn't accuse us. If the voice we hear is accusatory, it either belongs to the devil (Rev. 12:10), ourselves, or someone other than God. Accusers shove us toward depression and destruction.

A. W. Tozer explained some of the ways Satan accuses:

Are you allowing Satan to magnify the memories of your spiritual failures? He will always keep them before you unless you take your stand and move up in faith. The devil will whisper, "You didn't get very far along toward the deeper life, did you?" He will say, "You made a big to-do about wanting to be filled with the Spirit and you really flopped, didn't you?" He will taunt you with the fact that you may

have stumbled in the faith—and perhaps more than once. The devil wants you to live in a state of discouraged chagrin and remorse. Remember, the Bible does not teach that if a man falls down he can never rise again. The fact that he falls is not the most important thing—but rather that he is forgiven and allows God to lift him up!

Remember, too, that if God's voice does correct us, it is kind and cleansing, leading us to peace, healing, and joy.

God doesn't change His mind. "I the Lord do not change" (Mal. 3:6). Ever meet someone who says he's sure of God's will for him, but in a month he changes his mind? Then in a few more months he's certain it's something else? He probably hasn't heard from the Lord. When God calls us to a purpose or directs our steps, He doesn't careen us down one path and then to another. He accompanies us on a steady journey, even though at the moment the surrounding circumstances don't make sense.

If we're running back and forth, we need to stop and wait on the Lord. The problem is, it's human tendency to jump ahead of God, not being willing to wait until we're sure of His voice. And to be truthful, we can feel pressure from our spiritual community to hear from God. When people ask, "What is God saying to you about this situation?" it's hard to gulp and reply, "I don't know." But be comforted: When we're uncertain, it's not unspiritual to admit we're clueless about God's direction for now. Actually, we exhibit maturity by admitting we don't know and have decided to wait until we find out. God asks us to follow, not lead, and we can't follow until we're certain He's said, "Let's go."

All of these indicators of God's voice can be applied to the other ways we hear from Him: through the Scriptures, messengers, circumstances, and the supernatural. But few if any of these factors will aid our discernment if we don't nurture a tender heart.

Keeping a Tender Heart

To discern God's inner impression in the bustle of each day, we need to hide away with Him periodically, filling up on His presence and emptying out our sin, stress, and cluttered-up souls. Sitting at His feet, even if only for moments at a time, we learn to recognize His voice. Consequently it's easier to pinpoint the sound of His utterances amidst our routines, transitions, and emergencies. Most of all, time with God softens the heart, making it sensitive to His guidance.

Veteran missionary Amy Carmichael advised:

Give much time to quietness. For the most part we have to get our help directly from our God. We are here to help, not to be helped, and we must each learn to walk with God alone and feed on His Word so as to be nourished. Don't only read and pray; listen. And don't evade the slightest whisper of guidance that comes. May God make you very sensitive, and very obedient.

To keep a tender heart and open ears, we can follow the missionary's advice, represented in this poetic prayer by the Methodist minister John Wesley:

Open, Lord, my inward ear;

And bid my heart rejoice!

Bid my quiet spirit hear

Thy comfortable voice.

Never in the whirlwind found,

Or where the earthquakes rock the place;

Still and silent is the sound,

The whisper of Thy grace.

From the world of sin, and noise,

And hurry, I withdraw;

For the small and inward voice

I wait with humble awe.

Silent am I now, and still,

Dare not in Thy presence move;

To my waiting soul reveal

The secret of Thy love.

*Lord, my time is in Thine hand,
My soul to Thee convert;
Thou canst make me understand,
though I am slow of heart;
Thine, in whom I live and move,
Thine the work, the praise is Thine,
Thou art wisdom, power, and love—
And all Thou art is mine.*

With this prayer on our lips, we ready ourselves to hear God's voice.

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