



DOES GOD HAVE A VOICE?

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If God did not speak, the world would not exist.

If God did not speak, we would have no idea how to know Him.

If God did not speak, every person would be a law unto themselves and might would be right.

If God did not speak, we would be lost in our sin (the Savior would not have come).

If God did not speak, we would live in isolated, if not antagonistic, tribes (Jesus' Church would not exist).

If God did not speak, I think the whole world would be silent.

But God has spoken! And God speaks today! And life is bright because He does.

If God has a voice, how has it been heard?

The Godhead (Trinity) conferred among themselves to create humanity: "*Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness'"* (Genesis 1:26).

Angels have spoken in God's name to the likes of Abraham, Jacob, Gideon, and Mary and Joseph, the parents of Jesus.

God has spoken, and still speaks, through Creation (nature) – it was formed by His voice, and now carries His voice to the world.

Psalm 19: 1 The heavens proclaim the glory of God.

The skies display His craftsmanship.

*² Day after day they continue to speak;
night after night they make Him known.*

*³ They speak without a sound or word;
their voice is never heard.*

*⁴ Yet their message has gone throughout the earth,
and their words to all the world.*

Romans 1:20 Ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see His invisible qualities—His eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God.

However, what we may hear and know of God through His creation is limited, because it is wordless. If we want more than mysterious feelings and vague impressions, we need meaningful words.

God has spoken through Humanity, who hears His voice, and proclaims His voice, as:

- Individuals
- Priests
- Prophets
- Kings (authorities)
- Jesus
- Apostles
- Christians (the Church)

In summary, then, here are the ways God has spoken in the past:

- Creation – Trinity
- Formation – Humanity
- Judgment/Salvation – Noah
- Identification – Abraham
- Emancipation/Socialization – Moses
- Recovery of Hope – Prophets
- Redemption – Jesus, the Suffering Messiah

Here is the way God is speaking today:

- Proclamation – the Church of Jesus Christ

And here is a way God will speak in the future:

- Renovation – Jesus, the Conquering King

So, how did we get to where we are today?

By observing the Creation (which still, and always, speaks to those who are listening of God's glory).

But beyond that there are also:

- Audible words (rarely)
- Impressions (Spirit gifts)
- Visitations, visions, dreams
- Oral transmission (from one generation to another)
- Scripture (preserved in the Bible)

- Proclamation (words spoken in His name)

“The same Spirit who delivered the Scriptures to holy men of old speaks today in the hearts of those who gather around the written Word to minister and be ministered to.” - Dallas Willard

Blinded by What We Want

Many people have longed to hear an audible word or see an angelic appearance or for Jesus Himself to appear and speak with them, but as Willard noted, “our most sacred experiences often blind us.” Those who have enjoyed such encounters often become so fixated on their past experience that they can no longer hear God’s voice unless it comes in similar majesty and wonder.

Willard said, “People are meant to live in an ongoing conversation with God, speaking and being spoken to.” And that does not mean one ecstatic experience after another.

When Elijah ran from Jezebel’s threats and hid himself in a cave, God spoke His name to reassure him of his calling. As he stood on the side of the mountain, the Lord passed by, and a blast of wind struck the mountains, but God was not in the wind. The earth shook violently, but God was not in the earthquake. Lightning flashed and a wildfire raged, but God was not in the fire. Then a “still small voice...” (1 Kings 19:12).

This is what we should seek; not the fireworks and spectacular signs of God’s impact in the world (they only tell us where He has been and what He has done), but His living voice—bringing comfort and courage, wisdom and direction, purpose and power to our lives.

When God does act in extraordinary ways, some who witness it may go so far as to confuse the medium with the message and will worship the experience rather than the One who acted through it. If it happened to someone else, those who witnessed it often feel spiritually inferior until something similar happens to them.

Jesus affirmed: “*Man shall live by every word that comes from of the mouth of God*” (Matthew 4:4). This un-spectacular communication from God is within reach of every person—believer and unbeliever, young and old, male and female. If, indeed, life is the result of every word from the mouth of God that reaches our ears and penetrates our hearts and is embedded in our minds, it is fair to ask ourselves, “How lively am I today?”

God Speaks

As Christians we stand in a millennia-long tradition of humans who have been addressed verbally by God.

Willard referred to an issue of Newsweek magazine: The words “Talking to God: An Intimate Look at the Way We Pray” covered the front of *Newsweek’s* issue for January 6, 1992. The main article was devoted to some sociological studies of the practice of prayer undertaken in the United States. “This week,” the article said, “more of us will pray than will go to work, or exercise, or have sexual relations... 78 percent of all Americans pray at least once a week; more than half (57 percent) report praying at least once a day... Even among the 13 percent of Americans who are atheists or agnostics, nearly one in five still prays daily.”

“We might well ask, ‘How could there be a personal relationship, a personal walk with God—or with anyone else—*without* individualized communication?’”

Comedienne Lily Tomlin asked, “Why is it that when we speak to God we are said to be praying but when God speaks to us we are said to be schizophrenic?”

We are to be participants, not mere spectators.

“If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and heal their land” (2 Chron 7:14). If we humble ourselves and seek God, He will respond. Such interaction is part of our friendship with God.

What does it say about someone’s view of God that he or she uses the term *personal relationship* but there are no specific communications?

We need a *clear understanding* and a *confident, practical orientation toward God’s way of guiding us and communicating with us*.

First, *we need to understand that God’s communications come to us in many forms*. To those already mentioned, we now add these: vision, dream, prophecy, godly counsel, spoken and written words, impression in the heart, thoughts in one’s mind.

Second, *we may have the wrong motives for seeking to hear from God*. We all in some measure share in the general human anxiety about the future. Many people seek to hear God solely as a device for obtaining their own safety, comfort and sense of being righteous. (We seek to know in order, in some measure, to control.) For those who busy themselves to know the will of God, however, it is still true that *“those who want to save their life will lose it”* (Mt 16:25).

Third, *misconceiving the nature of our heavenly Father and of His intent for us creates a truly overwhelming problem* that blocks our understanding of His communication with us as His redeemed children and friends.

As E. Stanley Jones observed, “Obviously, God must guide us in a way that will develop spontaneity in us. (Otherwise, we would be mere puppets.) The development of character, rather than direction in this, that, and the other matter, must be the primary purpose of the Father. He will guide us, but He won’t override us.”

Can you be sure that God has *not spoken* to you? What events in your past *could* have been messages from God? Take some time later today to reflect on the details of some of these events and discover in what ways God has already spoken with you.

Learning how to hear God is not a magic or psychic ability that one adds to their toolkit. Such was the case with Simon, formerly a sorcerer. When the Samaritan people began to respond to the Gospel preaching of Philip, Peter and John came down from Jerusalem to pray for them that they might receive the baptism with the Holy Spirit. As they laid their hands on them, they were receiving the Holy Spirit.

Acts 8:18 Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money, ¹⁹ saying, “Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.” ²⁰ But Peter said to him, “May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!

Learning to hear God’s voice is to be sought *only as a part of a certain kind of life*, a life of loving fellowship with the King and His other subjects within the Kingdom of Heaven. Here are three guidelines (with thanks to Willard again) for pursuing that kind of life.

1. Love God with All Your Being

Only our *communion* with God provides the appropriate context for *communications* between us and Him. Such communion requires a certain humility. Not the kind that denies self-worth, but the kind that trusts and waits for God to act. We show this humility when we refrain from *pretending* we are what we know we are not, and from *presuming* a favorable position for ourselves, and from *pushing* or trying to override the will of others. Trust God to make a way for you and to provide all that you truly need.

2. Mere Humans Can Talk with God

The humanity of Moses, David and Elijah, of Paul, Peter and Jesus Christ himself—of all that “wonderful company of riotously human women and men” (Willard) whose experience is recorded in the Bible and in the history of the church—teaches us a vital lesson: *Our humanity will not by itself prevent us from knowing and interacting with God just as they did.*

3. Hearing God Doesn’t Make You Righteous

God’s purposes are *not* merely to support us or make us look and feel secure in our roles or to make sure that we are right. Indeed, being right is one of the hardest burdens humans beings have to bear, and few succeed in bearing up under it gracefully. Have you seen the little sign

that reads, “Lord, when we are wrong, make us willing to change, and when we are right, make us easy to live with!”? It’s a good prayer, isn’t it?

Hearing God in Scripture

The open secret of many “Bible-believing” churches is that only a very small percentage of their members study the Bible with even the degree of interest, intelligence, or joy that they bring to bear upon their favorite newspaper or magazine.

Some imagine they are not “important” enough for God to speak to them. Well, you *are* important enough for God to communicate with you. You were important enough for God to give His Son’s life for you and to choose to inhabit you as a living temple. Obviously, then, you are important enough for Him to guide you and speak to you whenever that is appropriate.

I bought a new cap recently. It says, “That’s what I do, I FIX STUFF, and I know things.”

But I say to you today, don’t just read the Bible to *know things*. The Bible is not an encyclopedia of the world’s knowledge. All of its narratives, poetry, and prophecy have just one aim: to help you know God through Jesus Christ. Any other aim in reading it will fall short.

To the leaders of religion, Jesus said:

John 5:39 “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; ⁴⁰ yet you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life.

Because Bible reading is *not* primarily about learning things (collecting and retaining intellectual information)—rather, it is the medium through which the Holy Spirit (its Source) communicates with us—it must be read with the aim to “catch His voice” (that “still small voice”). Like a whisper, you can miss it if you are not attentive.

As you read the Bible, look for something to catch your attention. It may be something that puzzles you or challenges what you believe. It may be a question about, or stemming from, something you are reading. Perhaps a connection with another passage of Scripture, or with the memory of an experience in your life. It may be the dawning of illumination—an “Aha!” moment. As you read, look for the Holy Spirit to highlight something for you in ways like these.

You may read only one sentence before the light shines, or you may read several chapters. If nothing at all catches your attention by the time you complete your reading for the day, pause to ask the Lord to show you soon what He wants you to know about Him and His ways. It will come to you.

Sometimes, your reading is simply storing the Scripture in your heart and mind for the future, when the Spirit will bring it back to the surface of your consciousness to teach you something.

If you don't store up His words today, He will have less to work with in the future, and clarity will be elusive.

Receiving Guidance

One aspect of hearing God is receiving His guidance. Guidance is a process where some person, thing or sequence of events is brought to follow a definite course. In the most inclusive sense the train is guided by the rails upon which it runs, the driver guides the car, the writer guides the pen or keyboard, the radar guides the airplane, the stars guide the ship, the teacher guides the class, and the parent guides the child. (Willard)

God could, certainly, *determine* the course of our lives by manipulating our thoughts and feelings or by arranging external circumstances—what is often called the “closing” and “opening” of doors in the “sovereign will” of God. But He can and does also guide us by *addressing* us. Humanity's actual experience of God, profusely documented in history, shows this.

Each way God communicates with us has its own special uses, but all the ways are not equally significant for our life with Him. In terms of overall importance, the written Word and Jesus, the living Word, rank far above a voice or vision that may be used by God to speak to an individual. And from among the individual's experiences of hearing God, the “still small voice” has a vastly greater role—in frequency and significance—than anything else.

In the still small voice of God we are given a message that bears the stamp of God's personality quite clearly and in a way we will learn to recognize. But, in contrast with other cases, the *medium* through which the message comes is diminished almost to the vanishing point, taking the form of thoughts that are our thoughts, though these thoughts are not *from* us. In this way, the human spirit becomes the “lamp of the Lord” (Prov 20:27).

We will explore this dynamic topic further this month, as Pastor Tim addresses us next week about God's purpose for communicating with us. Then I will return to speak about becoming familiar with the Spirit's voice in our lives, and, finally, we will experiment together with homework in listening for and making note of God's voice to us.