

Week 4: The Voice

I want you to think for a moment about expectations. When Christmas or your birthday comes, you have expectations about the gifts you'll receive. When you're about to receive a visit from a friend you've not seen for a long time, you have eager expectations about what that visit will be like. When a relative has long overstayed their welcome—you have even greater expectations about when they will leave!

But there's another side of expectations—the expectations that are placed on you by others—and your own expectations as well. Someone from John Ortberg's church made a list of unspoken expectations that the average person in their community and church has, based on the culture in which they live: [Pastors, feel free to make your own list that fits your community.]

- You will have good health, live a long life, be slim and physically fit, be toned, have great hair, make-up, and body shape.
- You will be intelligent, articulate, and computer savvy.
- You will get into a good school and do well in school. Of course you'll be popular.
- You will be sexually desirable without being promiscuous.
- You will pursue all your gifts and talents to the point of mastery.
- Of course you'll marry a Christian (who has met all these criteria).
- Once married you'll communicate wonderfully, your life will be filled with romance, and as a couple you'll share chores and have regular date nights.
- Your home will be beautiful (all the walls are naturally painted this year's cool colors).

- Your home will be clean, well-decorated, and organized. The landscaping (and your home *will* be landscaped professionally) will be picturesque.
- All your meals will be gourmet, low-fat (or low-carb, or high-protein). When you have children, all the baby food will be made from scratch.
- The kids will be naturally cute, healthy, smart, well-behaved, get into the right schools, escape all danger of peer culture but still be well-liked and popular.
- As a Christian you'll do ministry, be wise, respected, humble, have a daily quiet time, be a prayer warrior and a knowledgeable Bible student.
- Your goal is to be rich without being snotty, confident but not abrasive.
- You will create family traditions, with your holidays being beautiful and meaningful.
- Your children will be raised in the faith, and you won't do anything to damage their spiritual relationship with God.
- You will maintain deep friendships, extended family relationships, write letters, remember birthdays and anniversaries and send gifts, keep in touch with old friends, come to Bible study, stay relaxed, friendly, and easygoing ... did I leave anything out?

All of these expectations are the result of various voices that have spoken into our lives through the years.

There are other voices which speak into our souls that shape us as well. Some are voices of affirmation:

“I believe in you.”

“You are important to me.”

“I know you can do it.”

“I love who you are.”

And others are voices of minimization:

“You’re an idiot!”

“You can’t do anything right!”

“You’ll never accomplish much in life!”

“Why aren’t you as good as your brother (or sister)?”

Painfully, some of those negative voices may have even come from home. A demanding parent. A demeaning sibling(s). Or a parent who wasn’t demanding—they were silent—and you never heard their voice of love or affirmation.

Add to those voices the voices we hear from TV, radio, print media, work, etc.—and there are a lot of noises competing for our attention.

Out of all the voices ... what if the voice that was booming through your heart and mind was God’s and you heard it clearly? What if, during the course of every day, you recognized and responded to God’s voice speaking directly to you? Do you think that might have a reorienting effect on your days? How can we hear the voice of Jesus—our Shepherd—and *lock in* on that voice and follow him?

When we talk about being fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ, it means that we know what he desires and we follow through. We can pick his voice out from all the others—and we don’t veer away from where our Shepherd leads. Jesus had some pretty profound things to say about this. Listen to how he describes the relationship he has with his true followers:

“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.... My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.” (John 10:14–15a, 27)

In the original language, the word that Jesus uses for “know” doesn’t mean to simply be aware of something. It means to have an intimate relationship that is trusting and safe.

Around here we talk a lot about becoming a fully devoted follower of Jesus. How do you know if you are one? How do you really know? What’s the indicator? According to Jesus, a key indicator of our followership is if we are listening for his voice and responding immediately to what he says. We’ll talk a little later about how to distinguish his voice.

In the New Testament, the word for a fully devoted follower is “disciple.” It means to be a student or an apprentice to someone. It was quite easy to tell if someone had entered into that kind of learning relationship in the first century. Disciples like Peter, James, and John had made a decision—to spend every day with Jesus to learn from him how to be like him. They watched him, studied him, talked with him, worked with him. He had invited them to be his students—his friends and partners. That’s how they spent every day. That’s what it meant to be a fully devoted follower.

It’s important to understand that mostly they did the same activities as everyone else. They ate, slept, worked, played, and learned. They just did them all with Jesus, and they couldn’t believe they got to do this. Sure, they had left a lot of things—jobs, families, friends, security—but they did that with great joy. They couldn’t believe they had an opportunity to be with Jesus and listen to him.

For the disciples, the worst day of their lives was Good Friday when Jesus died. They thought their lives had died with him. The best day of their life was Easter Sunday, when Jesus defeated death and was raised again to life. Jesus said that now nothing—not even death itself—nothing could keep his friends, his students, his disciples from being with him. Jesus’

final words, recorded in the gospel of Matthew are, “I am with you always, even to the very end of the age.” Always.

That promise of Jesus is just as true for you and for me today. If you have asked Jesus to be your forgiver and to lead every area of your life, then you can be assured that he is with you and will never leave you. And not only that, but he desires to be in a conversational relationship with you as well.

It’s strange and scary that in many Christian circles we have lost touch with the fact that God actually speaks to us. In fact, that thought alone can be a bit unnerving for most of us. We feel like it would be presumptuous to think that we might possibly have “heard” from God. And even scarier that he may want us to either *do* something or *change* something. So like a little child, we theologically stick our fingers in our ears and make noise with our life so that we can’t hear his voice.

Besides, many of us have been taught through our religious upbringing that God only speaks directly to the “paid professional”—the clergy—who will interpret what God said for everyone else.

When it comes to hearing God’s voice, one of the things that holds us back from believing he could be speaking to us is the list of misguided, wrong, or evil deeds done because someone has claimed to have “heard” from God.

A guy named Roger Barrier has written a book called *Listening to the Voice of God* and in it he tells about an experience he had with one of these misguided persons before he got married. Here’s how he tells it:

“One evening I was sitting beside my fiancée in a little church we occasionally attended during college. Shortly before the service began a woman spoke quietly to Julie.

“‘I have a word from the Lord for you,’ she said. ‘You will be like the prophetess Anna in Luke 2. You will be widowed after seven years and spend the rest of your life ministering in sweet service to God.’

“My first instinct was to tell the intruder I doubted God told her anything—that she had imagined it. If God had something to tell Julie, he was perfectly capable of telling her himself, but I held my tongue and looked at the young girl who would soon be my wife.”

Barrier continues, “I hate to admit that I worried occasionally during the first seven years of our marriage. On the evening of our eighth anniversary, I intentionally stayed awake until midnight. As I stood in the bathroom, I finally knew that woman’s dismal forebodings were nothing more than a figment of her misguided imagination.”

Think about that ... over seven years of worry because someone claimed to have “heard” from the Lord. Even so, far worse things have been done in humanity because some person or group claims to have “heard” from God.

On a personal level, every one of us knows the sin and junk in our lives, and we think that there’s no way that God would choose to speak to us. We begin to subconsciously—and sometimes consciously—rule ourselves out from the possibility that God could even want to talk to us. We think:

- I’ve done too many wrong things in my life ... there’s no way that God would have much interest in me.
- I’m not a good enough Christian yet. When I get to the place where my act is cleaned up ... *then* maybe I’ll be ready for God to speak to me—but he wouldn’t choose to do that any sooner.

- I don't know enough of the Bible ... when I know more, then he might choose to speak to me.
- God wouldn't be interested in me ... I've never done much good in my life—it's not like I'm an important person in the church or anything.

I'll try to say this as subtly as possible: ***DON'T YOU BELIEVE A WORD OF IT!*** Those are the voices that need to be ignored, discounted, and rejected. If you have those words or anything like them going through your mind when we talk about hearing from God, then it's your place to say something like:

“On the basis of the authority of the Bible I reject those ideas as contrary to it. When I asked Jesus into my life, he joined me right then. Imperfect, a sinner, not knowledgeable about the Bible—he loves me ‘as is’ and wants a relationship with me just as I am.”

Over the last three weeks we've talked about God's promise to pursue a relationship with us. We've spent time studying about our choice to be with Jesus—that he doesn't force us into a relationship with him, but it's entirely up to us. And we talked last week about the Holy Spirit's role of guiding and empowering us each day. Each of these builds on the other.

And if all this is true—and it is—that God wants a relationship with us, that we can choose to have a relationship with him (or not), that God places his Spirit in us to guide us, then we'd best become students at hearing God talk to us.

The truth is that God is not distant, but close—closer than you think. Listen to these verses from the pages of the Old and New Testament which reflect God's ongoing voice being heard:

“And [Adam and Eve] heard the sound of the LORD God ...” (Genesis 3:8)

“The LORD ... said to Abram ...” (Genesis 12:1)

“God said to Moses ...” (Exodus 3:13)

“The LORD said to Joshua ...” (Joshua 1:1)

“The LORD said to me [Isaiah] ...” (Isaiah 8:1)

“The word of the LORD came to him [Jeremiah] ...” (Jeremiah 1:2)

“The word of the LORD came to Ezekiel ...” (Ezekiel 1:3)

“The Spirit told me [Peter] ...” (Acts 11:12)

The same God who spoke in the Bible is the same God who speaks today. As we talked about last week, for those who are Christ-followers, God has placed his Spirit within you as a gift to lead, guide, empower, convict, comfort, and equip you. It is a gift you can never lose—but one which you can quench, subdue, and ignore because he will not force his way on you.

In fact, you have to decide if you want to hear from God or not. The writer to the Hebrews writes this warning: “See to it that you do not refuse him [God] who speaks.” (Hebrews 12:25)

Pay very close attention to this: the desire to hear from God also means a desire to obey him and not refuse him. So if we really desire to hear his voice, it means that we are ready and willing to submit to what he is going to say and follow through with immediate obedience. It does not mean that we are going to weigh it out and decide through selective listening what we’re going to do with it.

We’re going to take a closer look at a couple biblical accounts of God speaking and then list some guidelines to help us discern God’s voice through each day.

One of the most famous Bible stories of God speaking and making his presence known is centered around the prophet Elijah. The incident occurs in 1 Kings 19, but first let’s get some

context by checking out 1 Kings 18, which describes a huge spiritual victory that takes place on Mount Carmel.

There Elijah meets evil King Ahab and a huge gathering of people, including 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah. Elijah sets up the ground rules for the confrontation about to take place. Elijah challenges the prophets of Baal to set up an altar of rocks, sacrifice a bull and put it on the altar—and pray for Baal to send fire from heaven to consume the sacrifice. When they are done, he gets a turn. Whoever gets an answer has a real God. Fairly straightforward rules of engagement.

To make a long story short—but it’s worth your reading when you go home—Elijah wins. God sent such intense flames from heaven that even the rocks of the altar burned up. The prophets of Baal lost big-time. In fact, they didn’t survive the day.

However, even though Elijah won, even though God got glory ... the king and queen were pretty angry about losing their prophets and so they were gunning for Elijah’s life. So he takes off and hides in the desert wanting to die. Now take a look at 1 Kings 19:9–13:

“There he went into a cave and spent the night. And the word of the LORD came to him: ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’

“He replied, ‘I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.’

“The LORD said, ‘Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.’ Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the

LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

“Then a voice said to him, ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’

God was showing Elijah that, yes, he can do *huge* and *spectacular* things to make his presence known—like sending down fire from heaven. But lasting spiritual work doesn’t happen in big “extravaganza” moments of God’s power, but in the ongoing quiet of his voice and presence in the lives of his followers.

One of the best books you can read on discerning God’s voice is called *Hearing God* by Dallas Willard. In it he writes: “The still, small voice—those inner promptings—is still the most preferred and most valuable form of individualized communication for God’s purposes.”

Another account of someone hearing God’s voice in the Old Testament occurs in 1 Samuel 3. It’s the story of a young boy who was dedicated to serving God at the tabernacle by his mom. Beginning at about the age of three, Samuel grew up serving in God’s house.

Eli is the high priest and Eli and God are watching out for this little boy, Samuel. One night Samuel is lying in bed, and he hears his name. And he figures Eli called him, so he runs into Eli’s room. “Here I am.” And Eli says, “I didn’t call you.” It happens again, and he runs into Eli’s room again and Eli says, “I didn’t call you.”

Did you ever know of kids who interrupt their parents’ sleep at night for all kinds of odd reasons? But Eli finally realizes what’s going on. Look at 1 Samuel 3:7:

“Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.”

So when it happens a third time, Eli knows that God is speaking to Samuel, but Samuel does not know it’s God.

In other words, it's possible for God to speak to somebody and for that person not to know it's God speaking. Learning to discern the voice of God is an acquired skill. It's learned behavior. And the ministry of Eli is to help Samuel learn to recognize the voice of God in his heart.

I want to point out right now one of the most critical variables in entering into a life of partnering with the Holy Spirit, and it is a beautiful phrase. Take a look at 1 Samuel 3:19. Samuel is learning from Eli how to discern God's leading, God's guiding, God's whispers in his life. The Bible says:

“The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up”—and here's the phrase—“and he let none of his words fall to the ground.”

In other words, Samuel let none of God's words go unheeded. Anything God said, Samuel did. Any time God said, “Go,” Samuel went. Any time God said, “Speak,” Samuel spoke. He let none of God's words fall to the ground. He caught them all. He said, “God speak, your servant listens.”

I want to tell you, in this whole business of learning to discern the voice of God, being immersed in Scripture, having wise friends to get counsel from, and so on—those are all important. But perhaps most important is that you make the decision to say, “God, speak, and whatever you tell me to do, I will do. Even if it feels a little awkward or a little hard, I will let none of your words fall to the ground.”

If you have a prompting and you think it's from God, and it's consistent with Scripture, and it moves in the direction of the fruit of the Spirit—toward love and toward joy and peace, etc.—do it! Don't let a single word fall to the ground.

If it's to encourage somebody, to share your faith, to do an act of kindness, to confront in love, do it. Don't let a single word of God fall to the ground. And some of you today need guidance. And your prayer today just needs to be, "God, guide me." God really does that.

In his book, *Listening to the Voice of God*, Roger Barrier offers ten excellent guidelines for discerning God's voice. You might find these helpful ...

1. *God tends to speak with gentle leadings.* Don't be looking for the spectacular "fire from heaven," but listen for the gentle whisper, the inner promptings. Let your spiritual ears become sensitized to God's voice.
2. *God's voice produces freedom.* Jesus said, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:30)
3. *God tends to speak when I am seeking him.* The prophet Jeremiah reported God as saying: "Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart." (Jeremiah 29:12–13)
4. *When God is speaking, there is a sense that everything is under control.* God wants us in control of our faculties and decisions. God related that "the spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets" (1 Corinthians 14:32). Paul warns in 2 Timothy 2:24–26 that Satan wants to ensnare and control people when *he* speaks. Paul's hope is that the Christians "will come to their senses and escape the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will." When self and Satan speak, there is an inner sense that something is out of control.
5. *God convicts of specific sins.* John 16:8 teaches that the Holy Spirit "will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment." As Barrier writes: "My experience is that when God convicts of sin, his voice is quite specific: 'Yesterday at 2 p.m. you did *this*.' Satan and self, on the other hand, often accuse in broad generalities, leaving me with an

unfocused sense of haunting guilt centered around poor choices, questioned priorities, unfinished responsibilities, or unmet expectations. Now when I feel accused or have a nagging sense of unspecified guilt, I pause and consider why I feel so guilty. If there is not a definite sense of conviction about a specific sin, I know the feelings are not from God's Spirit."

6. *God speaks with 100 percent truth that can be tested by the Bible.* Make sure that your prompting is in agreement with the overall teaching of Scripture and with basic biblical themes. Anybody can pick one or two verses out of context, twist it around, and build a cult. You want to try to keep it all in balance with Scripture. That's why it is so important to be sure that you're spending regular time each day reading the Bible, building it into you, so that it's the framework for your thinking, for your responding.
7. *God's voice always leads to a deep, abiding sense of peace.* Sometimes that peace comes when we surrender to his voice and not let his words "fall to the ground." Obedience sometimes precedes peace. For example, Philippians 4:7 promises, "The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

That sounds great and it's a very true promise from God. And yet many people claim that verse and wonder why they don't have peace. But they don't realize that it's predicated on the obedience of the previous two verses. Philippians 4:4–6 says: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."

8. *Get wise counsel from Christ-followers you trust!*

9. *Make sure that what you are sensing is from God really agrees with the character and nature of God.* For example, God's voice wouldn't approve of a couple living together outside of marriage or of an extramarital relationship so that a person can be "happy." Those things would be contrary to what the Bible teaches and contrary to God's holy and pure character and nature.
10. *Ask yourself, "Does this agree with my conscience?"* You need to know that it's real natural to ask yourself, "Is it possible that maybe, just maybe, after going through this checklist—I could be mistaken about God's promptings? Could I possibly have missed something and be heading way off-base?"

I love what Dallas Willard says about this. He writes: "Of course you could be wrong. God doesn't intend to make us infallible by his conversational walk with us, but you are usually correct."

In other words, don't minimize, don't rationalize. Don't compromise.

So here's how it'll play out in our lives this week—how we'll make the choice to be with Jesus and listen for his voice—to begin to increase our sensitivity to hearing the voice of our Shepherd.

Tomorrow you'll have some leisure time. Of course, in our society, there's one primary activity that people engage in during leisure time, so it leads to the question: "Would Jesus watch TV?" Well, it depends on what's on.

If you watch TV, watch it, but watch it with Jesus and talk to him about what you see. If he wants to change your habits, he'll speak to you about that. You can trust him to do that. He really will.

When you read tomorrow, read with Jesus. Talk with him about what you're reading. The newspaper then becomes an invitation to pray for the world, for what's happening on the streets of your neighborhood, your city, in Washington, in Afghanistan, and in the West Bank. Just talk to God about the world.

Tomorrow, whatever the day holds—household errands, interruptions—every one of them is an opportunity to be with Jesus. When you forget, and you will, when you mess up, and you will, here's a real important rule just for tomorrow: no beating yourself up. No failing tomorrow because every moment is another chance. God just keeps sending them. That's grace. Every moment is a chance for you to be with him.

Tomorrow night when you lay down your head on the pillow, review the day. Thank Jesus for going with you. Thank him for his gentle whispers. Remember the moments when you heard his voice. Decide if you'd like to spend another day with him on Tuesday. If you would, invite him because he'd love to.

One thing you must do is decide. You will not drift into this way of life. Our culture will not make it happen; you must decide. So I'm going to give you a moment right now to decide. I'm going to invite you to write one last thing on your bulletin right now, so take your pen. Maybe it's just one word like, "yes," to express your heart or, "together," to remind yourself that you'll go through the day together. Maybe it's a phrase, "I'll walk with you."

Right now, as you write that on your bulletin, tell Jesus, "I want to spend tomorrow with you, listening to your voice." Put that paper someplace where you'll see it all day, maybe on your desk, taped to a mirror, or maybe in your calendar. Remember that this same offer came so many years ago to Peter, James, and John, and it changed their lives.

This is the best offer you'll ever have. You will never in your life—I don't care what happens, I don't care how much money you make or what ladder of success you climb—you will never have another offer like this one. People miss it all the time. People miss it every day, day after day, until the end of their lives. Some people go through their whole lives and they never take it. It's your day. Don't miss it.

Let's pray. [Let the room become still and silent] "Speak God ... your servants are listening.... [LONG PAUSE] ... Amen."