



Hearing God

Recognizing God's Voice

We are coming to the conclusion of a time of focus on Hearing God, on cultivating a conversational relationship with God as his companions in life. We've seen in our scriptures and even our own histories, that the intimate, ordinary way of communication—conversation—while not exclusively, is nevertheless the primary way God speaks to you and me. For it is through his union with the human voice and the human spirit that *most fully engages the faculties of free, intelligent beings who are socially interacting with God's love in the work of God as his collaborators and friends.*"¹

Yet the question remains, How do we recognize the voice of God? Today and next week, we'll attempt to provide one another with the resources to mature in confidence and humility in understanding God's voice. But let me say this at the outset, it is only through experience that we will come to know with sureness the voice of God in its most common forms. We must remember that there is no formula for hearing God. No three steps or secret token to get what you want (information, favor, clarity, peace) from Zoltar or Oz.

"...when God speaks and we recognize the voice as his voice," Dallas Willard reminds us, "we do so because our familiarity with that voice enables us to recognize it. We do not recognize it because we are good at playing a guessing game,"² or because we have unlocked a hidden practice, but instead because we have spent time listening and tuning our senses to the unique characteristics of his voice. In the same way a child learns to distinguish the sound of its mother from the other mothers on the playground, so to do we learn to identify the voice of our heavenly Father from our impressions, the variety of voices that infiltrate our minds, and even the tempter's voice.

The ability to distinguish the voice of protective, loving, authority is not unique to human beings. It is a rather natural (i.e., God created) ability for domesticated animals. The lowly nature of this innate ability makes God's people's inability and struggles to recognize God's voice a regular point of mockery by the exilic prophets.

'the ox,' says Isaiah, 'knows its owner
and the donkey its master's crib;
but Israel does not know
my people do not understand.' (Is. 1:3)

'Even the stork in the heavens,' adds Jeremiah,
'knows her times;
and the turtledove, swallow, and crane
observe the time of their coming;
but my people do not know
the just decrees of the LORD.' (Jer. 8:7)

¹ Willard, 126.

² Ibid., 226.

In comparison with the beasts of the field, we humans find in our advancement and technology that we are—unlike those beasts—“taxed with the forethought of grief” and “in fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be.”³ We find ourselves perplexed because we know not our master’s dwelling nor the time in which we live, not the just degrees (the spoken order) of the LORD...though understanding and revelation have been gifted to each of us. Remember Joel’s prophesy that we’ve referenced throughout the series.

Maybe we are offended by the simplicity of this God-given ability, which has atrophied amid achievements of progress and consciousness and the understanding of good and evil. Perhaps that is why Jesus’ illustration of the nature of our recognizing God’s voice was so divisive among the Jews. Here how Jesus describes our ability to recognize the Father’s voice,

‘Truly, truly I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers...

All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them...The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly...

I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.’

(Jn. 10:1-5, 8, 10, 14-16)

So, the good news is that just as the natural disposition and ability of the farm animal is to distinguish the voice and provisions of its master, so too is the natural disposition and ability of you and me as “God’s flock.” That we will recognize his voice and distinguish his voice from strangers is the assumption Jesus has for you and me.

But here is the thing, we can only do so by experience with others, by learning to listen and follow the voice that the other sheep are following—anyone entering the fold through Jesus (v. 7-9). Here is how Dallas Willard describes our issue and the natural process,

“We may mistakenly think that if God spoke to us we would automatically know who is speaking, without having to learn, but that is simply a mistake—and one of the most harmful mistakes for those trying to hear God’s voice. It leaves us totally at the mercy of any stray ideas we have picked up about what God’s speaking is like, [and the common sleuthing of putting together the clues of impressions from the Spirit, biblical passages, and circumstances to figure out what God is saying to us].

³ Wendell Berry, “The Peace of Wild Things”

Perhaps our inability to recognize his voice right off is a result of our fallen and distorted condition. Or perhaps it lies in the very nature of all personal relations—certainly you and I did not recognize the voice of whoever is now most dear and intimate to us the first time we heard it. Or perhaps it is because of the very gentleness with which our heavenly Father speaks to us. Whatever the reason, it seems that at first we must be told that God is speaking is to us [which is what we have been saying this entire series] and possibly even be helped to detect his voice [like Eli did for Samuel].

Only later do we come, without assistance, confidently to distinguish and recognize his voice as his voice. That ability comes only with experience. With assistance from those who understand the divine voice from their own experience and with an openness and will to learn on our part, we can come to recognize the voice of God without great difficulty.

On the other hand, we should understand that it is in Satan's best interest to make an inherent mystery of God's word coming directly to the individual. In this way the power of God's specific word for our lives can be hindered or totally lost. Without qualified help (which works alongside our own desire to learn and readiness to cooperate) God's direct word will most likely remain a riddle or at best a game of theological charades. This is generally the condition of the church today, I suspect. This would explain why such great confusion and difficulty exists about what it means really to walk with God (Micah 6:8). Such confusion allows evil impulses to move into the vacuum and sweep us away [as we unwittingly sow seeds to the flesh rather than the Spirit]."⁴

So we need some help to cultivate what will become instinctively normal. Today and next Sunday, as we conclude our focus on Hearing God, we'll try and provide some of those helps to you. Helps that you then have to apply, begin to experience as you converse with others about what you are hearing as they are doing the same and who have a bit more practice.

Remember, that we come to recognize the good shepherd's voice because we have spent time listening and tuning our senses to the unique characteristics of his voice. So what are the attributes of God's voice that distinguish it from the strangers' voices, the thief, and robber who wants to take life, possess it, use it, sell it, steal, kill, and destroy it? There are, according to Willard⁵ at least three:

The quality of God's voice: its tone and style (i.e., slow or fast, smooth or halting in its flow, indirect or to the point, etc.)

The spirit of God's voice: its attitudes and personal features (i.e., passionate or cold, whining or demanding, timid or confident, coaxing or commanding, etc.)

⁴ Willard, 220-221.

⁵ Ibid., 227-234.

The content of God's voice: its information conveyed ("Although this is rarely the most immediate sign of who is speaking, it is, in the end, the most conclusive mark, for it reveals the history and conscious experience of the speaker.")

Let's look at each characteristic individually and in contrast with the potential voices of the strangers.

THE QUALITY OF GOD'S VOICE | *It's weight*

When we think about the quality of a person's voice, we usually have the sound of their voice in mind; the unique tones, inflections, volume, and pace that is perhaps only slightly different than someone else's, nevertheless that distinguish one person's voice from another. This is why I can, for example, hear my children distinctively even when their voice is in unison with that of their classmates in a recital or lost in the jumbled chaos of the playground. Someone unfamiliar with my children's voices would hear only the unified voice of the mass or the conglomeration of sounds on the monkey bars. In either case, no one voice is distinct. **But, when we know the quality of a particular voice because we know the person whose voice it is, we can draw their words out of a crowd of noises.**

Now, we have said that God's voice, unlike that of my children or my wife for instances, does not primarily come to me in audible form. Instead, he communicates with me through my thoughts and perceptions, through union with the human spirit, my spirit. So, the unique quality of God's voice is something different than inflection or cadence. As Willard puts it, **"The quality of God's voice is more a matter of the *weight* or *impact* an impression makes on our consciousness."**

The weight of God's voice has to do with authority and power. It's like a gentle and steady force that inclines us to agree and compels us to respond, like your soul is saying, *"Yes, this is true and right."* E. Stanley Jones describes the distinguishing characteristic of the quality of God's voice this way,

'Perhaps the rough distinction between the quality of God's voice and our own subconscious voice is this: The voice of the subconscious argues with you, tries to convince you; but the inner voice of God does not argue, does not try to convince you. It just speaks, and it is self-authenticating. It has *the feel* of the voice of God with it.'

Again, this is a reality that if you have experienced it, you need no explanation, but if you have not, no explanation will do. We can think of the quality of God's voice this way; the thought or feeling comes to the mind as clear and compelling: "Serve my church," "Go and make amends," "Don't watch that," "Be on guard for your heart," "Rest in my love," "take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground," "Who told you you were naked?" "Do not be afraid," "The LORD is with you, O mighty man of valor," "Where were you when the foundations of the world were being laid?" "This is my Son in whom I am well pleased," As opposed to challenging and questioning voice of the enemy, "Did God say..." "Would God want that for you..." *"If you are the Son of God, command these stones...If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down...All these things I will give to you, if you will fall down and worship me."* (Matt. 4:3-9)

While I might argue back with the voice of God in union with my spirit, I am not arguing with the truth or the rightness of what is said; I am simply struggling to submit. Think about all the times in scripture when God spoke to people, and they certainly tried to argue with God about what he said, but not for clarity but because of fear and doubt. Instinctively they knew, even if they didn't immediately dare to follow, that the words spoken to them—within in their thoughts and perceptions—were from God.

Perhaps John Wesley describes the distinct quality of God's voice best when he said,

“How, I pray, do you distinguish day from night? How do you distinguish light from darkness; or the light of a star, or a glimmering taper, from the light of the noonday sun? Is there not an *inherent, obvious, essential* difference between the one and the other? And do you not immediately and directly perceive that difference, provided your senses are rightly disposed?

In like manner, there is an inherent, essential difference between spiritual light and spiritual darkness; and between the light wherewith the Sun of righteousness shines upon our heart, and that glimmering light which arises only from 'sparks of our own kindling': and this difference also is immediately and directly perceived, if our spiritual senses are rightly disposed.

To require a more minute and philosophical account of the manner whereby we distinguish these, and of the criteria, or intrinsic marks, whereby we know the voice of God, is to make a demand which can never be answered: no, not by one who has the deepest knowledge of God.”

Think about when Jesus spoke and the weight of his words. For example, in Matthew 7:29, after Jesus had spoken and awakened faith in many of the hearers, this what the gospel writer had to say, “for he [Jesus] taught them as one having authority, not as their scribes.” There is something unique about God's voice that sets it apart from other voices: including our own, those we respect, and those in authority over us. There is a truth and a rightness we can affirm, even if we struggle to accept and obey what's being spoken to us.

THE SPIRIT OF GOD'S VOICE | *It's personal features*

The first distinguishing characteristic we begin to recognize in God's voice is the quality or weight of his words to us and in us. The second distinguishing characteristic is the spirit of God's voice, the unique and consistent features of the temperament (attitude and personality) of God's speaking.

Jesus says over and over again to his disciples that to have known him and seen him is to have known and seen the Father. He also said that when he would depart from his time in history, that he and the Father would send the Holy Spirit to help us recognize the Father through brining to memory the words of Jesus.

So, when we talk about the spirit of God's voice, we are talking about the spirit of Jesus, “the overall tone and internal dynamics of Jesus' personal life as a whole.” We can know the attitude and personality of God's voice through the mood and personality of Jesus—in how he interacted with the people and what he communicated

about the nature of the Father in verbal and experiential form. And what did Jesus teach and demonstrate about the nature and character of the Father's speaking to his people—in contrast to the prophetic zeal of John the Baptist, the blindness of the religious leaders, and the selfish arrogance of the elite? Jesus showed us that the voice of the Father is “exalted peacefulness and confidence...joy...sweet reasonableness and...goodwill. His voice is not the voice of a bully. It will not run over you or your will.”⁶

The attitude and personality of God's voice reflect the characteristics of the waiting Father who is longly searching the horizon for a glimpse of his prodigal child, the generous landlord who when failed responds with double acts of mercy, the blessing master who doubly honors those whom he gifted, the good shepherd who protects and leads his sheep through the valley's of darkness to still water and green pasture. God's voice is confident, sure, but inviting, confirming a welcome into his presence. Convicting but not condemning. Truthful, yet full of mercy and compassion. A frankness that is free of hidden motives, and thus allows us to be vulnerable in our response.

Because, as we have said, the quality of God's voice carries with it a weight, and intrinsic authority and power, there is no need for God to shout or be hysterical when he speaks. Such is the nature of the still small voice in Elijah's story, remember?

“Any word,” says Willard, “that bears an opposite spirit most surely is not the voice of God.” James, the brother of Jesus, would seem to concur. He says,

‘But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.’ (James 3:17-18)

When God speaks to us, we hear a voice whose quality weighs on us and whose spirit invites acceptance. We also hear a voice whose content source we can recognize and verify.

THE CONTENT OF GOD'S VOICE | Its Conclusive Mark

Content is an essential part of recognizing the person speaking. “Although,” contends Willard, “this is rarely the most immediate sign of who is speaking, it is, in the end, the most conclusive mark, for it reveals the history and conscious experience of the speaker.”

The content of God's voice can be measured, evaluated against, and identifiable with the content of our Scripture. As Willard and many others contend, “The content of a word that is truly from God will always conform to and be consistent with the truths about God's nature and kingdom that are made clear in the Bible. Any content or claim that does not conform to biblical content is not a word from God. Period!”⁷

⁶ Willard, 230.

⁷ Willard, 231-232.

This does not mean that every word you hear from God will be a direct quote from Scripture. **What it does mean, is that whatever words you hear from God will fall in step with the principles and ideas of God and how we relate to him (and others) found in Scriptures, and more specifically in the “actions, spirit, and explicit statements of Jesus himself.”**⁸

So, if you think God has told you that you need concern yourself with the welfare of your community, the injustices of a neighborhood, or the wellbeing of those opposed to you...then you didn't hear God's voice because Jesus said to love our neighbors and enemies, and seek the good of and unity of our community. Or if you think God has given you a unique insight into someone else's issue and placed you over them...then you didn't hear God's voice as Jesus said we are bad judges. We'll be talking more about these explicit statements of Jesus next month.

Because the content of God's voice is so essential to recognize his voice as opposed to our own desires/visions of the world and even the enemies temptations—both of which twist scripture to our own demise by the way—it is imperative that we immerse ourselves in the Scriptures, and most specifically in the life and teachings of Jesus. For, as Jesus says, “whoever follows me will never walk in darkness [i.e., mishear] but will have the light of life” (Jn. 8:12).

When we know the words of Jesus and the scriptures given us, “we are set free to be open to the new and special [and specific] things that God wants to do in us and through us. We [are] free to develop [the confident companionship as collaborators with God]—free and safe within the pattern of Christ's life and teachings.”⁹ .

CONCLUSION

Through shared experience with others who recognize God's voice and follow the good shepherd, we too, learn to distinguish God's voice from our own and others. We come to recognize the quality (weight) of God's voice, the spirit (personality) of God's voice, and the content (conclusive mark) of God's voice. And so, when the Good Shepherd calls, we follow, going in and out of the pasture in the security and certainty of his loving care and communication. But we'll only get there through experience! There are no short cuts.

Let's pray

⁸ Ibid., 234.

⁹ Ibid.

COMMUNION

As we learn to recognize the quality, spirit, and content of God's voice, we come to know with confidence the life of abundance Jesus leads us into, a life in which we know with surety what God desires for us—not to earn our place but because we are joining with him in his work most clearly seen through the broken body and shed blood of his Son—to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God (Mich. 6:8).

As we receive today the evidence of God's love, let us hear his voice in our prayed response:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
Where there is sadness, joy;

O Divine Master,
Grant that I may not so much seek
To be consoled as to console;
To be understood as to understand;
To be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Savior, and Friend.
Amen.