

Before the invention of the refrigerator, people used icehouses to keep their food cold. Icehouses had thick, insulated walls with no windows and a tightly fitting door. During the winter large blocks of ice would be cut from rivers and lakes and stored in the icehouse. They were then covered in sawdust to further insulate them. In this way, the ice could last well into summer even to the next winter.

You could then go to the icehouse to get ice for your icebox at home. They even had ice delivery.

James Hamilton tells the story of one man who lost his valuable watch while working in an icehouse. He and his coworkers searched diligently for it, carefully raking through the sawdust, but never found it. A young boy nearby heard about lost watch and their futile search. He snuck into the icehouse during the lunch hour and soon found the watch.

Amazed, the men asked him how he found it.

"I closed the door," the boy replied, "lay down in the sawdust, and kept very still. Soon I heard the watch ticking."

Often the question is not whether God is speaking; the question is are we listening. There are many ways we can listen: reading, meditating, solitude and silence, conversation, listening to good teaching, watching the beauty of a sunset, listening to great music, however, there are a few things that are essential to hearing God, and I want to talk about those this morning.

Hearing God through His Word

The most essential practice when it comes to listening to God is hearing him through his Word. Scripture is the primary language through which God speaks. I think it's a mistake when some say that Scripture is the only way God speaks to us. We saw last week that God spoke throughout history in all sorts of ways from angels and dreams to burning bushes and talking donkeys. It's a mistake to put God in a box today and say that He cannot use any means at His disposal.

However, that being said, Scripture is called God's Word for a reason. It is His Word, His revelation, His will revealed to us. It is also the primary means through which God speaks in our lives. The apostle Paul calls the word of God the sword of the Spirit. It is the only offensive weapon in our spiritual arsenal. Everything else is defensive. Hebrews 4:12 calls Scripture a sharp two-edged sword that can discern the thoughts and attitudes of our heart.

We cannot claim to want to hear from God, while ignoring His word. If we do not spend quality time in the Scriptures, we will never be able to hear God in any consistent or accurate manner.

2 Tim 3:15-17

16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

If the only time you hear God's word is on Sunday morning, you're probably not going to hear God's voice much at all the rest of the week. Knowing His Word is what helps us recognize His voice. It's the language He speaks. It's how we discern His voice from our own desires and the deceptive lies of the evil one.

Hearing God through his word is more than just reading. More than just knowing in our head. It is knowing in our hearts and applying it to our lives. It requires meditation.

Meditation might some of us. We think it is a little weird. Maybe we think it's only for super spiritual people. Or we think it's something Buddhists or Hindus do. Sure, there are lots of religions that practice some form of meditation, but they also eat breakfast too, and we don't have a problem with that.

The reality is that everyone meditates, whether they know it or not. Meditation is simply when we focus our minds with some intensity and duration over a certain thought or idea. Some people focus on their favorite team, their favorite hobby, something going on in the news, politics, a company memo you received at work, a great new song you heard on Spotify.

The question of meditation is not *if* you will meditate, but on *what* you will meditate. You can spend hours ruminating on all sorts of things. How much do you meditate on Scripture?

Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the Bible, and the whole chapter is an acrostic beginning with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet going all the way from A to Z listing the wonders of God's Word. It uses the word meditate eight times. Check out verses 97, 98, and 99

*Oh, how I love your law!
I meditate on it all day long.
98 Your commands are always with me
and make me wiser than my enemies.
99 I have more insight than all my teachers,
for I meditate on your statutes.*

Hearing God speak to us through His word also involves whatever steps we take to focus our minds, and prepare our hearts to listen. How many of you when you're looking for a new address turn down the radio to see better? I like to tease my wife about it, because it's usually my music she's turning down, but there's a good reason she does it. We all do it. From a medical perspective it is to reduce our cognitive load – the amount of incoming data entering our brains, so we can pay more attention to what we are doing and the decisions we are making.

The same thing is true of us spiritually. We need to cut out the noise entering our lives, so we can pay more attention to hearing God better. We talked quite a bit about this recently, so I'm not going to revisit it so soon. However, it can be very helpful to set aside time just to listen to

God through His word, to have a sacred space that sets the right atmosphere so we can better hear God through His Word.

II. Hearing God through His Spirit

Secondly, we can hear God through His Spirit. If you are a baptized follower of Jesus, you have the Holy Spirit of God who dwells within you. Acts 2:38 says, *“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”*

This is a unique and essential part of our relationship with Him. This is why don’t have to rely on getting emails or text messages from God, because His Spirit resides within us and we can relate to God directly. Paul tells us in Romans 8:14, *“For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God.”* We are His children and a part of that Father-child relationship is the Spirit’s leading in our lives.

This is an area that either overly fascinates Christians because of its mystical quality and sense of spiritual power, or it intimidates Christians, because it seems to be the area of hearing God that is most prone to abuse. People can say and do anything with the justification “God told me to do it, The Spirit led me.” No one can argue with that.

So, we must proceed with caution. This is part of the reason I spent so much time last week leading with some words of caution, context, and clarity. So, if you missed that, go back and listen to that message, so you can properly digest what I’m saying here.

Given the caveats of what we said last week, primarily these two things – 1. Scripture is the final arbiter of truth. What God revealed in His word always trumps anything you think He might have said in your heart. God will never speak to you personally something that contradicts and conflicts with what He’s said in the Bible.

This leads us right to guardrail number two. We are always capable of misinterpreting the inner voice of God. Listen to last week if you have questions about that.

That being said, it doesn’t mean that God doesn’t speak to us personally, and that we can’t hear his voice. Call it what you will. An inner voice of God, impressions, spiritual nudging, or the still small voice of God, God can and does lead His children, and we can learn to better hear His voice through the Spirit.

Scripture contains His complete moral will. It applies to all Christian in all places at all times. It doesn’t require an addendum, and it doesn’t need updated to version 2.0. Where we need God to speak to us personally though are in practical questions, or issues of application.

Is God telling me to take a different way home this time? Perhaps there is a danger He is protecting me from, or there is someone He has placed in my path and wants me to help. Is God leading me to pay for the groceries of the person in front of me in line who just had the

cashier take a couple items off the tab? Or maybe the Spirit is warning not to help this person. He's flashing a red, warning flag. What's the most loving thing I can say or do to my wife right now after the horrible day she had at work? How can I bring grace and healing to her heart? How do I listen to and love my child, yet also provide proper discipline for their acting out? Does God want me to take job A or Job B, or am I free to simply choose?

These types of questions and more are times where it can be truly helpful to be tuned in to God speaking through the Spirit.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 2:11-12

These are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit.

The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. 11 For who knows a person's thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. 12 What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us. 13 This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words.[c] 14 The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit. 15 The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments, 16 for,

"Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?"[d]

But we have the mind of Christ.

It is the Spirit within us who helps us understand the mind of Christ. This helps us know the heart of God. The more we grow in Christ, the more we understand the mind of Christ, the better we are able to hear his voice.

This doesn't mean God will make every decision for you. You don't have to listen for some inner impression telling you whether to put on your left sock or right sock first in the morning. Even in the big decisions, God still expects us to use our God-given, scripturally informed wisdom, to use our brains and experience to make good decisions.

However, there are times where God says, "I want you to go here. I want you to do this. Take this job. Don't buy that house. Wait on that purchase. Don't go out with him again. Yes, you need to talk to that person."

We can totally miss these promptings if we are not prepared to hear His voice. If we are not in the habit of listening, his voice can be completely lost in the chaotic noise of the world or in the tumult of our own thoughts.

Friends, it's all about relationship. God's voice and spiritual leading isn't about learning some spiritual technique. It's all about relationship.

After 30 years of marriage, Teresa and I have all sorts of ways of communicating simply because we know each other. We've got our own insider language. We have inside jokes that only we get. I can communicate a whole volume of information just with the mention of a name, an event, an experience we shared together.

Just a quick glance across the table and something dropped in conversation, can tell me all sorts of things about what she's thinking. That just comes from spending a lifetime with her, living with her, and knowing her.

The more you grow in your relationship with God, the better you will hear His voice, and the more you will be able to follow it.

Hearing God through Your Conscience

Another way we can hear God's voice is through our conscience. We understand the conscience as a part of the human psyche that registers either guilt or affirmation based on the things we do and say. Now, everyone has conscience whether they are Christian or not. But a follower of Jesus who is equipped in the Word, and who has the indwelling of the Holy Spirit can train their consciences to be a reliable detector for the voice of God. God can speak to us through our conscience, if we have properly trained our conscience to listen for the right things.

Think of your conscience as an internal alarm system that lets us know if we are getting hotter or colder to the voice of God.

Rom 9:1

I speak the truth in Christ-I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit-

1 Tim 3:9-10

They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience.

The conscience has to be trained. It is not a sure-fire method for knowing God's leading. It is only as accurate as we have trained it to be. All people are created with a conscience that points them to God's eternal qualities.

Rom 2:14-15

Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, 15 since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.

Our consciences, however, can be skewed away from the truth. They can be calibrated to better hear the voice of God, or to be deaf to it.

In 1 Cor. 8 Paul talks about those with weak and strong consciences. Those with weak consciences are new, immature believers. The more mature believers however, have trained

their consciences to be stronger. Also note that stronger doesn't necessarily mean more active. In fact in 1 cor. 8 it is the weaker conscience that is overly sensitive.

You can also stick your fingers in your ears, so to speak, to ignore what God says through your conscience.

1 Tim 4:2

Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron.

Hearing God through the Community of Faith

I want to talk about one more way we can hear God speaking to us and that is through other believers. Often God uses other people to help us discern his voice. Revelation 2 and 3 contain 7 letters from Jesus to 7 churches. At the end of each of these letters, Jesus says, "Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

The voice of Jesus and the voice of the Spirit are one and the same, and often the Spirit speak in the context of the church. If we want to hear what Jesus is saying, we have to listen to the church. We have to be listening in the context of community.

We see an example of this in Acts 13 where the Holy Spirit uses the church in Antioch of Syria to call Barnabas and Paul to be the church's first missionaries. This wasn't a private call to these two men. This was a public call that came within the community of faith.

Luke doesn't tell us exactly how the Holy Spirit indicated to the church that this is what He wanted, but I find it interesting that the Spirit's leading came in the context of Christian community.

First they were part of a plurality of godly leaders, men of the Word, capable prophet-teachers. It also came in a group of believers who were in the midst of worship and prayer and fasting. It was out of this community that God's leading came. I don't think that was coincidental or accidental. I think the Christian community was integral to God's leading, and it played an important role.

Listening to God may be an intimate and personal experience with our Creator, but it isn't always a private experience. God doesn't save us as spiritual lone rangers, isolated islands of faith independent of other believers. He saves us into a community of faith. This community Jesus calls his own body, his bride. We usually refer to it simply as the church. In Greek, it is ekklesia which means the ones who are called out. We are called out together, in a community.

There are some people whose words consistently guide you closer to God's truth and joy and love. Then there are others whose words consistently lead you further from God. We need to make time for and keep close those that draw us closer to God. God will act in our lives through them. He will speak through them. He will guide through them.

Last week one of the warnings I mentioned was that there was always the risk that we could misunderstand our own subjective feelings as the voice of God. Listening to God through the community helps guard us from this danger. Godly friends can help confirm or question the inner voices we are listening to.

In the movie *A Beautiful Mind*, there is a scene that really illustrates the importance of this. John Nash was hailed as one of the most brilliant minds of the twentieth century. The word genius was an understatement. At a young age, he won the Nobel Prize. While still in his twenties he was a distinguished professor at MIT.

However at the height of his career he suffered a mental breakdown. He suffered delusions of paranoia and heard voices. He had to learn over time how to discern from what was really being said by people really there, and not the imaginary voices he heard.

Toward the end of the movie there is a scene where he comes out of the classroom and meets a man waiting to speak to him whom he has never seen before. The man says to Nash, "I've come to talk with you about being awarded the Nobel Prize." Not knowing for sure whether or not the voice is real, he stops one of his students, "Excuse me, do you see a man standing here? Is he in your line of vision? Is he for real?" The student says yes, so Nash turns to the man, "Okay, I'll listen to you now." In the same way the Christian community can help us better listen to God.