

Why God Speaks to Us Directly

Despite the overwhelming evidence in the Bible that God speaks directly to His children, there still remains a segment of the Christian world that seems adamantly opposed to the idea that God speaks today and that people can learn how to hear His voice. In most cases, the rationale revolves around some notion that hearing God is too mystical, too prone to error and emotional distortions, and it sounds too New Age. Supposedly, all we need as Christians in order to live well is an objective understanding of the Bible, a strong will, and some serious motivation.

Unfortunately, this belief in objectivity seriously overestimates our abilities of discernment when it comes to making sense of daily life. It also ignores the basic nature of the gospel and what it means to be a Christian. Our new life is not merely a test of obedience. God has invited us into a vibrant relationship with Himself, a relationship that has substance, one we can actually experience. Reducing all of this to a merely cognitive process strips the New Covenant of almost all of its power to transform lives. Even more, the belief that God stopped talking at the end of the first century requires us to water down major passages of Scripture and ignore the fact that what we learn most from Scripture is the absolute necessity of an interactive relationship with God.

Regarding our ability to live from our knowledge of Scripture alone, even conservative scholars who agree on basic principles of interpretation often have a wide range of understanding on very fundamental issues about the spiritual life. Furthermore, limiting God's voice to the written Word in no way ends the confusion about how to live the Christian life. How do we create strong loving bonds between people? How can I love someone I do not like? How do I forgive someone when I really think what they did was unforgivable? What do I do with a head/heart split inside myself. If I simply override my feelings and force myself to act in a way that looks like "obedience," then all I have accomplished is cleaning the outside of the cup. How do we clean the inside? I need something more than willpower and a commandment.

Second, the Bible is primarily a collection of stories about people who were led or not led by the Spirit – written down to show us what that looks like. Paul tells us we have those stories specifically to show us what we need to know about how to live (1Cor.10:11). *If then we have no direct means to be led by the Spirit, how are we to make any sense of those stories?* The one thing they do *not* tell us is how to live life without God's direct leading. In fact, they often provide examples of how our best idea of what to do apart from God's leading falls short of what God has in mind, such as when the disciples wanted to keep the children away from Jesus or send the crowds home, or when King Saul decided to do Samuel's job. Consider how very different the story of Cornelius might be if God had not visited Peter previously and given him the understanding he needed in order to override his preconceived ideas about Gentiles. If anything, *these stories show us how utterly dependent we are upon the leading of the Spirit for navigating through life.* Rather than trying to figure out what the Bible characters learned and then trying to copy the principles we distill from their experience, what if we developed the kind of relationship with God they

had, so we could learn from God the way they learned! Seems like we missed the most important lesson of all if we ignore how they wrestled through the issues with God in order to live well.

Third, these kinds of stories make a lot of sense when we see the bigger issue, that the level of discernment we need in order to see what God sees is way beyond us (Isa.55:9). If God does not show us how to see and discern, then we are left to “our own understanding” (Prov.3:5) which is precisely what gets us into trouble in the first place! To say that your understanding is guided by Biblical principles does not solve the problem. You must still rely on your powers of reason and judgment to decide not only what principles to apply in a given situation, but how to be proactive in loving someone, what kind of love would be most appropriate for this one person at this time, and so on. We may feel very “Scriptural” in our actions and yet be way off base in terms of what is truly needed or loving at the time. How often have we looked back on something we did years earlier (even as a Christian) and wished we had known then what we know now? That should be evidence enough that we have a lot to learn besides doctrine. What if we had known better at the time how to engage with our Mentor to ask for help?

Fourth, Jesus was very explicit about the ministry of the Holy Spirit as a mentor for life (John 16). As He was preparing His disciples for the coming changes, Jesus told them directly that He was passing on His job of training to the Holy Spirit. Given the context of His statements, one would have to perform some very interesting theological gymnastics to interpret those promises as a prophetic description of the Bible. And we today are as in much need of a mentor as were the first twelve disciples.

Fifth, if the Bible is our only source of God's living word to us, then one would have to say that for much of history the majority of His life-giving word was beyond reach for most Christians. That being the case, in what way would His promises to be with them and guide them make any sense at all? Is Christianity a way of life that requires literacy or access to another literate person in order to grow? Did Christianity require the invention of the printing press in order to flourish? These are not trivial problems. It may be easy to equate God's word to the printed text in modern times in modernized countries, but that perspective has some serious implications for millions of Christians over many centuries who would have no significant access to the truth necessary for life.

Sixth, *Jesus addressed this very issue* with the religious leaders of His day. Having no other direct source at the time, they were looking to the Scriptures for every detail on how to live. But Jesus changed all of that, arguing that the purpose of the Scriptures was to point to Jesus Himself, and that life was something that came from engaging with Him, not the printed Word (Jn.5:39-40). How are we to make sense of this interchange if His intention was to point us back to the Word as our only source on how to live?

Seventh, while the Bible is “living and active” we can all see that it does not do its work automatically. Nearly every Christian who has attempted a devotional life has gone through periods of time where reading the Bible seemed more like doing homework than feeding the soul, despite their best efforts. We can try to find ways to fault the person involved, or we can consider the possibility that we need divine help to quicken the Word to our heart and mind, and most of us have had little to no training on how to

engage the Holy Spirit in this way. If we are routinely missing God's ministry to us of bringing the Word to life, our experience with dry devotionals actually makes perfect sense.

Eighth, any concern that listening prayer might be a form of New Age simply does not hold up under close examination. From one end to the other the Bible is full of examples of people hearing from God and being directly led by the Spirit. These were holy events in which our God was deeply involved and the enemy was defeated. No where does God give us any reason to suspect that all of this would change, and that any effort to connect with Him directly would become a dangerous or sinful action. Fostering this fear is not only foolish, it is actually a form of quenching the Holy Spirit. Refusing to learn how to hear the voice of God just because the enemy has managed to counterfeit listening prayer makes about as much sense as refusing to speak at all because some people swear or say hurtful things.

Finally, the Christian life is not just about knowing the right things to do, and that is not the only reason God would want to speak to us. His word is life, bread for our soul (Isa.55:1-3). His presence with us is more than an idea, it is a living reality that we can experience and be aware of. God wants to have an authentic relationship with us, and relationships are almost impossible without direct communication. Our needs go way beyond correct answers to our questions about what to do. We need to be loved! We need to hear God's heart for us. And just as *the manner* in which a person says something to us is as important as *what* they say, so hearing God speak things into our hearts in exactly the way we need to hear them is part of what makes a conversational connection to Him so life-giving. God's voice carries with it the power of life. And we need that life in order to live as God intended.

As important and inherently full of life as Scripture is, we need God Himself in order to live. God created us as relational creatures, He desires a relationship with us, and His directives are ultimately about being relational. He promised to be with us and guide us in all things, not just by giving us principles to live by, but by mentoring us in life and by speaking truth into our heart that we need day by day. And He was very careful to be quite explicit about this matter of our listening to His voice.

Are there problems that come with learning to hear from God? Absolutely! But if we let our fears stop us from learning how to discern God's leading, then we are already doing exactly what we claim we are trying to avoid, namely, letting our emotions run our life instead of following after God.

Learning to discern God's voice and how He leads us in life will take a lifetime. But with practice, this is an area we can grow in. The wonderful fruit it bears in our life is truly evidence that we are engaging with God Himself. And we also have the witness of many of the great Christians throughout history who have left us their stories of how they heard from God. These stories were never meant to be the exception. They are examples of the kind of relationship we can all have with God. We just need to be trained and mentored in how to listen and discern.

For more help in learning how to listen to the Spirit of God, please see the book
Whispers of My Abba by David Takle.