

HEAR MY VOICE*

Living by the guidance of the Holy Spirit does not have to be complicated. It starts with simply trusting that you do indeed hear His voice. Sometimes at first, it doesn't seem like a voice speaking. Actually, it seems more like an inner knowing about something, usually about something that you have no rational way of knowing but somehow, you just know. You might call it an impression or a sense of what is really happening underneath the surface of a situation or of what you are supposed to do about something.

We begin living by the Holy Spirit by trusting that this inner knowing is, in fact, the voice of God. Begin by trusting that Jesus does speak to you because you are His sheep.

*John 10:14, 27: "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and **my sheep know me-- ... My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.***

NO MORE CASTING LOTS

When Jesus ascended into heaven and told His disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the promise of the Holy Spirit, they obeyed His order and went into the city. However, while they were waiting, they took some Kingdom business into their own hands. Without the Holy Spirit, they still regarded the Kingdom of God in an earthly manner and were anticipating that Jesus was going to return imminently as a warrior King to restore great power and dominion to Israel. (See Acts 1:7.) They read the Scriptures (without the Holy Spirit) and concluded that it must be God's will for them to appoint someone to replace Judas who had betrayed Jesus and hanged himself. They created criteria for this person's qualifications (without the Holy Spirit) and chose between two prospective candidates in the most godly manner they could think of – they cast lots. (See Acts 1:12-26.)

In essence, this is a spiritual coin toss. To us this seems foolish but to them, it was a scripturally approved and proven methodology for settling differences. (See Joshua 7:14; 1 Chronicles 24; Nehemiah 10:34.) God even controlled the lot casting of Gentiles. (See Jonah 1:7; Ezekiel 21:21.)

*Proverbs 16:33: The lot is cast into the lap, **but its every decision is from the LORD.***

*Proverbs 18:18: **Casting the lot settles disputes** and keeps strong opponents apart.*

However, let us learn from the example of the pre-Holy Spirit disciples and not do what they did. It can be tempting for us, even with the Holy Spirit, when we perceive and believe that we understand the will of God, to rush ahead and try to bring it to pass using our own way of doing things. This is especially true when we have good ways of doing things and even "Biblical" ways of approaching situations based on our theology or understanding of God's principles.

The problem is that our logical, practical, common sense methods may not be at all the way that God has designed to bring His will to pass. Like the first believers, there are times when God tells us to wait for Him and instead, we busy ourselves doing things that He did not ask us to do – and we base it on Scripture! There are times when we put all of our own criteria on something or someone even though that may or may not be the criteria that God has for that thing or person. There are times when, even though we are very prayerful, we are simply wrong because we are not waiting for God and listening for the Holy Spirit the way that we should. The disciples were told to wait for the Holy Spirit before they went anywhere or did anything for Jesus. In our walk with the Lord, we also must learn to wait for the Holy Spirit, both for His prompting and His power, before we go anywhere or do anything in Jesus name. Like them, we need a

new guidance system to lead us into all truth and show us what to do and how to do it. Otherwise, we ourselves are no better than lot casters.

*John 6:63: **The Spirit [God's way] gives life; the flesh [our idea] counts for nothing.** The words I have spoken to you--they are full of the Spirit and life.*

*Zechariah 4:6b: **'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,'** says the LORD Almighty.*

After the Holy Spirit was poured out, there is no record of disciples ever casting lots again. The Holy Spirit spoke to believers and directed their movements according to the will of God. Even for us today, if we want or need wisdom from God, all we have to do is ask.

*James 1:5-8: If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, **you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.** That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.*

Once we have asked and received wisdom from the Holy Spirit, all that is required of us is to believe that we have heard God. Then, we stand firm in what we have heard and obey the promptings of the Holy Spirit until what God told us becomes a reality.

WAYS TO HEAR GOD'S VOICE

When we think of talking to a person, we know that they can speak to us in a variety of ways. For example, they can speak to us face to face, call us on the phone, write us a letter, or send us a gift. When they are speaking, they might answer us with a yes or no, speak in plain terms, tell us what to do or where to go, tell us a story, or show us a picture in order to express their point.

Hearing from God is as simple as hearing from another person – as long as we do not overcomplicate it. Remember, God's design for mankind in the Garden of Eden was to be in constant open two-way communication with us. Jesus has restored us to spiritual access to God's guidance so that we can hear His voice and do what He says. You could say that having the Holy Spirit within us transfers us from an "external guidance system" to an "internal guidance system." No longer do we have to guess or try to interpret what God is saying through random events or seeming coincidences. God speaks to us.

Here is a brief snapshot of various ways that God speaks to us by the Holy Spirit.

Inner Impression: The primary way that God begins to speak to us as His children is through inner "impressions" in our hearts. As described above, it seems as if we know that we should or should not do something or go somewhere even if it might contradict what we think in our natural mind. As we begin to follow these impressions, God will guide us into deeper communication with Him.

Inner Urim & Thummim: In the Old Testament, the High Priest wore a breast piece which contained stones called the Urim & Thummim. These stones were used as a way of obtaining answers to important questions with a "yes" or "no," "this one" or "that one," "go to war" or "don't go to war." (See Numbers 27:21; 1 Samuel 14:41, 28:6; Ezra 2:63; Nehemiah 7:65.) Now that we have our High Priest, Jesus, dwelling inside of us through the Holy Spirit, it is like we have an inner Urim & Thummim. This means that we can consult God anytime about anything with a "yes or no" type of question and receive an answer in from Him.

Inner Direction: God also speaks to us with plain directive speech that we hear from the Holy Spirit within us. Jesus is our King and sometimes, He gives us instructions or guidance which He desires for us to follow. He also loves us and sometimes, He tells us to do or not do something for our own good. This happened frequently with the early believers in the Book of Acts.

*Acts 8:29: **The Spirit told Philip,** "Go to that chariot and stay near it."*

*Acts 11:12a: **The Spirit told me** to have no hesitation about going with them.*

(See also Acts 10:19, 11:28, 13:4, 16:6-7, 20:22-23, 21:4, 11.)

In the days of the first followers of Jesus, the majority of the civilized world were illiterate. They had no access to the Holy Scriptures and even if they obtained access, they would not be able to read them. The letters of the New Testament were read out loud to the communities of believers that gathered together in homes to worship Jesus. They lived by the guidance of the Holy Spirit for everything they did and everywhere they went. This is the way Jesus lived and God desires for us to live this way too.

Dreams and Visions: When the Holy Spirit was poured out on the day of Pentecost, Peter quoted from the Book of Joel that God's sons and daughters would "see visions and dream dreams." (See Acts 2:17; Joel 2:28.) Dreams and visions are largely similar in that they are a visual image or a picture in motion that comes into our minds or plays across the stage of our consciousness. This does not mean that every picture we imagine or dream we have is from God. However, some dreams and visions are from God and should be taken seriously as God speaking to us.

When dreams and visions are from God, they can be subject to interpretation. We must seek the Lord and ask Him to help us interpret correctly. For example, when Peter had a vision of a sheet coming down from heaven, a voice also spoke to him with the interpretation. The interpretation was so far from what Peter anticipated that the Lord repeated it three times until Peter finally understood. (See Acts 10:9-17.) Therefore, we cannot be presumptuous that we automatically know what God is saying to us but must ask Him to help us. He will.

Through Scripture: God also speaks to us through His written Word. Even though the first disciples did not have access to the Scripture, in most cases, we do. The Word of God is the written record of God's communication with mankind from the beginning and shares with us what is still yet to come in the times ahead. When we read the Scripture with the Holy Spirit dwelling inside of us, it may seem as if certain words, phrases, stories, or passages are whispering to us, or standing out, or even shouting to us. This is the Lord communicating to us through His Word. This said, we cannot randomly select what parts of the Word of God we like to listen to and do not want to hear. We must approach the Scriptures with reverence for their holiness and authority in our lives. We stand upon the promises of God to us while also submitting ourselves under the authority of the One who authored it.

If we have access to the Word of God and are able to read, we must devote ourselves to studying it, meditating on it, and growing in our knowledge of God through understanding it correctly. This is the predominant way that we will grow in understanding God, His character, His ways and dealings with people, and what Jesus died to give us. This said, it is one thing to read a story about your best friend's interactions with other people but, it is another thing to spend time talking to and interacting with your best friend for yourself.

Scripture becomes our check and balance as we receive guidance and hear the Lord speaking to us to test whether or not they align with the Spirit of the Lord who wrote the Scriptures. This said, there are times when the Scriptures seem to contradict themselves (even though God is never actually contradictory.) For example:

*Proverbs 26:4: **Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you yourself will be just like him.***

*Proverbs 26:5: **Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes.***

Another example is how at the Red Sea, God told Moses to be still and lift his staff over the waters until they parted but at the Jordan River, God told Joshua to have the Israelites enter into the river so He could stop the flow. If Joshua had presumed based on the writings of Moses what Israel was to do when they encountered a body of water, they would still be waiting on the other side of the river!

All of this is to say that as supreme and overriding as the Word of God can be in our lives, it is only through relationship with God and hearing from the Holy Spirit that we will know which Scripture to apply at the right time.

Prophecy: God speaks to us today through the prophetic word. He can do this directly to us or He can send someone else to speak to us on His behalf about things that are happening in our lives, things God

wants us to do, or things that are to come. There are many instances in the Old Testament of people who were used by God to deliver His Word to His people and there are several New Testament examples of this as well. Now that the Holy Spirit dwells in each one of us, according to the Scripture **all believers** can prophesy. This said, prophesying is a gift of God that we learn to function in. Like developing a skill, we grow in our accuracy, delivery, and interpretation of what God is saying. This said, like dreams and visions, not every prophesy is from the Lord. Therefore, we must seek the Lord for interpretation in order to respond correctly according to His will. (See 1 Thessalonians 5:20-21; 1 John 4:1.)

Audible Voice: God can and does sometimes speak in an audible voice. (See Matthew 3:17; John 12:28; Acts 9:3-7, 10:13.) This is like hearing the voice of a person in the room with you. This is rare but it does still happen today.

Circumstances: God does not actually speak through circumstances, but His hand upon our life can be evidenced through our circumstances. This can be challenging to interpret because sometimes we have walked ourselves into something that God never intended for us and yet, we are upset with God for it. (See Proverbs 19:3.) Other times, we think positive events prove that we are on the right path when in fact, it is the enemy leading us into a snare. Long story short, it is not the most accurate way of hearing from God or interpreting His will. Jesus died so that we can hear His voice.

Listening to the Lord: If we desire to hear the Lord more, we have to position ourselves to listen more to Him. This can be done through prayer, journaling, fasting, practicing His presence, and spending prayerful time with other believers. Regardless of how we choose to approach the Lord, the point is that we need to allow Him time to speak rather than filling the whole time with our own chatter.

Face to Face: Jesus calls us His friends. (See John 15:14.) What He desires is for us to have face to face communication with us, like a man speaks to His friend. This does not mean that Jesus will always appear to us but that we know His voice the way we know our best friend's voice. It is no longer riddles and mysteries but plain speech from one friend to another. This is the relationship Jesus had with the Father while He walked in a flesh like ours on the earth. This is the relationship He wants to have with us while we are still on this side of heaven so that we can know Him and move in step with Him. This is the language of love and spiritual maturity. (See 1 Corinthians 13:9-11.)

*Numbers 12:6-8a: He [the Lord] said, "Listen to my words: "When there is a prophet among you, I, the LORD, reveal myself to them in visions, I speak to them in dreams. But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. **With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the LORD.**"*

NOT DOUBTING – ABIDING

One we have heard God, there are three primary ways we will be tempted to doubt His guidance. Jesus told the Parable of the Four Soils about a farmer who sowed seeds on 4 different kinds of soils. (See Matthew 13:1-23; Mark 4:1-24; Luke 8:4-18.) In this parable, the seed represents God's word, and the soil represents the condition of our hearts to receive and believe what God has said. We do not have time to dig fully into the Parable of the Four Soils but, instead, we're going to use it as a template for understanding how to stand firm in the Holy Spirit's guidance.

The first way we are tempted to doubt what God has said to us is through the enemy. The same serpent who tempted Adam and his wife to eat from the wrong tree in the Garden of Eden by saying to them, *Did God really say...?*, will say the same thing to us. Of course, I am not referring to a literal serpent but a spiritual one who is constantly contradicting or twisting what God did indeed say. In fact, it seems that whenever God truly has said something, that contrary voice is right there saying, *Did God really say...?*, to get us to doubt and abandon God's guidance. Be alert for this, and don't allow the enemy to snatch away your confidence.

The second way we are tempted to doubt what God has said to us is through others misunderstanding us and the trials which arise in our lives between the time that God gives a promise and the time when

the promise or purpose is fulfilled. We set out to obey God, and then our friends abandon us or pick on us or tell us that we've lost our mind to be doing such a thing. Then, everything seems to go wrong which would seem to prove our friends to be right...except they're not. It's just another way of testing our faith and causing us to question, *Did God really say...?* Be ready for this and be prepared to stand on God's promises through misunderstandings, persecution, trials, and attacks until His word is fulfilled.

The third way we are tempted to doubt what God has said to us is through our desire for other things, usually temporal things like comfort, money, status, or security. We set out to obey God and then, some other opportunity comes up that would pay us more money and/or we convince ourselves that God wants to bless us in ways that are, in truth, a distraction. Or, the responsibilities in our lives seem to take up all of our time so that we find ourselves unable to do what God has said. This includes even "good" or "godly" things like serving in the Church, taking care of our families, or working to make a living. Or, somehow, God's way just seems too hard, or it seems that we could have our desires fulfilled faster if we did it our own way or the world's ways. When these temptations come, we find ourselves asking, *Did God really say...?* This is why it is important to keep our hearts set on Christ and His Kingdom and things of eternal value so that these temporal things hold less value in our lives. God knows what we are eternally responsible for and He knows how to guide us in all of it.

But finally, there is a fourth soil in this parable and that is the soil that stands firm and endures through the questions, trials, confusion, and temptations all the way to receiving the promised outcome. This is the person who has remained or abided, in God's word and the things that He has promised.

*John 15:4-8: **Remain in me**, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. **Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.** "I am the vine; you are the branches. **If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit;** apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. **If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.** This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.*

The word for remain in this passage means "to abide, continue, endure, keep, wait for, and not become different." While abiding can be challenging, it is not strained. All a branch has to do to remain in the vine is to allow the vine to fill it with sap and receive all that the vine has to give it.

Similarly, when we believe that we have heard God speak to us, we have to remain, continue, endure, and wait, receiving all that Jesus wants to share with us without hardening our hearts until what He says come to pass. Then, we will produce much fruit.

*Hebrews 3:15: As has just been said: "**Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion.**"*

*Proverbs 3:5-6: Trust in the LORD with all your heart and **lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him**, and he will make your paths straight.*