

Hearing the Voice of the Lord



**Practical Steps in Learning To Recognize
and Respond to the Lord's Voice**

By Chris Simpson

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An Incredible Dream

One night the king had an incredible dream. God Himself appeared to him and said, “Ask for anything at all and I will give it to you.” Even in his subconscious state, Solomon was amazed. Anything? His mind raced for a moment, but then the true humility of his heart surfaced.

He said to the Lord, “How good You were to my father David to allow his son to sit upon the throne. I feel like a little child in the face of this great responsibility. If there’s one thing I need more than anything else at this point in my life, it’s a hearing heart! So, Lord, give to me the ability to hear Your voice clearly and distinctly so that I may know how to be a faithful and wise king.”

This pleased God greatly. Rare indeed was it that one of His children made such a selfless request. He then told Solomon that he would be given a hearing heart and that as a result he would be the wisest man who ever lived.

Suppose God were to appear to you in a dream tonight and offer you a similar thing: “Ask for anything at all and I will give it to you.” (Note: The choices you make in a dream often reveal the true nature of what’s in your heart.) Honestly, what would be your first response to God’s offer? More money? A desired relationship? A successful career or ministry? A long life? While there’s nothing wrong with any of these requests, they may reveal that your priorities need some readjusting.

Apparently Solomon never regretted his decision, for he later said, “*Wisdom is better than rubies; and all the things that are desired cannot be compared with it.*” (Prov 8:11)

The Visitor

One day Jesus went to visit a few friends in a little village called Bethany. When He came to the house, Martha welcomed Him inside. She was very excited to see Him, as it had probably been some time since He'd been that way. After a few pleasantries, she excused herself to hurry to the kitchen to prepare Him an afternoon meal.

Meanwhile Mary, her sister, came in and quietly curled up at His feet, asking questions and enjoying His peaceful presence. After a while it began to be evident that Martha was feeling annoyed across the house in the kitchen. We all know how someone can communicate feelings of anger by slamming a cabinet door and banging pots and pans. Jesus and Mary probably looked at each other, she with frustration and He with a knowing smile. The furor seemed to increase as the moments went by when suddenly the kitchen door burst open and Martha came into the room fuming:

“Lord, don't you care about me? Why are you allowing my sister to sit around and do nothing while I'm in the kitchen doing all of the work? Tell her to get up and come help me with the meal. It's just not fair that I have to do all of the cooking alone while she just sits here!”

Everything got quite still as it usually does when somebody lets out a burst of pent-up frustration. Undoubtedly Martha had been nursing a grudge against her sister for quite some time in this area. Now she had her chance to straighten her out. If she could just get Jesus to tell Mary to quit being so lazy, then she'd have to help her more around the house.

(Honestly, have you ever gone to God with the expressed purpose of trying to get Him to change somebody else? This attitude of presumption almost always

reveals a root of bitterness. You'll find, if you haven't already, that the Lord usually steers the need to change back to yourself.)

Jesus calmly looked up and spent a few moments looking into Martha's angry eyes. They were troubled eyes that desperately needed peace. He said, "Martha, Martha, you are very anxious about many things. I can see that in your eyes. One of the reasons for all of your worries is that you have your priorities wrong. While I appreciate your effort and energy there in the kitchen preparing me dinner, have you ever thought that you may need to eat at My table more than I need to eat at yours? Mary realizes this. She knows that she needs to spend time with Me, even if it means skipping a meal or two. She realizes that only in Me is peace found.

Martha, I've come to your house for a visit. Put aside your struggles and strivings for Me for the time being. Be done with your anxieties and fears. Open your eyes, see and understand who I am and what I want to do for you. Come, sit at My feet and feast at the table of My mercy, forgiveness and peace!"

Where Are You?

Do you relate to Martha? The majority of believers would! If you're like most Christians today, I'm sure you want to serve the Lord and do your best for Him. It would be good, however, to ask yourself if you do much of this in a state of frustration and anxiety. Also, do you tend to walk around with unforgiveness and bitterness in your heart towards others, particularly those you perceive are not quite as spiritual as yourself?

I'm not writing this to come down on anybody. I'm just trying to point out the truth as to where most believers are much of the time. Until you can see where you are, it's hard to see where you need to be going. Jesus tells you where you need to be going - to sit at His feet. He told Martha that was all that was really required of

anybody: to sit at His feet and hear His gentle voice of wisdom, encouragement, reproof and counsel.

It's only when you hear the living words of Jesus that you'll get the unselfish energy to accomplish His works. Then, what you do for Him will be done in the spirit of peace with sensitivity, mercy and graciousness towards others.

Martha was definitely not operating from that spirit of peace. She was serving Jesus from a sense of duty and hurt. The root problem in Martha's life can be seen by examining her words to Jesus. When she asked the Lord if He cared, she was exposing the deepest part of her frustration. She really didn't know if Jesus loved her or not. This is the reason so many don't come to Him today. They're afraid of Him. They're convinced that all He has for them is a frown, a rebuke and correction. So, they stay away and try to please Him through much duty and service.

This kind of mentality saddens the Lord. He's grieved by such a state of the heart. Jesus always looks at the heart. While believers often focus on the things that they hope will bring them approval and acceptance in His eyes, all He sees is hurt, fear, rejection and bitterness. And if there's one thing true about Jesus, it's that when He sees these things, He longs to heal them. He wants to come to you to heal your broken heart, to open the prison doors of your pain and to release the captivity of your thoughts into the peace of His Holy Spirit.

Recognizing the Shepherd's Voice

Jesus said in John 10:3-4 that His sheep hear and know His voice. If you are truly one of His, then that statement is true of you. You do hear and know His voice. The problem with most of us, though, is that His voice often seems faint and far away. The apostle Paul tells us, "*If you would hear His voice, harden not your hearts.*" (Hebrews 3:15)

When you don't respond to the things that He tells you, then His voice will tend to become fainter and fainter behind the roar of your thoughts and anxieties. Many believers' minds are so wracked with noise and clamor that it's hard for them to hear His "still, small voice."

Elijah didn't find God's voice in the earthquake, wind or fire, but rather in "A still, small voice." (1 Kings 19:12) That's why the Shepherd wants to, "Lead you beside the still waters." (Psalm 23:2) For the Lord said, "Be still and know that I am God." (Psalm 46:10) In other words, you'll never really come to know the Lord in any intimate way until you cultivate the art of "being still" in His presence. Now, let's consider the story of how a prophet of old came to hear and recognize the Lord's voice.

Early one morning, long before sunrise, little Samuel heard someone call his name. Thinking it was the priest Eli, he ran to where Eli lay and said, "I'm here, you called me." Eli said, "No, I didn't. Go lie down again, my son." A little while later Samuel again heard a voice calling his name. Once again he ran to Eli, and Eli told him once more to lie down. After this happened the third time, Eli finally perceived that the Lord was calling Samuel. He said, "The next time you hear your name called say, 'Speak, Lord, your servant hears.'" Then the Lord spoke to little Samuel the fourth time, and this time Samuel was ready and recognized the voice to be the voice of the Lord. (see 1 Samuel 3)

Learning to recognize the voice of the Lord is a process. Samuel had to hear His voice a number of times before he knew it, and even then he needed the help of another. So it is with us. There are so many voices in the world constantly vying for our attention: voices of fear, lust, pride, unbelief and deception to name just a few. How can we distinguish the voice of our Shepherd from all of the other voices? The Bible gives us clear guidelines in this area.

The Bible: Our Safeguard

Everything that your heart may hear from the Lord will always line up with the Bible. The Spirit of God will never speak a word contrary to the basic truths and tenants found in His Word. A thorough familiarity with the Bible is essential to recognize and distinguish the still, small voice of the Lord from anything else. Also, the words of Jesus always minister peace to the hearer. The psalmist tells us:

“I will hear what God the Lord will speak, for He will speak peace unto His people....” (Psalm 85:8)

Satan cannot counterfeit God’s peace. In his attempts to imitate the things of God, this is one area where he fails every time. Satan rules by fear. Jesus rules by peace. God comes with conviction while Satan always comes with condemnation.

However, many believers often don’t know how to distinguish between these two things and mistakenly think that heavy feelings of guilt and shame come from God. They don’t. They come from the devil. Satan’s puts heavy feelings of guilt and condemnation on you to try to make you feel hopeless about your weaknesses so that you’ll give up struggling against it.

Conviction is very different from condemnation. When the Holy Spirit convicts a person, He always offers light and hope that there is a way out of the area of bondage or sin. While one may weep under conviction, it’s always tears mingled with hope that God is bigger than the sin and offers a way out.

Why Don't I Hear His Voice?

There are many reasons why one may be having trouble hearing the Lord's voice. Let's go over a few of them. Ask the Lord if any of these areas might apply in your case.

* **A lack of disciplined "quiet time"**

This is probably the most common failing of believers today: the lack of a daily time with the Lord apart from the rush and confusions of the world. It shouldn't be a surprise to know that if you don't get still before the Lord, you'll find it quite hard to hear His still, small voice. There's so much noise in the world. Many folks surround their lives with noise, noise, noise from the television with its mindless chatter, radios constantly blaring, entertainment, amusement and mouths that talk, talk, talk.

God wants us to be still and learn to hear His gentle wooings in our innermost being. But so many are caught up in the "Martha syndrome" discussed earlier. Jesus knew that spending time with Him would take effort. He said that the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. But the question He asked Peter He could just as well ask us. "*Could you not watch with me one hour?*" (Matt 26:40-41)

A daily devotional time is essential if you hope to find quiet places in your soul to hear His voice. Also, if that devotional time is early in the morning, it'll change the spiritual outlook of your whole day. Scriptures tell us that Christ got up early in the morning to spend time with His Father. The Bible is full of early risers: Abraham, Job, Moses, Joshua, Elijah, David, Daniel, etc. The children of Israel had to rise early to pick up their day's ration of manna. If they slept late, they'd go hungry because the sun would melt the manna into the grass.

Until you win the “battle of the bed,” you’ll never really know much victory in the things of the Spirit. There are about thirteen references to sleeping in the book of Proverbs, and twelve of them imply that you shouldn’t do it much. The Lord said, *“Those that seek me early shall find me.”* (Prov 8:17) Even Adam and Eve apparently rose early in the morning, for it says that they had fellowship with God “in the cool of the day.”

*** Unrepented sins and attitudes**

The apostle Paul tells us: *“Exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin....While it is said, To day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts, as in the provocation.”* (Heb 3:13, 15)

For many years a radio broadcast called the “Voice of America” was sent across the iron curtain in Europe to speak truth to the communist captives in the east. Often, the local communist governments would broadcast gibberish in the same frequency to scramble the incoming messages. Whenever that happened, the people who relied on the VOA broadcasts for news, comfort and hope, would begin to despair.

The enemy does a very similar thing with believers. Whenever the voice of the Lord is coming in clear to a believer’s heart, he has hope and strength. The enemy hates this and so sets up temptations and diversions to scramble the Lord’s words. When you yield to the sins and lusts of the flesh, then the spiritual airwaves are jammed. As a result, despair and hopelessness begin to crowd into your heart and mind. Only the blood of Jesus applied to a truly repentant heart can restore the broadcasts of freedom and hope that the Lord longs to send.

When you yield to sin, it’s like throwing a brick into the calm waters of the soul. Everything becomes turbulent and disturbed. It often takes time for the waters

to become peaceful once again. This is what the apostle Peter was thinking of when he said, *“I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul.”* (1 Pet 2:11)

*** A lack of love for the truth**

Jesus said, *“Everyone that is of the truth hears my voice.”* (John 18:37) Whenever you embrace something that is not true, you limit your ability to hear the voice of Jesus. The enemy is constantly seeking to pour lies into your mind concerning yourself, others in your life, God and the devil.

For instance, concerning yourself, the enemy would like to cripple you with guilt and shame in the areas of your weaknesses and sin. Concerning others, Satan is always seeking ways to turn believers against each other through bitterness, pride and judgmental attitudes. Concerning God, the devil will try to convince you that God is angry with you and rejects you because of your failings. Finally, concerning himself, Satan wants people to fear him and his power. Ironically, it's the devil that's very much afraid of believers who stand against him and his lies.

God wants you to learn to love the truth about yourself, even if it hurts. When you develop a passion for the truth and are willing to allow God to speak truth to you, even through your brothers and sisters, then the power of His Spirit will set you free from deep-rooted deceptions and bondages.

How Do I Learn to Hear His Voice?

Solomon tells us that, *“In the multitude of counselors there is safety.”* (Prov 11:14) One way you can determine whether something you hear is from the Lord is to seek the input and confirmation of others. But not just anybody. Be sure to share what you're hearing with someone who you know has a track record of hearing the Lord himself.

A helpful rule of thumb to determine if something you're hearing is from the Lord is to ask yourself what others would think about it if they heard it. If you sense any hesitation in sharing what you heard, then consider it suspect. True words from God can stand the scrutiny of others, for all that is truth must come to the light. Jesus said: "*He that does truth comes to the light..*" (John 3:21)

If Jesus is speaking to you concerning an issue, then it's often to your benefit to check it with others before proceeding. Paul said, "*In the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established.*" (2 Cor 13:1) If the word is a word of direction or guidance, ask the Lord to confirm it to you through two or three distinct, supernatural events. It's not an act of unbelief to ask for this. The Lord will be pleased to confirm to you His word and is pleased that you don't just run ahead on everything you hear.

Hearing the Lord's voice is accomplished best through learning to live and love others in the body of Christ. It is a simple fact of life that others often have a better perception of where you are spiritually than you do yourself. We are all by nature very self-centered and often kid ourselves about our spiritual state and progress. So, God sends people in our lives who have discernment and can see us as we really are and not as we may be trying to be.

One of the best ways to learn to hear the sensitive voice of the Spirit in your life is to work on not being defensive with the discerning people in your life, particularly when they come to you with a word of correction or reproof.

Jesus once told His disciples, "*He that hears you hears Me.*" (Luke 10:16) There's an important principle found in these few words. Until you are willing to hear the Lord through others, it's very difficult to hear His voice on your own. God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble. If a person is too proud to hear di-

rection, counsel or correction from someone else, then it's very likely he'll be unable to hear it directly from the Lord.

It is also in the wisdom of God that His word is often found in the unlikeliest of people. God delights in sending people in your life that have His word for you hidden within them. Consider that colleague at work that's so hard to get along with. It may be that as you humble yourself and ask the Lord for the grace to love him, God will use his life to teach you many things. Or consider that family member that has the unique ability to always rub you in the wrong way. Go to the Lord and thank Him for the gift that person is in your life to teach you patience and love. Remember, the Lord once said, "*Whatever you do to the least of these my brothers, you have done to me.*" (Matt 25:40)

As you increase in humility towards others, you'll make an amazing discovery. Your spiritual eyes and ears will be opened, and you'll begin to hear the Lord in ways that you never previously imagined.

The Language of the Spirit

In learning to hear the voice of the Lord, it's essential that you understand the language of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit communicates to His people in a variety of ways. Unless you know His language, you may miss what He's seeking to say to you. Let's consider specific examples:

* **CONVICTION**: We all know this voice. It usually comes as a deep knowing inside your gut that you've grieved the Lord's heart or have been unloving or insensitive to someone else. The only way to respond to the voice of conviction is to quickly repent and be willing to humble yourself through confession, restitution or reconciliation. There's a clear picture of the voice of conviction in the following psalm: "*For day and night your hand was heavy upon me: my moisture is turned*

into the drought of summer. I acknowledged my sin unto you, and my iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord; and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.” (Psalm 32:4-5)

* **INSPIRATIONS:** Your mind may be suddenly filled with a flood of thoughts with specific facts describing a particular situation or thing. This often happens to me (as a teacher of the Word) when I’ve been meditating and seeking the Lord as to what to share in a teaching or sermon.

Inspirations also come as a nagging gut feeling that you have about something, but you must pay attention to it to hear it. For instance, suppose someone comes to you for some insight concerning a relationship problem that they’re having. After praying and asking the Lord for wisdom, He may communicate the answer to you through an inspiration in your spirit. To hear what He’s saying, you’ll need to get still for a moment to allow His guidance to come up from your spirit into your mind. Jesus said, “*Out of your belly would flow rivers of living water.*” (John 7:38) This is part of what that verse means. The revelation often begins in your gut and, as you reflect on it, it becomes clear in your mind.

* **SCRIPTURE VERSES:** Just about everyone has experienced this at times. You may be reading along in the Word and a verse “pops out” at you and seems to burn on the page with meaning for your life. Or the verse may trigger insight for a particular situation or circumstance that you’ve been puzzled about. God will often confirm His word spoken to you by other means through the “quickenings” of particular verses of scripture. Turn to the Bible after you’ve ‘heard’ something in the Spirit!

* **DREAMS:** The Bible is full of examples of God speaking to His people through dreams. If a dream is from God, the message will usually “burn” in your mind the day after you’ve dreamed it. The dream will be generally simple and di-

rect; it will minister peace, even if it's a word of caution; and it will bring glory to God alone. Always check out the validity of a dream with someone mature in the Lord to receive confirmation.

* **IMPRESSIONS**: Sometimes you will experience a deep “knowing” in your spirit about something, an “absoluteness” where there's no natural cause. Often God will speak to you this way when you're going through hard times and need to know His comfort. This is the “peace that passes all understanding” spoken of in Philippians 4:7.

Sometimes impressions will come as a sense of deep-seated excitement of joy and revelation concerning something to come. Jesus tells us that, “*The Spirit will show you things to come.*” (John 16:13)

Sometimes impressions may come as a pain or sensation in your body that correspond to similar pains or illnesses in another. This often happens when you're around someone that the Lord is wanting to heal at the time. As you are faithful to pray for others when this happens, you will increase your sensitivities in this area.

At other times impressions may come as a “lack of peace,” like the small ripples on a calm lake. Another word for this is a “check.” If you're considering a course of action and sense a “check” from the Lord, it's best to not act until He gives you the go-ahead. Paul speaks of this guidance of the Spirit in the following verse: “*Let the peace of God rule (arbitrate, play the umpire) in your hearts....*” (Col 3:15)

* **VISIONS**: Visions most often occur in the context of ministering to someone else. As you wait on the Lord for wisdom concerning how to pray for someone, He'll often communicate to you in this manner. Many don't experience this because of their reluctance to be still and wait on Him before beginning to minister to

another's needs. Visions often come as pictures in mind's eye - particularly applicable to the situation at hand (faces, words, animals, situations, common objects). Let's consider an example:

Recently, while waiting on the Spirit in ministry, I saw in my mind's eye a picture of a money order worth \$700 with the figure \$300 written on the corner of the check. As I looked at this, I kept sensing that the \$300 was not to be spent. Having no idea what this meant, I shared it with the lady I was praying with. She let out a cry of thanks to the Lord. Just that morning she'd been asking Him how much of the \$1000 she had on a money order she was to give to a particular missionary organization. Apparently, through that vision, He was telling her to give \$700 and to keep the rest. Visions like this come to us far more frequently than we realize. The problem is we just don't recognize the language of the Spirit.

Praise Breaks

A few years ago the Lord spoke to me and said that if I would come to Him often during the day for a few minutes of worship, then He would help me hear and distinguish His voice in my life. For a long time I resisted this simple word to me. It seems I could never get around to spending quality worship time with Him in the midst of my busy schedule. Oh, I'd have a good quiet time with Him in the morning, but it just seemed too much of a burden to stop during the day as well. The Lord, however, has a way of getting us to the place where we'll do what He says.

Eventually, I began to see that I desperately needed His intimacy during the busyness of the day. So I began to have "praise breaks." After a while, I was amazed at the difference it made in my spiritual life. I then began to share with others about "praise breaks" and how greatly they increase one's moment by moment intimacy with Jesus.

I encourage you to begin doing this. Just make a point of coming to the Lord for just three minutes a couple of times during the day with pure worship and adoration. You can always put aside whatever it is that you're thinking or feeling for just three minutes. Come right into the throne room with praise and adoration, thanking Him for all that's occurred since the last praise break. When you first resolve to do this, you may feel a great resistance from your flesh. That's natural. We are by nature very lazy and passive people, and the enemy likes to encourage this part of our nature. However, if you will commit yourself to come to Jesus this way, you will be amazed at the release you'll find in your daily struggles. All through the Psalms you'll find references concerning worshipping God during the day. In fact, there's even a verse that seems to refer to "praise breaks": "*Seven times a day do I praise you because of your righteous judgments.*" (Psalm 119:164)

As soon as you wake up tomorrow morning, worship the Lord for three minutes. Then, at breakfast time spend three more minutes adoring Him for the day that He's made. Then, do it mid-morning, at lunch, mid-afternoon, at your evening meal and right before you retire for the evening. As you are faithful to do this, you will experience an amazing thing. He will begin to draw near to you with greater revelations of His love, His mercy and His care. And, you'll begin to recognize His gentle voice deep within your spirit, sharing with you truths and wisdom from His heart. There's really nothing more exciting in life than this!

Mary's Revelation At His Feet

Remember earlier when we considered the story of Jesus' visit to Mary and Martha's house? Martha was full of anxiety and care, trying to serve the Lord. But Mary was sitting at His feet, listening to His voice and caught up in His presence. Jesus told Martha that what Mary was doing was really all that was needful. He says the same to you today. All that you really need is to spend time every day sitting at His feet, listening to His voice and enjoying His presence. When you've

made this your priority, everything else in your life will flow in peace with the Lord. I'm not saying that everything will be easy. But in doing this you will experience a level of grace that you've not previously known. And best of all, your intimacy with Jesus will increase.

A few years after that day at Martha's house, right before Jesus was to die on the cross, He again paid a visit to Martha and Mary. As He sat down to eat, Mary came to Him with some costly oil of spikenard and began to anoint His feet and to wipe them with her hair. Judas Iscariot was indignant and said it was a waste. But Jesus, in rebuking Judas, said an amazing thing: "*Let her alone, for she has done this to commemorate my burial...*" (John 12:7)

Apparently Mary had a revelation concerning what was to shortly happen to her Master. This is amazing. Even His closest disciples didn't understand that he was going to Jerusalem to be crucified, though He had told them plainly a number of times! But Mary, the gentle girl who loved to listen to His voice, received the revelation of His destiny.

God has much revelation, insight and wisdom concerning His purposes and plans that he longs to share with His sons and daughters. All He wants is for you to spend some quality time with Him, listen to His voice and eagerly obey all that you hear.

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