

## LEARNING TO HEAR GOD'S VOICE

Before refrigerators, people used ice houses to preserve their food. Ice houses had thick walls, no windows, and a tightly fitted door. In winter, when streams and lakes were frozen, large blocks of ice were cut, hauled to the ice houses, and covered with sawdust. Often the ice would last well into the summer. One man lost a valuable watch while working in an ice house. He searched diligently for it, carefully raking through the sawdust, but didn't find it. His fellow workers also looked, but their efforts, too, proved futile. A small boy who heard about the fruitless search slipped into the ice house during the noon hour and soon emerged with 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, but whether we are being still enough, and quiet enough, to hear.

In the Bible there are many stories of God speaking directly to people. Someone asked me recently why we don't hear more stories today about God speaking to people. I believe that God is speaking to people today. The problem is that so often we don't listen.

We are continuing our series today called Great Expectations. One of the expectations we have as believers is that God desires a personal relationship with us. He wants to speak with you. So how do we learn to listen? First of all we need to understand the ways in which God speaks with us. There are 2 words used to mean WORD in the Bible. God uses both of these 2 ways to speak to us today:

a. The first is the word LOGOS

A Greek philosopher named Heraclitus first used the term LOGOS in around 600 B.C. to designate a divine reason or plan. In the Bible it is used to speak of God's will or plan in the general sense. Jesus was described as the Word of God in that He was the fulfillment of God's plan in physical form.

The Bible is God's word. It outlines God's will and plan for each of us. When we speak the scriptures into a situation we are declaring God's will. For example, as we look at the world around us today it is easy to become discouraged. The needs of the millions around the world who do not know Jesus can be overwhelming and the tasks can seem too great.

Speaking the Word of God means declaring that God has already said that one day every nation would hear and receive and that one day people from every tribe and nation will be before God's throne in heaven. The job will get done – we know it because God has said it. Next week we will talk more about this, but today we want to look at the second meaning of WORD;

b. The second is the word RHEMA

The Greek word RHEMA means that God speaks a specific word to a specific person for a specific purpose through His Holy Spirit. An example of this can be seen in Acts 16:

Acts 16:6 Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. 7 When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. 8 So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. 9 During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."

This passage does not mean that God did not want Asia to hear the gospel. The LOGOS word says in the Great Commission to go and preach the Gospel to all nations. This did not mean that message had been retracted. This RHEMA word simply meant that for that time God wanted Paul to go to a different place - Macedonia. It was a specific word for a specific situation.

So how do we hear God's rhema voice today?

In chapter 1 Habakkuk begins by asking God the question "Why do the wicked prosper". God replies by telling him that He is allowing the nation of Babylon to prosper because he is about to use it. Habakkuk then asks the second question "How can you use such a wicked nation to do your business". Then he positions himself to wait and listen for God's answer:

Hab 2:1 I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts; I will look to see what he will say to me, and what answer I am to give to this complaint. 2 Then the LORD replied: "Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it."

1. WITHDRAW – I will ... station myself on the ramparts

To hear God speak the first thing you need to do is withdraw. That means get alone in a quiet place. In Hebrew the word used here for ramparts is MATSOWR which means an enclosed protective structure. Sometimes it is translated as TOWER. It means to find a secluded place alone, to go off by yourself, and eliminate external distractions so you can hear God speak.

In today's world that can be difficult at times, especially if you are a parent with young children. Susanna Wesley was the mother of 18 children. Two of her sons were greatly used by God. Charles Wesley wrote several hundred songs and hymns which churches still sing today. John Wesley was the founder of the Methodist denomination. With 18 kids, how did Susanna Wesley ever find a quiet place to pray? This was her solution. Every afternoon she would sit in her living room and throw her apron up over her head. The children knew that when mother was in her rocking chair with her apron up over her head she was not to be disturbed. Her example had a profound effect on her children.

Find a place where you can be quiet and get alone with God and listen. One of the reasons why you don't hear God speak to you more is because you are surrounded by noise. The radio is always on, the TV is always on, etc. The first step is you need to withdraw and get off by yourself. Get alone in a quiet place.

Luke 5:15 The news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. 16 But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed

Jesus withdrew often. He made it a habit – a necessary part of his ministry. If He needed to do it, we certainly do as well. We need to get away from the distractions. Get alone, removing every external distraction possible.

If simply withdrawing was all that was needed for you to hear God's voice then it would be easy. However there is more to it than that. After you get in a quiet spot then you need to quiet yourself, your own mind and your own emotions. That leads us to the second step.

2. WAIT – I will stand at my watch

Waiting means calming your thoughts and emotions. You need to quiet yourself down. Habakkuk says "I will stand at my watch". The word for stand is AMAD which means to wait or remain. To stand means that you don't move about, you stay put, you be still. It means to wait for awhile until something happens. Habakkuk says, I'm going to stand at my watch until I can hear God. God speaks to the person who takes the time to listen.

This is one of the reasons I love fishing. For me it becomes a time of prayer. As you sit there with nothing to do waiting for the fish to bite you calm your heart and wait for God to speak as well.

A woman telephoned the manager of a large opera house and told him she had lost a valuable diamond pin the night before at the concert. The man asked her to hold the line. A search was made and the brooch was found; but when he got back to the phone, the woman had hung up. He waited for her to call again, and even put a notice in the paper, but he heard nothing further. What a strange and foolish person, we say, but isn't this the way some of us pray? We tell the Lord all about our needs, but then fail to "hold the line." As a result, we miss the joy of answered prayer and the thrill and reward of a persistent faith.

The one reason why many of us don't hear God is we're just too busy. Hurry is the death of prayer. If you're going to hear God speak, not only do you need to get in a quiet spot but then you must mentally and emotionally calm yourself down too. Here's the typical prayer experience. You're going to pray today and so get off by yourself. Maybe you happen to find a quiet place. But the moment you set down to pray, your mind starts reminding you of everything you haven't done yet. I find because I think at high RPM's about 90% of the time, when I sit down to talk to God, my mind is racing.

If you're ever wondering what you have to do today, just set down and start to pray and you'll think of it all real quick. Because the devil makes sure all of those things crowd into your mind instantly. When your mind starts moving from subject to subject you get distracted. If you just try to ignore it, it doesn't go away. If you try to push them down, they just scream louder. One practical solution is to take paper with you into prayer so if something comes up you can just write it down and go back latter.

Waiting means it takes time. It's difficult to calm down in a hurry, it can't be forced. Have you ever tried to force yourself to go to sleep. It doesn't work. E.g. driving home and then trying to sleep. The harder you try to sleep, the more awake you are! You just have to wait until your mind calms down and you go to sleep. You must withdraw and then you wait in silence, which calms your thoughts and your emotions.

2 Kings 3: 14 Elisha said "... 15 ... now bring me a harpist." While the harpist was playing, the hand of the LORD came upon Elisha

I've often found in my own life sometimes the quickest way to calm down is to put on a praise tape or some slow Christian music. I just start listening to it and it shifts my body, mind, and emotions into a lower gear so I can learn to hear God. Once your body is still and once your mind is quiet then you become sensitive to hearing God speak. Inner calm opens the intercom to God and you can hear Him.

3. WATCH - I will look to see what he will say to me

The next step is to allow God to speak to you. Habakkuk said "I will look to see what he will say to me." The key word there is LOOK. An important key to hearing God is to understand that God's voice is often visual. I have found that God often speaks to me through a mental picture.

There are many examples of this in scripture. God gave you the ability to imagine. Sometimes we think that imagination just means daydreaming and comes from our own mind or worse. But using your sanctified imagination is an important part of the Christian life.

Eph 1:18 I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, 19 and his incomparably great power for us who believe.

What does that mean "the eyes of your heart will be opened". I thought my eyes were in my head? He's not talking about physical eyes. He's talking about spiritual eyes. Spiritual senses. When you were born physically you got a set of physical senses. Hear, taste, touch, smell, feel. When you were born spiritually you got reborn and got a set of spiritual senses: spiritual eyes, spiritual ears. Have you ever been reading the Bible and comes across a verse you have read a dozen times but all of a sudden it pops out at you? God just opened your spiritual eyes.

Studies have shown that between 50-75% of the population sees in pictures. When you read the Bible you don't just read the story, you see the story in your mind. You can see it happening. E.g. the importance of illustrations in a message – you see the point and remember it (for years after). If you are a visual learner it's going to be easier for you to let God give you a picture. For the rest you need to develop that ability. One way is to simply pray "Jesus, is there anything You want to show me? Do You want to give me an idea, an impression?"

#### 4. WRITE - write down the revelation and make it plain

Notice what the Lord says to Habakkuk next. He told him to write down the revelation. When seeking to hear God's voice it is important to be ready to record what He tells you. Start by writing down your prayers. This is called journaling. Almost every great Christian in history has journalized. They wrote down their prayers, what they wanted to say to God and then they would write down what they felt God answered.

If you want an example of journalizing, there's a whole book in the Bible on it. It's called Psalms. In Psalms, David usually started with a question for God. Then he would wait and watch and write down God's response. There are many benefits to developing this habit of journalizing. In the first place it keeps you focused. It gives your body something to do while you're praying. It keeps you focused. Your mind won't wander when you're writing down what you're trying to think about.

Another benefit is it allows you to remember what you've said to God and what God has said back to you. You don't have to learn a lesson over and over. Because you wrote it down and you go back and review it.

A third benefit is that later it allows you to test the impression. The Bible says real clearly that not every idea you get is from God. Some of them are from the devil, some of them are from God, some of them are self inspired. How do you test it? We will talk more about that next week!

#### 5. WORSHIP – Celebrating God's response

Hab 3:2 LORD, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O LORD.

After hearing God's reply Habakkuk responds through worship. He says, now that you've spoken to me, I love You and I want to express my love to You. God wants to have a conversation with you. We talk about having a personal relationship with Jesus – but how can you have a relationship to a person without talking. If you do all the talking, you don't have a relationship.

This is the difference in knowing about God and knowing God. There are really three kinds of relationships you can have. You can believe in God. That's the lowest form of relationship. Or you can be acquainted with God. That's a little bit deeper relationship. Or you can be the friend of God. Jesus wants that kind of relationship to you. He says, I want to call you my friends, where we commune and discuss and dialogue and converse and know each other. God wants you to be His friend.

God has given man one tongue but two ears that we may hear twice as much as we speak.

-- Greek proverb

Fred Craddock was the Professor of Preaching at Candler School of Theology in Tennessee. He used to tell the story of a time he was vacationing in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. He and his wife were seated at a table when an old man came up to them and asked, "How are you doing? Are you having a good time? Are you on vacation?" "Yes," said Professor Craddock. "We are on vacation and, yes, we're having a good time." "What do you do for a living?" the old man said. Professor Craddock wanted to get rid of the man so he said, "I'm a professor of preaching." He was sure that title would drive off any unwelcome intruder but it didn't. "Oh, you're a preacher!" the old man said. "Let me tell you a preacher's story." Before he could object, the old man had drawn up a chair to the table and started to unwind his tail.

He said, "I was born an illegitimate child. I never knew who my father was and that was very hard for me. The boys at my school had names they called me and they made fun of me all the time. When I walked down the main street of our little town, I always felt that people were staring at me and asking that terrible question, 'I wonder who's the father of that little boy.' I spent a lot of time by myself and didn't have any friends. One day a new preacher came to town and everybody was talking about how good he was. I had never gone to church before. But one Sunday I thought I'd go hear him preach. He was a good preacher so I kept going back. Each time I would go late and I would leave early so I wouldn't have to talk to anyone else. Then one Sunday I got so caught up in the preacher's message that I forgot to leave. Before I knew what was happening he had said the closing prayer and the service was over. I tried to get out of the church but people had already filled all the aisles and I couldn't get past them.

Suddenly I felt a heavy hand on my shoulder. When I turned around, that big tall preacher was looking down at me and asking, 'What's your name, boy? Whose family are you? Whose son are you?' When I heard that question I just shook. But before I could say anything, he said, 'Why, I know who your family is! I know whose son you are. There's a distinct family resemblance. You're the son of God.'" He said, "You know, mister, those simple words changed my life."

The old man got up and left. A waitress came over and asked, "Do you know who that was?" "No," said Professor Craddock. The waitress said, "That's Ben Hooper, two term governor of Tennessee."