

HEARING GOD – WHY WE NEED 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 His voice.

Today we are continuing in our series Hearing God. Last week we talked about the fact that we need the Holy Spirit to help us to hear from God and how we can practically do that. Today I want to talk about why this is important. Jesus said;

John 10:27 My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.

Sheep listen to the shepherd's voice. Why is it important that we hear from God?

1. So we can be Directed by God - steering us

If you watched my New Year's Eve message you heard me say that part of being filled with the Holy Spirit is being directed by God. We need to be able to discern God's voice so that we can follow His leading in where He wants us to go.

Why is direction so important? It is because we are at war. One of the most important thing in any battle is that the soldiers are able to communicate with the ones who are strategically leading and coordinating the battle plan. Communication is essential to victory. We see this often in Israel's history. It was only when the people listened to God's direction that they saw victory.

2Ki 6:8-12 Now the king of Aram was at war with Israel. After conferring with his officers, he said, "I will set up my camp in such and such a place." 9 The man of God sent word to the king of Israel: "Beware of passing that place, because the Arameans are going down there." 10 So the king of Israel checked on the place indicated by the man of God. Time and again Elisha warned the king, so that he was on his guard in such places. 11 This enraged the king of Aram. He summoned his officers and demanded of them, "Will you not tell me which of us is on the side of the king of Israel?" 12 None of us, my lord the king, said one of his officers, "but Elisha, the prophet who is in Israel, tells the king of Israel the very words you speak in your bedroom."

We see this often in the life of David. He relied on God's direction.

2Sa 5:19 so David inquired of the LORD, "Shall I go and attack the Philistines? Will you hand them over to me?" The LORD answered him, "Go, for I will surely hand the Philistines over to you."

David could have simply tried to repeat what had worked for him in the past, but in every battle he took the time to again seek God's direction. Just a few verses later we read;

2Sa 5:23-24 so David inquired of the LORD, and he answered, "Do not go straight up, but circle around behind them and attack them in front of the balsam trees. 24 As soon as you hear the sound of marching in the tops of the balsam trees, move quickly, because that will mean the LORD has gone out in front of you to strike the Philistine army."

Life is often like this. We face a situation and God tells us to deal with it in a certain way. Later, we face a similar situation and we may be tempted to simply do what we did the last time but God tells us to now approach it from a completely different angle. We see this dependence on God's direction also in the New Testament. The apostles relied on God's direction to know which way to go.

Act 16:6-10 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." 10 After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Was there anything intrinsically wrong with going to minister in Asia and Bithynia? Of course not. There were people there that needed to hear the message. However, the Holy Spirit was already preparing the hearts of people in Macedonia. There was an open door. When we listen to God we allow him to direct us to fruitfulness. Instead of relying upon conventional wisdom or things that have worked in the past, we receive insights to new opportunities and possibilities.

I have already shared before that when I was working for the Yonge St. Mission that I would go out in the afternoons and would have no idea of where to go. I would ask God for direction and He would often lead me to the right person at the right time.

Going to Kuwait for the first time. There is absolutely no way I could have known about what God wanted to do in that nation. I did not really even know where it was! It took us being obedient by going on the Doulos to get us to the place where God could speak to us to move there. It was only then that there was an outpouring of the Spirit and amazing things happened.

2. So we can be Devoted to God – sanctifying us

The second reason that we need to hear from God is so that we can have a growing intimate relationship with Him. Imagine being in a relationship with someone who never spoke with you. You try talking with them and they are always silent. You try phoning or texting them and they never respond. Communication is a two-way street and communication is essential in any relationship.

In his devotional book, "My Utmost For His Highest" Oswald Chambers writes, "Get into the habit of saying, 'Speak, Lord,' and life will become a romance. Every time circumstances press in on you say, 'Speak, Lord,' and make time to listen. Chastening is more than a means of discipline -- it is meant to bring me to the point of saying, 'Speak, Lord.' Think back to a time when God spoke to you. Do you remember what he said? As we listen, our ears become more sensitive, and like Jesus, we will hear God all the time."

Without communication you cannot have a good relationship; you cannot have a good marriage.

You know what the single greatest problem many fathers have? They are distant and they don't communicate with their kids. They do not talk to them. God is a good father and He is not distant. He wants to speak with you. He is not silent. When we spend time talking to God and listening to Him then He is able to respond to us in ways similar to how a good earthly Father would respond.

There are times that God will speak to us to assure us. Maybe you have doubts and do not know what to do with them. Maybe you have fears and nothing seems to help in alleviating them. At times like that God comes and speaks a word of assurance. Maybe we question if we are even saved?

Rom 8:16 The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.

I have told the story before about a time back in 1949 when Billy Graham was preparing for his Los Angeles Crusade. A close friend had thrown his mind into turmoil by saying that he did not believe that the promises of the bible were true. He had to admit that there were times that he also questioned the bible and had his own doubts. The night before the crusade he went out into a forest. He knelt down and placed his open bible on a tree stump. God came and spoke with him there and gave him the assurance he needed to move forward.

There are times that God will speak to us to comfort us. We all experience times of pain and brokenness. It is during those times that God comes and speaks words of health and healing to us.

2Co 1:3-4 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

When I was away at the University of Guelph my Grandmother lived with us in our home in Thornhill. I would come home sometimes on weekends. I remember one Wednesday night I was praying before bed and I remembered Grandma. I felt led to pray for her, so I did. When I went home that weekend she told me how nice it was that I had come to visit her and spend some time with her that week. I told her that I had not been home, and that she must have been imagining it, but she told me the exact day and time that I had been praying for her. It was God's way of comforting her.

There are times that God will speak to us to counsel us. To show us which way to go. Is this not what good fathers do? We have questions about our careers or cars and they are there to advise us.

Psa 16:7 I will praise the LORD, who counsels me; even at night my heart instructs me.

If you were to ask me what my favourite song was, I would say it is the song Joy in the Journey by Michael Card. There is a reason for that. Back in Seminary when I was struggling with God's calling for my life I was going through a difficult time questioning what I was supposed to do with my life. I was thinking about missions, but had so many fears. One night I was praying and asked God for direction, and that song came on. It starts saying "There is a joy in the journey, there's a light we can love on the way. There is a wonder and wildness to life, and freedom for those who obey." Immediately I knew that God had spoken directly to me. He just wanted me to obey. Yes, there would be joy in the journey, but first it meant I had to do what He had told me to do.

There are times that God will speak to us in order to protect us. There may be an unseen danger approaching. Those are times God will speak to us to warn us.

Mat 2:13-14 When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." 14 So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt

E. Stanley Jones tells of the time he was about to board a plane when he heard God, in his spirit, telling him not to get on the plane. He learned later that the plane crashed and there were no survivors. When he shared his experience with someone, they said, "You mean to say that you were the only one God told not to get on that plane?" Jones said, "By no means, but it is possible that I was the only one listening." It is important to develop your ability to hear God.

I remember being in Kuwait in 2001 and hearing from God that it was time to head back for Canada. I was not sure exactly why God was telling us this at the time, but we were obedient and left. We returned home in June of 2001. Just 3 months later I turned on the news and saw the World Trade Center on fire. It was then that I knew why God had told us to return home. The whole region was going to be thrown into chaos and who knows what would have happened if we had stayed.

3. So we can be Dependant on God - sustaining us

The third reason we need to hear from God is because we are dependant on Him.

John 15:4-5 Remain in me, and I will 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. 5 I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

As human being we need to draw on God, much like a plant needs to draw on light and water in order to flourish. That is how God created us. So what is the plant food that we need to help us grow? It is connection, and connection is only possible through communication.

Mat 4:1-4 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. 2 After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. 3 The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." 4 Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.' "

What did Jesus mean by saying this? Is there a commandment somewhere in the Old Testament saying that "Thou shalt not turn stones into bread to eat?" Of course not. Was it immoral to turn stones to bread? He was simply saying here that there was more to life than just food. We are not simply physical beings. Jesus was hungry, but that is the point of fasting. You allow your physical needs to remind you of your spiritual needs. His body was healthy. The reason that Jesus was in the desert was so that he could feed his spirit for the difficult days ahead.

Food is essential for our bodies to function properly, and hearing God is essential for our spirits to function properly. Jesus says that he was feeding "on every word that comes from the mouth of God." The Greek word used for word here is rhema. We need God's spoken individual word for us.

Heb 1:3 The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word...

Again, the word used here is rhema. That Jesus sustains us through His individual word to us. I am not trying to downplay the importance of reading the bible, simply remind us that hearing God is important. Along with the bible, it is the way that God feeds us and sustains us. We cannot truly live the life that God desires us to live without it.

When Paul visited Jerusalem after his third missionary journey he was arrested at the temple. When he was put on trial before the counsel a fight broke out. The soldiers had to remove him because they feared the mob would tear him to pieces.

Act 23:9-11 There was a great uproar, and some of the teachers of the law who were Pharisees stood up and argued vigorously. "We find nothing wrong with this man," they said. "What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?" 10 The dispute became so violent that the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them. He ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force and bring him into the barracks. 11 The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome."

That must have been a very difficult experience to have gone through. So, God came and spoke words of comfort to him. Has there ever been a time in your life when God came and spoke a word of encouragement directly to you to sustain you? To get you through a time of crisis? This has happened to me on many occasions.

We are dependant on God. If there is anything that this pandemic has reminded us of it is the simple truth that we should not take anything for granted. Everything we have, everything we are can be taken from us in a second. Every day is a gift, provided for us by the one who is also sustaining us.

Mat 11:28-30 Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

At first glance, this scripture can seem confusing. How is taking a yoke going to help those who are weary and burdened? The reality of life is that we are all yoked to something. All of carry around a tremendous burden all the time. Jesus is not asking you here to take on something new, He is simply asking you to stop trying to carry the weight yourself and to let Him take it instead.

I remember a few years ago reading an article entitles Why Pastors Leave the Ministry by Fuller Institute, George Barna and Focus On The Family. In a survey they did with pastors in America, they found the following. Each and every month in America 1,500 pastors leave the ministry permanently. There are about 4,000 new churches that will start but over 7,000 that will close each year in America. 70% of pastors continually battle depression. 75% of pastors will experience a significant personal crisis while serving in ministry. 80% of seminary graduates who enter ministry will leave the ministry within the first five years. 80% of pastors and 85% of their spouses feel discouraged in their roles. 70% of pastors do not have a close friend, confidant, or mentor. 50% of pastors are so discouraged they would leave the ministry tomorrow if they could. 50% of pastors' wives feel that their husbands entering ministry was the most destructive thing to ever happen to their families. Many pastor's children do not attend church now because of what the church has done to their parents. Only 1 out of every 10 ministers will actually retire as a minister in some form.

Only 1 out of 10, that is a sobering thought. Yet this does not apply only to pastors. How many who start the good fight of faith will actually finish the race? We need God.

We need to hear His voice so that He can steer us. We need to hear His voice so that He can sanctify us and we need to hear His voice so that He can sustain us. We need to finish the race that has been marked out for us. Only as God steers, sanctifies and sustains us can we do that.

Back in 1968 the Olympic games were held in Mexico City. The last evening in the Olympic Stadium at 7.00 P.M. the closing ceremonies had just been completed. The spectators were just getting ready to leave. The athletes were gathering their belongings when suddenly the announcer came on and asked everyone to remain in their seats. Down the street came the sound of police sirens. As the police motorcycles entered the stadium, there was a lone person moving slowly behind them.

The man's name was John Stephen Akhwari from Tanzania. Earlier that day had been the 40 Km Marathon. The final runners of that race had arrived hours before. The medals had already been awarded. What most people did not know was that early in the race Akhwari had taken a horrible fall. He had whacked his head, damaged his knee, and endured a trampling before he could get back on his feet. As he entered the Stadium covered in blood stumbling his way towards the finish line, the announcer told the audience what was happening. The response of the crowd was overwhelming. Thousands of spectators and athletes rose to their feet and began to cheer the man on. It had taken him all day to run the 40 kilometres, and his last few meters were met with a thundering ovation. When Akhwari crossed the finish line, he collapsed into the arms of the medical personnel who immediately whisked him off to the hospital.

The next day, Akhwari appeared before sports journalists to field their questions about his extraordinary feat. The first question was the one any of us would have asked, "Why, after sustaining the kinds of injuries you did, would you ever get up and proceed to the finish line, when there was no way you could possibly win it?" John Stephen Akhwari said this: "My country did not send me over 11,000 kilometres to start a race. They sent me over 11,000 kilometres to ... finish one!"