

## HEARING GOD – HOW GOD SPEAKS TO US

I was a student at Ontario Theological Seminary (now Tyndale) from 1997 to 1999. When I graduated that spring I had decided that I was going to go into missions. I had applied to SIM and had been accepted. I was going to be going to Liberia in West Africa. There was a compound outside the capital Monrovia that had a youth camp that I was going to be the director of. That summer I was living in Sarnia. The beginning of September I had to go to Toronto for a meeting so I decided to stop in and see my old roommate Tim Day. We had a good talk and then it was time to leave, so we decided to pray together. I prayed that Tim would have a great year and that his youth ministry internship would go well. When it was Tim's turn to pray I sensed that he was hesitating. I opened my eyes and he looked up at me and told me that he sensed that God was telling me that I was not going to go to the mission field until I was married. I think I actually laughed when he told me that. I told him that God had better hurry since I was supposed to be leaving in a few months.

We went downstairs and I stayed to have lunch with him. In was there that I first met Naomi. It was during that meal that God told me that I was going to marry Naomi. I went back to school for another 2 years and told SIM that I would not be going to Africa. I would have left for Liberia in January of 1990. The compound was attacked that March because of the Civil War and all the missionaries living there were killed. My life was saved and transformed because I heard God speak to me.

Today we are continuing with our series Hearing God and we want to look at the different ways that God speaks to us. God created each one of us unique with different gifts, abilities and temperaments. We have different styles of learning and different ways of expressing and receiving love. It should not be surprising then that each one of us hears from God differently.

Job 33:14 For God does speak -- now one way, now another -- though man may not perceive it.

God does speak to us in different ways. The question is whether or not we are able to hear Him.

1Sa 3:7-10 Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. 8 The LORD called Samuel a third time, and Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." Then Eli realized that the LORD was calling the boy. 9 So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. 10 The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

God was speaking to young Samuel, but he did not recognize His voice. I think that is the story for many of us. God is speaking to us but we simply do not yet know how to hear and understand it. So what are some of the ways that God still speaks to us today?

### 1. Out Loud - audible voice

Sometimes God will speak to us in an audible voice. This is how God spoke to Samuel in the Old Testament. He called out his name audibly. This is also how Jesus spoke to Paul in the New Testament. He spoke out loud in a way that Saul could understand.

Act 9:3-4 As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

Throughout the bible and history there have been many people who have heard God's audible voice. This has never happened to me, though there have been times that God's voice was so clear that it almost seemed audible.

Years ago there was a Psychologist named Tanya Thurman who wrote a book "When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God." She appeared on CNN and made fun of Christians who claim to have heard God's voice. In her book she says that studies have shown that around 10% of evangelicals claim to have heard God's audible voice at some time in their life. I do not know how accurate that is, but certainly one of the ways that God still speaks to us today is out loud, through an audible voice.

## 2. On High - angels

A second way that God often speaks to us in through angels. The word angel comes from the Greek word AGGELOS which means messenger. Angles bring us messages from God. Again, we see this happened many times in the bible. Angels appeared to Abraham, Lot, Jacob, Moses, Balaam, Gideon, Samson's mother and father, David, Elijah, Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, Jesus, Philip, Peter, Paul, and John.

Act 8:26-27 Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road--the desert road--that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." 27 So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch ...

There are also many historical accounts of angels coming to speak God's message to men and women. John Paton was a missionary in the New Hebrides Islands. One night hostile natives surrounded the mission station, intent on burning out the Patons and killing them. Paton and his wife prayed during that terror-filled night that God would deliver them. When daylight came they were amazed to see their attackers leave. A year later, the chief of the tribe was converted to Christ. Remembering what had happened, Paton asked the chief what had kept him from burning down the house and killing them. The chief replied in surprise, "Who were all those men with you there?" Paton knew no men were present--but the chief said he was afraid to attack because he had seen hundreds of big men in shining garments with drawn swords circling the mission station.

I have never had an angel appear to me, but they have to members of my family. My grandmother and aunt would see and hear from angels on a regular basis. God still speaks today out loud and through angels.

## 3. Other Things - supernatural

A third way that God sometimes speaks to us is through miracles. God spoke to Moses through a burning bush and to Balaam through a talking donkey. God used the hand writing on the wall to communicate judgement to King Belshazzar and He used a fleece to prove His word to Gideon. God refuses to limit Himself to only one way of communicating. He can use any means He wishes! He can use anything or any means He wishes!

Story of the first Kuwaiti coming to Christ.

There were many other times in Kuwait where God chose to speak to us through the supernatural. By doing so He confirms His word and will for our lives.

Years ago when there was a worship leader named Graham Kendrick who wrote songs like ‘Shine Jesus Shine.’ Our first year in Kuwait we heard that he was going to be in the gulf and was interested in coming to Kuwait and doing a concert. We jumped at the chance to have him come. The night of the concert we had set up outside so that as many people could attend as possible.

In Kuwait, the weather is almost always the same. The months of January and February sometimes has a few drops of rain, but the rest of the time it is hot and sunny, and never any wind. There is no 7 day forecast – just an 8 month forecast of hot and sunny. That night Graham Kendrick sang his song Go Forth in His Name. The last verse of that song says, “Listen the wind of the Spirit is blowing, the end of the age is so near. Pow'rs in the earth and the heavens are shaking, Jesus our Lord soon shall appear!” As we began that song a gentle breeze started to blow and when we reached that verse a wind blew up that almost knocked down the screen we had set up and blew everyone off the stage. I remember just standing there thinking “did that just happen!” It was a holy moment – God stepped in and said “listen to what you are singing!” It was a powerful reminder.

God still speaks today out loud, through angels and through the miraculous.

#### 4. Other People - servants

A fourth way that God speaks to us is through other people. When we read about the Gifts of the Spirit we see that there are gifts given by God to communicate His truth to the body of Christ. This includes prophecy, words of knowledge and words of wisdom.

Prophecy is basically just someone hearing what God is saying to a person or group and then passing it on to them. I started with the story of my Seminary roommate Tim sharing with me something that God had told him to tell me. There have been many other times in my life when people have spoken over me prophetically. Many times, it has been a tremendous blessing in my life.

When we first moved to Kuwait, the church experienced revival and I was having a hard time with the different spiritual manifestations that were happening. I did not grow up in a church where people would fall down when you prayed for them or when demons would manifest in the middle of a service. I remember questioning the validity of all the things that were happening. We had a pastors meeting with the some of the different pastors in Kuwait and as we were concluding one of the pastors introduces a person who was visiting from the states. This person was a prophet, and asked if we would like to be prayed for before we left. The prayer was amazing, there is no way a person who did not know me very well could have prayed so specifically for what was happening in my life. It was a tremendous blessing and encouragement to me.

There have also been times when God has given me a word of wisdom or knowledge for someone else. I would just suddenly be given information about a person – something that I had no way of knowing. For me, this most often happens when I am preaching. It can be very distracting!

God still speaks today out loud, through angels, through the miraculous and through other people.

#### 5. Our Minds - dreams and visions

A fifth way that God speaks to us is through dreams and visions. A dream is when God speaks to you when you are asleep and a vision is when God speaks to you when you are awake. Generally, these are visual images communicating God's word and will to us.

One of the first times this happened to me was when I was in Seminary at OTS. My roommate and I were praying one night. We were both interns at the same church, and while we were praying for the church I had this vision. I was given a clear picture of a basket full of figs, and there was one fig on top that was bad (it was rotten). That bad fig began to spoil the entire basket. This vision was so strong and clear that I felt compelled to call the associate pastor at the church I was interning at and tell him about it. I said that I did not know what it meant, but that I really wanted to just share the image with him. He thanked me and I hung the phone up. I really did not think anything more of it.

A few years later it was found out that the senior pastor of that church had been sexually assaulting women he was counselling. When it was found out and finally announced it almost destroyed the church. Years later I was speaking with that associate pastor I had called that night, and he told me that when I had called him he knew exactly what the vision was about, but that he had been afraid to do anything about it. I believe that God gave me that vision as a warning to address an injustice that was happening. I only wish that it had been listened to.

Most of the time, when God speaks to me it is in the form of a picture. It is an image that just suddenly comes to mind and is different than just the background noise of what usually occupies our thoughts. Sometimes it is just a single image, other times it is much more detailed and drawn out. Just a few years ago I was leaving the church one day when God gave me a picture of a big glass addition at the front of the church. After praying about it I talked to some of the leaders of the church and asked them if perhaps God could be calling us to build an addition.

God still speaks today out loud, through angels, through the miraculous, through other people and through our minds.

## 6. Our Spirits - still small voice

The sixth and last way that God speaks to us is through His still small voice. This is by far the most common way I have found that God speaks to me. It is when God gives you a sense or tug to move in a certain direction. There are many times when I have just sensed that God was saying something to me. Sometimes it includes an image but not always. It is a prompting, like a thought that does not go away.

In 1986 I had my first opportunity to go on a summer missions trip. I went to Bolivia for 3 months. It was a very difficult time but also a time of tremendous growth. On my way back to Canada I had a 4 hour stopover in Miami. I was walking through the airport on the way to McDonalds when I saw a Hare Krishna there handing out books. I walked past him and I felt a prompting to stop and talk with him. I ignored it, but the further I went the louder and more urgent the prompting became. Finally I decided to go back and talk to him.

I walked up to him and said "You are a Hare Krishna, and I am a Christian. So why don't you take a few minutes to tell me about what you believe and then I will take a few minutes and tell you what I believe." He agreed and proceeded to tell me all there was to know about his faith.

Then it was my turn. I had no idea of what I was going to say, but as soon as I opened my mouth suddenly all these words came flowing out. As I was speaking the man became more and more agitated. I also looked over and saw a girl in the waiting room beside where we were talking staring at me. After a few minutes the man said that he had an appointment he needed to get to and he picked up his box and books and left. I looked over to see if the girl that had been staring at me was still there but she also was gone.

I began to leave and I noticed that the girl was now standing behind a pillar beside me, she had been listening in on the conversation. She asked me "what were you saying to that man." I told her that I was a Christian and that I had been telling him about Jesus. She looked at me and said "Do you know that you are glowing!" She said that as she sat there waiting she looked up and saw me talking to the man and that there was a light that was shining all around me. She said "I don't know what you told him, but could you tell me as well?" We went to McDonalds and I had a chance to share my faith with her. She had spent the summer with the Peace Corps in central America, so we compared notes on what living in central and South America had been like. Her summer had been very difficult and she was searching for truth. God had used that prompting to get me to stop and do something that I really did not want to do, but as a result 2 people had heard the gospel.

God's still small voice is, by definition, small. That means that it can be easy to miss or overlook. Often, we wish that God would speak to us with a megaphone. That the clouds would part and a trumpet from heaven would sound and God would speak in a thunderous voice and tell us exactly what He wanted us to do. In my experience, that does not usually happen.

1Ki 19:11 The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. 12 After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. 13 When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

God chose not to speak in the wind and the earthquake and the fire. He chose the whisper. Why do you think He chose that method? Because it requires us to listen closely. If something is loud you just try and shut it out. However, when someone whispers to you it means that you have to lean in close and actively listen in order to understand. So what was it in this account that God told Elijah?

1Ki 19:15-18 The LORD said to him, "Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. 16 Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. 17 Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. 18 Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel -- all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him."

God tells Elijah 3 things. First, He tells him that he does not have to worry about his enemies. God is going to take care of it. He is going to raise up Hazael to deal with Ahab and Jehu who will deal with Jezebel. Second, he tells Elijah to get an apprentice - someone who is going to help him in his ministry and take over for him when he leaves. Third, He reminds Elijah that he is not alone, that there are still many faithful people in Israel.

These must have been very comforting words for Elijah. God was taking care of his physical, emotional and spiritual needs. They were words of comfort and hope. Because Elijah heard these words, things were different.

God wants to speak to us today. He will try to speak to us out loud, through angels, through the miraculous, through other people, through our minds and through His still small voice. Are we listening? There are times in my life when I have failed to hear what God was trying to tell me. When that happened, He would often increase the volume until my life became very uncomfortable. He does that because He loves us.

I have heard this quote before, "A man can never be the same after hearing Gods voice spoken in the power of Gods Holy Spirit; he will either obey and go forward, or ignore and die a little."

A good pilot does what it takes to get his passengers home. I heard the story of a flight that was heading into some very rough weather. The captain turned on the Fasten Seat Belts light indicating that everyone should take their seats. No one paid any attention to it. So the flight attendants came through and told everyone to take their seats and put on their seatbelts because of impending turbulence. However, it was a rowdy flight. People were on vacation and were not quick to respond; so she warned them again. "The flight is about to get bumpy. For your own safety, take your seats." Most did, but some still did not, so she changed her tone, "ladies and gentlemen, for your own good take your seats NOW!" When it seemed like everyone had taken their seats they heard the voice of the pilot come over the intercom. "This is the captain; people have gotten hurt by walking around and going to the bathroom instead of staying in their seats. Let's be very clear about our responsibilities. My job is to get you through this storm. Your job is to do what I say. Now sit down and buckle up!"

Good pilots do what it takes to get their passengers home, and so does God. So here's a question for you... How far do you want God to go in getting your attention? If God has to choose between your eternal safety and your earthly comfort, which do you think He is going to choose? Don't answer too quickly. Give it some thought. God does what it takes to get our attention. God will whisper, God will shout, God will touch and tug. He will take away our burdens; but He will also take away our blessings. God's goal is not to make you happy. His goal is to make you His. His goal is not to get you what you want; it's to get you what you need. So learn to hear His voice, and obey it immediately when you do.