

# Listening to God

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One question a new believer often asks is how can I hear God's voice? How do I know that what I hear is God and not my own imagination? Think back to your point of salvation and consider how you came to faith in Jesus: it was actually through God speaking to you. He may have spoken to you through people he brought across your path, or through a dream or over a period of time but it was God speaking; softening your heart, opening your ears to hear him and opening your eyes to see him. God continues to speak – now it is about you learning to recognise his voice and grow in your relationship with him.

**Pete:** From the time I became a believer in my late teens the whole direction of my life has been in response to his guidance and what I heard him say to me. One of the prayers I consistently pray for ourselves and for others is that we may hear God's voice. The Bible tells the story of people hearing God and doing what he says; of people hearing the voice of God and not doing what he says; and of those who have never heard his voice. Hearing or not hearing the voice of God will shape your eternity.

## How do we listen and hear God?

Natural listening happens because you have natural ears to hear. Spiritual listening happens because God has placed his Spirit within you. As you pray and seek God, his Spirit within you speaks to you through your soul. Your soul is your personality made up of your thoughts, will and emotions. The Holy Spirit speaks to you through your thought processes which then informs and shapes your will and emotions. This is how spiritual hearing develops.

### John 16:13-14

*'However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you.'*

Jesus made the following simple statement in **John 10:27**,  
*'My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.'*

When you made the decision to follow Jesus, you made a heart acknowledgment of your need and you put your trust in him, the Shepherd. This heart acknowledgment is like putting your spiritual ears into a constant listening mode so that you are always open to hear his voice. How do I listen? It's an attitude of heart. I simply keep my heart right before him so I am always ready to hear his voice. Think of a small child hearing their father's voice as they grow. At first they will not understand much of what is said, but they know the sound of that voice and respond to it. Eventually, as they spend time with their father, they learn to recognise what the different sounds mean until the language becomes clear to them.

What happens practically is that you begin to hear words spoken into your mind by the Holy Spirit. These words do not come from your natural thinking process. Toward the end of my time at university I was asking the Lord what I should do next. After some time these words dropped into my mind; '*join Horizons*'. 'Horizons' was the name of a young Christian missionary organisation that I had already come into contact with in the past. I instantly knew that these words did not come from my natural thinking process; they were placed

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there. God's words were straightforward and practical. He had done what was described in the above verse. He had given to me the knowledge of his will for me regarding my future.

## **Ways we hear God**

God will speak to us through numerous ways. It may be through his Word; through his peace; through a vision or a dream; through a word spoken to us by someone else or directly to our thoughts.

### **Through God's peace**

#### **Colossians 3:15**

*'And let the peace of God rule in your heart ...'*

In this verse the word '*rule*' means to '*act as an umpire*.' Often I am in a situation of having various options to choose from regarding what decision I might make. On such occasions I bring these options to the Lord in prayer. Sometimes God directs me by placing a supernatural peace upon one of the options but not on an alternative option. There are times when I find I have no peace over any of the options so then I have to reconsider the possibilities or I wait until another option emerges that is accompanied by his peace.

### **Through God's word**

#### **Psalm 119:105**

*'Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.'*

Sometimes when you are reading the Bible you may find that a particular passage or verse or even a word jumps off the page and resonates in your spirit and mind. On such occasions, the Holy Spirit uses the written word of God and '*switches the light on*' as it were in your understanding. He also uses the general truths of the Bible to direct our everyday choices through giving us wisdom and discernment of what is right.

### **Through visions**

#### **Acts 9:10-11**

*'Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias and to him the Lord said in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord" So the Lord said to him, "Arise and go to the street called Straight and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus for behold, he is praying....'*

God spoke to Ananias in a vision. When Ananias had received the vision he knew exactly what to do. As you read these verses you will see that in the vision, Ananias had a conversation with the Lord and God gave straightforward answers to his questions.

### **Through dreams**

#### **Matthew 1:20**

*'But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.'*

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My personal dreams seem to be a mixture of many things and don't quite make sense. However, as the example above shows, God can break into your imagination and place a dream that is a word from him. What distinguishes our own dreams from the dreams of God is that dreams that God gives are accompanied with supernatural faith to believe their message.

## **Through a prophetic message**

### **Acts 13:1-2**

*'Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers ... As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, "Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" Then, having fasted and prayed and laid hands on them, they sent them away.'*

A prophetic message is when someone else hears a word from the Lord for another person and they then speak it out.

## **Through the audible voice of God**

The last one to mention in this study is hearing the audible voice of God. This may be rarer but God can make himself known through whatever way he wants. At the beginning of this study I made a statement that hearing God's voice happens is through our spiritual hearing; this example of hearing the audible voice of God is one exception. In this case we hear his voice with our natural ears and we spiritually we discern that this is God speaking. The following verse gives an example of this.

### **Acts 9:4, 7**

*'Then he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me.' (v.7): 'And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one.'*

We know that God spoke audibly to Saul because others with him heard the voice as well.

## **How do I know I have heard God?**

All that is spiritual is not necessarily of God. The devil and his demons also operate spiritually. That is why we need to test what we hear as this next verse teaches.

### **I John 4:1**

*"Beloved, do not believe every spirit but test the spirits, whether they are of God: because many false prophets have gone out into the world"*

## **How do I test it?**

The ultimate test is this - does it conform to God's written word? Even when God uses people we trust and circumstances that seem fine to us, we must always consider what is being said to us in the light of the Bible. If what is said is of God then it will never contradict his written word.

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## Other ways to test what we hear

Do other trusted believers consider it is God speaking to you?  
Does it match other things God has said or is saying to you?  
Does it give you that sense of his peace and life in your heart – does it release faith to you?  
These next two verses express something of this.

### **Ephesians 2:14**

*'For He himself is our peace'*

### **Psalm 119:50**

*'For your word has given me life'*

## Testing a prophetic word

How do you handle a prophetic word given to you by someone else?  
A solid rule to remember: never take a prophetic word as your primary guidance as it may lead you into difficulty. For example, we have a number of friends who have in their past been told strongly by someone of the opposite sex that '*God has told me we are to be married.*' No-one would want to go against God but the test in such a situation is simple: if God hasn't said the same to you, then you know it's not God speaking and you are free to make your own choice regardless of the strength of their conviction! Primary guidance comes to you out of your personal relationship with God where you hear directly from him first. Prophetic words are good at confirming what you are already aware of. The following verse tells us that it is primarily God in you who directs the formation of your will and actions.

### **Philippians 2:13**

*'...it is God who works in you both to will and to do for his good pleasure'.*

A prophetic word given by someone else comes from outside of your own relationship with God. If that prophetic word confirms what God is already saying to you then that is good. If it does not then put it on the shelf and wait, perhaps it is for another time or it is not of God. If you are unsure it is wise to share it with a mature believer who knows you well and test it together.

## A general observation about hearing God's voice

God will always speak loud enough for you to hear – but never so loud that you cannot doubt. In other words it will always be clear enough for you to hear and follow, but never so loud that doubt will not be present within you. We conclude this study with the following promise and encouragement...

### **John 10:2-4**

*'Most assuredly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.'*