

Knowing the Voice of God

John 10:1-16, 27

Each of us is in an ongoing learning process, constantly honing our abilities to define and classify the things of God. Therefore, it is imperative that we know God's voice. Although our learning process may never be fully complete, we can become skilled, whatever our developmental stage may be, in knowing God's voice.

Confusion abounds over whether certain things are of God or of Satan. Sanctified common sense is always needed along with other positive directives in order to determine the things of God versus those of Satan. This lesson is designed to take away doubt, eliminate hurts, provide guidelines, and settle questions in your mind about the will of God.

New doctrines, satanic deception, and false teachers have appeared on the scene in every age. Nothing in my experience of over a quarter of a century of pastoring indicates that this will change. As long as the church is on earth, it will be targeted by Satan to deceive and destroy if possible. New and devious devices of satanic origin will always plague us. God has established some fundamental truths that are absolute and relevant to all generations lest they fall prey to Satan's deception.

One of life's most critical areas for both minister and saint is that of knowing the voice of God. I am convinced that God's people want to obey Him; the dilemma we face is knowing beyond any doubt whether God is speaking to us or not. The object of this study is to help both minister and saint to take the guesswork out of this vital matter.

Obviously, because of time and space we cannot cover each scriptural example or point here. However, these basic guidelines should stay the course for you. While I have included personal experience that I have gained through trial and error, God's Word remains the final authority on this subject.

DEFINITIONS

Discerning and recognizing God's voice in the midst of so many other voices is challenging to each of us. Therefore, it is essential to understand the terms of our text.

Know—comes from the Greek word *ginosko* (ghin-océ'-ko), which means to perceive, be resolved, be sure, and understand. Webster defines the word as "1. To perceive with certainty, to understand clearly. 2. To be acquainted or familiar with. 3. To have clear and certain perception." John 7:17 says, "If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself."

Voice—is from the Greek word *phone* (fo-nay'), meaning a disclosure, a tone (articulate, bestial, artificial), saying, or language. One definition given by Webster that is applicable to the text is "1. Any sound regarded as like vocal utterance; as, the voice of the sea. 2. Anything regarded as like vocal utterance in communication to the mind; as, the voice of his conscience."

Kenneth Taylor, in his Living Bible paraphrase, translated John 10:27 as, "My sheep know my voice . . .," to "My sheep recognize my voice." This is helpful in view of our subject.

GOD'S SHEEP KNOW HIS VOICE

Many variables affect us relative to knowing God's voice. Through the maze of information and input from so many areas that are not of God, His voice can still be heard. Certainty and assurance are essential since they are our only means of

withstanding Satan's onslaught. When we know we have heard from God, we can resist every force of hell that comes against us.

Being close to God is essential to hearing and knowing His voice. Lukewarmness, carnality, and worldliness develop a distance between us and God until we cannot hear Him when He speaks.

Since there is a human will and a divine will, conquering our will is a must before we can be submissive to God's will.

God need not speak to us directly concerning anything already written in His Word. Although His Spirit may remind, convict, or call us to obedience to the written Word (which is His voice), He is not obligated to speak to us audibly the things already contained in the Scriptures. Our responsibility is to study and obey God's Word, accepting everything written as His will and voice.

One-time calls can impact an individual for a lifetime! (Ministers and missionaries will relate to this statement.) We may receive confirmations, renewals, and encouragement to fulfill God's call, but just knowing He has spoken motivates us to carry out His command. Consider Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, the apostles, and Paul in this context.

We are to try the spirits since a spirit of error and a spirit of truth exist simultaneously (I John 4:1-6). According to Paul there are many voices in this world (I Corinthians 14:10). Therefore, through trial and error, time and experience we will come to know His voice.

Our own mind generates voices, better known as self-talk. Satan, people, books, thoughts, pictures, etc., constantly bombard our minds with voices and impressions. Distinguishing God's voice in the midst of such din and confusion is a challenge.

God leaves many things to common sense, practicality, and nature to guide us. God does not have to speak to us concerning where to park or sit, whether we should walk on the sidewalk, etc. Minor decisions are left to our God-given, innate intelligence; we do not need God-given directives in insignificant decisions.

God will give us any instructions we need if they are not already available to us. He is our Shepherd, He speaks to His sheep, and His sheep know His voice.

METHODS THROUGH WHICH GOD SPEAKS

Several and varied methods exist as vehicles through which God may speak; let us examine the more basic ones.

God's Word—The Bible is the most reliable source we have to depend upon as being God's voice. Without error, contradiction, or fallibility, we can trust God's Word as the final authority on any and all matters.

Every other method presented in this lesson must come back to the Word as the final reference point. Never believe or accept anything as being from God if it contradicts the Bible. Trusting others or yourself to be right is always a mistake; obey God's Word regardless of the cost. Remember the fate of Adam and Eve for disobeying God's Word.

People of God—Men and women of God whom you have confidence in can help you know God's voice, or God may speak directly to you through them. Pastors and other ministers are essential to our spiritual welfare and balance when it comes to knowing God's voice. Eli helped Samuel when he was confused over the voice of God (I Samuel 3:1-18).

God Speaks Directly to Us—God uses this method to call people into His service and give specific directions and instructions to them in vital matters. God spoke to Abraham while he still lived in Mesopotamia (Acts 7:1-4). He spoke with Moses through the burning bush (Exodus 3:1-18). God talked to Balaam through a donkey (Numbers 22:22-35). God still speaks today through His Spirit, giving direction, leadership, and instruction to His people (Acts 8:26-29; 10:19; 13:1-2; 16:6).

We should guard against haste and overzealousness when acting upon what we feel is a directive from God. Calls from God do not die, while excitement, fervor, and zeal have a way of cooling with time. New converts should become rooted and grounded in the truth before making important decisions based upon what they think is a direct order from God.

Gifts of the Spirit—Prophecy, as well as tongues accompanied by an interpretation, is God speaking to us. Both scriptural methods are to be judged by the listeners, which does not mean they should criticize or ignore what is said but rather judge its accuracy and adherence to Scripture (I Corinthians 12; 14).

Dreams and Visions—Both of these occur in the lives of most people without having any scriptural or spiritual meaning. When we rely on a dream or vision as a directive from God, we must be absolutely sure God is speaking. God spoke to many in His word through this method. Among them were:

- **Solomon** (I Kings 3:5-15).
- **Joseph** (Matthew 1:18-25; 2:13, 19, 22-23).
- **Pilate's wife** (Matthew 27:19).
- **Peter** (Acts 10:9-18).
- **Paul** (Acts 18:9-10).

Angels—God has and can send an angel, one of His messengers, to us with a message. When we know it to be an angel of God (remember, the devil has angels), we should regard it as God speaking, should the angel speak to us in some manner. Both Old and New Testaments abound with experiences of angels visiting people. A few of the people to whom angels appeared are: (1) Hagar—Genesis 16:7-11; (2) Abraham—Genesis 22:11-19; (3) Zacharias—Luke 1:5-22; (4) Cornelius—Acts 10:1-8; (5) Philip—Acts 8:26-27.

By Impression—Although we could consider this as God speaking to us directly, I want to distinguish between the audible voice of God and an impression upon our mind by the Spirit. Each of us has inner voices or self-talk, along with other outside forces making impressions upon us. By no means are all of our impressions from God; therefore, we must become sensitive to the extent that we can determine what is from God versus what is from the world, the flesh, or the devil.

Trial and error come into play here. All make mistakes when acting on impressions alone, since impressions can originate from many sources. Reflect on past impressions. Let time and experience teach you until you do not act impulsively on every

impression, but only those you know are from God.

God's Spirit guides, grace teaches, and God often speaks in a still, small voice. Consequently we must have an ear that can hear what the Spirit is saying to us. All this goes on within the heart and mind as an impression, a method used often and extensively by our Lord to speak to us.

In directing a service, making financial decisions, receiving a call to service, making minor or major decisions relating to life or church, etc.—in any or all of these God could speak to us by impressions. It is known as a still, small voice, one we have learned to detect by impression.

Remember, always authenticate the voice of God by using the Bible as a final reference point. Whether it be a minister, angel, spiritual gift, audible voice, dream, vision, or impression, we must verify and document it by the Word. Our generation needs to hear from God and then act upon and obey what He tells us to do.

THE VOICE OF STRANGERS

People who know God's voice will not follow a stranger, because his voice is different from the one they are accustomed to following (John 10:5). The word *stranger* here comes from a Greek word meaning foreign, different, alien, or hostile. Paul warned us of the many voices that are in the world (I Corinthians 14:10). We must have a clear note and a certain sound before we act.

Our day abounds with strange voices and doctrines, with deceivers of every sort and type existing in our time (Ephesians 4:14, Hebrews 12:9). Most are not necessarily cultic or weird teachings; nevertheless, they are totally *different* from biblical truths. Printing presses and media methods pour forth a constant stream of strange doctrines; the voice of strangers is never silent as Satan seeks to lead God's sheep astray.

We must apply sound scriptural principles and deep spiritual perception to every directive in order to determine its origin. We must exercise caution in the smallest of matters lest we fall prey to the voice of strangers. Stay close to the Shepherd; hear His voice often. It will be clearly discernable in the din of all other voices.

HOW TO DISCERN GOD'S VOICE

Focusing on God's methodology of speaking will help us discern the Shepherd's voice from the voice of strangers. Some comparative measures that we can take to know what is God's voice are:

1. Compare what you are hearing (whether it be from man or inward impression) with what you have been taught. Never abandon principles of morality, honesty, or integrity instilled in you by your parents or the church. Contemporary peers of each generation pressure God's people to forsake biblical guidelines, scorning them as foolish and out of date; turn a deaf ear to such enticements. Your mind and body can tell you a lot of wrong things and pawn them off as being godly. Take heed at this juncture and remember truths you learned from childhood (Hebrews 2:1-3; II Timothy 1:5; 3:13-17; II Thessalonians 2:15).
2. Compare what you are hearing with past experiences. Recall from the past what was of God and what was the flesh, then act accordingly. Time and experience are great teachers; utilize them for your spiritual welfare and wellbeing. Quit making the same mistakes over and over; become wise to Satan's wiles and devices.
3. Compare what you are hearing with someone else's experience. Use godly, successful men and women as sounding boards to determine if you are on course or not. Independence and self-centeredness are sure routes to following the wrong voice. Take advantage of the knowledge and expertise of those who have walked the path you are now on. Paul did this in his ministry (Galatians 2:1-2). Samuel had Eli's guidance in discerning God's voice in his hour of youth and crisis (I Samuel 3:1-18). You and I need the wisdom of others.
4. Compare what you are hearing with God's Word. Immediately reject any message or impression contradictory to the Scripture. Anything coming from God will harmonize with the Bible and the spirit of the Word.

Acting impulsively and hastily, especially when there is question, only brings hurt and damage to us and others. A comparative analysis of what we are hearing with these four guidelines will always provide a safety net against failure and deception.

Much of what is called "of God" is really of humans or Satan. Caution regarding eternal truths and your eternal destiny is always in order. Learn to wait on God. Do not try to rush the situation as Saul did by offering sacrifices when he was not supposed to. Waiting and checking things out are good rules of safety in determining God's voice! To sum it up, be sure it is God's voice, not just your feelings, desires, or impression before you move or act.

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU MISTAKE GOD'S VOICE

Webster says that a mistake in this context means "1. To perceive or understand erroneously; to interpret or estimate incorrectly; to misunderstand or misapprehend. 2. To recognize or identify incorrectly, to take (one thing or person) for another."

For each of us the consequences of mistaking God's voice varies widely. We can run the gamut from extreme hurt and irreparable damage to minor discomforts when we fail to distinguish the voice of the Shepherd from the voice of strangers. Lives have literally been wrecked because someone listened to the wrong voice. If at some juncture this has happened to you, perhaps these few remarks will bring consolation and new direction to your life. Since none of us is exempt from making this type of mistake, we need to be extremely cautious lest we hurt and destroy others along with ourselves. In our floundering and seeking, there is no reason at any time or place to mistake the clear tones of the Bible. God's written Word is clear, and we must adhere to it. This portion of the lesson addresses areas of our lives where there are no written guidelines.

NOTE: Willful disobedience to, disregard for, or rebellion against what we know is God's voice is not included here. Balaam was guilty of this

type of behavior along with King Saul, Korah, and countless others. If you are suffering because of rebellion against God's directives to you, you only need one word of advice: repent and get on with what God has told you to do. The problem will be solved even if some damage remains.

Although they are not a result of mistaking God's voice, when you encounter severe trials, reversals, financial loss, or poverty while doing the will of God, Satan will try to defeat you by making you think you have missed God's will. Obeying God's voice does not always bring prosperity, progress, and popularity! If you are in God's will and obeying His voice, learn to accept the circumstances and stay true to God in spite of them.

Ministers

It is naive to think or suggest that every preacher and church has made every move in accordance with God's voice and will. Does this mean that we are all out of the will of God and doomed to defeat? No it does not. While God may not have been pleased with your action or what others did, you can still walk pleasing to God. Here are examples:

- You resigned a church out of the will of God and the church has chosen someone else.
- You were an evangelist and began pastoring or doing something else out of the will of God.
- You were voted out of a church and felt you were wronged.
- You were voted out of an office that you felt God wanted you in.
- You are in a place or position and feel you should be somewhere else, but there is no opportunity for you to make that change.

If any of the foregoing situations, or one similar, exists in your life, consider the following remedies:

Prayerlessness, stress, flawed judgement, domestic problems, the rebellion of others, along with many other factors could create such a scenario. Whatever the cause, often it cannot be undone. If so, you should:

(1) Ask God's forgiveness for your mistake. (2) Allow it to become a learning experience. (3) Forgive those who have hurt you and gone against God's will. (4) Keep bitterness out of your heart toward anyone. (5) Quit kicking yourself and looking back with regret. (6) Make the best of where you are. You can be productive, successful, and please God in the position you now fill. (7) Be ethical toward those who took your place (or the one you want to be in). Never undermine or work against anyone filling a position that you feel God wants you to have. (8) God will ultimately place you where He wills; until then, be your best where you are.

Churches

When a church as a whole wrongs a minister or leader in any capacity they should collectively repent and make reconciliation to that person. Although the removal of a pastor may not be undone, the hurt should be removed as much as possible. Extreme caution should be exercised by any church before raising their hand against the ministry. Removing a man from the pulpit should be a last resort. Ministers should conduct themselves so there would be no reason for removal.

Should such an event occur out of the bounds of the Scripture and the will of God, the church should:

1. Make restitution and reconciliation with the pastor they have wronged.
2. Any minister who has been wronged should forgive and get on with his life.
3. Let this be a learning experience and not let it happen again.
4. Accept the pastor they now have and support him and love him as the Scripture teaches.
5. Become a prayerful, soul winning church with a spirit of unity.
6. Understand that the way to solve problems is not by changing pastors but by prayer, repentance, and forgiveness.

Gifts of the Spirit

If prophecy and interpretations are not of God but come from the spirit of the speaker or speakers, the following should be done:

1. Whoever is in charge should correct the matter if they deem the mistake to be serious and harmful to the congregation present and then proceed with the service, endeavoring to restore a good spirit to the meeting.
2. If it is an immature saint or the mistake was in good faith and in a good spirit and no serious harm is incurred, the leader should instruct the person privately concerning spiritual gifts; the church should forgive and pray for that person.
3. Persons used in the area of spiritual gifts should:
 - Be taught by the pastor;

- Learn what the Bible teaches on the subject;
- Be sure God is the author of anything they say in His stead;
- understand the liberty and limitations placed on the gifts to speak
- Understand that God allows the hearers to judge the prophecy or interpretation as to whether it is biblical and accurate.

Individuals

Each of us has the privilege of having God, our Shepherd, speak to us on an individual basis. Should you mistake God's voice in some area of your life, many of the guidelines given to others in this section will help you correct your error and give you direction. Some moves are reversible; others are irreversible. If reversible, be humble enough to admit your mistake, repent, and do what you know is right. When actions are irreversible, accept the consequences and serve God acceptably where you are.

SUMMARY

Oh, how I desire that we would always know God's voice and obey it! Our Shepherd wants to lead us to green pastures, but we must first know His voice and then follow Him. If you have, rejoice! If you missed it or made a mistake, all is not lost; the Shepherd still lives, loves, and leads. His voice still calls. Indescribable blessings await those who hear, know, and obey His voice.

“Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.” (Revelation 3:20)