

Welcome and Good morning. Welcome to Foothills Church. My name is Dillon if we haven't had a chance to meet yet. I am one of the pastors here at Foothills and I am so glad to be here with you this morning. (Greet 9:30 Classic and Online Community). Today we are continuing our study on the Holy Spirit. Last week we took a break to hear from a few of the students who went to Croatia, if you missed it you can check it out online or better yet, next Sunday at 12:30 in the Worship Center they are going to tell more stories and share more pictures so you can attend that and get an even fuller report.

Our topic this morning is listening to the Holy Spirit.

As I approached this topic I found myself wrestling with several questions and I'm hoping some of you have had similar questions. Here they are: Does God still speak to us? How does God communicate with us? How do we hear God speak or listen to the Holy Spirit? How do we know that it is God speaking to us and not our own thoughts, feelings or desires? And lastly, and this one is a tough one, do we actually want to hear God speak to us? Because if we do want to hear God, if we really want to listen to the Spirit, we might have to change the way we live. All of these are questions we are going to wrestle with this morning and hopefully come out with a few solid answers and biblical principles. Sound Good?

Does God Still Speak?

I believe the answer to this is a resounding YES! Let's unpack this a little further. Hebrews 1: 1-3 Summarizes the primary way God communicated with his people throughout the Old Testament and up until Jesus Christ. It Says: "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his

Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. ³ He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high." So, first God spoke, primarily through his prophets, then through his Son Jesus, now take a look at the promises Jesus made about the Spirit.

John 14:26 But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. And then, in John 16:13 Jesus says: "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵ All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you."

On the Day of Pentecost, God granted the Holy Spirit to believers who put their faith in Jesus Christ as their savior and surrendered their lives to him. And God continues to grant the Holy Spirit to all who believe today. If you are a follower of Christ, if you are a believer, then God promises that he will fill you with his Spirit, and the Spirit will guide you and teach you and speak to you.

How does God communicate with us?

Throughout Scripture God has chosen to reveal himself in several ways. These include physical manifestations of his presence including things like the burning bush, the pillar of fire and smoke, The Angel of the Lord might be an example. He has also communicated through dreams and visions, beginning with the patriarchs, and several of the prophets were given distinct visions. Think of Isaiah and his vision of the throne room of God, Ezekiel and the vision of God's chariot. Daniel and the great statue of gold, silver, bronze and clay. God continued to use dreams even in the New Testament. God has sent his Angels to deliver specific instructions

or information on a few rare occasions in Scripture. So God uses these various methods of communicating with us.

However, the primary means by which God has communicated to his people throughout history is through words. Over and over again in the Bible is the phrase "The word of the Lord came to me and said. . ." Over and over again, God has chosen to speak his word to his people. And God continues to speak through his Spirit primarily through words. One of the clearest ways that God speaks to us is through the Bible. I am not talking about bible roulette, you know what I mean? When people are facing a difficult decision or circumstance so they get out their bible, cover their eyes, and flip randomly through the pages and then stick their finger on a verse and try to divine how it answers their question or solves their problem. Don't do that! Not a good way to listen to the Spirit. What I am talking about is when the Holy Spirit helps us to understand the purpose and intent and meaning of scripture and even how to apply the principles of scripture to our lives and our situations. God does this all the time. The theological term for this is illumination. When the Spirit illuminates scripture, opens our eyes to the truth of God's word and helps us internalize them and apply them to our life and circumstance. In order to hear the Spirit speak to us through the Bible we have to be reading and studying the Bible and applying it to our lives.

Lastly and perhaps most importantly to our topic this morning, God speaks directly to us with words. Sometimes it's a strong feeling, a nudge, a prompting to do something or say something, but mostly God speaks to us with words.

How do we hear God speak and how do we discern God's voice?

I want to look at two Old Testament stories that help shed light on this question. The first is in 1 Samuel chapter 3. Turn in your bibles there. 1 Samuel 3. Samuel was a boy who had been born through God's miraculous work, and in response, Samuel's mother dedicated him to the

service of the Lord at the Tabernacle. At this point in the story he is still a young boy. Let's read: (vs 1-11).

This story of Samuel shows us that we have to learn to recognize God's voice and it takes time and practice. Like any other discipline, have to practice. Samuel didn't know what God's voice sounded like. He didn't know that God was speaking to him. When we are young in our faith we don't always know what the Spirit sounds like or how to listen. Sometimes God is speaking to us repeatedly and we just don't hear him and we need a friend to flick us in the forehead to help us discern what is going on.

Dallas Willard, a renowned Christian Philosopher say's it this way:
"Perhaps our inability to recognize his voice right off is a result of our fallen and distorted condition. Or perhaps it lies in the very nature of all personal relations. Certainly you and I did not recognized the voice of whoever is now most dear and intimate to us the first time we heard it. Or perhaps it is because of the very gentleness with which our heavenly Father speaks to us. Whatever the reason, it seems that at first we must be told that God is speaking to us and possibly even be helped to detect his voice. Only later do we come, without assistance, confidently to distinguish and recognized his voice as *his* voice. That ability comes only with experience." (Willard, Hearing God, P220-221)

If you have struggled to hear God's voice, if you have struggled to hear the Spirit speaking to you, don't give up. It takes practice and experience but I assure you if you are listening, God will speak to you. We have this promise from Christ. If you are a believer, a follower of Jesus, you will learn to recognize his voice. John 10:27-28 My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand." It takes time and experience but we can learn to recognize when God is speaking to us.

The second Old Testament story that sheds some insight into listening to the Spirit and hearing and discerning God's voice is found in 1 Kings 19. This is a story about the prophet Elijah. Shortly after his showdown with the profits of Baal on Mt. Carmel, where he prayed and God sent fire down from heaven and burned up the offering. Elijah finds himself fleeing for his life from the evil queen Jezebel. God sends him on a journey for 40 days out into the wilderness to Mt. Horeb the mountain of God. Seems like a good place to hear from the Lord right? Now let's look at the story. Let's read: (vs 9-18).

A few quick observations from this story that will help us practice listening to the spirit and discerning God's voice.

1. Spend time Alone with God.

Elijah went alone to a quiet place to talk to God. (Side note, Jesus did the same thing regularly). Obviously Elijah was well experienced in hearing from God as one of his prophets. And still, God sent him out somewhere alone. If you want to practice hearing and discerning God's voice, the best place to practice is in quiet solitude. I know this is counter cultural. If you are an extrovert, a people person, you don't like solitude. If you are in a family with young children, you can hardly find enough solitude to use the bathroom let alone spend time with Jesus. It's for real. Some of my friends in college lived in a house with a bunch of roommates and they converted a closet under the stairs into the prayer closet. It was the only place anyone could find quiet. If you want to practice listening to the Holy Spirit, go spend time alone.

2. Eliminate Distractions.

These big, cataclysmic events: blasting wind, fire, earthquake, these would have been awesome and terrifying demonstrations of God's power. But God did not speak through those things. Those were just distractions. Raise your hands if you have a lot of distractions in your life? Have you ever looked at the clock on your phone and wondered where the last hour went? Have you ever gotten off work, ate some dinner on the couch in front of the TV and didn't really move again until you went to bed? Between traditional media, social

media, video games, and music, books, we are literally entertaining ourselves into oblivion. These screens we carry in our pockets are literally rewiring our brains the longer we stare at them. And we haven't even talked about all the good things we are spending our time on like jobs, spouses, kids, activities, hobbies, bible studies and volunteer opportunities. We are so, so busy in this culture of ours. So busy, that we often feel guilty or out of place if we slow down and actually rest.

Our minds can be our own worst distractions when it comes to listening to the Spirit. Our thoughts often wander, we fixate on our conflicts, our worries, our plans or dreams. Sometimes our thoughts drift to our mistakes, our temptations, our grief or losses. It can be hard to learn how to turn all those things off and keep our focus on listening, and allowing God to direct our thoughts and our time with him. I'm not one to claim that there is a devil behind every bush, but I wonder why Satan would waste his time trying to deceive us or mislead us when all he has to do is distract us every day and keep us from listening to the Spirit. If we don't learn to quiet the distractions it will be very hard for us to discern God's voice in our lives.

3. Learn to recognize the still small voice. God spoke through a quiet voice and Elijah knew that voice. God often uses our own thoughts, our own emotions, memories, and recollection of scripture to speak to us in a still small voice but we have to learn how to recognize it.

Again, Dallas Willard explains: "God addresses us in our own spirits-our own thoughts and feelings toward ourselves as well as toward events and people around us. This I believe, is the primary subjective way that God addresses us. Of all the ways in which a message comes from within the experience of the person addressed, the form of one's own thoughts and attendant feelings is the most common path for hearing God for those who are living in harmony with God." (Willard, Hearing God. P. 130).

Pastor Mike talked about this a couple weeks ago. Very often when we are facing difficult circumstances, decisions or temptations, the Spirit will

bring to mind a specific verse or the line from a worship song at just the right moment. That is the voice of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes God gently reminds us of his love and grace at just the right time. He uses our own thoughts and emotions to speak truth to us and to guide us. And only regular time with God alone and free of distractions will give us the experience we need to discern when it is God speaking or when it is our own voice or thoughts speaking.

4. God invites us into a conversation. To hear God speak, to listen to the Spirit, comes with an invitation into a deeper relationship with the living God. If your attempts to hear God are limited to questions about your future or asking for help, you are missing out on a rich and full conversation and you will often fail to hear what God is saying. If we do all the talking in our prayer time, it should be no surprise that we have such a hard time hearing God speak to us. We often treat God more like a genie with phenomenal cosmic powers, and less time listening for his voice and word. We ask for help, we ask for wisdom, we ask for healing, for provision, for reconciliation, for direction and guidance, all good things, all things that God has invited us to seek him for, but then we say "in Jesus name, Amen!" and head out the door to the next busy thing in our lives. In order to listen to the Spirit, we have to wait long enough to hear God's answers. If this is true, and I believe this is true, that God invites us into conversations, then I need you to think about this for a moment: What question is God asking you today?

How do we know that it is God who is speaking and not something else? All of this sounds great, Time alone with God, free of distraction, conversation with Jesus, still quiet voice, it all sounds great. But how do we know that it is actually God's voice and not our own thoughts, desires, wishes, fears or feelings that are leading us? Here are a few things.

1. The Spirit will always affirm the promises and principles of scripture. If you are struggling with what to do, what to believe, what to think, wrestling through a decision that has moral or ethical consequences, the

Spirit will always affirm what is taught in scripture. So read your Bible and know what it says.

2. The Spirit speaks with authority. Our own thoughts or inner voice can often be messy, confusing, unsure, full of emotion, but God's voice comes with the weight of authority. E. Stanley Jones says it like this: "Perhaps the rough distinction is this: The voice of the subconscious argue with you, tries to convince you: but the inner voice of God does not argue, does not try to convince you. It just speaks, and it is self-authenticating. It has the feel of the voice of God within it." (Willard, Hearing God, P. 229)

3. God uses our circumstances to speak to us and guide us. When we are facing tough decisions or seeking the Lord for direction it can be really hard to discern God's will and plan. Sometimes we just have to wait until the circumstances make it clear. And if God is silent, we pray for wisdom and make the best decision that we can with the information that we have and trust that God is with us and guiding us. Sometimes trusting God's leadership is as simple as taking the next step on the path that is set before us. He can speak through our circumstances.

Our last question: Do we really want to listen to the Spirit?

This question is so important because if you say no, you are missing out on such an incredible, miraculous relationship with the God of the universe who is literally dwelling inside you. You will miss out on so much that God wants to show you and teach you and communicate with you. But if you say yes, if you really do want to listen to the Spirit, then you are submitting yourself to God's will and direction in your whole life and it might mean you have to make some huge changes in your life and huge sacrifices for him.

James 1:22 says: "Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says"

Listening to the Spirit is not merely passive, we have to follow the Spirit, we have to respond and obey God's leading and direction. Perhaps the reason you are struggling to hear God's voice is because God has already

told you what you need to be doing and he is just waiting for you to respond. You might already know what God wants and you just aren't willing to make the change. Its ok. God is patient, he will wait. But as we practice doing what god tells us, prompts us to do, we see the fruit of obedience played out in our lives and that reinforces, strengthens our confidence in our ability to discern his voice and we grow closer in that trusting relationship that he has for us.

If we want to listen to the Spirit we might need to change our lifestyle and our habits. We might need to say no to some busy things in our lives, some distractions, in order to slow down and hear that quiet voice. It might cost us. But the reward is much greater than the price we have to pay to listen to the Spirit.

Key Takeaways.

God does speak directly to us through his Holy Spirit today.

We cultivate our ability to listen to the Spirit through quiet solitude and time with the Lord in his word.

We have a relational conversation with God and listen carefully for his answers and even his questions.

When God speaks, we listen, we receive his words of affirmation and we obey his instructions.