

How Do I Listen to God?

Under the Hood #1 | Jun 30, 2024 | 8:00, 9:30, 11:00 AM | Steve Howell



Series Intro: "Under the Hood"

Last week we wrapped up our sermon series on the Old Testament book of Ezekiel, and I pray that you'll continue to find insight and inspiration from those messages!

Today, though, we are heading into new territory. Our new series will continue to be biblically grounded, but rather than working through a book of the Bible by itself, I want us to work through some "how to" information that can provide practical power for your faith.



A few weeks ago, on my family's vacation to visit relatives in Arizona, we opted to take a road trip instead of flying. And rather than putting the additional wear and tear on one of our current vehicles, we decided to rent. The vehicle we received? A maroon 2024 Jeep Grand Cherokee!

It was nice, but also a little confusing. All the controls were just a little bit different from the vehicles we drive, so our instincts were...off. It was unnatural to turn a dial to shift gears. It was awkward to press the button for cruise control. And don't even ask about the paddle shifters – they didn't just change gears; they triggered an argument between me and Deb!

The biggest difference, though, was the engine. It was a hybrid vehicle, so it drove using a combination of electric power and a traditional combustion engine. As the vehicle automatically adjusted systems to accommodate our driving situations and styles, I found myself wishing for a little more power. Maybe it was the way I drove it, but every time I wanted just a little more "oomph" I felt like it gave me a little more "nope."

I could say more about the Jeep, but this is a sermon, not a car review. I'll focus on the feelings we had – the desire to go faster, to have more power – and the subsequent frustration of not knowing how to coax more out of the engine! We wished that we had more guidance from the person at the rental agency, or that we had an online video tutorial, or maybe some sort of book that explained everything about the car that was stored in a convenient place like the glovebox (who would look there?).

When you want *more* but you don't have the knowledge, the tools, or the insight to get it, you grow frustrated. We all want *specific, real-world* understanding that can help us.

And it is the same with our faith, isn't it? We want just a bit *more* out of our walk with Jesus. So, we want guidance. We want someone to assist. We want *specific, real-world* understanding that can help us.



That's why we're here today, going "under the hood" in our faith.

This new sermon series will give us a chance to gain *specific, real-world* experience that will help us get a little *more* from our faith. With a few tweaks and adjustments, our spiritual life might gain extra horsepower that will help us traverse the rough roads we're all navigating.

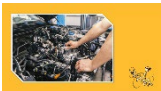
Each week, we will explore **one** specific area and discuss practical ways to improve. My prayer is that these few, small changes will have a big result...and that the subsequent impact will drastically improve our collective experience with Jesus. Six months from now, this church might look different because of what happens here! A year later, you might look different because of what starts now. That is my prayer.

[Prayer]

So where do we begin today?

Let me start with a story.

Sermon Intro: An Ear for Engines



Probably no one in my life here in Tonganoxie thinks about engines quite like Matt Kessler. I know lots of people who know a thing or two about vehicles, but Matt's mechanical knowledge is unique!

A little while back, I was having some trouble with a vehicle and did a little armchair mechanic work of my own (translation: I looked at YouTube). I took the symptoms that were abnormal, researched them, and decided the problem was most likely a wheel bearing on the front driver's side. The part was easy enough to obtain, but the installation was going to be a little beyond my skill level (and toolset).

So, I talked to Matt, and he invited me over to work in his shop (translation: I could watch and stay out of the way while he did everything faster and better). When we arrived, I was ready to jack up the car and start pulling things apart...but Matt had other ideas.

"Let's take it for a drive," he said.

We hit the road and he had me roll down the window. It was a beautiful, cool Saturday morning with the sun just over the horizon and mist still hovering over the ponds. It seemed like a chance to enjoy a bit of nature before we started working, but appreciation of nature was not on Matt's mind.

He just listened.

The car rolled along, starting to make unnatural grinding noises as I drove faster and as I braked. His trained ear kept listening. After a half mile, he said, “We can head back now.”

Back at the shop, we did a little more exploring...opening the hood, jacking up the front end, moving things here and applying pressure there. Through it all Matt kept listening. Eventually, he rendered his verdict.

“It’s not the wheel bearing. It’s your transmission.”

Great news? No. (I didn’t say the story had a happy ending!)

But at the very least, Matt’s ear – Matt’s *listening* – kept us from going down a path we didn’t need to go down. *Listening* stopped us from fixing something that wasn’t broken in the first place.

Listening can take a lot of different forms when you are working on cars. You can have the trained ear that just knows how an engine should sound, like Matt. Or you could use a scanner that plugs into your car and *listens* to the engine and the computers inside. You can find out how the engine is running (real-time data) or read what error codes the sensors have picked up.

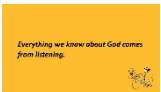
Either way, *listening* helps you understand what is really going on so you can address it properly.



The Importance of Listening

Spiritually, we need to do the same; we need to *listen*.

Why? Keep this statement tucked away in your brain: ***Everything we know about God comes from listening.***



My son, Jacob, was telling me about a conversation he had with a colleague on a recent trip. They began discussing theology (the kind of conversations you have when you’re young and trying to figure out the world). Jacob’s friend laid out an entire belief system: he didn’t believe in god, but if god did exist he would be like _____ . He proceeded to fill in the blanks with ideas about what god could or could not do, why he did or didn’t interact in certain situations, and how he would hand the afterlife, etc. Some of his ideas were previously reasoned, others were generated on the spot in response to Jacob’s questions. But regardless of how much thought he put into it, there was one glaring problem: all of it was made up! It was a spiritual fiction he created based on nothing outside his own head.

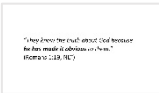


The belief system he held was wrong, but for the sake of argument, let’s pretend he was right. Pretend that god *was* exactly as Jacob’s friend described. How would any of us *know*? Could we *verify* any of it with a scientific test? Could we record it in high-definition video? Could we document it through any of our senses? No. Nothing could be authenticated. Nothing could be tested. There is no evidence that could prove him right.

That is the case with a made-up religion, yet the same could also be said about Christianity and its claims. Can we prove the existence of the Holy Spirit? Can we empirically show that justification and redemption has occurred using a chemical test? What measurement tool confirms the presence of God?

Nothing. Nothing can be verified. Nothing can be tested. There is no visible evidence today that could prove us right.

The only way we can know anything about God is because He *reveals* it to us. ***Everything we know about God comes from listening.***



*“They know the truth about God because **he has made it obvious to them.**”*
(Romans 1:19, NLT)

Sometimes God reveals hints about His character as we listen to nature. **“Natural revelation”** might come from observing the stars, or exploring the patterns built into our world. We perceive and reflect, drawing conclusions about God and what He is like. But “natural revelation” can only stir up interest and nudge us toward God. The rest must be shared through what scholars term “special revelation.”

“Special revelation” makes truth clear. “Special revelation” is an explicit statement from God, a message or action that tells us detailed, previously unknown information. It might come in the form of **spoken words** in an **encounter** with God (ex: Abraham meeting with the Angel of the Lord in Genesis), or it might come in the form of **written words** in the Bible (ex: God-breathed, inspired books of Scripture. See 2 Timothy 3:16-17).

We only know what God has **told** us about Himself. ***Everything we know about God comes from listening.***

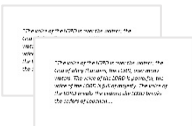


Recognizing His Voice

But how do we listen? What is the “voice” of God like? How do we recognize it?

When God Speaks

Before we say anything else, we should remember that when God wants to be heard, He will be heard! Scripture often portrays the voice of God in **powerful** metaphors:



“The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD, over many waters. The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty. The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars; the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.... The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire. The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness; the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. The voice of the LORD makes the deer give birth and strips the forests bare, and in his temple all cry, “Glory!”” (Psalm 29:3–9, ESV)

Throughout the Bible, God has no trouble being heard above the noise!



But he doesn't always use His big voice.

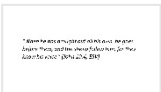
Sometimes God shows up in a **whisper** (ex: Elijah in 1 Kings 19:12) or a **dream** (ex: Jacob in Genesis 28). Sometimes his voice isn't audible; instead it is **readable** (ex: King Belshazzar in Daniel 5) or **internal** (ex: Paul's insight from the Spirit in Acts 20:23). God speaks in many subtle ways, and sometimes we might struggle to hear His words.

However, we should take heart knowing that the voice – in any form – is recognizable.



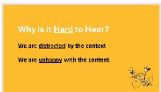
Have you ever watched an animated show or movie? The big budget animated films (from Pixar, Disney, or DreamWorks) all use celebrity voice actors. It's a curious practice, because nothing about the animation itself requires them to hire such expensive talent. A no-name voice actor could do just as well. But the RECOGNITION of the actor's voice helps the audience connect with the characters. You listen and think, is that Christopher Walken? Is that Dwayne Johnson? Is that Chris Pratt? There's comfort in hearing a familiar voice.

And when it is God's voice, if you are a Christian, you and I will recognize it. You will know the voice of Jesus! Remember this verse we talked about a few weeks ago?



"When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice." (John 10:4, ESV)

If you listen, you're going to know the voice of Jesus. To use the biblical metaphor, if you have "eyes to see" and "ears to hear," you'll recognize Him because, ultimately, hearing is a choice. You *choose* to put yourself in a **position** where you *can* hear Him, then you **commit** to really *listening*.



Why is it Hard to Hear?

If it's a choice, then why is He still sometimes so hard to hear? I think there are two big reasons:

1. We are distracted by the context
2. We are unhappy with the content.

Distracted by the Context

Sometimes there is so much going on around us that it is hard to distinguish the voice of God. The soundscape around us is filled with noise. We have TVs in the background, podcasts playing while we work, and songs in the ever-present AirPods® hanging out of the ears of most youth.

In the middle of the noise, how do you stop and think? How do you process and listen? We are distracted from God's voice by everything around us.

Unhappy with the Content

Sometimes we don't want to listen to what is being said. He shares uncomfortable truth that challenges the way we think or act. It's not so much that we *don't hear* God's Word but that we *don't want to hear* it.

We ignore it because we are unhappy with the content of what God says.

But if we don't *listen*, we'll never know Him. Remember? Everything we know about God comes from listening...so, if we don't listen, we will miss out.

Listening can be difficult. But you *can* do it! And you *should* do it!

So, how do we listen? What are some *specific, real-world* ways that we can listen better?



Practical Ways to Listen

Let me share a few tweaks to your daily routine that can help you listen to God. These might be **new** (you've never heard them before) or a **review** (you've heard them a lot), but hopefully they will inspire you to listen better than ever!

Let's go "under the hood" and adjust **five practical actions** to help you listen to God.



1. Set a time limit on your phone.

Under the "Digital Wellbeing and Parental Controls" setting on Android phones or the "Screen Time → App Limits" setting on iPhones, you can set a timer on **categories** of apps (ex: social media) or on **specific** apps (ex: TikTok). When the clock hits zero for the day, you can't use those apps anymore (if you use a bit of self-control and don't add more time).

Scriptural Foundation: "Be still and know that I am God." (Psalm 46:10, ESV)

Why it works: To listen to God, you need to eliminate some noise. For a lot of people, the phone has become the go-to activity when there is a pause in the action. We instinctively check for new messages or texts, play games, or just look at cat videos. By limiting screen time, you limit the distractions that prevent you from listening to God. The stillness creates time when you can focus on prayer and God's Word.



2. Hit the "play" button on an audio Bible.

Audio versions of the Bible used to be a luxury, and an inconvenient one at best. They took up a lot of space (*think bulky cases for all your cassette tapes or binders for your CDs*), required a special device to listen, and cost a small fortune. Now, though, your phone can read the Bible to you **for free** while you do laundry or mow the yard! Use the **TCC church app** to listen (download it using the QR code on screen), or you can pull up a

dramatized version on one of dozens of sites. More options are available all the time, in every version imaginable - even street-level versions with Hip Hop music playing in the background!

Scriptural Foundation: *“Give ear, and hear my voice; give attention, and hear my speech.”* (Isaiah 28:23, ESV)

Why it works: We all hope for specific revelation for our own situations (*ex: should I take this job, should I marry this person*), but most of what God wants from us is obedience to the things He has **already shared** in His Word! By finding ways to spend more time listening to the Bible, you ensure that you are hearing the baseline expectations and information from God.



3. Test your intrusive thoughts.

We all have random thoughts that enter our minds during the day. How do you tell which ones are from God and which ones aren't? If you get a fleeting impulse, how do you decide if you should follow or reject it? God *does* speak through the Holy Spirit, and Jesus *promises* we will know His voice, so we can have confidence in our ability to hear. We just need some guidelines to help us decide.

Scriptural Foundation: *“A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.”* (John 10:5, ESV)

How it works: I find three things to be good indicators that something is from God and not a crazy thought from my own brain (or a whisper from worse!).



1. **The thought is consistent with Scripture.**

God won't lead us to do wrong. “Shoot your boss” is probably not the voice of Jesus. “Call this person and pray with them” might be...because praying for others is consistent with Scripture and with God's character.

2. **The thought is not comfortable.**

God often asks us to step outside what is comfortable...because if it is something we would do anyway, why would he have to tell us? A nudge to initiate a spiritual conversation or financially contribute to a ministry might be His voice.

3. **The thought won't go away easily.**

I have a lot of thoughts that come and go, but something from God will be persistent. God's multiple attempts to get Samuel's attention in 1 Samuel 3 are a great example. If you can't shake an uncomfortable, biblically appropriate voice, it just might be God.



4. Develop a “Yes...Now” mindset.

Procrastination is easy for many of us. We'll get to it...later. But if you hear the voice of God, there should be no hesitation. You should obey it immediately.

Scriptural Foundation: There's a great example of this in a quick story from the Old Testament. **2 Kings 5** talks about an army commander named Naaman who almost missed out on being healed from leprosy because he didn't quickly obey God. Make a note of it and read it later (after you run out of time on your social media timer)!

In the meantime, here's an additional verse that encourages action:

*"Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, **"Today**, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness,"* (Hebrews 3:7–8, ESV)

Why it works: The more you listen to and obey God's voice, the more easily you'll be able to listen and obey later. Like James says in his New Testament letter, *"... Don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves."* (James 1:22, NLT)

Note: There is one caveat to the "Yes...Now" mentality. Make sure you test the thought before acting! After that, if you have a chance to obey in the moment (whether sticking to a biblical precept or following an immediate, personal push), do it without hesitation!



5. Initiate the Conversation

I know this is tough for a lot of people – we want to be approached, not be the one approaching. It's true of newcomers at church, it's true of people at work, it's true about high schoolers and dating. And we even adopt that approach when it comes to hearing from God. Our go to move is to sit on our hands and wait.

But if you want to listen to God, instead of waiting...initiate the conversation. Pray, ask, and seek!

Scriptural Foundation: *"Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you."* (Matthew 7:7, NLT)

Why it works: God is a good Father who gives good gifts to those who ask. And He is a God who is generous with information and wisdom. We don't have to know *why* He responds. It is enough that Scripture tells us to ask...and tells us repeatedly!

Are you faithfully bringing your requests to God? If not, do it, and then listen!

Choose one or more of these *specific, real-world* ways that you can listen better and make them habitual so that you can hear God's voice more frequently and clearly than ever before.

Closing

What might happen when you listen? I hesitate to share this following story in my message, because it honestly makes me nervous. But I think it happened for a reason, so I'll just be transparent.



Recently, I've been thinking back to when I started working at our church seventeen years ago. Attendance was closer to 400 each Sunday, and the back parking lot was full during services. It's been a while since the cars filled the back lot, and several factors have dropped us down to lower numbers. But Tonganoxie continues to be filled with people who need to know Jesus

So, in the mornings on Sunday, after I park and before things start in here, I've been walking the back lot and praying for God to bring in those people who need Him - to fill it again not for the sake of numbers, but for the sake of His Name.

As I was wrapping up my lap around the lot earlier this month, I heard(?) a question: "How long?" As in, when do you want to get back to full?

I felt a tug of war between my own faith and my pragmatism, but I eventually responded, "2 years." Immediately after, it was like God was saying, "Ok...be faithful in praying and preparing for this for two years."

Now...was that an intrusive thought or was it from God? The interaction ticks all the boxes after testing. This was certainly scriptural, definitely uncomfortable, and it was persistent. I don't know if God has plans to bring our church numbers back up to where we were...or if He has plans to expand our ministry in other ways...or if He just wanted us to prepare as if the growth will happen.

But I'm trying to listen. I'm trying to obey. The Holy Spirit was whispering to my heart, and I want to be responsive!

I know I will need to stay faithful in prayer (because God is the power source, not me), and all of us will need to work to get the systems in our church back in place to handle that kind of growth (because we've been in survival mode for a while rather than thriving).

Moments like that – moments of hearing from Him – aren't constant, but they are important. And you can only catch them when you are listening.

When you listen, will He say something profound or dramatic to you? Maybe. Will He challenge you to do something bold that requires bravery and trust? Maybe. Or maybe He just gives you reminders of His daily presence and provision.

Whatever He says, the goal is not to get a message; the goal is to grow closer to the One who gives you the message.

So, listen up! Listen whenever He speaks. Know His voice. Trust His voice. And obey His voice!

Listen Up!





Prayer

Invitation

I want to invite you to listen today.

Ask for God to make His voice clear and obvious. Pray for help to listen, but also for strength to obey quickly.

We're going to stand and sing our song of invitation now. Please worship as we proclaim our reliance on Jesus. But please also stick around after we sing and pray if you want to talk more about how to put any of this into practice. Come see me, see Jordan, or see any of our church leaders who are here (leaders, please raise your hand).

Let's stand together and sing.

PRAYER REQUESTS:

Notes

The Importance of Listening

Everything we know about God comes from listening. (Romans 1:19)

Recognizing His Voice

When God Speaks (Psalm 29:3-9; John 10:4)

Why is it Hard to Hear?

Distracted by the Context

Unhappy with the Content

Practical Ways to Listen

1. *Set a time limit on your phone.* (Psalm 46:10)
2. *Hit the "play" button on an audio Bible.* (Isaiah 28:23)
3. *Test your intrusive thoughts.* (John 10:5)
4. *Develop a "Yes...Now" mindset.* (Hebrews 3:7-8; James 1:22)
5. *Initiate the Conversation* (Matthew 7:7)

Discussion Questions

Use the following questions based on today's sermon as a starting point for spiritual discussions with your family or a small group of Christian friends this week.

Fellowship—Relationship with a Purpose

- Are you a good listener? If so, what has helped you become strong in this area? If not, what makes it challenging?

Growth—Thinking About Spiritual Matters

- *“Everything we know about God comes from listening.”* Evaluate that statement. What are some truths about God that you can only know from listening to what He has revealed?
- Read Romans 1:19. If truth about God can be obvious to all, why do so many people have warped views of who God is?
- How do you imagine God's voice sounds? What qualities would His voice convey? Compare your responses to Psalm 29:3-9. According to the passage, what qualities would His voice convey?
- Would you rather experience God's voice audibly or in written form? Why?
- Why is Jesus' voice recognizable to Christians (John 10:4)? What makes it different than other voices?
- Which obstacle to listening gets in your way more when it comes to God's voice? Is it: A) Distraction from everything around you, or B) Dislike of the message He shares? Explain.
- Which of the five “practical” steps in the sermon notes* are you most likely to use? Why did you choose that answer?
 - ** Answers to the blanks under “Practical Ways to Listen”: 1. Limit; 2. Play; 3. Intrusive; 4. Now; 5. Initiate.*
- Brainstorm three more actions that could improve the way you listen to God.

Prayer – Taking Your Thoughts to God

- Ask for God to make His voice clear and obvious. Pray for help to listen, but also for strength to obey quickly.