

Experiencing God

Listen Up!

August 15, 2021

What a great movie and a great scene and a great introduction to what we're going to be talking about today.

We'll come back to it in just a bit but first of all, good morning everyone!

Whether you're here in the building or watching online, I'm so glad you're joining us.

If this is your first time or your first time in a long time, you should know that we're smack dab in the middle of a series called *Experiencing God*.

And we're doing this series because we want to discover how to be more aware of God's

presence and activity in our everyday lives.

I mean, it's one thing to come into a church setting like this one and experience God's presence ...

- As we sing songs of worship
- And as someone leads us in prayer

But it's quite another to walk out those doors (or turn off the livestream) and be able to sense God and what God is doing in the world around us.

Of course, having said *that*, I should probably explain – especially for those who are not Christians; those who are not believers in and followers of Jesus ...

And, by the way, if that's you – if you're *not* a Christian ...

I'm really glad that you decided to be here or to watch online because many, many years ago, we actually started this church for people ...

- Who aren't sure if they believe in God ...
- Who wonder if Christianity and "church" have any relevance to life in the real world ...
- But who are open-minded enough to learn what it's all about.

So, if that's you ... welcome.

I hope what we do today (and every Sunday) is helpful to you in your spiritual journey.

Anyway ... I should probably explain that, in spite of the many difficulties involved in

sensing God's presence and activity in everyday life ...

... which I talked about in the first message of this series ... and which, if you missed, you can watch, listen to or read by going to the media tab of our website and app ...

Anyway ... in spite of the difficulties involved in sensing God's presence and activity in everyday life, *it really is possible for those who believe in Jesus to do just that.*

That's because when you come to the point where you say "yes" to Jesus ...

When you come to trust in who He is and what He has done for you on the cross and in his resurrection ...

When you come to that point, something incredible happens in the spiritual dimension

of your life.

The Apostle Paul once put it like this:

*When you believed in Christ,
he identified you as his own
by giving you the Holy Spirit,
whom he promised long ago.*

Ephesians 1:13 (NLT)

When you put your faith in Jesus to be your savior, God the Father did something miraculous by putting the Holy Spirit in you.

... which means that your physical body became, basically, a “mini temple” of God!

Literally. That’s what Paul wrote:

*... your body is the temple of
the Holy Spirit, who lives in
you and was given to you by
God. 1 Corinthians 6:19
(NLT)*

And because the Holy Spirit is always present in you – if you're a Christian – He can speak to you at any time and in any way He chooses.

In fact, that's what Jesus said He would do.

"The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you." John 14:26 (NIV)

He'll be speaking to you, so listen up!

But the question is ... how do you recognize when that's happening? How do you sense what the Spirit is saying and what God is doing?

Well, that's what this series is all about.

A Quick Review

And, actually, I should say again – for those who might want to go a little deeper – that this series is based on

... a book of the same name by Henry Blackaby

...

... which I read many years ago ...



... and which was very helpful to me in developing *my own* spiritual awareness.

Now, what Blackaby did in *writing* this book – actually, he discerned these principles and lived by them for many years before he wrote anything ...

What he did was to look at the many stories of people in the Bible who experienced God's presence and activity; people who heard from God and knew God was speaking to

them.

And he observed that there was a consistent pattern of how God revealed Himself and how people were able to perceive that and respond to it ...

A pattern which he calls *The Seven Realities of Experiencing God*.

And so far in this series we've talked about the first three.

#1. God is always at work around you on *His* agenda.

Even when you don't see it or perceive it, God never stops working.

And the reason we sometimes *don't* see it or perceive it is that we – as the naturally self-centered creatures we are ...

We think of Jesus merely as an “addon” to our lives who, after saving us from sin (thank you Jesus!) ...

We think Jesus is there primarily to help us out when things get beyond our ability to control.

Not that God *doesn't* help us when that happens, but God's agenda is so much greater than that ...

... which is why a much better way to think about what's going on when we “accept Christ” is that, as much as we are inviting *Jesus* into *our* lives, *God* is inviting us into *His* life and to be a part of carrying out *His* agenda.

... which naturally leads to the question: what is God's agenda in this world?

Last week we saw that probably the most

concise way to describe it is found in one of Paul's letters.

Paul wrote that ...

*God was, in Christ,
reconciling the world to
himself, no longer counting
people's sins against them.*

2 Corinthians 5:19 (NIV)

Instead of abandoning the world, God chose to address the sin problem that separates all of us and all of creation from Him.

And He did that by becoming a man in the person of Jesus to bring the world – all of us and all of creation – back to Himself.

Everything that God *has been* doing and *is* doing in this world works to that end.

That's the big picture. That's God's agenda.

And God has always partnered with men and women – ordinary people like you and me – in that work ...

... which is why Paul adds that “God has committed to us the message of reconciliation.”

Practically speaking what that means is that ...

- God *never* blesses an individual – God *never* acts for the good of someone – for that person’s sake alone.
- God *always* blesses us so that we can then turn around and be a blessing to others.

But not just so we can feel good that we’ve somehow “paid it forward” or even just to make someone else’s life better in some way.

God blesses us so that we can bless others so that they can be pointed to the Source of the blessing; so that they, too, might be reconciled to God through Jesus, just as we have been.

And that's so important to understand.

But it's not just about "working for God and God's agenda" which is why *the second reality* of experiencing God is that ...

2. God pursues a continuing love relationship with you that is real and personal.

THE most important thing you can do as a Christian – and we talked about this two weeks ago – is to ...

- Receive God's love
- Rest in God's love
- Respond to Him in love
- And for your relationship to constantly remain rooted in love as the firm foundation of everything else. (We sang about that just a few minutes ago)

So many problems happen to Christians who don't understand this reality and neglect their personal relationship with God or when we get the priority out of order.

But assuming it *is* in order, the third reality that Blackaby observed is that ...

3. God invites you – if you're a Christian – to become involved with Him in His work.

And this, we saw last week, is where the

ability to discern God's presence and activity in the real world – not just in a worship service at church – this is where that comes into play.

... because just *knowing* God's agenda in the world is *not* the same as an *invitation* to join Him.

Instead, it's when you actually see God doing what only God can do that you are invited to adjust your life and join Him in that work.ⁱ

That's how Jesus did it and, if we believe in Him and follow Him, obviously we should do it the same way.

And I gave several examples of ...

- The kinds of things that only God can do
- And what it looks like to join in when you see those things happening

... so I'm not going to say any more about it today.

If you missed last Sunday, you *really should* head on over to the media tab on our app sometime this week.

Beyond Observing

But, today, I want us to look at *the next* of the seven realities of *Experiencing God*.

And this one is so important because discerning God's presence and activity goes beyond "just observing" what only God can do.

That's obviously very important but there's more to it than that, and here it is.

Reality 4: God speaks by the Holy Spirit ...

... who, again, is living in us (somehow) because we have turned to Jesus.

God speaks to us by the Holy Spirit ... and the way He does that is ...

... through the Bible, prayer, circumstances, and the church ...

Which is what we're going to talk about in the rest of this message.

But when God speaks by the Spirit through those channels, he does so in order ...

... to reveal Him-self, His purposes, and His ways.

When God speaks to us, He's typically not doing so to reveal the winning Powerball numbers.

He's not interested in doing a magic trick to show off ...

... which only makes sense because, again, this is *a relationship* we're talking about.

And in a relationship – if it's healthy ...

- You get to know who the other person really is at the core – their character is revealed.
- You discover what matters to them – their purposes, so to speak.
- And you get to know their "ways" – or how they do things.

By the way, this is one of the things the movie *Evan Almighty* gets right.

As the story goes along, Evan discovers

“God’s” character, purposes and ways, and he even joins with God in what God is doing.

Of course, that’s just a silly movie, so let me give you a very quick example that shows up in the very first pages of the Bible.

Moses writes in Genesis 17 that ...

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, “I am God Almighty ...” Genesis 17:1 (NIV)

Now, because we’ve heard that phrase “God almighty” so often (we even sang it earlier) it’s easy to jump right over it and miss that what God was doing here was revealing his character to Abram.

“Hey Abe, first things first. I want you to know that my name is El Shaddai, God Almighty.

"All mighty. There is nothing I cannot do."

And if you read the rest of the story, it soon becomes obvious *why* that revelation mattered to Abram.

"Abe," God continued, "I'm going to make you the father of many nations. In fact, I'm going to bless the entire world through your offspring."

... which described both God's purposes (blessing the world) and ways (making Abe a dad) ...

... which to Abram sounded like crazy talk because, again, he was 99 years old!

And 99-year-old men married to 90-year-old women don't have children *unless ... unless ...* an Almighty God says so.

And He *did* say so and that's exactly what happened.

God blessed the world through Abram and Sarah when thousands of years later, Jesus of Nazareth was born to a young woman by the name of Mary who was their direct descendant.

And he is still blessing the world through them and His "almighty-ness."

But, again, point is ... whenever God speaks, he almost always reveals some aspect of Himself, His purposes, and His ways *because that's what relationships are about.*

And God is serious about relationship. It's the foundation of everything else.

But let's back up and talk about the part

before that in this reality which is that ...

God speaks to us by the Holy Spirit through the Bible, prayer, circumstances, and the church.

Now, from my own experience with God over the years, I would phrase that a bit differently and add a few other things to Blackaby's list.

And I'm actually going to do that in just a few minutes.

But the first thing we need to understand is that those elements – however many there are and whatever you might call them – are not equal in their authority.

They're not all on the same level. One stands out above all the others ...

And that one is the Bible, for many reasons.

In the interest of time, I'm only going to give you the top two.

Number one, Jesus said that the Spirit (who lives in those of us who believe in Him and follow Him) ...

Jesus said that the Spirit would remind us of "everything He had said."

But how can you be reminded of something you don't know?

You can't. You have to know it first.

And where you come to know what Jesus said is the Bible, specifically, the New Testament.

And when you know that, then the Spirit can bring that to your mind whenever necessary.

Second reason the Bible stands above the

others ...

Number two, Paul writes, is that ...

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. 1 Timothy 3:16-17 (NIV)

The scripture is a one-stop shop, so to speak, to teach us and guide us and correct us and train us so that we are *able* join with God in his work.

Maybe a good way to think of this is to say that ...

The Bible is the Holy Spirit's "primary language."ⁱⁱ

A primary language is the one you've grown

up with. It's the one you learned first.

For most of us in this room or watching online, English is our primary language.

Now, here's what's interesting.

Even if you've learned another language, unless you've actually *lived* in another culture and been *immersed* in the language for some time, it almost always reverts back to the primary.

In other words, if your primary language is English, your secondary languages get translated back into English in your head.

The analogy is this:

The Spirit's primary language is the Scripture which means that, to "translate" any of the other "languages" that He uses, you always

have to go back to that.

You always have to check what you think you're hearing from the Holy Spirit's "secondary language" against the Spirit's "primary language" which is, again, the Bible.

Which means ... and this is the point I'm driving at in all of this.

You and I will never be good at hearing what God is *saying and doing* right now if we're not familiar with what God has already *said and done* in the past. <repeat>

God has already revealed so much of his character and his purposes and his ways in the scripture.

And it only makes sense that what He would say to us now, in our everyday lives, would line up with that in some way, right?

And this is why, friends, if you're a Christian, it is so important that you regularly engage with the Bible *personally* on your own.

And I know that's not easy because the Bible is a really big book and there are parts that are, quite frankly, pretty strange – at least to us ...

But there is help available. You don't have to figure it all out yourself.

The simplest way is to download the Bible App (otherwise known as the YouVersion) onto your tablet or smartphone.

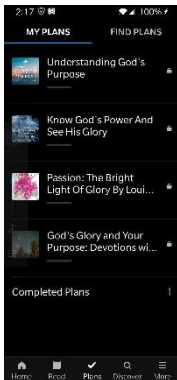


And, as the picture shows, there's a thing called "Verse of the Day" where the app literally, every

day, will pop up a verse in your notification area.

It's amazing to me how many times, when that happens to me, something about God's character, God's purposes and ways are brought to my mind and I go, "oh, yeah, that's what I want to be thinking. That's what I want to be doing."

There are also reading plans you can follow that will keep you from winding up in a "biblical ditch" – otherwise known as the book of Leviticus.



Those are a few of the plans on my app. And there's a jillion more out there.

Point being, the Spirit speaks through the Scripture, so it's important for you to engage with the Bible personally one-on-one.

And it's also important that you engage with

the Bible through “public proclamation” – where a spiritually-gifted communicator teaches scripture and scriptural principles in a clear and compelling manner ...

... like I’m trying to do right now.

Paul writes that God has chosen to communicate his wisdom through the preaching of the Gospel ...ⁱⁱⁱ

... which means that whenever I or one of the other pastors is up here and you feel like “wow, have they been following me around? Because that’s exactly where I’m at ... or ... that’s what I need to hear.”

Whenever that happens, that’s not me. That’s not my doing.

That’s God. You are actually experiencing God in that very moment.

Anyway, my point is that ...

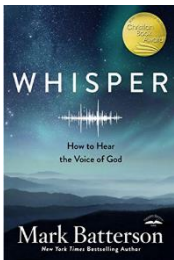
- The Bible is the Holy Spirit's primary language ... which means that ...
- You and I will never be good at hearing what God is *saying and doing* if we're not familiar with what God has already *said and done* ... which is what the scripture tells us.
- And therefore, we need to regularly engage with the Bible *personally* and "in public proclamation" ... or preaching.

Other "Languages"

Now, once that foundation is present in our lives, we can start to listen for – and truly discern – some of the secondary languages that the Spirit often uses.

And I'm going to share five of these very quickly which means that we're not going to be able to go all that deep, so I want to encourage you to read Blackaby's book for yourself ...

... or to check out another book called *Whisper* (by Mark Batterson) which goes into a lot more detail on some of these.



All of these are backed by examples from scripture where God spoke to someone in these ways ...

But I'm going to start with the second one on Blackaby's list which is prayer, which seems kind of odd because when you think of prayer you think of communication going from us to God and not the other way around.

So, how can we hear God speaking *to us*

through our prayers *to Him*?

1. Pray, then make the connection between what you prayed and what happens next.

You have to pay attention after you pray because sometimes what happens isn't exactly what you expect, but God is at work answering your prayer.

I gave an example of this last week – how our staff was divided about how to handle the recent non-mandate mandate regarding churches and masking.

I was praying about what we should do, and Mica was praying about what we should do and even though we held opposite opinions, after we prayed the same exact scripture came to both of us, independently.

I won't go back through all of that again – check out last week's message if you missed

it – but it was such a great example of paying attention to what happens next when you pray.

Another language that God sometimes uses is what some people call ...

2. “Promptings” which are internal impressions that God wants you to do something *right now*.

You see a need and you feel like God wants you to step in and meet it.

Or you get this thought that you should do something or say something, and it doesn't make sense, but you feel like you should do it anyway.

That's a prompting and when you follow it, sometimes you find out that it really was from God. And sometimes you find out that it was just that burrito you had for lunch.

But actually, this is kind of exciting to think – to know – that God will occasionally impress on you to do something right now.

Of course, again, this is where we can really get off into the weeds and think God is saying stuff that He isn't ... which is why it's so important to be rooted in what God has already said and done, which is revealed in the scriptures.

When God tells you to do something in a prompting you can be sure that it will line up with what he has already revealed about his character, his purposes and his ways.

One little tip about this one: if you've never experienced a prompting from God, what you might do sometime is simply pray, "God, what's the next right thing you want me to do?"

And then whatever comes to your mind, just do it.

Chances are, you'll experience God just by taking out the trash or hugging your kid or being nice to a stranger.

Ok, so we have prayer and promptings ...

Another way that God speaks to us is through ...

3. People who know Him and are tuned in to Him.

And this happens a lot but, again, you have to be paying attention.

And you also have to be connected to people who know Him and who are tuned into him – which, basically, is what the church is all

about.

Church most people think is about the building and services and serving the community like we did in the TSG.

But actually, the church is people following Jesus who encourage other people who are following Jesus to keep following Jesus.

Hebrews 3:12-13 puts it like this:

See to it brothers and sisters that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God, but encourage one another daily.

Hebrews 3:12-13 (NIV)

When someone who follows Jesus encourages you to keep following Jesus instead of turning away because it's hard, you're experiencing God.

And by the way sometimes God even uses those folks to put you on a path you would have never expected.

I told you last week about how I came to know that I was supposed to start this church back in 1994.

But I would have never thought that I was supposed to be *the lead pastor* until a guy I had never met suggested that I do it.

He – the guy – was starting a church in Colorado and I was willing to do anything to be on the staff of a church that prioritized reaching people who were distant from God.

He was looking to hire an Arts Director, so I sent him a resume in which I described not only my qualifications but also my vision and my personality and my spiritual gifting and my secular job experience.

He wrote back a very short letter saying, "you're not the guy we're looking for, but have you ever considered planting a church yourself? I think that might be what you're called to do."

I was shocked.

But when I showed his letter to several people who knew me well, to a person they all said, "yeah, I can see that. I think you could do that. I think you'd be good at that."

Anyway ... if you want to hear God speak into your life, you need to surround yourself with people who are God-centered and biblically grounded.

Now, maybe you've noticed that these first three all start with the letter "P": prayer, promptings and people.

These last two start with the letter "D" ... and I'm going to have to wrap these up real quick but their pretty straightforward.

4. Sometimes God speaks to us through our desires ...

5. And sometimes God speaks to us through open and closed doors.

Psalm 37:4 says "delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart."

That doesn't mean God's going to give you whatever you want.

What it means is that when you really pour into your relationship with God – when you really connect to Him – He will put desires in your heart for the things that are part of his plan for your life.

... which again, is why knowing the scripture is so important, because that's where you understand what matters to God.

And I think most of us – even if we're not Christians – understand the idea of open and closed doors.

You ask God to lead you and then a door opens which means you're supposed to walk through it because, again, you're paying attention to what happens after you pray, right?

And I think that's right most of the time – again, as long as it lines up with what God has already said and done.

But where we can get off into the weeds with this one is thinking that just because something is difficult, that means the door is closed and you shouldn't do it.

Sometimes it's difficult to do what God is telling us to do because there is an enemy who is fighting against God and against people who want to do what God tells them to do.

Sometimes it's difficult to do what God is telling us to do because it's just not time. Sometimes God reveals his purposes and plans to us well before they are supposed to happen and we have to wait.

That's not a closed door. That's a character-building exercise in patience.

And we should embrace it until the door finally opens.

Are We Listening?

Now, I've covered a whole lot of ground today

and I hope what you've heard is helpful to you, especially if you're struggling to hear God's voice.

I hope when you leave today or shut down the livestream, you'll be able to focus in on at least one "language" that the Spirit speaks, prioritizing (of course) the *primary* language of the Spirit, which is the scripture.

However, I do need to add one more thought to the mix because as much as we *say* we want to experience God and hear from God, there is a prerequisite condition; a singular quality that has to exist before it ever becomes possible for us to hear.

Actually, there are two; the first being that you are a Christian – that the Holy Spirit actually is living inside of you.

But assuming that's the case ... there is one

other condition that must exist, one that Jesus would often mention after teaching something or explaining something.

He would give his sermon or make his point or interpret a parable ...

And then He would say ...

“He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” - Jesus of Nazareth

... meaning that even though God was speaking through Him, only those who were *open* to hearing would be *able* to hear.

What does it mean to be open?

Well, that’s a whole message in and of itself but let me give you three things very quickly.

To have “ears to hear” means ...

- To relate to God as a person and not as a “fix-it-genie.”
- To release our preconceived notions of what God ought to say or do.
- To be willing to say “yes” to whatever God says even before He says it.

To have ears to hear is an attitude of the heart that says ...

“Your agenda, your kingdom matters more than mine.

“Help me to understand what that looks like in my life. Help me to reorient my life to that idea.

“Help me to trust that whatever you say

– whatever you ask – will be for my good and for your glory.”

“So, speak Lord, for your servant is listening.”

And Lord, that is our prayer this morning.

In Jesus name, Amen.

CLOSING COMMENTS

One more thing before we leave today.

I said that before you can hear God speak you have to be willing to say “yes” to whatever God is going to reveal to you.

Well, we have this thing we do around here every so often called the “Say Yes” campaign.

The idea behind it is that God is already at work here at North Heartland and He is inviting some of us to join Him in that work by volunteering on one of our ministry teams.

There are so many things that need to happen around here – and not just on Sunday but all through the week – so that we can be and do what God has called us to be and do in this community.

And the “Say Yes” campaign is a way to find out if you’re supposed to be part of that by making a short-term no-strings-attached commitment to be part of a team.

By that I mean that you agree to serve for a period of time – 12 weeks which includes time for training and understanding the task.

And then, at the end of that time, you can just walk away if it’s not a fit; if you discover that it

isn't where God wants you to serve.

And the reason I'm telling you this is that today we're launching another campaign and I'm inviting you – if you're not already volunteering here at NHCC (or somewhere else in the community) – to “say yes.”

As you leave this morning, Jill and Julie will be at the two high top tables across from the coffee bar and they will let you know what areas need volunteers as well as answer any questions you might have and help you sign up.

You can also go on our website or our app and see the needs and sign up there if you prefer.

That's all for today. Thanks for coming. See you next week!

Endnotes

ⁱ Blackaby, Henry T.; Blackaby, Richard; King, Claude V.. *Experiencing God* (2021 Edition) (p. 133). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱ Aaron Couch, Southeast Christian Church, message of 05-03-20, referring to concepts in Mark Batterson's book *Whisper*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Romans 10:14; 1 Corinthians 1