

Doubt: Dark Side of Faith II

God Talk

September 2, 2012

PRELUDE – Our God’s Alive

**Congregational Songs – In the Secret /
Marvelous Light**

**Feature – Just My Imagination (The
Cranberries)**

Feature – “Smell the Color Nine”

Over the past couple of months, as you know if you’ve been hanging out with us at all, we’ve been looking at specific issues that we collectively, as a congregation, have said cause us to doubt. We’ve divided this series into two parts – the first part dealing with doubts about God in general (which we

completed three weeks ago) and the second part (where we are now) dealing with doubts about our *experience* with God. As I prepared for this series, I found out that a lot has been written about the first set of doubts, dealing with God, but not much has been written about the second set.

I think that's a bit of a shame because while it's extremely important to be able to deal with our doubts about God (which, if you missed the first part of this series, are normal and not a sign that we don't have faith) ... while it's extremely important to be able to deal with our doubts about God, it's the doubts about our *experience* with God that have a much greater impact on our everyday lives.

For instance, last week we talked about doubting whether God really has saved us and totally forgiven us and whether or not we can lose that salvation if we “really mess up” after we accept Christ. I don’t know about you, but that impacts my life a lot more than the occasional wondering of “so, if God truly is good and all-powerful, why do bad things happen to good people?” I don’t see that kind of thing happening every day *but I do sin every day*. And some days I sin a lot. Some days I sin without even knowing it. Some days I sin even *with* knowing it. And so being able to deal with all the doubts surrounding the experience of God’s salvation in my life is a lot more pertinent than those big “cosmic questions” we looked at in part

one.

And I think the same thing can be said of the issue we're going to look at this morning. As Irv said ... Who among us has not had an idea or thought or dream or vision or an impression and concluded – "wow, I think God might be trying to tell me to do something" – and then said, "Nah, it's probably just my imagination?" I think being able to navigate *that kind of experience* has a huge impact on everyday life, so that's what I want us to look at this morning. By the time we're finished, my hope is that you will be able to more accurately discern when God is speaking to you.

And let's be clear (just in case there is any doubt about it): *God is still*

speaking to us today.

As Jesus himself once said:

"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me." John 10:27 (NIV)

And as the OT prophet Isaiah wrote:

*Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it."
Isaiah 30:21 (NIV)*

God speaks to his people. And that only makes sense because the context of this whole Christianity thing is *relationship*. If we belong to Jesus – if

we've come to him as our savior and Lord – we're in a relationship with Him. And a relationship by definition requires some kind of communication between the parties involved.

So, it's not too much of a stretch to say that *hearing God speak ought to be a normal part of the Christian experience*. It ought to happen to us at least from time to time. And if it doesn't happen then we need to figure out what's wrong or maybe even question whether or not we truly have a relationship with God. A lot of people assume they do but they've never come to the place in their life where they've done what we've read every week in this series.

*If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.
Romans 10:9 (NIV)*

If you've never made that declaration; if you've never come to that conviction in your life, you are not saved, you are not forgiven and you do not have a relationship with God. And that's where you need to begin. You don't need to be worried about "am I hearing from God?" You need to worry about, "am I in a relationship with God?" You come to this point in your life and you say, "I'm a sinner and Jesus is my savior and I believe and I want him to be my Lord and savior." And then you worry about whether or not you're

hearing from God.

Why It's Hard

Anyway, as I was saying, hearing God speak ought to be *a normal part of our experience* if we're followers of Christ. But if that's true, why is it so hard? Why do we have such doubt about it?

As I thought about my own experience in this and also what I've seen in others who belong to and follow Jesus, I think there are three reasons why we struggle to discern God's voice in our lives.

1. The first I'll call the "dull mirror" principle.

Have you ever looked in a mirror that's dirty or rusty or foggy from moisture? When the mirror in my bathroom is foggy, I can see that my chin is darker than the rest of my face, but I can't make out the individual hairs of my beard.

The Apostle Paul in a letter to the Corinthians tells us that it works the same when it comes to sensing spiritual reality ... which obviously includes things like hearing God's voice.

He writes:

Now we are looking [at spiritual reality] in a mirror that gives only a dim, blurred reflection of reality as in a riddle or

enigma, but then when perfection comes [in other words, when Jesus comes back and sets all things right and sin is finally removed and there is clarity], we shall see in reality and face to face!

*1 Corinthians 12:13
(AMP)*

Now I know in part, imperfectly, but then I shall know and understand fully and clearly, even in the same manner as I have been fully and clearly known and understood by God.

*1 Corinthians 12:13
(AMP)*

In other words, between now and then,

hearing God's voice is kind of like trying to smell the color blue, as the song put it. It's real, it's there, but it's not perceptible in the usual ways that we tend to perceive things. By definition, it's going to be hard. There are going to be questions and doubts whenever we think we've heard God's voice. And that's OK. For as long as we are on this side of eternity, that's normal.

However, just because it's hard doesn't mean it's impossible. To use Paul's analogy, we should at least be able to discern *something* in that mirror. But when it comes to hearing God's voice, a second reason that a lot of us struggle is because ...

2. We lack clarity on how God primarily speaks to us.

And if you aren't clear on *that* – on *how* God primarily speaks – then you don't know where to tune in.

Unfortunately, as I've listened to and watched people over the years, whenever most people think about "God speaking" what comes to their mind is something fairly sensational. To most people, God speaking means that you have a vision or a dream. Or it means that you get a mental picture while you are praying or you hear an audible voice. And I don't want to minimize that because sometimes God does speak in those ways.

But more often than not, it's a lot less dramatic. More often than not, God speaks to us through the scripture combined with the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit (assuming, again, that the Spirit lives in you because you have come to Jesus as your savior and Lord).

Paul writes:

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.

*2 Timothy 3:15-17
(NIV)*

All scripture is God-breathed, Paul

says, and the wording in the original language is meant to communicate that the scripture is something that comes from within the deepest part of God. It's like God's guts are being poured out on these pages. It carries with it the essence of who He is and how He thinks.

And that's why Christians call the Bible the "Word of God." It's both what God *has* said and *continues* to say to this world, including you and me. God is speaking through that book, even today.

Here's how this works:

When you read a verse like:

"Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."

Luke 6:38 (NIV)

When you read a verse like that, or you hear someone (such as a pastor or another Christian) explain it, you think:

- "You know, I've put this off long enough. I need to look at my budget and figure out how to arrange things so I can give 10% of my income to the work of God."
- Or it occurs to you that "Wow,

God's making a pretty hefty promise right there. He's going to give back to me in direct proportion to how I give to him!"

- Or ... "Oh my gosh. I am missing out on so much blessing. I've been using a teaspoon instead of a shovel to measure out what I give to God!"

Whenever thoughts like that come to you from the scripture, there's a very high probability that it's God speaking to you through his Holy Spirit. That's why it's so important for us to spend lots of time opening our lives up to the scripture. It's the primary way God speaks to us.

Now, we'll come back to that in just a bit, but there's one other reason why we tend to struggle to discern God's voice. And it might be the biggest one of all.

3. We have a fundamental misunderstanding of “God's will for my life.”

And the reason this is so huge is because, when most of us think about hearing God's voice, it's this particular issue we have in mind. We want to hear God's voice because we want God to give us guidance on various issues ranging from ...

Where we should live to who we should marry to what we should do for a living, when we should retire, how much we should have in our

401K, whether or not we should have more children, where we should go to college, what we should do to care for our aging parents, whether we should sell our home or remodel it ... and the list could go on and on if we had time.

Knowing the will of God for the major decisions in our lives and, even in the day-to-day experience of our lives, is a very important issue for most Christians.

So, we want to make *sure* that what we *think* we're hearing from God really *is* from God. That's why, in the doubt lists that people turned in at the beginning of this series, the number one question that came up over and over with

respect to hearing God's voice was ...

**“How do I know it's God speaking
and not just my own desires?”**

“I don't want to mess up on that. I don't want to think it's God only to find out later it was *me* and I did the wrong thing, made the wrong choice, accepted the wrong job, chose the wrong mate, etc. etc. etc.”

Have you ever had those kinds of thoughts? I'm sure you have. I have.

And those kinds of thoughts can drive you crazy to the point where you totally over-analyze everything and become paralyzed with indecision and you do nothing ... or ... you just throw your

hands up and say “whatever. I can’t figure it out. Just throw a dart at the wall and let God direct that if He wants.”

Ever felt that way? I have. And it’s frustrating because it seems like in the moment when we most need to hear God’s voice – we need to know His will and make some kind of decision – we have the hardest time discerning it. However, again, I think that’s because we have a fundamental misunderstanding of God’s will.

In his book, *10 Dumb Things Smart Christians Believe*, one of my favorite authors and pastors, Larry Osborne, calls this misunderstanding “blueprint thinking” and he describes it like this:

Most followers of Christ believe there is a blueprint somewhere in the mind of God that, instead of describing how *a house* should be built, describes how *our lives* should be built, specifying in exact detail [the answers to the kinds of issues I just described]. And most Christians also believe the secret of being blessed by God is to discover that plan – the blueprint – and follow it.ⁱ

However, Osborne says, the truth is that God's will is a lot more like a game plan than a blueprint ... and a game plan doesn't spell out every move in exact detail. Instead, it sets forth general guidelines and strategies, with lots of freedom and flexibility as the

game unfolds, as long as you stay within the rules. And once you know the game plan, then it's up to you to make the wisest choice in whatever situation you find yourself.

Take a football game as an example. The offense typically comes in with an idea of how they are going to attack the other team's defense. And during the week, they may even design and practice new plays with that goal in mind. But, during the game, if for some reason the defense stops those plays, the team is free to adjust and choose a new strategy. And if that strategy doesn't work, they are free to think up another one on the spot. What they aren't free to do at any point is to change the rules of the game. They

can't put in an additional player. They can't start throwing the ball to linemen. Those kinds of adjustments aren't allowed.

And my contention is that God's will is a lot more like *that* than a blueprint and that a lot of our stress about "is it God or just my own desires" is totally unnecessary.

Or, as Osborne puts it:

"We worry about things when the Lord says 'I don't really care. Play whatever game you want to play in the backyard – just stay in the backyard.'"

"Now, wait a minute, Rick. I'm not sure

this is really biblical! What about all those people who God directly told to do something in the Bible? Their experience makes it sound like there might be a blueprint.”

That’s a really good point! However, in reality, what happened to those people wasn’t that they were following a blueprint. It was, to continue the football analogy, God calling *an audible in their life*.

For instance, you remember a couple weeks ago we read the story of Abraham being called to pick up everything and move without knowing in advance where he was going? God simply said, “You just get going and I’ll tell you when you’re there.” A lot of us

hear that story and we think "oh, that's how the everyday life of a Christian is supposed to work. You just kind of stand there and you only move when God says 'move.' Stop. Move. God's directing me like a little puppet."

But, when you read the whole story of Abraham's life, that kind of divine direction (God calling an audible) only happened a handful of times. Most days, Abe kept his head down and played in the backyard where God had placed him according to the rules God had given him.

And I think this makes sense not only in Abraham's situation but in ours as well because it traces back to how human beings were created in the first place.

When God put Adam in the Garden of Eden, the Bible doesn't say He hovered over Adam's shoulder all day long telling him exactly what to do about the geraniums. And it doesn't say that Adam spent all day beseeching the Lord's guidance on how much corn to plant.

Instead, what we see is God giving Adam a few ground rules ... plus ... a mind and tremendous freedom to use it as he saw fit – as long as he played by those rules. And I'm pretty confident it works the same way with you and me.

Now, please don't hear what I'm not saying: I'm not saying that God doesn't want us to consult Him in the major decisions of our life. He does. However,

I am saying that, in a lot of cases, God doesn't have a preference. God says, "you choose where you'll live; You choose what job you take, as long as you're staying in the yard and playing by the rules."

And I'm also not saying God doesn't sometimes whisper to us and prompt us to do something. Absolutely He does. However, I *am* saying that I don't think that is happening all the time.

Instead, I think God tells us to listen to his Word and to allow his Spirit *who is always speaking when we listen to the Word* to instruct, encourage, affirm, convict and shape us through that Word. And the more often *that* experience happens in our lives, the

more we will develop *godly wisdom* so that we pretty much know what we should do 99% of the time.

As Paul puts it:

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Romans 12:2 (NIV)

Discerning an Audible

Of course, with all that said ... even if God's will is a lot more like a game plan than a blueprint and in 99% of the

situations you face, God wants you to simply make wise decisions ... the question still remains: in that 1% of the time when it might be that God *truly is* calling an audible in your life, how do you know it's Him? If you have a thought (or vision or dream) or even hear a voice and you really think it might be God, how can you discern whether or not it is?

That's a very important question because even though something "feels spiritual" that doesn't necessarily mean it's from God.

As the Apostle John puts it:

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but

test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. 1 John 4:1 (NIV)

How do you do that? How do you test the spirits? How do you know if it's from God or not?

There are many principles that we could look at this morning that will help us become much more accurate in our spiritual discernment (such as practice and experience over timeⁱⁱ) but I want to share three principles that I have personally found to be very helpful both in my personal life and as a pastor who is responsible to "shepherd – or lead – the flock of God" (as Paul puts it).

Principle #1. Accurate discernment is typically contingent on “game plan” alignment.

To use the Larry Osborne analogy, if the game that God wants us to play is football and we keep bringing out the baseball gloves and the baseball bats, expecting guidance on how to play baseball, we're not aligned with the game plan and whatever we're hearing is probably not coming from God. To put it more directly, if you want to be sure it's God's voice you're hearing, not only do you need to know *how* He primarily speaks to people, you also need to understand the kinds of things God typically talks about. You need to have some sense of what God's primary agenda (or game plan) is for

the world.

That's a great question. So, what is God's agenda for this world? Well, remember what Jesus' main message was? We've talked about it on many occasions. The Gospel of Mark says that after his baptism ...

*Jesus went into Galilee,
proclaiming the good
news of God.*

*"The time has come," he
said. "The kingdom of God
has come near. Repent
and believe the good
news!" Mark 1:14-15
(NIV)*

In other words, "God's presence and

activity on this Earth is near and it's now. Stop believing and living as if it's not; as if it's something reserved only for the future in some spiritual afterlife. Become a kingdom-oriented person right now, in this life." That's what Jesus was saying – "The good news is that you can do it and I'll be there with you."

This was so important that He often told them to "seek first the Kingdom and all of the other concerns in your life will be taken care of."ⁱⁱⁱ Align yourself with Kingdom purposes and everything else will fall into place."

So, for followers of Jesus, this is where our focus is supposed to be: *How can we live our lives in such a way that God gets the most glory and the*

Kingdom expands even more through us?

So, when people say they're hearing from God about things like what color socks to wear or which road to take to avoid a traffic jam or which job or mutual fund will best set them up for a comfortable retirement, I have to wonder. I wonder because the will of God for our individual lives isn't somehow isolated from or elevated above what He has already said matters most to Him in this world.

Again, that's not to say that our clothing and traffic patterns and income aren't important. They are. (Well, maybe not the clothing). But they are not God's primary agenda or concern for you and

me.

If God truly is speaking to you, more than likely it's going to be in line with "here's how you can better fulfill my Kingdom purposes; here's how you can better bring glory to my name at your job, in your marriage, in your finances, in your family – even in your hobbies. God's going to speak to you about how you can experience life in such a way that others say, 'wow, I'd like to know God in the way you know God.'"

Accurate discernment of God's voice is typically contingent on "game plan" alignment. That's the first principle.

Here's the second (and most people don't like this one):

Principle #2. Accurate discernment typically requires movement from isolation to collaboration (especially if it is a big decision).

I can't tell you the number of people I've heard thru the years say something like

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- "I was praying the other day and I felt God telling me to sell my house and move."
- "I just have this heavy burden about my friends who don't know Jesus. I think God is telling me to quit my job and start a church."
- "I can't find a job (or I don't want a job) so I think God's will is for me to raise financial support and become a missionary"

- "I think God wants me to quit my job and go into business for myself."
- "I think God wants me to run for political office."
- "I think God wants me to marry Billy Bob (or Sally Sue)."
- "I think God is telling me to -

<some huge thing>"

I can't tell you the number of people I've known thru the years who have said and done things like that who later wound up in a ditch angry at God because "it didn't work" ... *who also never took the time to first run that impression by at least one other wise person who had permission to, at the*

very least, challenge their thinking and, at most, tell them they were wrong or even crazy. They heard something in isolation and assumed it was God – yet God never told them to do any such thing! And they would have known it if they had invited someone else to test it out with them – if they had moved from isolation to collaboration.

This is why the Bible says things like

...

The way of fools seems right to them, but the wise listen to advice. Proverbs 12:15 (NIV)

Listen to advice and accept discipline, and at the end you will be counted among the wise.

Proverbs 19:20 (NIV)

One of the most unmistakable aspects of biblical faith in both the Old Testament and New is that discernment is a communal process of: *giving other people who know us and/or the issue we're facing permission to speak into our life.* In fact, when Paul writes about the gifts of the Spirit to the church at Corinth, he says that one of the ways God empowers some believers is by giving them a supernatural ability to listen to our situation and then speak a word of wisdom into that. So why would God give people that gift if we weren't going to take advantage of it?

Now, does that mean that whatever someone else says – even if they're

really spiritual and gifted and knowledgeable – trumps whatever we think God might have said to us?

Sometimes it does. If most of the people you know and who know the situation are saying “Stop! You’re going to go off a cliff,” you’d better think twice before you keep going.

But sometimes, those folks are serving another purpose in your life because collaboration has the benefit of allowing us to be tested by “friendly fire” before the real test begins.

As an example, when I got to the point in my life, in the early 90s, where I felt so burdened about people we knew who didn’t know Jesus that I thought

God wanted me to start a church, I began to run that idea by some people who knew me well; some people who knew a lot about what it took to plant a church. Most of them said, "yeah, Rick, we can see that. We affirm what you think God is telling you."

But not everyone did. Several people had the courage to point out flaws in my personality that would make it very difficult. One person – a church planting expert – told me that what I was trying to do wouldn't work here in the Midwest. Now, were those people right? No, they weren't. But they were extremely valuable to me because they helped me see how I needed to change; to be aware of some huge pitfalls. God wasn't directing me to stop

through them, but he was providing greatly needed wisdom through them that enabled me to be successful, enabled all of us to be successful.

Accurate discernment typically requires movement from isolation to collaboration.

Principle #3. Accurate discernment typically produces consolation instead of desolation.

Many years ago, a man by the name of Ignatius – St. Ignatius of Loyola – became very ill. During his long recovery – with lots of time to think – sometimes he would imagine serving God with his life and other times he would imagine running away from God and just living according to whatever

carnal desire struck him in the moment. And he began to notice something:

While both thought patterns brought to him a sense of delight in the moment (i.e. he could see how both paths would be enjoyable), afterwards – after he had mentally lived out each scenario – he was conscious of a profound difference. *The “running away from God” scenario left him feeling dry and discontented; on the other hand, the “serving God with his whole heart” scenario left him feeling contented and fulfilled.* In this way, he wrote, he came to recognize the difference between godly and ungodly spiritual influences in his life.^{iv}

At some point, he realized this had

great application for discerning whether or not it was God's voice he was hearing. Whenever he "heard" something that might be a word from God, he would take some time to think about it and talk about it with others. And then he would make a decision but he wouldn't act on it until he had experienced what he called "consolation" or "desolation."

If he experienced "desolation" – which he described as a sense of discontent, agitation and demandingness that everything had to work out just like he thought it should; a disordered confusion of mind – if he experienced that, then he would conclude it probably was not God speaking and that he should not act.

If, on the other hand, he experienced “consolation” – a sense of peace, sincerity, and submission before God; a desire to be merciful and impartial to others and desire to produce a fruitful life for God – he would conclude that it truly was God speaking and move forward without vacillating, confident that even if He was wrong, God would step in and correct him.

As the book of Proverbs promises:

*Commit to the LORD
whatever you do, and he
will establish your plans.
The LORD works out
everything to its proper
end (even when we mess
up). Proverbs 16:3-4a*

(NIV)

Closing Commitment

I think that's a good way to bring this message to a close: *commit to the Lord whatever you do* because the assumption in all of this is that we really do want to *do* God's will, not just *know* God's will; to be not just "hearers of the Word" just so we can hear God, but doers of what we hear – "doers of the Word."

- As important as it is that we clear up our misunderstanding about God's will;
- As important as it is that we begin to move in the direction of

collaboration instead of isolation;

- As important as it is that we begin to spend time seeking consolation or desolation before we launch out on something ...

The question that we most need to wrestle with right now is ... do we really want to be aligned with God's game plan? Do we really want our lives to count for God and God's Kingdom?

And to help us in that, the band is going to come back up ... We're going to sing "Take My Life"; we've sung it before and it's an expression to God, kind of like a prayer. It's actually a dangerous prayer where we say, "God, I'm not sure what you will say or what your wisdom will lead me to do in my life but

that's what it's about. It's about saying 'yes' to you in my life. So, God, that's what I want to say to you this morning."

And I don't know what that means for you. I don't know how that will change your job or your family or your finances – I don't know, but I do know this is where it begins: "Take my life Lord and let it be consecrated to you," and through that I'll be led and guided.

Let's pray:

Jesus, we want to confess to you right now that as much as we want that to be true of us, it's not 100% true because there are parts of our lives that we don't give to you completely. It just reminds us again of how gracious you are and how

loving and merciful a savior you are and how much we need the gospel, the good news of the Kingdom. We're so grateful that you have given us a savior, that your promise is you will continue to drive us in the direction of perfection and that we will become more and more of those kinds of people because that's what our hearts want even though we're not there. We thank you for that in Jesus' name, Amen.

Let's stand together and sing ...

Congregational Song – Take My Life

Endnotes

ⁱ Larry Osborne, 10 Dumb Things Smart Christians Believe

ⁱⁱ Heb 5:14

ⁱⁱⁱ From Matthew 6:33

^{iv} See <http://www.theway.org.uk/Back/s027Murphy.pdf>