

Does God Whisper to Us Today?

Does God Whisper? Part 1

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1

Does the Bible teach that Christians are to listen for God's voice to guide their decisions?

The keynote speaker's list of spiritual qualifications was not lengthy. There were no references to his academic letters, theological acumen, skill at biblical living, or personal holiness. Instead, he was simply introduced as "a man who hears from God." It was the ultimate sign of spiritual competency. The implication for the audience was clear. He listens to God; they should listen to him.



It's hard to think of anything that has captured the imagination of Christians recently as aggressively as the idea of hearing the voice of God. The notion is, to many, so obviously Christian, so undoubtedly biblical, that its truth is beyond question. To challenge it is akin to spiritual treason.¹

For many, such an intimacy is central to personal relationship with God, the core of vibrant Christianity. Without it, genuine closeness to our Lord is not even possible.

Anyway, listening to Christians talk about it, the experience appears to be ubiquitous. Virtually everyone seems to be "hearing from God" in some fashion—pastors, writers, even the regular folks at your weekly Bible study—so the basic idea must be right. After all, Jesus said, "My sheep *hear* My voice." Real believers *ought* to experience this (if this is what Jesus meant), and if any one of us happens to be the odd person left out, there are plenty of books promising to impart this skill.

A CHRISTIAN BIRTHRIGHT

A host of writings over the last decade suggest that two-way communication is central to having an intimate relationship with God. We talk to Him in prayer, then He "talks" to

¹ I've actually been called a heretic for questioning it. A heretic is usually defined as someone who denies a cardinal doctrine of the faith.

Does God Whisper to Us Today?

us, often with guidance tailor-made for our situation. It's what one author calls a "conversational relationship" with God.²

This ability to hear directly from God is not reserved for a select few. Rather, the experience of prophets and godly men of old is also the birthright of every Christian. Jesus took his directions directly from the Father. This was the standard experience of the early church in the book of Acts. It should be ours, too.

2

If we don't yet know how to "recognize" God's voice, be confident that God is "trying" to get through. With the right instruction, the skill can be learned from those who are proficient, just as little Samuel learned from Eli.

On this view, the ability to personally connect with God is especially important when it comes to making decisions. One notable author writes:

Have you ever needed to make a decision, but had no idea what God wanted you to do? You wanted to do what was best, but you were not sure what that was.... God always has a plan in mind. The challenge for most of us is how to discover it.... He is willing to speak to each one of us, *but we must be in a position where we can hear His voice.*³ [Emphasis added.]

God knows best, and hasn't He promised to give guidance?⁴ Our task is to wait until the Master gives instructions.⁵ These may come by subtle impressions or promptings one writer calls God's "whispers."⁶ Others talk of "listening prayer," or hearing the "still small voice" of God,⁷ or being "led" by the Spirit, or getting an "assignment" from God.

DANGER IN THE SILENCE

As normal as these concepts seem to some—and as spiritually appealing as they sound—there is a dark side. What if God's whispers are not forthcoming? One pastor wrote me

² Dallas Willard, *Hearing God—Developing a Conversational Relationship with God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

³ Charles Stanley, *How to Let God Solve Your Problems—12 Keys to Finding Clear Guidance in Life's Trials* (Thomas Nelson: Nashville, 2008), 103-104.

⁴ [Ps. 32:8](#) and [Prov. 3:5-6](#) are verses frequently cited, but those passages don't specify the *means* of guidance. Many presume this means personal revelation. But God's Word could easily qualify, especially considering that 28 chapters of wise guidance immediately follow the promise in Proverbs.

⁵ Henry Blackaby and Claude King, *Experiencing God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 141.

⁶ Bill Hybels, *The Power of a Whisper—Hearing God. Having the Guts to Respond* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010).

⁷ A reference to [1 Kings 19:12](#).

Does God Whisper to Us Today?

plagued by indecision. “I’ve felt ‘stuck in the mud,’ so to speak, waiting for ‘the voice of God’ to impress me with His leading in so many areas.” For this pastor, God’s silence was agonizing.

And silence from God is a cause for concern. The author of one bestseller on this topic warns that a failure to hear from God is a failure in one’s love relationship with God. “If the Christian does not know when God is speaking, he is in trouble at the heart of his Christian life!”⁸

Consequently, there are legions of Christians who are disheartened and defeated—sometimes even questioning their own salvation—because the heavens have been quiet. After all, Jesus said, “My sheep *hear* My voice.” And what of those who don’t hear? “You are not My sheep,” was Jesus’ answer ([Jn. 10:26](#)). This is a chilling prospect for those left alone in the spiritual silence.

ONE BIG QUESTION, MANY SMALLER ONES

This month’s *Solid Ground* is the first of a three-part series in which I want to ask a simple question: Are these claims sound? Which is to ask, “Are these claims biblical?” What is the scriptural answer to the following smaller questions?

- Does the Bible teach God is “trying” to speak to each one of us? Can His efforts be thwarted by inattention, excessive activity, or sin, as some suggest?
- Is having a conversational relationship with God taught in the text?
- According to Scripture, does prayer involve two-way communication? Do we talk to God, then listen as God talks to us?
- When Paul uses the phrase “led by the Spirit,” does he mean “sensing” subtle hints from God that He uses to prompt and push us in the direction of His will?
- Does God’s promised guidance mean He reveals to each of us individually what He wants us to do?
- Does the Bible give us reason to expect the same interaction with God as Moses, Samuel, and Paul had with Him,⁹ or were their experiences unique?

⁸ Blackaby, 132, 137.

⁹ Stanley, 108.

Does God Whisper to Us Today?

- For Jesus, did “hearing” His voice mean that all His true sheep receive regular personal messages from Him?
- Is it true this was modeled by the Savior, the apostles, and the early church?
- And if we don’t currently possess this skill, does the divine record suggest it can be taught as Eli taught young Samuel?



These are the issues I’m concerned with, but there are built-in hazards to raising these questions.

LEST I BE MISUNDERSTOOD...

Part of the difficulty of addressing these issues is a massive ambiguity in the phrase “hearing God’s voice.” For some, any intervention by God in their lives—conviction of sin, insight into Scripture, godly wisdom from a Christian brother or sister, an idea that seems to come from nowhere that bears wonderful fruit—can be called “hearing the voice of God” because all entail God’s personal, intimate—and what I take to be completely biblical—involvement with them personally.

Ambiguities like this lead easily to misunderstanding, so let me tell you what I am *not* challenging.

I am not questioning the normal experience of a deep, profound intimacy with God that is sometimes so emotionally overwhelming it leaves us weeping in awe before Him.

I am not questioning whether God can work sovereignly to give us thoughts, insights, ideas, or plans. In fact, I’m sure He does (though I will offer some qualifications about how I think we should assess such things). I am not denying the work of God in our lives through all kinds of secondary causes—counsel, circumstances, personal gifts or capabilities—to accomplish His sovereign purposes.

I am not denying answered prayer, though I am not convinced all prayers are biblically appropriate (we can ask for things we shouldn’t be asking for).

I am not questioning whether God can “speak” powerfully to us in our unique situations from Scripture when the text is understood according to its objective meaning gleaned from the context.

I am not a “cessationist,” that is, I do not think the so-called “sign” gifts (tongues, prophecy, etc.) ceased in the first century. There may be bona fide prophetic words for

Does God Whisper to Us Today?

the church in the fashion of prophets of old.¹⁰ Alleged prophets, however, should be tested ([1 Thess. 5:20–21](#)), and the test is the same now as it's always been ([Deut. 18:22](#)).

I do not deny that the Spirit comes alongside us as a helper in powerful and palpable ways to teach, convict, comfort, or empower us to deal with sin, difficulties, trials, and discouragements.

Finally, I do not deny that God is *capable* of giving special revelation to anyone or to any church at any time. God can do whatever He likes, and I am fully convinced there are unique situations where He does this today, just as in biblical times.

None of these things is in question, as far as I'm concerned.

What *is* at issue for me is whether the Bible teaches *everyone* can be a prophet of sorts, whether *each* Christian can expect to hear from God in the ways described above with private, personalized revelations, and whether this is a standard, ordinary part of the Christian life that can be taught and developed.

This I do not think is taught in the Bible, and I would like to tell you why.

There is only one way to answer these questions, and the proper method is not by appealing to personal experiences or citing godly authorities who disagree. You may have noticed I've been citing authors by name only in the endnotes. There is a reason for this.

My focus here is not on personalities, but ideas. I am not interested in discrediting those who I have every reason to believe are good and decent Christian leaders. In fact, some of them are friends. Rather, I am asking if the ideas they have advanced are biblically sound. That question cannot be answered by looking at the character—either good or bad—of those on either side of the issue, but only by looking at the ideas themselves in light of God's Word.

My question is a scriptural one, and to answer it we must turn to the text.

¹⁰ I *do* make a distinction between the gift of prophecy and the office of prophet or apostle. I do not think these offices function today, but that is a different issue.

Does God Whisper to Us Today?

“MY SHEEP HEAR MY VOICE”

John 10 is almost universally cited in support of the view that hearing the voice of God is a standard feature of the normal Christian life. The wording itself seems straight-forward and unambiguous: “My sheep hear My voice,” Jesus says.

Whenever this verse is quoted to me in discussions on this issue, I always ask a simple question: “What is happening in John 10?” It’s a fair question, it seems to me. How can we be confident of Jesus’ meaning if we don’t know who He is speaking to or what His line of thinking is?

No one in this context has ever given me an answer to this question. Nor have I seen it addressed in any book invoking this passage. I suspect it’s because they have never looked. I’m fairly confident of this because I can’t imagine that anyone looking carefully at the context of John 10 could ever appeal to this proof-text to support this view. A closer examination shows why, though I invite you to read the chapter carefully for yourself first before you continue here.

John records four mentions by Jesus of His sheep hearing or knowing His voice (10:3, 4, 16, 27). Verse six is key to understanding these references. Here John explicitly states that *Jesus’ remarks about hearing His voice are a figure of speech*.

Jesus begins by talking about shepherds and sheep (10:1–6). Unlike the thief and robber, the legitimate shepherd enters by the door and calls His own by name. They follow Him as He leads them out. Jesus’ point is lost on those listening, though, so He explains the details of His illustration.

He is the door of the sheep (7). Those who pass through Him find salvation and abundant life (9–10). He is also the Good Shepherd who, unlike the hireling, lays down His life freely for His sheep (11–13, 15, 17–18). The shepherd and the sheep know each other (14). When His other sheep hear His voice, they also become part of His flock (16).

Once again, the Jews fail to completely understand (19–21). What is the problem? Jesus’ answer is crystal clear: “You do not believe because you are not My sheep” (26).¹¹

¹¹ I know Jesus’ explanation in the latter part of the chapter is taken from a different encounter with the Jews than in the first half where the issue of hearing Jesus’ voice is originally raised. However, I’m convinced Jesus is still responding to the same topic, which is why John grouped the separate encounters together. The language of the text also seems to make this obvious.

Does God Whisper to Us Today?

At this point, two key questions need to be answered from the text of John 10. First, what does it *mean* to hear Jesus' voice? Second, what *causes* His sheep to hear His voice?

One author suggests that "hearing" means gaining insight or finding an application for a command from Scripture.¹² The sheep also "hear" when they receive a personal "assignment" from God through a "leading" or a "calling."¹³

7

This is not the way Jesus answers, though. It is critical at this point to remember John's clarification in verse six. Jesus is using a figure of speech. The reference to "voice" cannot mean an actual voice. A thing is never a metaphor of itself. *A metaphor is a picture of something else.* Jesus must be referring, in a figure, to something else that the phrase "hear My voice" represents. What is it?

Jesus says, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me and I give eternal life to them" (v. 27–28). Note the sequence: They hear His voice. They respond by following. Then He gives them eternal life. Hearing Jesus' voice results *in* salvation; it is not the result *of* salvation. It is something that happens to *nonbelievers* that leads to their belief. It is not a skill possessed by *believers* as a result of having belief and subsequent relationship with God.

What "voice" is it that draws us to Jesus and results in our salvation? It is the ineffable drawing by the Father through His Spirit of those who are His. This is a concept John has already introduced and developed in earlier chapters of his Gospel, using the same metaphor in the very same way (5:25, 5:31–34, 5:37–38, 6:35–40, 6:44–45, 6:65, 8:18, 8:47). It is a figure of speech for the inner working of God "calling" us to salvation.

Remember, the Jews have no trouble actually hearing Jesus. They know what He is *saying*. They hear His teaching with perfect clarity. The problem is they are not *responding* with faith. The "voice" Jesus speaks of is not the whispers of God in a conversational relationship with a Christian, but the effective call of the Holy Spirit that brings us to Christ in the first place.

Why don't the Jews "hear" in the sense that Jesus means? Why don't they respond and believe? Jesus tells us plainly. They do not "hear" because God is not "speaking" to them. They are not among the sheep the Father has given to the Son (26). If they were, they'd "hear." That is Jesus' unambiguous teaching.

¹² Blackaby, 164-168.

¹³ Blackaby, 168-170.

Does God Whisper to Us Today?

Now the second question: What enables us to hear? One writer claims, “Knowing God’s voice comes from an intimate love relationship with God,” and again, “As you walk in an intimate love relationship with God, you will come to recognize His voice. You will know when God is speaking to you.”¹⁴

But Jesus never suggests such a thing. Jesus says the *Father* is the cause, sovereignly enabling those sheep He has given to Jesus to “hear” and respond. This “hearing” is not for believers *after* salvation, but for non-believers *before* salvation. It is not dependent on the quality of our love relationship with God, but on the Father’s choice.

There is another damaging consequence of a misreading of this text. According to Jesus’ comments, hearing His voice is essential to salvation. Those who do not hear *are not His*. Rather they are outsiders, bereft of eternal life, lost.

There is an unavoidable consequence of blending the wording of John 10 with this author’s definition of hearing Jesus’ voice. He writes, “Those who do not have the relationship (‘do not belong to God’) do not hear what God is saying ([John 8:47](#)).”¹⁵ In the verse quoted, Jesus is castigating the Jews for unbelief, calling them the sons of Satan (8:44). This places a tremendous burden on the believer who questions his spirituality—and even his salvation—if divine messages are not forthcoming.

If this is your worry, fret not. The notion of hearing the voice of God is completely foreign to the text of John 10. To Jesus, hearing His voice is not a skill to be developed. It is not a spiritual discipline opening up lines of personalized communication with God. Rather, it is a figure of speech depicting the Father drawing the non-believer into Jesus’ arms. If you have come to Christ, you’ve already heard the voice Jesus is talking about. If not, you would not have come to Him in the first place.

LED BY THE SPIRIT?

What does Scripture mean when it says Christians are “led by the Spirit”? Once again, the simplest way to answer that question is to look up the verses that use the phrase. Since it appears in only two places in the epistles (Romans 8 and Galatians 5), our task is easy. Paul is the author of both and he uses the phrase in exactly the same way in each case.

Paul begins Romans 8 by explaining how the law of the Spirit of life in Christ sets us free from the law of sin and of death (8:2). What the Law couldn’t do (bring life) God did by

¹⁴ Blackaby, 138, 163.

¹⁵ Blackaby, 138.

Does God Whisper to Us Today?

sending His Son to die for us and then giving His Spirit so we can walk in life and peace (3–8). Every true Christian has the Spirit of Christ dwelling in him, Paul argues, giving life to his mortal body (9–11). Then in verses 12–14, Paul writes this:

So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die. But if by the Spirit you are *putting to death the deeds of the body*, you will live. For all who are *being led by the Spirit of God*, these are sons of God.

9

Notice the obvious parallel between “putting to death the deeds of the body” and “being led by the Spirit.” Notice the obvious parallel between “putting to death the deeds of the body” and “being led by the Spirit.” Paul is saying, in other words, “All of you who being ‘led by the Spirit’—that is, you who are putting to death the deeds of the body—you are sons of God.”

Clearly, this passage is not referring to individual “promptings” of God we “sense” to get guidance. That meaning is completely foreign to Paul’s flow of thought.

Rather, the Spirit every true Christian possesses “leads” us away from the bondage of the flesh into the freedom and peace of a life of godliness—what Paul calls “putting to death the deeds of the body.”

Flip over to [Galatians 5:16–26](#) and you’ll quickly see Paul applies the same reasoning to the phrase “led by the Spirit” in this passage. Christ sets us free from the “yoke of slavery” of the Law. The promise of the Spirit (note 3:14) gives real hope of righteousness. We’re to use our new freedom not as an opportunity for the flesh, but to live righteously by serving one another in love (5:1–15).

A battle rages, however, between the flesh and the Spirit (17). How do we win this battle? Paul’s answer: “*Walk by the Spirit*, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh” (16) and, “If you are *led by the Spirit*, you are not under the Law” (18).

Once again, the two statements in parallel mean the same thing. *Walking* by the spirit, being *led* by the Spirit (and *living* by the Spirit, later in verse 24) mean overcoming the gruesome deeds of the flesh (19–21) and manifesting the fruits of the Spirit (22–23), leading to Paul’s summary: “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (24). This is why someone who is led by the Spirit in Paul’s sense is “not under the Law” (18). They are already fulfilling the law by their righteous conduct.

Does God Whisper to Us Today?

This is the same basic message of Romans 8. Read the whole passage yourself, then ask if Paul is teaching here that being “led” by the Spirit means getting promptings and nudges from God to hint at His will for us. It’s simply not there. Rather, this notion is a contemporary Christian idea that believers unwittingly *read into* the text. Paul’s point is completely different.

The New Testament record speaks with one voice here. There is no “hearing the voice of God” in passages referring to the leading of the Spirit.¹⁶ We’ll have to look elsewhere for evidence of this teaching.

In the next *Solid Ground*, I’ll explore this issue further, looking at the example of Jesus, the testimony of the book of Acts, the “mentoring” of Samuel by Eli, and a very important biblical principle I call the “lesson of the bugle.”

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¹⁶ Jesus was “led” (or “impelled”) by the Spirit into the wilderness ([Matt. 4:1](#), [Mark 1:12](#), [Luke 4:1](#)). But this does not seem to be an internal prompting of the sort Christians describe. Rather, the text indicates the Spirit actually took or drove Jesus into the wilderness. The words used (*ago, anago*) are the same words describing Satan “taking” Jesus to different locations during the temptation.