

Does God Whisper to Us Today?

Does God Whisper? Part 2

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In the [last issue of Solid Ground](#), I raised a question that may have startled some readers. I asked if the current emphasis on “hearing” the voice of God is biblically sound.

I say “startled” because for some people this is like asking, “Does Jesus love me?” or “Is God good?” What could be more obvious, biblically?



What may seem self-evident at first glance, though, doesn’t always turn out to be sound on closer analysis, and I have come to believe—contrary to my initial impulse—that hearing the voice of God is in that category. In these three issues of *Solid Ground*¹ I am offering you my reasons why.

Of course, my question is not about whether there can be profound intimacy with God, or supernatural interventions by Him, or dramatic movements of the Spirit, or deep emotional experiences, or Spirit-directed insight into Scripture, or even whether God can or *does* speak in the modern era. I’m convinced each of these is true.

Rather, does the Bible teach that, as a matter of course, every believer can expect his or her own *private* revelations, two-way *personalized* communications, and *custom-tailored* guidance from God? Is this a skill that can be learned? Was this modeled by the Savior, the apostles, and the early church? Does Scripture teach we can expect the same interaction with God as Moses, Samuel, and even Jesus, or were their experiences unique?

Since hearing from God is for many Christians central to relationship with God, they *assume* it as part of the package when reading the Bible. A casual reading of certain phrases, then (like “led by the Spirit” and “My sheep hear My voice”²), is enough to justify their convictions. My goal is to take a closer look, “examining the Scriptures...to see whether these things are so” ([Acts 17:11](#)).

¹ This is the second installment. The first is available in enhanced digital form at www.str.org.

² Both of these phrases were covered in detail in the last issue (May-June 2011) of Solid Ground.

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I want to be very transparent about my approach. I am going to a handful of passages that are commonly understood to support this teaching, and one by one attempting to show they provide no such support. If I've made a reasonable case and it turns out the standard texts don't teach or imply this view, then the view itself should be in question.

This is not simply an idle exercise in exegesis, though.



DUAL DANGERS

I have two chief concerns. First, many Christians actually feel spiritually sub-standard and defeated because for them the heavens have been silent. This can be debilitating, and it's profoundly unfair to them if their only shortcoming is entertaining a false expectation of what a relationship with God entails.

The second danger is more troubling to me. To claim to have received direct revelation of some sort from God is a weighty matter. It's a claim Old Testament prophets staked their lives on, literally ("But the prophet who speaks a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak...that prophet shall die." [Deut. 18:20]).³

Yet conversations between Christians are often littered with casual references to one's latest revelations without any sense of the gravity of the assertion, or any sense of responsibility to justify the claim.

Even Jesus Himself didn't presume to speak for God without compelling evidence. Instead, He regularly appealed to corroborating witnesses: John the Baptist, prophecy, miracles, and Scripture (see [John 5:30–39](#), [10:25](#), [37–38](#); [14:10–11](#)). If this was the standard for Jesus (and Paul, [2 Cor. 12:12](#)), doesn't the ordinary believer owe some accounting?

Further, when God communicates to us, whatever He says has complete authority. A private revelation may have a different scope of *application* than the Bible (Scripture is meant for the whole church, where individual revelations are for the individual). It has no less *authority*, though, since the private message presumably comes from the same God who inspired the text.⁴ No true word of God can have any less say-so than another.

Can you see the inherent dangers here? It certainly doesn't occur to most people, but at bare minimum is there any concern that many might be taking God's name in vain?

³ All Scripture references are from the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise noted.

⁴ I have not heard any proponent of this view put it this directly, but this is the unmistakable implication of their claim.

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Much worse, if this idea is not sound and Christians have been encouraged to interpret certain impressions or circumstantial events as hints from God, then a host of well-meaning believers have actually been speaking “presumptuously” for God. They then act on the deciphered message as if it were divine decree.

Of course, neither of these dangers prove that the notion of hearing God’s voice is biblically wrong-headed. Scripture alone must answer that question. It does underscore the liabilities the church faces, though, if the conventional wisdom is flawed.

I know that proponents of this view emphasize that any alleged revelation must be tested by Scripture. Agreed, but the qualification misses my point. The method *itself* must be tested by Scripture. That is my task here.

Part of the rationale for the idea that each Christian can develop a “conversational” relationship with God is it seems to be the actual experience of so many in Scripture—Jesus, the early church, even a boy named Samuel. Is that the case?

THE IMITATION OF CHRIST?

What of Jesus? Jesus said He did the things the Father *told* Him to do. If Jesus regularly received direct revelation and guidance from the Father, shouldn’t we expect the same?

This is a fair challenge. After all, Jesus is our model. Paul said, “Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ” ([1 Cor. 11:1](#), cf. [1 Thess. 1:6](#)). One popular writer put it this way: “When I want to learn how to know and do the will of God, I always look to Jesus. I can find no better model than Him.”⁵ He then cites Jesus’ statement in [John 5:17, 19–20](#):

My Father has been working until now, and I have been working.... Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do, for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner. For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself does...

The Father showed Jesus. Jesus is our model. Therefore, we should expect the Father to show us in like manner. That’s the rationale.

There is no question that Jesus is a model to us. But is Jesus our model in *everything*? Is there reason to believe some characteristics of Jesus’ relationship with the Father might be unique? I think the answer is yes.

⁵ Henry Blackaby and Claude King, *Experiencing God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 65.

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Jesus not only was the perfect man and humble servant, but also the Messiah and incarnate Son of God. Clearly, we should imitate Jesus' human perfections. But aren't prerogatives of divinity or messianic office in a different category?

Let's look at the passage more closely. Something important is missing from the citation (note the ellipses). The omission of verses 18, a portion of 19, and verses 21, 22, and 23 is unfortunate. Each is vital to our understanding and seriously qualifies the application of this passage, as this more complete citation of [John 5:17-23](#) shows:

(17) But He answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working."

(18) For *this cause* therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, *making Himself equal with God*.

(19) Jesus *therefore* answered and was saying to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing, for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner."

(20) For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing, and greater works than these will He show Him, that you may marvel.

(21) For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes.

(22) For not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son, (23) in order that all may honor the Son, even as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him.

Note, first of all, verse 18, the overlooked verse. The Jews, understanding Jesus' comments to be a clear claim to deity, seek to kill Him. The word "therefore" in verse 19 indicates that what follows is a response to the Jews meant to buttress Jesus' singular claim in verse 17.

Note also the three phrases in parallel construction: "For the Father loves the Son and shows Him all things...", "For just as the Father raises the dead...", and "For not even the Father judges anyone..."

These verses form a complete literary unit. If the Father showing Jesus "all things that He Himself is doing" is an example for us to model, then what of the phrases joined with it that immediately follow? Are we also to imitate Christ by giving life to whom we wish,

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judging the world on the Father's behalf, and demanding that all people honor us as they honor the Father?

Clearly not. In context, these verses identify a trio of singular prerogatives of the Son of God. He is unique and therefore has unique obligations, unique abilities, and a unique relationship with the Father.

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Verses 26–27 should clear up any question on this score: “For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself, and He gave Him authority to execute judgment, *because He is the Son of Man*.”⁶ The phrase “Son of Man” is a Messianic title from [Daniel 7:13](#) that Jesus used often. It is *because* Jesus is the Divine, Messianic King of Daniel's vision that He operates in this unique way in relationship with the Father. Jesus has a singular role.

In [Deuteronomy 18:18](#), God told Moses to look for a prophet in the future who God would speak through in an unparalleled way: “I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.” Jesus is that prophet. His experience of revelation from the Father, then, is special, not something for us to emulate.

This explains why Jesus never directs His disciples to follow His example in [John 5:17–23](#). No subsequent writers—Peter, John, Paul, Luke—even hint at it. We are not to imitate those things pertaining to Jesus' divinity or His Messianic office.

This same principle applies to Jesus' comments in [John 8:26, 28](#):

“I have many things to speak and to judge concerning you, but He who sent Me is true, and the things which I heard from Him, these I speak to the world.... When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that *I am He*, and I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me.”

Remember, John 8 is one of the great chapters on the deity of Christ. The Jews ask, “Who are you?” (v. 25). Jesus eventually answers: “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I Am” (v. 56). Jesus is arguing that He is utterly exceptional. He is from above, not from below, and not of this world (v. 23). He is the only Savior (v. 24). He lives in perfect obedience to the Father (v. 29). He is a free man—a son—not a slave (v. 35). He has proceeded from the Father (v. 42). He is the great “I Am” (v. 58).

⁶ Jesus' use of the phrase “son of man” may not always be a reference to Daniel's prophecy. In this case, however, the conclusion is unavoidable. In this statement in John, Jesus is grounding His authority to render judgment not in His humanity, but in His role as Divine Messiah-king.

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Some people in the Bible have a unique role. These include Moses ([Num. 12:2–9](#)), Samuel ([1 Sam. 3:19–20](#)), Paul ([2 Cor. 10:8](#)), and (as we have seen) Jesus. Because special revelations were granted them does not mean they are available to us.

Imitate them in servanthood ([John 13:13–15](#)), in faith ([Heb. 13:7](#)), in godliness and joy in tribulation ([1 Thess. 1:6](#)), in selflessness ([1 Cor 10:33–11:1](#)), and in faith and patience ([Heb. 6:12](#)). But do not imitate them in the privileges of their singular offices.



The life of Jesus does not support the notion that every Christian can expect to receive revelation as a standard feature of his relationship with God.

But what about the experience of the early church?

GOD SPEAKS IN ACTS

In Acts we have a focused look at a relatively short period of history (30 years) recording radical manifestations of supernatural activity. Acts is frequently appealed to as evidence for the view that private, individual revelation is an ordinary means of guidance and a standard feature of the fruitful Christian life. But what do we actually find?

I went through Acts verse by verse looking for concrete examples of God giving special directives of any sort. I have listed every one of them below in chronological order. Here's what I found.

An angel rescues the apostles from prison and tells them to preach the Gospel (5:19–20). An angel sends Philip to the Gaza road (8:26). The Spirit directs Philip to the Ethiopian eunuch (8:29). While traveling on the Damascus road, Saul hears the audible voice of Jesus sending him to Damascus (9:4–6). In a vision, the Lord instructs Ananias to visit Saul (9:10–16). In another vision, an angel tells Cornelius to send for Peter (10:3–6). The Spirit, in connection with a vision, tells Peter to visit Cornelius (10:19–20). An angel orders Peter to follow him out of prison (12:7–8). The Holy Spirit sends Saul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey (13:2). The Spirit forbids Paul to speak the word in Asia (16:6–7). Paul is directed through a vision to Macedonia (16:9–10). Jesus appears to Paul in a vision and tells him to preach the Gospel in Corinth (18:9–10). Paul is told through prophecy not to enter Jerusalem (21:4). Jesus tells Paul in a vision to leave Jerusalem (22:18, 21).

Note the means of these revelations. The majority (six) entail visions. Three times an angel is the messenger. Four times the Spirit speaks. One is a prophecy. One other is the voice of Jesus.

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There are five other examples of supernatural revelations that are predictive in nature, but do not dictate any direction—they give no assignments. In fact, in one case (Agabus' prophecy of imminent famine) the Christians determine *on their own* to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren in Judea. These examples can be found in [Acts 11:27–30](#), [20:23](#), [21:11](#), [23:11](#), and [27:22–26](#).

At first glance the list of interventions seems formidable, but the initial impression is misleading. This actually is a very small amount of activity considering the three-decade time span of Acts. God's special revelations to the leaders of the early church are limited to only 14 from the time of Pentecost to the end of the account,⁷ and even these are grouped in fewer units.⁸

Two are jailbreaks. Two pertain to Saul's dramatic conversion, two to Cornelius' conversion, and two to the Ethiopian eunuch's conversion. Two are about Paul's stay in Jerusalem ("Don't enter" and "Get out"). The remaining four are about Paul's missionary journeys (the initial commission, direction away from Asia, direction to Macedonia, told to preach boldly in Corinth).

Notice a couple more significant facts. First, there is no indication in the entire record that God communicated through some inner "sensing." Completely absent from the text are phrases like, "I feel led...", "I think God is telling me...", "I feel God is calling me...", "I believe it's God's will that...", "I've received lots of confirmation...", "I'm sensing the Lord's direction...", or "I have a peace about it..."

The kind of language often used to describe hearing God's voice is completely absent from this biblical account. There is no record of knowledge of God's direction based on internal promptings—*not a single one*. In Acts, the rare times God gives special directives He communicates in *clear, supernatural* ways. More than half the time He used a vision or an angel.

Second, there is no evidence that any of these directives were sought. There is no indication of any Christians, including Apostles, "waiting" for God to guide them. In the

⁷ I did not include the casting of lots in [Acts 1:15–26](#) because to me this is not a clear example of God guiding. The initiative was on the disciples side and they cast lots. Some think this was a misguided effort and that Paul was Judas' replacement. The text doesn't indicate. Before the final straws were drawn, though, objective criteria had to be met ([Acts 1:21–22](#)). Anyhow, casting lots doesn't seem to be in anyone's guidance game-plan these days.

⁸ Of course, one could argue there were many times God intervened during this period, but Luke failed to record them in Acts. This is possible, but it's speculative. I think it's safer to base our conclusions on what the Holy Spirit actually revealed, rather than on conjecture about what might have happened.

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New Testament we find no pleading with God or laboring in prayer for God to reveal His will or give guidance. The revelations in Acts are surprise intrusions in every case.⁹

But there is another consideration.

NO DIVINE DIRECTIONS

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For balance we must also note other important decisions in Acts clearly *not* directed by God. There are many times when the disciples make decisions marking significant events in the life of the early church that are the kind many think require a word from the Lord. They entail decisions about the how, when, where, why, and who of ministry. Yet there is no evidence of intervention from God, and no indication the disciples even sought it. They simply weighed their options in light of circumstances, then chose a judicious course of action consistent with prior, general commands of the Lord.

Notable examples include Philip's ministry in Samaria (8:5), resolving the complaint about the Hellenistic widows (6:1–6), and Barnabas and Saul establishing a teaching ministry for a year in Antioch (11:26). Elders are appointed in the new churches (14:23). The Jerusalem council resolves the problem of the Judaizers (15:7–29).¹⁰ Paul embarks on his second and third missionary journeys (15:36, 18:23). Paul sets up shop as a tent maker and starts a ministry in Corinth (18:3). Paul establishes a discipleship training program for two years at the school of Tyrannus ([Acts 19:9](#)). Paul has a healing ministry on the island of Malta for three months ([Acts 28:9–11](#)).

These decisions seem odd in light of conventional wisdom on hearing from God since none of these important endeavors was directed specifically by Him. Rather, each appears to be the result of a unilateral decision by the disciples using wisdom to respond to the circumstances at hand.

And these are just the tip of the iceberg. *Altogether I found 70 such instances in the book of Acts alone, contrasted with the 14 occasions of specialized direction during that same time.*¹¹

⁹ One possible exception is [Acts 13:2](#) where the leaders “were ministering to the Lord and fasting” when the Spirit commissioned Saul and Barnabas for their first missionary journey. One might infer they were seeking guidance, but the text does not say this. Since no other passages indicate this pattern, there’s no reason to read this into the text.

¹⁰ Here the conclusion of the leaders was characterized as something that “seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church” (22) and later as something that “seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (28). Apparently, the leadership took the collective decision-making process of the council to be divinely ordained, not divinely revealed.

¹¹ The full list of 70 examples can be found at [str.org](#) under the title “Divine Direction in Acts.”

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Even more can be found in the epistles. Paul chastises the Corinthians for not working out their own legal differences ([1 Cor. 6:3–6](#)). He does not counsel them to seek God’s decision. Instead he asks, “Is there not among you *one wise man* who will be able to decide between his brethren?”

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul gives the most thorough instruction in the Bible on the issue of marriage. He details pros and cons of single life over married life. He solemnly notes the moral obligations of both. He then leaves the decision in the hands of the believer. There is no hint in this passage that any Christian must “hear from the Lord” even on the weighty matter of marriage.

Peter gives explicit instruction about the use of spiritual gifts in ministry ([1 Peter 4:10–11](#)). He does not say to wait for one’s calling—nor does any other passage of Scripture, for that matter. Instead, given that each believer has a spiritual gift, Peter enjoins him to employ it in works of service as a good steward, doing all to God’s glory.

So what should we conclude from the record of the early church in Acts and other passages in the New Testament? There is no support here for the idea of hearing from God to live optimally as a Christian. The concept is not taught there, and the pattern is not modeled.

In the [next Solid Ground](#), I’ll explore the claim that hearing the voice of God is a skill that can be learned (as Samuel allegedly learned from Eli). I’ll also examine the habit of looking for private messages from God by cobbling together the “hints” He allegedly drops regarding His will, and the question of how to know when thoughts or ideas are “from the Lord.”

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