

Does God Whisper to Us Today?

Does God Whisper? Part 3

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1

Civil war battles were tumultuous affairs. The thundering of guns and muskets was not just deafening, it was dangerous, drowning out the one means of group communication: the bugles.

Before the invention of modern military “coms,” battle instructions were delivered using musical signals. Buglers directed skirmish maneuvers like “forward,” “in retreat,” “change direction to the left,” “cease firing,” and the like. Lack of clarity could be deadly. Confusing the bugle call for “advance” with the call for “retreat” might cost the battle.



Even in the first century buglers were vital to combat maneuvering, which is why Paul traded on that image when chastising the Corinthians for speaking in tongues without an interpreter. The practice yielded no profit because the communication lacked clarity:

Yet even lifeless things, either flute or harp, in producing a sound, if they do not produce a distinction in the tones, how will it be known what is played on the flute or on the harp? For if the bugle produces an indistinct sound, who will prepare himself for battle? So also you, *unless you utter by the tongue speech that is clear, how will it be known what is spoken?* For you will be speaking into the air. ([1 Cor. 14:7-9](#))

Paul’s point was simple. Communication requires clarity. Though his specific concern was tongues without interpretation, Paul’s general principle applies to any type of divine revelation. The “lesson of the bugle” is just as applicable to claims of revelation today as it was in Paul’s day: Unless the speech is clear, the message will not get through.

This insight seems to have been overlooked of late, though. Many well-meaning Christians apparently believe God *is* in the habit of communicating important details regarding His purpose for our lives with speech that is not clear.

The fault is not with God, they say, but with us. God is “trying” to communicate, but something is lacking. We haven’t learned to listen properly. To lay hold of his spiritual birthright—a conversational relationship with God—each Christian needs to learn to “hear” the voice of God.

Does God Whisper to Us Today?

In two previous issues of *Solid Ground*¹ I raised questions about the biblical legitimacy of this idea. I looked closely at passages on being “led by the Spirit” and Jesus’ sheep “hearing” His voice. I asked if the pattern in Jesus’ life or the practice of the Apostles in Acts supported this notion.

In this final installment, I want to address some other ways this idea has been defended. According to Scripture, does prayer involve two-way communication where we talk to God, then listen as God talks to us? Does the Bible teach God is “trying” to speak to each one of us? Can His efforts be thwarted by inattention, excessive activity, lack of spiritual skill, or sin, as some suggest? And if we don’t currently possess this skill, does the divine record suggest it can be taught as Eli taught young Samuel?

My questions are not about what God *can* do, or even what He *does* do in unique circumstances, but about what the Bible teaches Christians in general are to expect from being in relationship with God. What does the text actually teach?

PRAY AND LISTEN

Two-way communication is essential to all relationships. Classically for Christians in relationship with God this has meant Bible study and prayer. We let the “word of Christ richly dwell within” ([Col. 3:16](#)), then by “prayer and supplication with thanksgiving” we make our requests before God ([Phil. 4:6](#)).

Recently, though, an alternate approach has become popular, dubbed by some as “listening prayer.” Prayer is conversation with God, the argument goes, and all conversation is two-way. We speak, then God speaks. Therefore, prayer should include listening to God as well as talking to Him.

The Psalmist tells us to “be still” ([Ps. 46:10](#)). God spoke to Elijah through “a still, small voice” ([1 Kings 19:12, KJV](#)). If we quiet ourselves properly during prayer, we can expect the same. The basic sequence is this: pray, be still, get impressions (the small voice), then interpret.

It’s always a good idea when supporting texts are offered for an idea to go back and read the larger passage itself.² Sometimes surprises await. Here is what we find in [1 Kings 19:11–13 \(NASB\)](#):

¹ See the May-June and July-August 2011 issues, available in enhanced digital form at www.str.org.

² The operating principle at STR is “never read a Bible verse.”

Does God Whisper to Us Today?

So He said, “Go forth and stand on the mountain before the Lord.” And behold, the Lord was passing by. And a great and strong wind was rending the mountains and breaking in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire a sound of a gentle blowing [“a still small voice” KJV, “a gentle whisper” NIV]. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave. And behold, a voice came to him and said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

3

Please notice that whatever was happening in v. 12 (either a voice, a whisper, or a gentle blowing) it was something Elijah *heard*. It was not a feeling, an impression, or an inner nudge needing interpreting. Throughout the account God speaks directly, but gently, to a deeply depressed prophet,³ assuring him he was not alone as he feared. Nothing in this passage suggests our need to “listen” for God’s *inner* whispers.

In like manner, Psalm 46 teaches a different lesson than the “be still and listen” advocates suggest. The psalm opens this way:

God is our refuge and strength,
A very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change
And though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea.

The psalmist continues to magnify God as a mighty stronghold giving protection and gladness to all who seek safe harbor in Him, then concludes with this application: “Cease striving [“be still” ESV, KJV, NIV] and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth.”

As the New American Standard Bible (NASB) translation suggests, “be still” doesn’t mean be quiet and listen, but rather stop striving and rest. It means trust in God’s power, not listen for His voice. The “listening prayer” application is completely foreign to the point of this psalm.

There is a more serious problem with this practice, though. In a discipleship group I led years ago, we isolated every single verse in the New Testament having anything to do with prayer. We outlined our findings under headings like “What to Pray,” “How to

³ One of the greatest prophets of the Old Testament, by the way, suggesting that Elijah’s experience—like his entire ministry— was unique and not a model for us to copy.

Does God Whisper to Us Today?

Pray,” “Attitude in Prayer,” “Where to Pray,” “God’s Role in Prayer,” and more, all with detailed subheadings. We didn’t miss a thing.⁴

Remarkably, 25 pages of citations yield not a single reference to listening prayer, not one. Jesus leaves it out of His instruction on prayer to His disciples ([Lk. 11:1–4](#)). Paul tells us to devote ourselves to prayer ([Col. 4:2](#)), to pray without ceasing ([1 Thess. 5:17](#)), to pray at all times ([Eph. 6:18](#))—the list goes on and on—but neglects to ever mention listening. Hmm. The same for Peter, James, and Jude. Why the silence?

The complete lack of scriptural support for this notion raises an important question. If the Bible never hints at this practice, why is it so frequently advanced in popular texts as a vital part of discipleship and spiritual formation?

Prayer may be conversational in tone, but nothing in Scripture suggests it’s anything like a two-way conversation. The Bible is replete with references to listening to God through the Word.⁵ It is completely silent on the role of listening through prayer.

Even so, some insist that hearing God is a legitimate skill that can be taught, evidenced, they say, by the relationship between Eli and little Samuel.

ELI AND SAMUEL

The relationship between Eli, the priest, and his servant, the young boy Samuel, has been offered as an example of a godly man mentoring a younger believer in the art of “recognizing” the voice of God. In like manner, there are mentors today who can impart the same skill to willing disciples.

The model looks something like this. The godly man, Eli, adept at recognizing the voice of God, teaches the skill to the younger believer. Samuel then applies the guidelines and succeeds in connecting with God, an experience available today to any Christian.

At this point I invite you to read 1 Samuel 1–3 to discover for yourself what the text actually says. It reveals an entirely different picture from the model outlined above. Indeed, not a single detail just described can be found in the account.

To start with, Eli was not a godly man adept at recognizing the voice of God. First, there wasn’t much for him to hear since “Word from the Lord was rare in those days” (3:1). Second, Eli was not a godly man. The only record we have of God ever communicating

⁴ You can find the complete outline [here](#).

⁵ A small sampling includes [1 Pet. 2:2](#); [Eph. 6:17b](#); [2 Tim. 2:15](#), [3:16–17](#), [4:1a](#); [1 Jn. 2:14](#); [Titus 1:9](#).

Does God Whisper to Us Today?

with Eli is when a prophet pronounces a curse on him and his family for their immorality (2:27–36). Further, the text explicitly states that little Samuel did not yet know the Lord (3:7). So neither was in relationship with God to begin with.

When God does speak to Samuel, the little boy hears Him perfectly, even though he had not developed any special perceptive abilities (3:4, 6, 8). What Samuel hears seems to be an actual voice, not a nudge or an impression or an inner sense. Indeed, the voice is so clear Samuel takes it to be Eli calling from another room (3:4–8).

Eli does not teach Samuel anything about the distinguishing characteristics of God’s voice, but rather—after the third time being awakened by the boy—“discerns” that the voice Samuel has been hearing is God’s (3:8) and instructs him to answer.⁶

God then speaks to the boy by appearing to him in a vision (3:10a, 15). Afterwards, Eli drills Samuel on the details (3:16–18), hardly the actions of a man accustomed to hearing from God.

The account ends with these words: “Thus Samuel grew and the Lord was with him and let none of his words fail” (the test of a true prophet), “and all Israel from Dan even to Beersheba knew that Samuel was confirmed as a prophet of the Lord” (3:19–20). Clearly this was not an experience available to every child of God—Jew then, or Christian now—but the unique call of one of the greatest prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures.

In short, nothing in this passage supports the idea that older believers can mentor younger believers in the ability to hear or recognize God’s voice. I don’t mean to be uncharitable, but the passage itself is so at odds with the interpretation given by those in this tradition, I have wondered to myself if they ever actually studied the account in light of their instruction.

But there is a deeper problem with the entire approach of learning to hear God’s voice that goes to the issue of God’s character.

DOES GOD TRY?

The idea that skill in hearing God needs to be developed seems odd, since no mention of this is made in Scripture and no biblical examples of developing this skill with increasing success exist. Instead, the prophet had one chance to get it right ([Deut. 18:20–22](#)).

⁶ Considering the details of the account, I take this discernment to be a simple process of elimination. Someone is speaking to Samuel. It’s not Eli. No one else is around. It must be God.

Does God Whisper to Us Today?

But there's another problem. Let me introduce it with a question: Does God try? It's a trick question, so don't answer too quickly. It might help to answer another question first: What is implied by the notion of trying?

A try is an attempt with an uncertain outcome. "Trying" suggests the possibility of failure. Human beings try, but God does not. Only two things could cause Him to falter: want of knowledge or want of power. God lacks neither. Therefore, God cannot fail in what He intends to do. Therefore, God never *tries*. He simply *acts*.

6

How is it, then, that some suggest God is *trying* to speak to us, but can't get through? Of course, I know the answer: There is no lack in God, only in us, they say. God is speaking, but we are fallible—inept, distracted, unskilled in the spiritual disciplines.

Consider this problem, though. A standard challenge to inerrancy is that the Bible was written by men. God may have been involved, but men make mistakes. Any amalgam of divine and human action falls short of perfect truth. End of issue.

How do we answer? We point out that God is bigger than man. What God attempts, He accomplishes. Since the final product is determined by God's ability, not man's liability, it doesn't matter whether men or monkeys wrote the Bible, there will be no errors. The perfection of the text is rooted in the character of God guaranteeing it accomplishes His intended purpose ([Isaiah 55:11](#)). God doesn't try.

The same is true for hearing God's voice. If human limitation interferes with God's communication, we surrender our argument for the inerrancy of Scripture. If, however, God is big enough to secure word-for-word accuracy of the text, the same rationale applies to hearing the voice of God. It is impossible for man to short-circuit God's design.

Think about it. If you genuinely intend to accomplish something and expend effort to do so and someone else stops you, who is stronger, you or he? Even Saul of Tarsus—unregenerate, in rebellion, on a bloody rampage against the saints—heard when Jesus spoke to him.

Yes, people may not "listen," that is, obey.⁷ *But I don't know a single instance in Scripture where God intended to speak to somebody who failed to hear Him.* God's intention coupled with an act of His will and joined by His power always accomplishes its goal. Suggesting otherwise is a libel on God's character.

⁷ When the text says something like, "Listen to the voice of the Lord," it usually is using the word "listen" synonymous with the word "obey," much like a mother who says, "Listen to me when I tell you to do something."

Does God Whisper to Us Today?

If God wants to communicate, He succeeds. You cannot fail to hear Him even if you are deaf—remember, even the dead will hear His voice ([Jn. 5:25](#))—because God always accomplishes what He intends. No skill needs to be learned to hear Him. Nowhere does Scripture suggest such a thing.

What the Bible does teach about God's intimate involvement with our lives takes a different shape.



A VERY PRESENT HELP

I'm convinced God is a very present help in time of trouble, confusion, and distress ([Ps. 46:1](#)). He's not merely a source of comfort, but also a source of understanding, creativity, or sudden awareness of answers to hard questions or insight on difficult problems.

I've often prayed when stymied by a computer malfunction, stonewalled on a writing assignment, or vexed by lost keys (and found them soon after praying). Countless times I've trusted the Spirit for skill in clarifying difficult concepts for an audience or maneuvering in a tricky conversation. A friend tells how prayer even brought a flash of insight on a plumbing problem. God sometimes responds to such prayers subtly, sometimes dramatically. Clearly, God is at work.

One way God works is to give wisdom, which He promises to those who ask, especially in the midst of trying situations ([James 1:5](#)). Some think, however, this means God simply tells them what to do. God speaks; they listen. This is not wisdom, though, because even a fool can follow directions.

Wisdom is skill at living. It's insight into the way the world works. Merely following orders requires no discernment, no deliberation, no knowledge, no reflection, no understanding—in short, no wisdom.

There's a difference between receiving revelation of some sort ("God told me...") and growing in wisdom, or gaining insight to unravel a problem, or getting creative "inspiration," or experiencing the outworking of a spiritual gift. Special revelation is extremely rare and carries with it a unique authority. By contrast, creative inspiration or insight is common, especially for the Christian actively depending on God and leaning on Him for help ([Prov. 3:5–6](#)).

Since God is directly involved in both, but through different means, I think it's best to use different language for each. There's a distinction between "God gave me this song" or "God told me how to fix my sink," and "My ability or inspiration or insight come from the Lord." If God really gave the song, we're not free to rewrite, partly because they're

Does God Whisper to Us Today?

God's words, not ours, partly because improving God's song seems like a contradiction in terms.

However, if we see God as the spiritual force behind our gifts and accomplishments, we can pray for wisdom, help, inspiration, and creative solutions to vexing problems expecting Him to respond without being committed to saying God gave me this song, or told me where to find my keys, or God spoke to me about how to fix my plumbing.



Does the Holy Spirit *speak* to us? That depends entirely on what one means by "speak."

Scripture identifies different ways the Holy Spirit subjectively works in us. The Spirit teaches, convicts, comforts, and leads us out of sin. The Spirit renews us, giving us godly desires. I believe God even gives us ideas we have the freedom to act on. There is also the ineffable way God communicates giving solace, wisdom, insight, and understanding.

None of these involve personal revelation, though, which is what we normally mean by the word "speak." I wouldn't say my wife "speaks" to me when she hugs me, though I may infer from this she loves me. When she talks, there is propositional content. When she hugs, there is comfort. The two are different, so we should keep these concepts distinct, as Scripture does.

It's clear to me that many Christians use the phrase "the Spirit speaks to us" in ways the Bible just doesn't support. Scripture simply doesn't teach anything like a conversational relationship with God or that we must each individually hear from Him to live the optimal Christian life. Nor is there any advantage to active listening. If God wants to say something, He will. There's no need to be quiet and "tuned in" lest you miss His message.

Not only is it unnecessary, it's dangerous. Even in stillness there's something to hear, if only the hum of our own thoughts and impulses. The danger lies in assigning divine authority to them. There is no biblical justification for this and perils abound. Christians choose jobs, schools, investments, careers, and even spouses this way.

GOD IN A BOX?

Does this put God in a box? Not at all. I am not dictating what God can or cannot do. He can intervene in any way He chooses. However, we must base our teaching and conduct on what the Scriptures actually teach, not on what might be possible with a sovereign, all powerful God. J.I. Packer notes:

God may reveal Himself and give guidance to His servants any way He pleases. It is not for us to set limits on Him. But it remains a question as to whether or not we

Does God Whisper to Us Today?

are entitled to expect “hotline” disclosures on a regular basis. The correct answer is no. All the biblical narratives of God’s direct communications with men are exceptional on their face, and the biblical model of personal guidance is quite different.⁸

In one sense, all theology boxes God in by describing the borders of His person and character. It’s based on God’s own self-revelation, though, not on our private ideas. When God describes Himself and His ways, these are not limits; they’re truths.

Which view is more limiting of God: the view God is free to speak whenever He wants is capable of making Himself heard even when we are not listening, or the view God can only get through when we’re quiet, focused, and listening intently?

Does the Bible teach we should get our private, personalized marching orders directly from God? It does not. Rather, it urges us, enjoins us, commands us, time and again, to listen for God in the pages of His Word.

Spiritual maturity is not the ability to hear God’s voice. It is the ability to know, understand, and apply Scripture in every circumstance.

Arguably, the greatest movement of God’s Spirit in the last 1000 years was the Reformation. It was not started by a whisper from God. It was started by a verse of Scripture: “The just shall live by faith.” Martin Luther was simply listening to the only Word of God we are ever enjoined to hear, know, and obey—the Bible.

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⁸ J.I. Packer, *Hot Tub Religion* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1987), 117.