

Does God Whisper to Us Today?

When God Speaks

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In the spring of 1982, I first raised an alarm about the widespread assumption that having what some have called a “conversational” relationship with God is the birthright of every born-again, spirit-filled Christian.

According to many notable—and indisputably godly—Christian leaders, developing this interpersonal element of “hearing” God is not only vital to our intimacy with him, but it’s also a critical component of our ability to make sound decisions regarding God’s will for our lives. Indeed, they say, from God’s side, the personal communication lines are wide open to every believer. If we are not hearing God’s voice, it’s not because God isn’t trying; he is. We just aren’t listening properly. God is not the problem; we are.



I think this is a dangerous trend for two reasons. First, nothing like this broader enterprise—learning to hear the voice of God,¹ listening prayer, following the subtle hints or “leadings” of the Spirit, etc.—is actually taught in Scripture or even modeled there. The passages cited to support it are almost universally taken out of context, mischaracterized, or misapplied. This view, in my judgment, has largely been a hallowed Evangelical spiritual tradition in search of a proof text. By contrast, an entirely different model for making decisions is evidenced in the teachings of the text and in the life of the early church.

Second, many Christians feel spiritually sub-standard and defeated because the heavens have been silent for them. No extra-biblical divine communications direct them, guide them, or comfort them, and the silence can be devastating to those who fail to connect with God in this way. “It’s paralyzing when you don’t hear,” one person told me.

¹ When I refer to “hearing” the voice of God, I’m not limiting the phenomenology—the way God’s communication is perceived in our experience—to audible communication. Based on the internal evidence, the biblical standard seems to be a voice that is audible, but there are other ways God can convey his words to us. I’m using “hearing” to describe any way God chooses to deliver a clear, substantive message to his children.

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It's profoundly unfair to those otherwise solid Christians to saddle them with this sense of deficiency when their only shortcoming is entertaining an expectation that isn't actually supported by Scripture. Deep disappointment has descended on many who haven't received personal, private messages from God, and, in my observation, substantial confusion has descended on many who think they have.

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LETTING THE TEXT TEACH

God can do whatever he wants, of course, but we can't teach whatever we want. Our instruction about how God directs should not be based on his *ad hoc* actions in special circumstances in our own lives or in the lives of others.

We cannot exegete our unique subjective experiences, no matter how veridical. We can only exegete the teachings of the text and the experiences of New Testament Christians to see what any believer can reasonably expect to experience in his day-to-day relationship with God. Our instruction should be grounded on biblically clear teachings and on demonstrable patterns clearly evidenced in the life of the early church.

What the text teaches and what the record shows is that God's guidance does not come through nudges and hints and subtle intimations we must cobble together and decipher in order to decode his purpose and plan for our lives. Nor does guidance characteristically come through the kind of supernatural intervention we occasionally see in the biblical record.

Rather, Scripture demonstrates that God's standard and near universal means of direction comes from principles in God's Word that are applied with wisdom to the circumstances immediately before us. That's what the text teaches, and that's what the early church practiced.

However, that isn't the point I want to develop in this piece. Since I have spoken and written extensively on this issue in the past and carefully documented the textual case for this "wisdom model" of biblical guidance against the nudge-nudge, hint-hint, hearing-from-God version,² I will not revisit those arguments here. Instead, I want to consider what seem to be genuine exceptions to that biblical rule.

² See *The Ambassador's Guide to the Voice of God, From Truth to Experience, Decision Making and the Will of God*, etc., available at str.org.

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The fact is, sometimes God *does* speak. The record clearly shows that at specific times God intervened with specialized guidance and individualized directives. What does the Bible have to say about those times? When God speaks, how do we know?

It turns out that even those interventions follow a particular biblical pattern—one not in evidence in the vast majority of circumstances where people think God is “trying” to tell them something. We’ll look at that pattern in a moment. First, though, I need to clear up some confusion.

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THE LESSON OF THE BUGLE

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

Before the invention of modern military “coms,” battle instructions were delivered to the cavalry and to infantry skirmishers using musical signals. Buglers guided and positioned combatants with calls meant to communicate “skirmishers forward,” “charge,” “to the color,” “retreat,” and the like. Lack of clarity could be deadly. Confusing the bugle call for “forward” 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](#))

The Corinthian church of Paul’s day—much like the church today—had to navigate claims of special revelation. Paul’s “lesson of the bugle” was meant to weed out the noise. His point: Effective communication requires clarity. If the alleged revelation is not clear, it cannot be obeyed.

Though tongues without interpretation was Paul’s specific application of this commonsense notion, his general point applies with equal force to any type of divine revelation. Paul’s instruction is just as applicable to claims of God speaking today as it was in his day because the underlying concerns are the same: Unless speech is clear, the message will not get through. That’s true for divine direction from any source: dreams,

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visions, prophetic words, or tongues with interpretation. They all fall under the lesson of the bugle.

This insight seems to have been overlooked of late, though. Many well-meaning Christians apparently believe that God *is* in the habit of communicating important details regarding his purpose for their lives with speech that is not clear, using hints, nudges, and barely discernable whispers.



Those who hold that view offer a caveat, though. The failure is not with God but with us. God is trying to communicate clearly, but we haven't learned to listen properly. To lay hold of this spiritual birthright—a conversational relationship with God—each Christian needs to learn how to hear his voice.

This qualification, though, is based on a second confusion.

DOES GOD TRY?

Is God trying to get through to us, yet something—inattention, excessive activity, lack of spiritual skill, rock and roll—is keeping him from getting through? Scripture makes no such intimation. There's a more serious problem, though.

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 and often fail. But can God fail?

Only two things could cause God to falter: want of knowledge or want of power. He lacks neither. Therefore, God cannot fail in what he intends to do. If he cannot fail, then he never *tries*. He simply acts, always accomplishing his full intention. The prophet Isaiah makes this explicitly clear regarding God's communication:

So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth;
It will not return to Me empty,
Without *accomplishing* what I desire,
And without *succeeding* in the matter for which I sent it. ([Isa. 55:11](#))

How is it, then, that some suggest God is *trying* to speak to us but can't get through? The standard response is that we mortals are fallible—inept, distracted, unskilled in spiritual disciplines. There is no lack in God. The fault is our own.

Consider the consequence of this thinking, though. A standard challenge to inerrancy is that the Bible was written by men. God may have been involved, but men make mistakes.

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Any amalgam of divine and human action always falls short of delivering perfect truth. End of issue.

How do we answer? We point out that God is bigger than man. What God purposes, he accomplishes. Since, with Scripture, the final product is determined by God's ability, not man's inability, it doesn't matter whether men or monkeys wrote the Bible. If God is the ultimate author, then there will be no errors. The perfection of the text is rooted in and guaranteed by the character of God. God doesn't try.

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The exact same principle applies to hearing God's voice in any of its iterations. If human flaws can genuinely interfere with God's communication with us, then by that logic we surrender our case for biblical inerrancy. If, however, God is big enough to secure word-for-word accuracy of Scripture in spite of his partnership with fallible humans, then the same logic applies to hearing his voice.

Think about it. If you genuinely attempt something and someone else stops you, who is stronger? He is. Yet no one is stronger than God. Consequently, it is impossible for man to short-circuit God's efforts. 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.

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 ([John 5:25](#))—because God always accomplishes what he intends. No human skill is needed to hear him. Nowhere does Scripture suggest such a thing, and counterexamples abound.

Biblical prophets had only one chance to get it right. Errors led to execution ([Deut. 18:20–22](#)). Neither Peter nor Cornelius was listening carefully to hear God's voice when God supernaturally directed their meeting together ([Acts 10:1–33](#)). Even Saul of Tarsus—unregenerate, in rebellion, on a bloody rampage against God's people—had no problem hearing Jesus say, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” ([Acts 9:4](#)).

I do not know of a single instance in Scripture where God attempted to speak to somebody, yet they failed to hear him.³ If the Bible never records even one such example, then what makes us think it's happening to multitudes of God's children today?

³ Just so I'm not misunderstood, there were times when God spoke clearly, but the people did not listen—that is, obey. There were also times when God communicated with precision, but the message was not understood. “Mene, mene, tekla, upharsin” from [Daniel 5:25](#) comes to mind. The inscription was clear, but the meaning was not. Some of Jesus' parables fall into the same category. The point of the parable may have been obscure, but Jesus' words were not in question. That is my point here.

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In one sense, it's not even possible to learn to hear God's voice. Here's why. Either God is speaking, or he is not. If God *is not* speaking, you can't learn to hear him because there's nothing to hear. If God *is* speaking, it's impossible not to hear him because God doesn't try.

How do we know if God is communicating with us? The answer: We can't miss it. And this is precisely what we discover in the record of God's dealings with the early church in the book of Acts.



GOD SPEAKS IN ACTS

In Acts, we have a focused look at a relatively short period of history (30 years) that evidences a number of 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 discover there?

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 of the Lord sends Philip to the Gaza road (8:26).
- The Spirit tells Philip to join with the Ethiopian eunuch (8:29).
- While traveling on the Damascus road, Saul hears the audible voice⁴ of Jesus sending him to Damascus (9:4–7).
- 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).

⁴ We know the voice was audible because others heard it, though they couldn't make out the details since the message was not intended for them but for Saul.

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- The Holy Spirit says to set apart Saul and Barnabas for their first missionary journey (13:2).
- The Spirit forbids Paul to speak the word in Asia (16:6–7).
- Paul is directed to Macedonia through a vision (16:9–10).
- Jesus appears to Paul in a vision and tells him to preach the gospel in Corinth (18:9–10).
- The disciples tell Paul “through the Spirit” not to enter Jerusalem (21:4). Paul recounts how Jesus told him in a vision to leave Jerusalem (22:18, 21).

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Note the means of these revelations. The majority (six) entail visions. Three times an angel is the messenger. Three times the Spirit speaks, though in two cases, (13:2)⁵ and (21:4), that might have been through prophecy. One other is the voice of Jesus.

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’s prophecy of imminent famine), the Christians determine on their own to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren in Judea.⁶

At first glance, the list of interventions seems formidable, but the initial impression is misleading. This is a modest amount of activity, considering the three-decade time span of Acts. God’s special revelations to the leaders of the early church were limited to only 14 from the time of Pentecost to the end of the account,^{7,8} and some of these are grouped together around individual events.

Two pertain to Saul’s dramatic conversion, two to Cornelius’s conversion, and two to the Ethiopian eunuch’s conversion. Two are about Paul’s stay in Jerusalem. Four more are about Paul’s missionary journeys (the initial commission, direction away from Asia,

⁵ The text doesn’t specify the means of communication here, but Luke notes that prophets were among those present (13:1).

⁶ These five examples can be found in [Acts 11:27–30](#), [20:23](#), [21:11](#), [23:11](#), and [27:22–26](#).

⁷ I did not include the casting of lots in [Acts 1:15–26](#) because this providential sign was used before the initiation of the New Covenant era at Pentecost. Note, however, that before the final straws were drawn, 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. This is possible, but it’s speculative. I think it’s safer to base our conclusions on what the Holy Spirit actually revealed in the text rather than on conjecture about what might have happened but was never mentioned.

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direction to Macedonia, and instruction to preach boldly in Corinth). Two are also jailbreaks.

Notice two more significant details. First, there is no indication in the entire record that God communicated through subjective impressions. Completely absent from the text are phrases like “They felt led,” “They thought God was telling them,” “They felt God was calling them,” “They believed it was God’s will for them that,” “They were sensing the Lord’s direction,” or “They had a peace about it.”

The kind of language Christians characteristically use to describe hearing God’s voice in some fashion is completely absent from the record in Acts. There’s no instance of anyone receiving God’s direction through internal promptings—*not a single one*. The rare times God gave special directives, he communicated them 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 actively sought. There is no indication that any Christians, including apostles, were “waiting” for God to guide them. In the New Testament, we find no pleading with God for guidance and no laboring in prayer for God to reveal his will.⁹ The revelations in Acts are surprise intrusions in every case.

NO DIVINE DIRECTIONS

For balance, we must also note other important decisions in Acts clearly *not* directed by God. The disciples frequently make decisions marking significant events in the life of the early church that are the kind many think would require a word from the Lord. The disciples’ decisions include details 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 the 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).

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 actively seeking guidance. That certainly is possible, but the text does not say this. Since no other passages indicate this practice, there’s no reason to read it into the text. Even if they were seeking guidance, though, this one instance still would not be enough to establish a pattern.

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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 tentmaker and starts a ministry in Corinth (18:3). Paul teaches for two years at the school of Tyrannus (19:9). Paul has a healing ministry on the island of Malta for three months (28:9–11).

These decisions seem odd in light of conventional wisdom on hearing from God since none of these important endeavors seem to have been specifically directed 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 after Pentecost in the book of Acts alone, contrasted with the 14 occasions of specialized direction during that same time.¹¹

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 it so, that there is 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 the pros and cons of being single or being married. 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 instructions about the use of spiritual gifts in ministry ([1 Pet. 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? Yes, God sometimes gives special revelation when needed, but the pattern of guidance we find in Acts has certain earmarks. First, it was rare. Second, it was an intrusion into the normal process of decision making that the apostles followed. They were not waiting on special

¹⁰ In this case, 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 and Decision Making in Acts](#)."

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assignments from God. Third, those intrusions were *supernatural* events—visions, angelic appearances, heavenly voices, prophetic words—and not vague hints based on feelings. Consequently, the commands were clear and unambiguous, completely consistent with Paul’s bugle principle. Finally, no skill at hearing was necessary. God was acting, not trying.

There is no support in Acts for the idea that hearing from God is vital to living optimally as a Christian. The concept is not taught there, and the pattern is not modeled there.

We do see something else in Scripture, though, that we need to consider—something that also frequently fits our own experience with God.

GOD STIRS THE HEART

In each of our lives, there are times we feel an irresistible urge to pursue a godly end: to pray or to plan or to act. Sometimes the impulse is subtle, and sometimes the urge is so overwhelming it cannot be ignored. Some in Scripture had a similar experience.

Ezra wrote that his efforts to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem were joined by “everyone *whose spirit God had stirred* to go up and rebuild the house of the Lord” ([Ezra 1:5](#)). Haggai records, “So *the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel*...governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua...and they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God” ([Hag. 1:14](#)).

Nehemiah, cupbearer to King Artaxerxes of Persia, asked for permission to journey to Jerusalem and restore the ruined walls of the city. Twice he acknowledges that God was the one compelling his actions: “I did not tell anyone *what God was putting into my mind* to do for Jerusalem” ([Neh. 2:12](#)), and, “Then *my God put it into my heart* to assemble the nobles” ([Neh. 7:5](#)).

At first blush, these accounts appear to be counterexamples to my point, occasions of God moving his people to action by subjectively stirring their hearts to act according to his purpose. Wasn’t God “leading” them?

Well, yes, after a fashion, but that needs qualification. Not only did God “lead” his own people this way. He also led pagans the same way:

- Ezra tells us that “*the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus* king of Persia” to authorize the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem ([Ezra 1:1](#)).

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- John says of the enemies of God who “wage war against the Lamb” that “*God has put it in their hearts to execute His purpose...by giving their kingdom to the beast*” ([Rev. 17:14, 17](#)).

What should we make of these examples of God directing these decisions? It seems clear that these were not occasions of God guiding those seeking to “hear” his voice. Rather, they are examples of God’s providential, behind-the-scenes work to accomplish his sovereign ends.

Sometimes the agents were aware, in retrospect, of God’s hand compelling them to act, as with Ezra, Nehemiah, and Haggai. Note Ezra: “Blessed be the Lord, the God of our fathers, *who has put such a thing as this in the king’s heart*” ([Ezra 7:27](#)). Sometimes the agents themselves were not aware, though, as with those in Revelation.

In each case, though, their actions were not based on subjective impressions taken as subtle directives from God. Rather, what the text shows is that God sovereignly arranges the affairs of men.

The same is frequently true in our own lives. We feel a godly, irresistible urge to act, then afterwards recognize it was God’s providential hand guiding the events. The clear lesson: God can get us to do things that are part of his larger plan without our having to learn to hear from him so we can obey his voice.

Does God ever speak today to individual Christians about his goals and purposes for them? I’m convinced he does. We never exegete our experiences, though. We can only exegete the text—the patterns we clearly see in Scripture.

What we learn there is that on rare occasions God intervenes to direct his people in powerful, supernatural ways—through a vision, a dream, a prophetic word from a bona fide tested prophet, or speaking directly with clarity and without ambiguity.

There is no biblical evidence, though, that God communicates his will through nudges, hints, or subtle impressions *that we need to decode* to decipher his “leading.” There is no biblical evidence that we must learn to hear his voice. If you’re tempted to think God *might* be speaking to you, he isn’t. When God speaks, you can’t miss it. His voice is crystal clear because God doesn’t try.

If God has not given you a clear, unambiguous, supernatural communication of a specific direction for you personally, then choose the wisest, morally sound course of action available to you in the circumstances.

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