

The Ear of a Servant 12-2-01
John 10:3-5,27

Last weeks message had been stirring in my heart. I act so often at my own whims that I would hesitate to call myself a servant. My desire is to be more like Jesus, doing nothing but what I see and hear from the Father. I just heard a rabbi on Larry King trying to say that God does not want to live and work through us. His analogy was that if Larry King were the mouthpiece for Jesus, then the words would be Jesus' words. It would be the Jesus show. That is exactly what I hope. I don't want the Paul Wallace show, I want the life of Christ manifested through me. Since hearing is so important to being a servant, to yielding to His life, let's look at what the Scripture declares in regards to this topic.

I am well aware that some preach that God no longer speaks to man. In fact, I heard a message along those lines last week on Christian radio. They believe that those who claim to hear from God are really hearing their own thoughts or worse yet, an evil spirit. I think this extreme viewpoint comes from the misunderstanding of the change in the role of the prophet, which took place when the Holy Spirit was poured out. In the Old Testament the office of a prophet was quite different than the gift of prophecy today. The prophet of the pre-incarnation era was the voice of God to man. Since the Holy Spirit was not poured out on all, he was a mediator between God and man. His words were the indisputable word of God. If his prediction did not come to pass, the Law ordered that he be stoned. His writings would be destroyed.

According to Jesus, the last person to have this office of prophet was John the Baptist. Luke 16:16 (NIV)¹⁶ *"The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it.* The author of Hebrews tells us the same thing. Heb 1:1-2 (NIV)¹ *In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways,² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.* God used to use the prophet as His mouthpiece but now has spoken to us in Jesus.

The idea that God spoke to us and is done speaking reminds me of some marriages. You know, the guy who never tells his wife he loves her. He told her at the altar and doesn't need to tell her again unless things change. That just isn't a love relationship. *"If any man will hear my voice and open the door"* – Jesus says He will come in and dine with you. The Orientals take a long time to dine because that is when they relax and communicate with one another. Those who care for one another communicate with each other.

After John, we have an intermediary stage when the life and teachings of Jesus are recorded and taught by the 12 Apostles. Peter's criteria, for a replacement

for Judas, were someone that had been with Jesus and witnessed the resurrection. The early church taught "the Apostles doctrine". They were the ones chosen to relay the life and teachings of Christ because they had spent the most time with Him and were chosen by Him to be His representatives, His apostles. From the beginning of the ministry of Christ, the new mediator between God and man is Christ Jesus alone. (1Timothy 2:5) No prophet is needed to proclaim God's will.

The church still has apostles and prophets, according to Ephesians 4:11. What is the difference between those in the Old Testament and those in the New? For one thing we do not need to write down their every word and add it to our Bible. We have the words and testimonies of the original Apostles that declare the good news – the gospel – to us. Secondly, we have the indwelling Holy Spirit to discern whether or not what they are speaking is of God. We can ask if the Spirit within us bears witness to their words. We can refer to the recorded word to see if it lines up. Every denomination and group seems to have a different interpretation of what a prophet's or apostle's role is in the church today. We'll save that topic for a later date.

Because of that misunderstanding of this difference, and the fear that people are going to throw out the Scripture for new revelation, some preach that man does not hear from God except through the written word. When Jesus said His sheep hear His voice, they preach that is referring to the recorded word. Can the Holy Spirit speak directly to our hearts? How do we hear, to be the servant of the Living God, today? Because we might classify the 12 Apostles (I count Paul as one of them) as in a class of their own, let's take examples from others in the book of Acts as to how they heard from the Lord. Next week we'll look at the Apostles' instructions on the same subject, Lord willing.

We can hear from God through our Christian brothers and sisters. The Apostles had the people choose men to deal with some of the physical details of the early church. They told them to choose men who were full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. How does the Holy Spirit commune with man? Is it only impressions and feelings or does He not also use words? The Jews began to argue with one of the men that had been chosen. Acts 6:8-10 (NIV)⁸ *Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.⁹ Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)--Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia. These men began to argue with Stephen,¹⁰ but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke.* Stephen spoke by the Spirit. The Spirit of God gave him the words to say. That is what we would hope is happening every time someone teaches and preaches. Peter exhorted us, 1 Peter 4:11 (NIV)¹¹ *If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God.* That is what Stephen was doing by the Holy Spirit, speaking the very words of God. God can speak to us through our brothers and sisters in the Lord. He may speak through us to them contrary to

what the Rabbi on Larry King thought. In fact, my spirit bore witness that Max Lucado's words were the voice of the Spirit to all who would listen. The Holy Spirit within us will bear witness if the words are from God.

When Saul was converted, the Lord spoke to Ananias in a vision. Acts 9:10-16 (NIV)¹⁰ *In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered.*¹¹ *The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying.*¹² *In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."*¹³ *"Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem.*¹⁴ *And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."*¹⁵ *But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.*¹⁶ *I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."* Here is a conversation between Ananias and the Lord. Some type of vision accompanied it. Ananias received very specific instructions as to what the Lord wanted him to tell God's new servant Saul. Ananias expresses his concern, but he gets a very definite order from his Master. God can speak directly to us and answer our questions directly, when necessary. Some people really desire this type of communication. Looking at the lives of the New Testament saints we don't find this occurring on a regular basis. It is usually for some very important work that comes with great responsibility. Ananias thought he was risking his life to get near the Christian killing Saul and needed some clear communication.

God can speak to us through heavenly messengers, angels. We have examples of Philip (Acts 8:26) and Paul (Acts 27:23) and Peter (Acts 12:7) who all had angelic messages even though they were filled with the Spirit. They are all apostles but we also have Cornelius the centurion, and all those gathered at the ascension. Paul warns us that if we have a message from an angel it must line up with the Gospel. Satan can appear as an angel of light.

We have an example of a New Testament calling of prophet at work in a man that predicted a future event. This moved those who heard it to give financially for the need that would be coming because of the events prophesied. Acts 11:27-29 (NIV)²⁷ *During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.*²⁸ *One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.)*²⁹ *The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea.* A prophetic utterance may cause a burden to be placed upon our hearts. When Paul was going to Jerusalem a prophet warned him of his impending imprisonment. The warning must have prepared his heart for what lay ahead. I have heard preachers quote 1Corinthians 13:9,10 to claim that the gift of prophecy passed away after the Bible was complete. They would claim the perfection to come was

the Scripture. If that is so, be consistent with your interpretation throughout the verse. ⁹ *For we know in part and we prophesy in part,¹⁰ but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears.* If we were to be consistent, we would conclude knowledge has passed away also. Nothing in Scripture declares the gift of prophecy to be passed. It will no longer be needed after the second coming for its purpose will be passed. The two witnesses of the last days are called prophets. Just because a gift has been abused does not mean we should ignore it. We'll visit this topic more thoroughly at a later date.

One of my favorites is found Acts 13:1-3 (NIV)¹ *In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul.² While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."³ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.* The early elders in the church of Antioch fasted and worshipped together and heard from the Holy Spirit. It does not give us the details of how they heard, i.e. audible voice, still small voice in the heart, prophetic utterance. I think we do not have the specific way recorded because then we would insist that the Lord be confined to speaking to us in that one way every time we fast and worship. Sometimes what Scripture leaves out can inform us as much as what is written. This fourth way of speaking I would express as, 'the Holy Spirit voicing His will to a group of elders.'

In the second church council we see the discerning of God's will through consensus of godly men. Acts 15:28 (NIV)²⁸ *It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements:* Together they sensed the leading of the Holy Spirit. The conviction in each other's heart was a confirmation that the Holy Spirit had directed them. Although some of the Apostles were involved in this decision, elders of the area were also.

We can discern the truth by searching the Scriptures. Every other method of hearing from God will not contradict the Word of God. Acts 17:11 (NIV)¹¹ *Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.* We should always be like them and check and see that what we perceive to be the voice of God, matches up with His recorded word. If you cannot find an applicable instance, ask someone you know that is knowledgeable in the Word.

In the book of Acts I see these seven ways of hearing from God. Certainly God is not limited to them, but we have them as an example. I listed them in the order they appear in Acts, but I'm going to re-list them here from what I believe to be least to the most common. This is just my opinion from observation, you may find the order somewhat different in your experience.

1. God speaks directly in an audible way as one would have a conversation with a man. This is usually in an extreme situation with great responsibility.
2. God uses angelic messengers of which we have numerous examples in Acts.
3. Prophecy (I'm sure many charismatic churches would differ on the placement here – I use the word in this case as telling the future to prepare our hearts or guide us to an action, as in the case of giving to the church in Jerusalem.)
4. Elders gathered in fasting and worship, discern the voice of the Spirit. I wish this were one of the more common ways. It is to our detriment it is not. Perhaps because of our lack of desire to seek God together that it is not a more common way to hear from God.
5. Consensus of godly people gathered to decide an issue. There seems to be a unanimous opinion in Scripture when the Lord has truly directed the hearts of those gathered to seek His will.
6. Through the voice of a brother or sister speaking by the Spirit. Some define this way too as prophecy. Most do not use the word to mean that today, though it literally means, 'to speak forth the Word.'
7. The written Word of God comes alive as we read it and the Holy Spirit makes an application or helps us discern truth from error. Disciples of Jesus should be daily in the Word, and experience the Holy Spirit reminding us of Scripture to apply to ourselves and to speak to others.

Next week we will look at the most common way we hear from God, the voice of the Holy Spirit within us. That is at work throughout the above-mentioned ways, and should be our moment by moment experience. We will examine the instructions the Apostles gave in regards to discerning God's voice to us.

As we consider the ways God speaks to us, let's not forget that a heart after God is needed for the hearing of God's voice. Sin can block our ears and cause us to not truly desire to hear. The desire to hear and the will to obey opens the ear to hear. As bond-slaves of the Lord, we want to hear out of love. When we find ourselves too busy to hear we have to check our heart. Have you been hearing from the Lord and acting at His leading? If not, what stands in the way? It is usually some desire that has not been forsaken. The Lord wants to speak to us more than we desire to hear. His word to us is Light. Let the Light in and the darkness will flee. Ask the Lord to open your ear to His loving voice. He wants to hear your voice and for you to hear His.