



Chapter 3: Hearing God's Voice

We long to hear God's voice. What we often fail to realize is that God longs to speak to us.

If God desires that we "pray without ceasing," "be devoted to prayer," and cast "all (our) anxieties upon Him," would it make any sense that He Himself would not speak to us as well about anything? Many agree that God speaks to us today, but how? Here are a few common beliefs.

Hearing the Voice of God: "Let Me Count the Ways..."

"God speaks only through the Bible, and only to a limited degree."

This is a common theological position held by many conservative, mainstream evangelicals. God's revelation is complete and He speaks only through the theological truths of the Bible. Revelation—the disclosure of absolute biblical truth—was completed with the close of the New Testament canon. Illumination by the Holy Spirit helps believers understand and properly interpret truth. Practical application of biblical truth is less critical than proper methods of interpretation of Scripture. Personalization (personal, practical application in everyday situations) is dependent upon the believer's grasp and application of biblical truth and purely for purposes of sanctification. *"Sanctify them in Your word. Your word is truth."* (John 17:17) God speaks to believers through His Word, but His voice is limited to theological truths, and the personalization of Scripture is limited to the practical application of those truths.

“God speaks through the Bible, but also through believers with spiritual gifts such as prophecy, words of knowledge and words of wisdom.”

This is what is commonly called a “Charismatic” view. Though the Charismatic view would deny that new theological truth can be given outside the Bible (new revelation), God can speak directly to believers through gifted people. Some believers have the gift of prophecy, others of wisdom, others of knowledge, others of tongues and still others the gift of interpreting tongues. These gifted believers can speak to the everyday concerns and problems of other believers because the so-called “sign gifts” of the New Testament did not cease when the canon was closed. All gifts of the Holy Spirit are as available to believers today as they were to the believers of the Early Church. Believers hear God’s voice through gifted teachers (the teaching of the Bible) and through members of the body of Christ, the church, whom God has gifted.

“God speaks through the Bible, but also through extra-biblical sources.”

For example, the Roman Catholic Church teaches that God speaks through papal decrees and church councils as well as the Bible. The doctrine of Apostolic Succession teaches that the Pope is the direct spiritual descendant of the Apostle Peter and therefore is the only one anointed by God capable of revealing new truth. In general, the believer receives all of his instruction from the church, including the proper interpretation and application of Scripture. As far as the believer is concerned, the presence of the Holy Spirit is purely for purposes of sanctification. This approach to hearing God’s voice expresses itself in other denominations as well. Mormonism, for example, considers the extra-biblical writings of Joseph Smith to be equivalent to the Bible. Followers hear God’s voice through *Doctrine and Covenants* and *Pearl of Great Price* as well as from the Bible. Another example is the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Followers believe Ellen White was a true prophet of God and her writing and teaching, though by SDA doctrine not equivalent to the Bible, should be heeded as if it were.

With all these conflicting views, how does a Christian hear God's voice today? What means has God provided that enables His children to hear His voice?

Walk with the Word takes the position that every Christian can hear God's voice directly through His Word. Hearing God's voice does not require a church hierarchy to speak to believers. Hearing God's voice does not require extra-biblical writings and does not require specially gifted believers. Nor has God ceased speaking directly to believers. To repeat, Walk with the Word takes the position that every believer can hear God's voice directly through His Word. The key is in the phrase "through His Word."

The Bible Alone is the Word of God

Walk with the Word takes the position that the Bible alone is the only source of revelational truth from God. When the canon of the New Testament was closed, no other revelational truth was required, delivered or needed. Extra-biblical writings and the doctrine of Apostolic Succession are not part of God's plan or revelation. Regarding the New Testament, God's truth came solely from Jesus Christ (John 14:6; 17:8, 17) through the apostles and prophets of the Early Church (John 16:13; Ephesians 2:20). In fact, the New Testament writers clearly warned against attempts—and predicted there would be attempts—by others to add to or change the truth as given to them directly from Jesus Christ (Acts 20:29-30; 1 Timothy 1:4; 4:1, 7; 6:3-4; 2 Timothy 4:3-4; Titus 1:1, 14; 2 Peter 1:12; 2:1-2; 1 John 4:1; Jude 17-19).

All true Christians have the Holy Spirit dwelling within them. This truth was prophesied in the Old Testament (Joel 2:28-32) and realized in the New (John 20:22; Acts 1:8; 2:4, 38-39; 10:44; Romans 8:9, 11; 1 Corinthians 2:12; 3:16; 6:9; Galatians 3:5). The presence of the Holy Spirit in the believer brings about, amongst other things, the assurance of eternal life (Romans 8:11; Ephesians 1:13), the fruit of

the Spirit (Galatians 5:22), spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:4, 7), a new identity as a child of God (Romans 8:16), empowerment for sanctification (1 Corinthians 6:19; 1 Thessalonians 4:3; 2 Thessalonians 2:12), and His leading (Romans 8:14; Galatians 5:18).

Additionally, the Holy Spirit speaks to and through the spirit of the believer (Acts 2:4; 4:8, 31; 8:19; 10:19; 11:12, 28; 13:2; 15:28; Romans 8:16; Galatians 5:16, 25; Ephesians 5:18-19; 6:18). Though there are varying interpretations to each of these passages, this one thing is clear: there is the potential for dynamic interaction between the Holy Spirit and the spirit of the believer. At Walk with the Word we believe that it is this divine interaction between the Holy Spirit and the spirit of the believer that enables a person to become directly connected to God through His Word; that is, to hear God's voice. Is it an audible voice? No, it is a voice heard from the heart superintended by the Holy Spirit.

Only True Christians Have the Holy Spirit

Many people call themselves "Christian." The only correct definition, however, must come from the Bible. The term "Christian" was first used in a town called Antioch in Syria (Acts 11:26). In general, the term referred to those who were followers of Jesus Christ. Specifically, however, early Christians knew actually what the term meant: They had received Jesus Christ as the Savior from their sins and the only hope of eternal life. In gratitude, the obvious response was becoming a devoted disciple of Jesus Christ for the rest of one's life. For Jews, that meant acknowledging that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah and announcing such through baptism (Acts 2:37-41). By accepting the fact that Jesus was the Messiah and receiving Him, they also acknowledged that their sins could be forgiven by Him. But God alone can forgive sins (Mark 2:1-12). Thus Jesus was the Son of God and therefore equal to God, the very reason for which He was crucified (John 5:18; 8:59).

Other portions of Scripture clearly indicate that Jesus Christ is the Second Person of the Trinity, the Logos, the Son of God. John 1:1-5, 14; 19:7; 20:31; Luke 22:70 should end all discussion on whether or not Jesus claimed to be the Son of God. It stands to reason, then, that regardless of how good or sincere a person's faith might be, if they call themselves Christian but worship a Jesus other than He who is presented in the Bible, they worship a false god. The Jesus they worship is a Jesus of fabrication, not the Jesus of the Bible. Therefore, if the Jesus that is worshipped is not the Jesus of the Bible, then it is impossible for the Holy Spirit to dwell within the person, regardless of how good or morally pure that individual might appear to be.

Therefore, to experience the divine interaction between the Holy Spirit and the spirit of the believer that enables him to become directly connected with God through His Word, the Holy Spirit must dwell within. If a Jesus other than the Jesus of the Bible is not worshipped or received, the Holy Spirit does not dwell within.

True Christians are those, and only those, who have, with a sincere heart by faith, received the Jesus of the Bible as the one and only Savior from their sins. The Bible teaches that when a person receives Jesus by an act of faith, the Holy Spirit comes to permanently dwell within the life of that person. Literally, a spiritual transformation takes place. That person is delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of God (Colossians 1:13), forgiven of all sins past, present and future (Colossians 1:14), seen by God as one of His children (Romans 8:15-16), made a co-heir of Christ Himself (Romans 8:17), and made a "new creature" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Only the Holy Spirit Can Explain God's Word

Has it ever happened that a scholar has read and studied the Bible most of his or her life and yet not become a Christian? Does it happen that a person reads the Bible, even quotes verses from the Bible, and yet does not become a follower of Jesus Christ? Of course; it happens all the time. Why is this the case? How does this happen? It happens because the individual reading the Bible has not committed to

receiving Jesus Christ as his or her personal Savior, and therefore the Holy Spirit does not dwell within.

Without the Holy Spirit in the life of the reader, the Bible is just another book; either an interesting history of the Jews, a book of philosophy, or an intriguing book of antiquity. Some may even receive inspiration from the Bible, such as the desire to have 1 Corinthians 13 read at a wedding, or Psalm 23 read at a funeral. But regardless, without the Holy Spirit it is impossible for the reader to appreciate the Bible as God's Word.

The Bible is more than a book of historical fact or a source of inspiration. It is literally the Word of God; that is, God's word to mankind, given to change him. God gave us His Word so that we might know Him, might order our lives around Him, and might learn to live by faith in Him. This can only be done if we hear His voice. The Old Testament was given, amongst other reasons, so that Jesus Christ might be recognized when He came. The New Testament was given so that the church might have a foundation for carrying the good news about Jesus Christ to all people.

Through the Bible all absolute spiritual truth has been given once for all with the closing of the canon. That does not mean the words themselves are no longer dynamic and available for personal application on a daily basis. The Bible is not just full of static spiritual truths to be applied as necessary by the believer.

For indeed, *"The word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart."* (Hebrews 4:12). While some apply this verse only to the act of justification of the unsaved, and still others to include the sanctification of the believer, Walk with the Word takes the position that the Word of God is applicable for all believers in all areas of the Christian walk at all times of the Christian's life.

The operative word, of course, is “all.” Not only does the Holy Spirit “explain” God’s Word to us—that is, help us understand its truths—He is always present in our lives to help us apply God’s Word to any given situation.

The Bible is not a book of static truths to be learned and applied; the Bible is literally God’s voice speaking to us in any given situation at any given moment in time. God wants his children to make the right choices and understand how to apply His principles in every area of life. Therefore, He has given us His Word as His Voice, heard by the heart, superintended by the Spirit. At Walk with the Word, we believe that personal application can be made from any portion of Scripture. That is because “...*the Word of God is living and active...*”

The Bible is very much like a two-way radio with the party at the other end, the transmitter always on the air. The listener can turn on his receiver and hear the words of the transmitter and just listen. Because the transmitter has a basic program presented in an infinite variety of ways, the listener can always learn something new each time he listens. But it doesn’t end with just listening. There are times when the listener has a specific question or need. The listener can call the transmitter and ask a specific question (prayer), and the transmitter is there to provide a specific answer.

Learning to apply God’s Word to one’s daily walk is only part of the process. Walk with the Word recognizes the value, for example, of the *Life Application Study Bible* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2000). The editors have done a superb work in providing practical application to all parts of God’s Word. But here again, it is the editors who have provided the application. Walk with the Word encourages each and every believer to learn to apply God’s Word on his or her own to everyday, personal situations, therefore taking application one step further: personally hearing God’s voice through His Word.

Hearing God's Voice: How It Works

In Southern California, a young couple was preparing to go to the mission field. Their organization gave them the choice of going to Africa or to Central Asia. They were undecided. Obviously, they could be used mightily by God in either location. They desperately sought God's will in the matter. They wanted to know where, with their gifts, talents and personalities, they could best be used. They asked for guidance from the Holy Spirit whether they should go to Africa or to Central Asia. It was while reading Jeremiah 24 that their hearts began leaning toward Central Asia. They saw Central Asia as more the *"figs that could not be eaten due to rottenness"* (v. 2). Later, when asked why God would send them to a country where they could not openly evangelize and plant churches, Isaiah 58:6-11 spoke to their hearts. It would be their very presence, the testimony of their lives manifested through the good works of helping the poor and oppressed, that would serve as a witness of Jesus Christ and His love, and break down the cultural barriers against Christians. *"Then your light will break out like the dawn, and your recovery will speedily spring forth; and your righteousness will go before you; the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard"* (v. 8).

God's Word, applied in their hearts by the Holy Spirit, enabled this couple to make a difficult decision about where to go on the mission field. Here's another example.

The deacon of a church was very discouraged. It seemed that no one appreciated him, even his pastor. He just did his work, week after week, without recognition or appreciation. Recently, he had even come under criticism about some unpopular actions he had taken. He was about to quit his position and leave the church. One morning, during his private devotions, he read in the book of Judges about the Danites' inability to "drive out" the people in the valleys, forcing them to live in the mountains...not an ideal place for an agricultural people. He asked the Holy Spirit to open his eyes to see what the passage meant to him personally. Quickly he began to see that the reason the Danites had

been unable to drive out the people was because they lacked faith and failed to believe God. Instead of trusting God, they took matters into their own hands and, against God's will, left their designated home and migrated north. The journey was disastrous, resulting in the Danites introducing idolatry into Israel. The deacon realized that he needed to trust God, that God had given him a "land" to live in, and that to leave would be against God's will. He needed to trust that his work did not go unnoticed by the One who really counts, God Himself. He needed to learn to live by faith, unconcerned about the lack of appreciation of others. To leave against God's will would be to follow the pattern of the Israelites in Judges: *"everyone did what was right in their own eyes"* (Judges 21:25).

Here are two examples of how Christians "heard" the voice of God through His Word. They were, through the Holy Spirit, able to apply God's Word to their personal situations.

Is This "Spiritualizing" the Text?

In the many ways the Scriptures can be interpreted, the only correct method is the literal-historical approach. That is, the interpreter must assume verbal, plenary inspiration of the Bible, that the writers were superintended by the Holy Spirit, that the biblical text is to be taken as literal until proved otherwise, that the text must be interpreted in light of the historical context, and that the interpreter must attempt to discern what was the author's intent in writing the biblical text. Such are the principles of correct interpretation of Scripture.

To spiritualize the text is to apply a method of interpretation that implies that the true meaning of the text is hidden, and that the text means something other than what it appears to say on the surface. Similar to allegorization, spiritualizing the text states there is a mystical, hidden meaning to the text, something that goes beyond the literal-historical meaning, and that is the true and only correct interpretation of the text. It is a mystical approach to interpreting God's Word.

Hearing God's voice through His Word is not spiritualizing a biblical text because it has nothing to do with the interpretation of Scripture. Hearing God's voice through His Word pertains only to application, not to interpretation. It is using the principles, the thoughts, and the words of Scripture to apply to an individual's given situation. This is nothing new in Scripture. In fact, God expects the believer to apply the principles of His Word. John 14:21 states, *"He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me..."* God expects that those who say they love Jesus will apply His words to their lives and live accordingly.

Again, Galatians 6:7 states, *"Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap."* The *Life Application Study Bible* provides a general application:

"It would certainly be a surprise if you planted corn and pumpkins came up. It's a natural law to reap what we sow. It's true in other areas too. If you gossip about your friends, you will lose their friendship. Every action has results. If you plant to please your own desires, you'll reap a crop of sorrow and evil. If you plant to please God, you'll reap joy and everlasting life. What kind of seeds are you sowing?" (p. 2067).

The principles of hearing God's voice through His Word is nothing more than enabling every believer to make his or her own personal application to life situations from God's Word.

Pitfalls and Dangers

One objection raised to applying God's Word to one's personal circumstances is that the application will be incorrect or even unbiblical. There is the humorous story of the Christian who wanted to hear what God had to say, and so closed his eyes and opened to a verse in the Bible. He placed his finger on the verse that read, "Judas hanged himself." Finding that verse not very encouraging, he closed his eyes and picked another verse. It read, "Go thou and do likewise." Still unsatisfied with the results, he chose yet another verse. It read, "What thou doest, do quickly!" (Old anecdotal story; source unknown)

It is very possible that the Bible may be misapplied just like it is possible that the Bible may be misinterpreted. But because the Bible may be misinterpreted, should believers be discouraged from reading it? Of course not. Because the Word of God may be misapplied, the alternative of not making personal application is far worse and deprives the believer of one of the great blessings and intentions from God's Word. David wrote, *"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."* (Psalm 119:105)

Here are some guidelines that may be helpful to correctly hearing God's voice through His Word.

- ***No application can be contrary to what the Word of God itself teaches.*** For example, the Bible clearly teaches, both in the Old and New Testaments, that adultery is a sin. Therefore, it is an incorrect application that a husband or wife should leave their spouse because "God's will is for me to be with this other person." It is impossible for that application to be the will of God. It is, most likely, the will of the flesh.
- ***The principles of the New Testament always take precedence over the principles of the Old Testament.*** For example, God gave the Israelites instructions to drive out, and sometimes destroy, wicked nations. This instruction from God's Word was applied incorrectly to support the Crusades. In recent years, similar misapplication has been used to bring harm to those who promote abortion. But God never gives that instruction in the New Testament. The progress of the kingdom of God is made by *"speaking the truth in love"* (Ephesians 4:15), not by violence. Nowhere in the New Testament is violence ever advocated. Therefore, any application that includes violence is not from the Holy Spirit, but from Satan.

- ***Sometimes there is more than one right application.*** For example, a young woman may be faced with the decision of marrying and raising a Christian family, or of remaining single and going to the mission field, or any combination thereof. Any of those choices are pleasing to God; that is, no one choice may be more God's will than another. In that case, God may leave it up to the believer to pursue the desires of her heart as long as, in the process, she seeks to please God in the process. God's will is that the young woman wants to please Him. How she does that may be left entirely up to her.
- ***If in doubt, ask.*** To avoid misinterpretations of the Bible, study Bibles and Bible dictionaries are available, as well as the teaching of pastors, elders, deacons, and Christians strong and experienced in the faith. Because of the nature of "hearing God's voice through His Word"—personal application—few "books" are available because they would have to be many volumes and would have to be about you! Learning to hear God's voice through His Word is a blessing that develops with experience and maturity. Therefore, for someone new at listening to God's voice, seek the counsel of a more mature and "seasoned" Christian. The best help would not be for that individual to "hear God's voice" for you, but to facilitate the process by which you yourself are enabled to hear God's voice.

Connecting with God through His Word means hearing God's voice personally. At Walk with the Word we believe every Christian who indeed has the Holy Spirit dwelling within is gifted and able to hear God's voice directly through His Word.

"The unfolding of Your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple."

—Psalm 119:130