

Hearing the Voice of God

God is speaking today.

In fact, He has never stopped speaking. He has volumes to say to our generation, both corporately and individually.

One of the keys to making the Christian life real is not looking back (to great personal experiences, days of revival, periods of particular blessing, when we sensed a hunger for God and a desire to experience His presence), but building a strong relationship with our Heavenly Father NOW. He wants us to hear his voice, understand His word, be secure in His direction and enjoy His counsel in our current day-to-day circumstances. Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice ... and they follow me" (John 10:27). God says, "I will instruct you, and teach you the way you should go". The Psalms are full of such sentiments. The writer to the Hebrews challenges Christians, "Today if you will hear His voice, do not harden your heart" (Hebrews 3:7, 15, cf Ps 95:1-7.).

If you have not yet reached that "place", where you know God speaks and that you have the capacity and willingness to listen to Him, you need to press on. The challenge facing every Christian today is this: if God is still speaking, if He has never stopped communicating; if He wants a relationship with each of His children; why do so many Christians find it difficult to hear Him in the first place? Why do Christians still struggle to understand His will, to receive correction and unequivocal guidance in their lives? You may genuinely believe in Jesus, have an intellectual knowledge about God, prayer and obedience to the Holy Spirit, but not know how to listen to God, actively and, as a consequence, have a turbulent or mediocre Christian life.

The Voice of the Lord

I was recently reading Psalm 29 (Good News Bible) and something about the underlying tenor of the message hit me powerfully. The Psalmist talks at length about the Voice of God, using thunderstorms in the Middle East as an illustration. He shows that all creation is able to hear God's voice clearly, every time, the first time. On the day the world began, the Voice of God brought everything into being (Psalm 33:6, 9), matter out of nothingness (theologians call this "creatio ex nihilo"), order out of chaos. As the Creator visiting and living us, Jesus spoke God's Word with the same power and stilled a storm over a raging sea (Mark 4:39). God's powerful word continues to uphold everything (Hebrews 1:13).

When I read Psalm 29, I was reminded of winter thunderstorms I experienced during three and half years living in Lebanon. I would stand on the balcony of my 7th floor apartment in Beirut (where I was posted by my employer), look out over the Mediterranean Sea and observe the dark clouds heading towards the coast. Sometimes I would go to bed and see the lightning, waiting for the inevitable clash as the storm system reached the coast, where the mountains come down almost to the sea. Only a narrow plain separates the ranges and the shore.

When the storms hit, they would be accompanied by incredibly loud thunder that echoed powerfully between the buildings in the central business district of the city (more noisy than the Israeli jets that would over-fly Beirut, breaking the sound barrier and teasing the occupying Syrian army). When the torment broke over the mountains, tons of snow and ice were dumped on the higher elevations (Mount Lebanon is over 3000 metres above sea level). This would be the hint for my family to get out the chains and skis and drive through the tail of the blizzard to a chalet at the ski fields to which we had access. On occasions our parked vehicle would be nearly buried in the snow, but the slopes were the best in the Middle East. Fabulous skiing and tobogganing.

After crossing the Lebanon Mountains, the storm would continue eastward, across the Bekaa Valley (a normally dry area known in ancient times as Kadesh, then across the Anti-Lebanon Mountains into Syria, where snow continued to fall heavily. I once forced my way by car through a blizzard from Damascus to Beirut; on another occasion I was stranded in Syria. But when the clouds cleared, it was easy to see fresh snow on beautiful Mt Hermon and the adjacent high country. On the Israeli side of the mountain there are ski resorts. When the snow melts the waters form the beginning of the Jordan River.

The Psalmist David uses these storms as a powerful “type”. When God speaks to the mountains, they respond with “How high?” He is greater than the mountains; the ancient cedars that cause people to stand in awe crack because of the power of His voice. He is the creator. All His works listen to His Voice and respond in unquestioning obedience. ONLY MAN (who has the free will to do so) often chooses not to hear and obey the voice of God.

If God speaks so clearly, why is that so many Christians appear to find it hard to listen to Him? I want to suggest a number of reasons, as well as some remedies.

Blockages to Hearing the Voice of God

1. We may be unaware that God wants this kind of relationship with us. In many religions God is distant, unreachable, and ineffable. If He is physically close He nevertheless does not communicate with humans. Even in the Bible there were many who thought of Him this way. When He spoke on Mt Sinai the people begged Moses, “You do the listening and pass on God’s message to us; we want to keep our distance” (Exodus 20:18-21). In organized religions around the world people expect professional priests to talk to God on their behalf, to act as mediators. It is assumed they have the training, time and authority to do so; mere humans simply stand back and wait for the priests deliver on behalf of the Invisible, to tell them what to do. I recently observed a mass in the beautiful Serbian Orthodox Saint Sava Cathedral in Belgrade. The impression throughout the event was that God and His word lived behind the screen (known as the “iconostasis” it is designed to conceal the altar except when it is opened briefly during the liturgy) and that only the priests had the authority to go to “the other side” and connect with Him.

The congregation stood (believing it was disrespectful to sit in God's presence, as thou God only dwelt in the cathedral), and crossed themselves from time to time, purchased and lit candles, savoured the smell of fresh incense and watched in awe as the clergy carried God's Word to the pulpit and back into obscurity. This entire model is misleading. God wants to have a personal relationship with each and every one of us. Do you have such a relationship?

2. We may have developed selective hearing. There is an old saying in English: "There are none so deaf as those who do not want to hear". Adam enjoyed the presence of God until the day he sinned; thereafter He hid because he heard God's voice seeking him out (Genesis 3:8). Hundreds of times in the Bible we are reminded that God speaks: For example: "The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah." "God spoke." "Thus says the Lord". And so on. Tragically, most people ignored Him. He wasn't saying what they wanted to hear, so they shut him out (as though that were possible). Finally, He sent His Son, and Him they crucified (see Hebrews 1:1, 2). Whether or not we hear the voice of God in our lives usually depends on our willingness to listen.

3. We may be listening to other voices for direction, so we end up confused. How many of us decide to "go with the flow" on important matters, instead of thinking through all the issues and establishing what is right and what God wants us to do. "The flow" may be at odds with His will. The boy Samuel heard a voice as he lay in bed late one night; so he assumed it was the priest Eli, with whom he lived in the Temple precinct (1 Samuel 3:3-10). He had to learn how to distinguish God's voice from those in his community. Eli and his sons only listened to the voices of the masses, not the voice of God. There came a time in the life of Israel that "every man did what he liked" (Judges 21:25). That's not far removed from current-day attitudes. There are many competing voices today, a lot of noise; the airways are often jammed. Do you block out God's voice. Are other voices louder and more penetrating? Is it hard for Him to penetrate the barriers of your consciousness? "

4. We may be out of practice. All through the Bible we encounter people who "hardened their hearts" toward God. As a result, it was difficult for them to put His will into action. But they had a choice. David wrote, "I will hear what God says" (Psalm 85:8). We may simply have forgotten how. The Scripture records God's growing sense of frustration as He sought to communicate with His people "all day long" (Isaiah 65:2). On one of the occasions during which God spoke audibly, in the time of Jesus, the people thought they had heard thunder (John 12 29). The Israelites called themselves the people of God, but they were out of practice. After four hundred years of apparent "silence" since the last of the Old Testament prophets, when they heard the real thing they didn't recognize it. They lost spiritual discernment and, as a consequence, had difficulty interpreting what God was actually saying to them.

5. We may have been deafened by hang-overs from past situations or problems. My maternal grandfather was partially deafened by exploding shells

on the Western Front in France during World War I. As a result, he spent the rest of his life wearing a hearing aid. When he became tired of conversation or squabbles among his grandchildren he simply turned it off.

The Psalmist says, “To you I call, O LORD my Rock; do not turn a deaf ear to me. For if you remain silent, I will be like those who have gone down to the pit.” (Psalm 28:1). Maybe you have felt God was silent. Or maybe you have turned off your spiritual hearing aid because you have been hurt by circumstances. The Prophet Elijah felt it (1 Kings 19:14). He had to deal with personal feelings, fears and frustrations, get out of hole he was in and find God all over again. God CAN speak to us through our circumstances; He may test us, but He won’t destroy us (1 Corinthians 10:13). In the midst of all the problems and isolation that Elijah felt he encountered a “still small voice” (1 Kings 19:12). God was still there.

6. We may have put ourselves out of range. It is easy to do. We stop praying and reading God’s word. We become ensconced in our feelings and opinions. Before long we are effectively out of range, without realizing it. Let me explain. I was recently interviewed for a Christian radio broadcast in the city of Ploiesti, a town to the north of Bucharest in Romania. The manager of the station described to me the range of the station’s broadcasts. It could, he explained, reach listeners on the other side of Bucharest (he often received feedback from those areas); the radius encompassed a population of several million. But if the listener traveled further south, toward the Bulgarian border, or too far in any other direction, it became increasingly difficult to tune in and the broadcast faded away to nothing. It all came down to range. Go beyond the range and reception becomes erratic. Move away from dependence on God and a willingness to hear him, and guidance becomes unclear; we turn off the apparatus, find excuses as to why we do our own thing and get lost in the cosmic loneliness. Psalm 29 reminds us that the Voice of God is in the airwaves all around us. We need to have the receiver on and the channel open.

Remedies

If God is speaking, what is He saying today? To you and me? How can we remove the blockages described above?

1. We need to start with a genuine desire to seek him. “He will be found by you” (Isaiah 55:6). “He is not far from any one of us” (Acts 17:27). Get into practice, make it a habit to seek God and to expect that He will make Himself known to you. Make interactive prayer a deliberate, conscious part of your daily life. Get into the discipline of seeking God; don’t let the market crowd God out of the 164 hours you are not at church each week.

2. Talk to the Holy Spirit and listen to Him. Prayer involves 2-way communication. God has given you one mouth and two ears, to actively listen. Every Christian can (and should) have a relationship with the Holy Spirit. Jesus taught that the Spirit has come to earth to “guide (us) into all truth” (John 16:13). He would be “in us, with us, along side of us”. As Christians we know we are

God's children because the Holy Spirit has made us aware of this new status (Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6); He comes into our hearts crying "Abba Father", so we know the channel exists.

3. Obey His promptings. Get into practice of responding positively to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Parents complain to their children: "How many times do I have to tell you?" God is a Father. He knows we are human. But we should not make our humanity an excuse, when we are also (as Christians) the "temple" of the Holy Spirit, the dwelling place of God. Don't allow disobedience or indifference to His promptings turn into hardness of heart. Obey Him at all times, at home, on the job, in church; in your personal relationships. Learn to heed the voices of your Christian leaders (Hebrews 13:17) and the advice of experienced Christian friends. Your Father loves you; He will not lead you into chaos (1 Corinthians 14:33).

4. Practice the presence of God. Don't shut Him out of your life and decision-making. Get to know him, learn to recognize His voice when He speaks. It is important to live as though God is right there, with you.

5. Pray-read God's Word. Your Heavenly Father has given you the Bible as wisdom and lessons for your daily life. He will use it as His voice, to speak to you. Pray what you read into your daily life. It is simple: read a verse, then pray and personalize it. Specifically. One verse at a time. Think about what God is saying, and what you are saying back to Him. I guarantee it will revolutionize the way you read and apply the Bible in your circumstances and plans.

6. Get alongside those who know God, have proven Him in their lives and have character that is consistent with genuine Christianity, and learn from them how to hear Him when He speaks. If you are an experienced believer, teach others how to hear the voice of God for themselves. Mentor those who are younger than you in the Christian faith. Make disciples.

If you will do all that has been outlined above, it will help make you a more confident Christian, with a relevant message to your world. The Holy Spirit will communicate with you. You will hear the voice of God the first time, every time. He will teach you, instruct you, and give you ideas and wisdom. There won't be confusion. You will know how to deal with wrong voices, have peace in your heart, confidence, assurance, security and "rest" as a Christian even if there are storms in your life. Remember: the Voice of God is above the storm.