

Knowing God's Voice . . . p. 1

In John's Gospel, chapter 10, we read about the Good Shepherd, the one who has such great concern for his sheep that He is willing to lay down his life for them. After introducing the topic by saying that the robber will climb into the sheep pen, Jesus goes on to say this:

The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.

(John 10:2-4)

Then Jesus goes on from there to reveal to His disciples more about who He is, that He is the gate for the sheep, that He has come to give His sheep life to the full, that He is the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep, that He knows His sheep and that they know Him and that He has other sheep who will also listen to His voice.

This is a rich passage and it tells us important things about how to follow Jesus. Mainly, it tells us that He cares about us, very, very much, and that we will hear Him speak when we listen for His voice. This week I want to start a series on knowing God's voice, on being a people who can hear what our good shepherd is saying to us and who will follow only that voice, only the voice that speaks to us wisdom and life and truth.

And I want to start this series by encouraging you to believe that you can hear God speak. Some of you know it well and you've told me stories of times when God spoke to you very clearly and directly and led you somewhere through that process. Others may not be so sure. You may doubt that you've ever heard God speak to you, or even that you ever could. So we'll stay in this passage for awhile and allow Jesus, our Master, to speak to us today.

Notice what Jesus says about His followers, His sheep. He says that they listen to His voice, that they know His voice and that they know Him. They know Him so well that they won't follow anybody else. They don't listen to the stranger's voice, to the voice of the one who wants to steal them away from their Master. So, what does Jesus sound like? How do we know when it's His voice or when it's the voice of the stranger, trying to sound like Jesus?

Here's one thing Jesus said: "Come to Me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you. Let Me teach you, because I am humble and gentle and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke fits perfectly and the burden I give you is light." (Mt. 11:29,30)

Here's another thing Jesus said: "If you refuse to take up your cross and follow Me, you are not worthy of being mine. If you cling to your life, you will lose it; but if you give it up for Me, you will find it." (Mt. 10:38f)

Here's another one: "Now, go and learn the meaning of this Scripture, 'I want you to be merciful. I don't want your sacrifices.' For I have come to call sinners, not those who think they are good enough." (Mt. 9:13)

One more: "Then Jesus prayed this prayer: 'O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, thank You for hiding the truth from those who think themselves so wise and clever, and for revealing it to the childlike. Yes, Father, it pleased You to do it this way.'" (Mt. 11:25f)

Does Jesus always say the same kind of things? Is He always speaking words of comfort and hope? And if that's not the case, what can we say each of these sayings from Jesus has in common? How can listening to this variety of sayings help us know the voice of our Lord?

1. His words have the ring of truth. What He says resonates with our spirit because we know it's right, it's true.
2. His words are helpful in leading us into the knowledge of God and how to live in response to Him. He doesn't give mixed messages about how important obedience is, for example. He keeps calling us higher and encouraging us to know and love and obey the Father.
3. Jesus always honours the Father and sets the example for us to do the same.
4. Although some of Jesus' sayings are hard and demanding, they are also loving. They express to us the blessings that come to the person who truly sets his or her heart on the Kingdom of God
5. Jesus' teaching is not just a matter of good words, but is demonstrated in the life He lived.
6. Jesus gives us insight into the world that stands in rebellion against His Father ... and shows us how to respond to it
7. Jesus tells us that it's what is going on inside us that He is most concerned about.
8. Jesus reveals how valuable it is to be humble

You could add any number of insights into Jesus' teaching and His interactions with people, but that gives you a kind of flavour for what was important to Him, and an ability to discern His voice from the other voices that clamour for our attention.

What do we do with that knowledge? Let's make this as practical as we can. Jesus says that His sheep, His followers, will know His voice and will refuse to follow a stranger, a different voice that would lead them in a different direction. So, when you're praying and asking God for wisdom on how to deal with a situation you're facing, maybe a decision or a crisis in a relationship, what will tell you that you're hearing the voice of the Master and how will you know if the thoughts flowing through your mind are from an imposter?

1. The words, the pictures, the ideas that come to your mind will ring true. You will have the sense that they are right for you, that they reflect how God has made you, that this is real.
2. The idea, the direction, the call to obedience, all will be honouring to the Father.

3. You will feel valued and loved in the process, even if it's a challenging thing you're called to. As a result, you will experience the Lord's care for you in the word the Shepherd gives.
4. Even if you feel rebuked or chastened in some way, you will welcome it, embrace its truth, and begin to obey because you know it's right.

I remember very well being in a meeting at the McPherson Centre, a worship seminar with Bob Fitts from Youth with a Mission. Bob was introducing us to the School of Worship that he was running at the YWAM base on Kona, Hawaii and he just casually remarked something like, "Maybe God's calling some of you to take that school." And it was like this word went out from the speakers and landed right in my heart — I was convinced that he was talking to me, inviting my family to that school.

But it wasn't just that God spoke right into my heart, but that he prompted two other people who were there at that seminar to come up to me afterwards and say, "When Bob said that thing about people here who should pray about coming to join us in our school in Hawaii, we thought of you, we thought it was right for you."

About 15 months later, Patti and I and our two boys, aged 3 and 1, were in that School of Worship and it was a wonderful and life-changing experience. Do I wonder whether or not God was leading us to go there - no! - did I mention that it was in Hawaii?! There have been other decisions that have not been as powerfully directed and other words I have had that I had to just hold onto by faith, but God speaks; He wants to direct our paths, to lead us. I remember that the decision to move to Maple Ridge just came one day. We had been looking at houses in Fraser Heights, near Pacific Academy, but it didn't feel like that was right for us, somehow. Then we started to feel a call to plant a church, a different kind of church than what we had known, where we met in small groups in homes. And suddenly, we found ourselves looking for land to build on in Maple Ridge, feeling quite sure that the Lord was in it, that He was directing the whole process. At one point I was working at two church plants - our house church and a church plant in Surrey - when I started to feel very uneasy about the direction of the church in Surrey. It might have been okay for the others who were involved, but it was really clear to me that I couldn't continue in it. So I resigned from that position, taking quite a bit of flack in the process. I remember talking to Carol Moerman at that time and just, almost flippantly, asking her if Murray wanted to be part of another plant.

About eight months later, we started Silver Valley Community Church, meeting in Maple Ridge Park in space graciously given to us by Ridge Meadows Parks and Rec. Was I responding to a word from Jesus when I made that comment to Carol or was I just being flippant? Had I prayed about it for days or did it just come in the moment? To be real, it came in the moment, but there was nothing about it that seemed to me to be flippant. I wanted, very much, to follow through and plant a new church and I wanted Murray and Carol to be with us when we did.

So, how could I have been sure that I was hearing Jesus' voice in each of those decisions? How could I know for sure that I wasn't being deceived and led away from God's plan and purpose for my life?

1. I had to believe that I was hearing Jesus' voice, that it was Him that was speaking into my life and directing my steps. There is always an element of faith in making these decisions and I felt confident enough to trust that this was right.
2. One of the reasons for that confidence was that there was an element of excitement, anticipation, for the things that were being placed in front of me. There was a desire to do them and a sense that these steps were things I would truly enjoy and which would utilize the gifts God had given.
3. Another reason was that there was no check in my spirit, no nagging sense that this was off base somehow. In none of those situations did I feel as though I was disobeying God's will, or that He had something else He wanted me to do instead.
4. A fourth reason was that each of these steps were accompanied by confirmations: from Patti, from circumstances, from friends - God will often give confirmations to remove uncertainty.

Another example of this comes from a time when Patti and I had been living in Victoria for two years. God really used that time in strengthening our marriage and giving us some direction for our lives, but it came to an end rather suddenly. The economy was on the skids, interest rates were up above 17%, and we had a mortgage at 13%, but the business which I was running depended to some degree on new construction and that had simply dried up. I was given a choice between buying the business or being replaced by someone who would buy it, and I chose to look for work elsewhere. At about this time, I had two friends, on separate occasions, tell me that they thought it was time for me to put my energies into ministry rather than into business and I felt that this was from the Lord. I started to look for those kinds of opportunities in Victoria, but was also applying for government jobs - the main employer in Victoria, of course. And then, as if God's hand was somehow at work, all the teachers on temporary contract in Victoria School District were let go - most of whom were rehired before September - but Patti had no job security and I had no job. We listed our house and prepared to move back to the mainland. I contacted an old friend who was pastoring in Richmond and asked him to be on the lookout for any churches that might be looking for a staff person and he phoned back to ask me to come on staff with him as an intern at his church. This was late in June. On the last day of school, the janitors closed the building at 4 o'clock in the afternoon and Patti had to head home. As she came through the door, the phone was ringing and it was someone from the Surrey School Board saying they thought they would try to reach her "one more time" about a position at Colebrook Elementary in Surrey. By the end of July we had moved back to the Lower Mainland, this time to Richmond, Patti had a teaching job in a tiny school with a staff that she still meets with, usually a couple of times each year, for dinner and catching up. I began an internship that lasted for 13 months and which was followed by a blessed 10 years of serving alongside Murray and Carol Moerman at New Life Community Church in Burnaby.

What were the signs that told me I was hearing the Good Shepherd's voice?

1. God had clearly been at work in the circumstances that took us to Victoria in the first place and it was clear that He was at work in these circumstances, too. The surprising offer of an internship, the "one more time" call from Surrey, the quick sale of our home, the potential job offer from the Ombudsman's office that came just a bit too late - it was the classic case of doors that open and doors that close, and we could see God's hand in it.
2. Again, the encouragement or confirmation from friends was incredibly important. I didn't ask for their input, but they were pretty blunt. "You're not called by God to sell products in a retail environment, but to serve the body of Christ." Other people are called to build businesses, but that wasn't my strength or my calling and these friends nailed me on it. They spoke in a prophetic sort of way, giving me insight into God's plan and His timing.
3. And, I have to say that this felt right and good and this combination of circumstances and timing and confirmation, even direction, from friends, is God-given direction and helps us to move ahead with confidence that He's involved.

What other guidelines help us to be confident that we're being led by our Good Shepherd?

1. He won't ask us to do things that violate the nature of the Father or the clear teaching of Scripture. In other words, He won't ask us to act unfairly towards others, to make commitments that we can't keep, to act unethically or immorally or anything like that. The Father is faithful to the covenants He has made, so we can expect that He will lead us in ways that demonstrate that characteristic of faithfulness. He is merciful, so we can expect He will lead us to show mercy rather than exact revenge or to judge harshly. His word teaches us not to be sexually immoral, so we can be sure that He's not leading us into that kind of relationship. This is an area which isn't short of examples, so I'll leave it there for now.
2. We are taught in the New Testament that the Father communicates to us "Spirit to spirit". Speaking of the mystery of the cross in his first letter to the church in Corinth, Paul wrote: "But we know these things because God has revealed them to us by His Spirit, and His Spirit searches out everything and shows us even God's deep secrets. No one can know what anyone else is really thinking except that person alone, and no one can know God's thoughts except God's own Spirit. And God has actually given us His Spirit ... so we can know the wonderful things God has freely given us." As we grow in our experience of listening for God's voice, we will learn to trust the Spirit's promptings in our mind and to feel His excitement as He plants vision in our hearts.
3. One more guideline is to remember that God has made us and He knows exactly how He has made us and what He has made us for. He wants us to be doing the things that "fit" with us. That doesn't mean everything will be easy, or that we'll never have to do things we don't like, but it does mean that we'll have the sense that the thing God is calling us to do is something that seems right, it fits, it's suited to who we are. The things I've felt called to do haven't always met with instant "success", at least to the people who measure such things, but they have taught

me, shaped my values and priorities, helped me know God better and love people more. So, I'm okay with that.

In the weeks ahead, we're going to be looking at some of the ways God makes helpful boundaries for the choices we make, the directions we take, in life. We'll look at how we can use Scripture as a means of receiving guidance and also how we can learn God's ways of leading through some of the historical examples in Scripture. We'll talk about how and what we can learn from the poetry of the Bible, especially the Psalms and other wisdom literature and we'll talk about listening to the Holy Spirit. We'll start this series in two weeks after hearing Jeremy teach us on worship next Sunday and I'm looking forward to growing with you in hearing from the Father and walking more confidently in His ways for my life and for our family.