

Knowing God's Voice through Scripture

We've begun a series on hearing and knowing God's voice as He leads us in our walk with Him. God is a creative communicator and He speaks to us through circumstances, through people, through the voice of His Spirit, through our conscience, through a book we might be reading, through dreams and visions. It would be foolhardy to list the ways God speaks and then say, "That's all there is - there are no other ways God can speak."

Today we want to look at how we can hear the voice of God through reading His Word, the Bible. If you've taken the Alpha Course, you might remember the teaching there on how *not* to hear from God through Bible reading. The method to avoid was of opening the pages of the Bible at random and putting your finger on a verse and then reading it. Their example came from, first, the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 27 and verse 5:

Judas threw the money onto the floor of the Temple and went out and hanged himself.

That would be a discouraging start in your search for guidance, so you might try again, hoping for a better result. You flip a few pages over, eyes closed, and plant your thumb on a verse, finding that you've landed on Luke 10:37:

Jesus said, "... now go and do the same."

Feeling quite anxious now, you flip over a few more pages, looking for a way out of your dilemma only to arrive at John 13:27:

Then Jesus told him, "Hurry. Do it now!"

So, we are not advocating the blindfold, thumb on the page version of looking for biblical guidance, but we believe that God's word is living, it still speaks. We need to know how to understand its message and that's what we'll look at today.

I want to look at four broad areas in which we can be confident in the Bible's ability to give us direction. The first is the boundaries that Scripture establishes for our behaviour - the rules we are to live by if we are going to know God's will and walk in His ways. The second is the character that God looks for in us and that He rewards and responds to. The third is the central importance of faith in both hearing from God and obeying the things He says to us. The fourth is the importance of developing a familiarity with God's voice through a familiarity with His way of speaking through the Scriptures. So, let's dig in for the details.

1. The Bible gives us boundaries

I love the illustration that Nicky Gumbel gives in the Alpha course of the time he was commandeered into refereeing a soccer match. He didn't really know all the rules and he didn't have the knowledge to establish boundaries, either the lines within which the game was to be played or the rules which said certain things were fouls. So the game quickly devolved into chaos with the young boys continually complaining to him that something should have been called differently. Without the boundaries appropriate to

the game there were soon injuries and heated emotions and no one was happy with how things were going. Then the man arrived who was supposed to be refereeing all along. He established the lines within which the game was to be played, blew the whistle when a foul was committed, didn't take any nonsense from the young players and everyone had a great time. Life is like that. We need boundaries within which to live if we are going to feel secure, happy, fulfilled.

We know some of the obvious boundaries that Scripture teaches - many of them have become laws in our land, things like "Do not murder" and "do not steal". But even within the Ten Commandments are boundaries that aren't the law of the land, aren't even thought all that important, even by believers, and yet provide us with vital direction in hearing God's voice.

How about this one: "Honour your father and mother. Then you will live a long, full life in the land the LORD your God will give you." (Ex. 20:7) The idea of giving honour was not just giving respect, but it included the obligation to offer financial support, and generally to provide for the needs of the parents. This loving care for parents was expected by the biblical writers, but that isn't always the expectation today. In fact, if you spend any time at all in seniors' care facilities, you can't help but notice the large number of people who have no one visiting them, or maybe get one or two visits during a whole calendar year. And yet here is a simple principle: If you want to live a long, full life then show respect and care to your parents. Do we believe that? I think lots of Christians do and they tend to be very caring and do a lot to provide for the needs of their parents, but it's not a practice that you would call "trending" in society as a whole.

That's one example of a boundary that helps us make decisions in life. Let's look at some of the big ones, some of the boundaries that are repeated often and given great importance by the Bible writers.

1. Be kind to the poor. We're coming up on an election in our city where some candidates will be telling us to get rid of the poor, or hide them, or keep them someplace far away from where we live. Let's look at a few words from the prophet Isaiah:

But to the poor, O Yahweh, you are a refuge from the storm. To the needy in distress, you are a shelter, you are a shelter from the rain and the heat. (Is. 25:4)

Or this teaching, from the second telling of the law:

If there are any poor people in your towns when you arrive in the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward them. Instead, be generous and lend them whatever they need. (Deuteronomy 15:7)

Many of the warnings that the prophets gave were confronting the injustice and exploitation of the poor that was happening in Israel during the time of the kings. As I was reading my daily devotional one morning recently I came across this verse in Isaiah:

*When the poor and needy search for water and there is none
And their tongues are parched from thirst,
Then I, Yahweh, will answer them*

I, the God of Israel, will never abandon them
(41:17)

So, this idea of taking on some of the burdens of the poor in our community is taking on the heart of God for those who are struggling.

2. A second boundary that the Bible tells us God is looking for is the commitment to faithfulness, to keeping your vows, to being trustworthy and honest. Psalm 15 starts with the question, “Who may worship in Your sanctuary, Yahweh? Who may enter Your presence on Your holy hill?” and then gives this in answer:

*Those who lead blameless lives and do what is right,
speaking the truth from sincere hearts
Those who refused to slander others or harm
their neighbours or speak evil of their friends
Those who despise persistent sinners and
honour the faithful followers of the LORD
And keep their promises even when it hurts.*

(Ps. 15:1-4)

This is all about integrity and persistence in doing what is right. It includes faithfulness in marriage, faithfulness in worship, faithfulness in honouring our Lord in the choices we make in life. This is an expression of God’s character; He is faithful in all His dealings with us and asks us to be faithful in our dealings with Him and with one another. One more verse on this topic:

The righteous person will live by his faithfulness (Habakkuk 2:4)

This is a character trait that brings life.

We could add lots more boundaries from our reading of the Bible; things like showing mercy, gaining wisdom, loving the weaker brother or sister, building God’s church, serving one another in humility, worshiping God alone. But we need to move from a discussion of how God guides us within boundaries to the kind of character development that He wants to see in us, the kind of people we are becoming.

2. The Character God looks for in us

This is such a key factor in recognizing God’s voice because it isn’t what we expect. We expect that what God really wants for our lives is exactly what we want for our lives which is, more or less, to be happy. We don’t think of what it will take to prepare us for our eternal destiny. You and I never think of what kind of character formation will be necessary if we are someday to be put in the position of judging angels ... Just think about this little passage from 1 Corinthians 6 and think about what God might have to do in our approach to life to prepare us for this:

If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the saints? Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life. (6:1-3)

In this context, Paul is saying that followers of Jesus should not go to the law courts to settle disputes with each other, but should ask for a fellow believer to help them resolve their dispute. If you're suing a fellow Christian and having your suit decided by an unbelieving judge, you are not ready for the role that God has prepared for you in the life to come. Your character is not formed to the degree that you are ready to judge the world, let alone to judge angels.

Look at the character of the people God chose to use for key roles in the history of the people of faith. He chose Abraham, a man who trusted God to lead him everywhere, and who was a devoted worshiper of his God. In each new place he settled we read that his pattern was to pitch his tent and then build an altar, a place of worship, a place of sacrifice to God. Moses, a humble leader of maybe a million and a half people, who feared the LORD more than he feared the Pharaoh of Egypt and who spoke God's word to an unrepentant ruler. Joshua, brave and obedient, one who honoured his God. Samuel, one who heard from God regularly and fearlessly spoke out the words he had been given.

David, the king who was able to grasp God's vision for the nations to know His glory and who expressed that repeatedly in the songs he wrote. Jeremiah, who wished that God would use someone else to prophesy, because speaking the word of the LORD got him into such trouble, but who, nonetheless, was faithful to his calling.

On and on we could go, and from each of the heroes of the Bible narratives we could learn something about the character that God is looking for. But how was that character formed in each of these people? For Moses, it was during the time he spent watching sheep graze through the wilderness of the Sinai peninsula. He had to go through some hard times, some frustrating and unproductive times, in order to grow in the humility that would be necessary for him to do things God's way in leading Israel out of Egypt.

If you're looking for guidance and you don't feel like God's giving you the answers you need, ask the hard questions about character formation and ask Him to show you what He's working on, what you need to learn, how you need to grow in preparation for the responsibilities that may lie in wait in the distant future.

3. The importance of Faith

The third area which helps us know God's voice and respond appropriately to it, is the area of faith. We can sometimes react in a doubtful way to guidance that is coming our way. We doubt that we're able to do what's being asked of us, we doubt that God would guide us in that direction, we doubt that His will for our life could involve challenges (see the last point), we doubt that we can even hear from God. If we don't believe that God speaks to us or that we can hear, we're going to have a hard time following. We're going to second guess everything He tells us and we're going to find a way out of even the things we really want to do with our lives. If it seems too good to

be true, just remember my story from a couple of weeks ago about God calling us to go to school for six months in Hawaii. By the way, He followed that up by very clearly leading us to go on outreach with our school of worship which took us to Germany for a month. Jeremy had been packing for days, getting his stuff ready to go back to Canada. On the morning after we had prayed and made the decision to go on outreach, he asked, "Are we going to another country now, because that's what I think God is telling us to do." From the mouth of a three-year-old, the confirmation of God's guidance.

One of the key components of faith is that we are not putting our confidence, our trust, in what we think we are capable of, but we are putting our trust in God and in what He has spoken to us about His plans. Those are NOT the same thing.

Unbelief can sometimes seem like modesty, like humility, but it's actually a perverted form of pride. When we say that we're not convinced God wants to use us, we're more likely than not looking for confirmation that others think that we're perfect for the job. Or we're making an excuse for ourselves to not serve in His Kingdom. Or we're trying to sound modest when we don't really believe what we're saying. We're pretty complicated. But God knows us, He knows what we're capable of, for better or for worse, and He wants to use us in this world.

4. Becoming Familiar with the Voice of God in Scripture

The fourth and final key to knowing God's voice is to develop a familiarity with that voice by reading widely through the whole of Scripture, the whole Bible. You see God's jealous anger when the very people He created for His glory despise Him and choose instead to worship things their own hands have made and, in that, you see a God who has great concern for the condition of our hearts, who wants us to choose well and, as a result, to live well.

You will also see a God who has great compassion on His people. He introduces Himself to Moses as the compassionate and gracious God, a 'feeling' word followed by an 'action' word. And we see this revealed in the person of Jesus as well. We see Him rescuing the woman caught in adultery, then telling her that He doesn't condemn her, but that she should change the way she's living.

You will see a God who has the power to turn the course of history, to change the fate of nations. Just look what He did to Egypt, or Assyria, or Moab, or Babylon. Then look through the history of the church and how it has changed the world for good: the rescuing of abandoned infants, healing the sick, establishing hospitals and universities, beginning the discipline known to us as science and, in our day, launching hundreds of mercy missions around the world that feed the hungry, clothe the poor, rescue the slaves, provide clean water, mediate between warring factions, negotiate peace.

God has always been a God who speaks. That's His nature. He wants to communicate with us and so He speaks in many ways. If you and I spend consistent

time in reading the Bible, in trying to find good answers to our questions, in digging in to the history of the events it describes and especially in trying to know the God of the Bible, we will learn to hear and trust that voice, spoken to our hearts by the Spirit.

So, let's review and apply the things we've considered today.

1. The Bible gives us boundaries and when we live within those boundaries, we are blessed. There is a security in knowing and obeying the will of the Father, choosing His ways and trusting Him with the results.
2. The Scriptures also show us that God is very interested in developing, in us, the character of Kingdom people. He will help us to learn to value what He values, including those things that only seem to be learned through hard lessons. We have the choice to embrace the learning, grow deep with God, and become very familiar with Him as He speaks to us in all circumstances.
3. The Scriptures tell us that without faith we can't please God ... we have to trust Him. Trusting in Him includes learning to trust that He is speaking to us and that He has made us in such a way that we can hear His voice and follow Him.
4. Finally, the Bible shows us the kinds of things that God has spoken, repeatedly, to His people. When we read and reread the Scriptures, we find familiar themes rising up again and again as God confronts His people's rebellion and idolatry, their lack of love, their injustice towards the poor.

Guidance can come in a variety of ways, but maybe the best way is to know the guide and keep stepping into what He has showed us is the good way. You may have grown weary of reading the Bible in that "daily devotions" kind of way. Try it again, seeing if you can expand your knowledge of your Master's voice, your familiarity with His ways. Ask Him to speak to you as you read His word and then read with expectancy, your heart tuned to the Holy Spirit.