

# Hearing God

Part One of Four

## ***Jeremiah 10:1-5, 14***

*1 Hear what the Lord says to you, O house of Israel. 2 This is what the Lord says: “Do not learn the ways of the nations or be terrified by signs in the sky, though the nations are terrified by them. 3 For the customs of the peoples are worthless; they cut a tree out of the forest, and a craftsman shapes it with his chisel. 4 They adorn it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so it will not totter. 5 Like a scarecrow in a melon patch, their idols cannot speak; they must be carried because they cannot walk. Do not fear them; they can do no harm, nor can they do any good ... 14 Everyone is senseless and without knowledge; every goldsmith is shamed by his idols. His images are a fraud; they have no breath in them.”*

## ***Habakkuk 2:18-20***

*18 Of what value is an idol, since a man has carved it? Or an image that teaches lies? For he who makes it trusts in his own creation; he makes idols that cannot speak. 19 Woe to him who says to wood, “Come to life!” Or to lifeless stone, “Wake up!” Can it give guidance? It is covered with gold and silver; there is no breath in it. 20 But the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him.*

## ***Isaiah 45:18-25***

*18 For this is what the Lord says – he who created the heavens, he is God; he who fashioned and made the earth, he founded it; he did not create it to be empty, but formed it to be inhabited – he says:*

*“I am the Lord, and there is no other. 19 I have not spoken in secret, from somewhere in a land of darkness; I have not said to Jacob’s descendants, ‘Seek me in vain.’ I, the Lord, speak the truth; I declare what is right. 20 Gather together and come; assemble, you fugitives from the nations. Ignorant are those who carry about idols of wood, who pray to gods that cannot save. 21 Declare what is to be, present it – let them take counsel together. Who foretold this long ago, who declared it from the distant past? Was it not I, the Lord? And there is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none but me.”*

*22 “Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other. 23 By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked: Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear. 24 They will say of me, ‘In the Lord alone are righteousness and strength.’ All who have raged against him will come to him and be put to shame. 25 But in the Lord all the descendants of Israel will be found righteous and will exult.”*

# Hearing God - Part One

## The Living God Who Is Not Silent!

Our Scripture this morning tells us in no uncertain terms that our God is nothing like idols made of wood or stone. They are dumb! Mute! They have ears but do not hear, and mouths, but do not speak. In them there is no breath. But our God speaks! And His speaking is not in secret, from somewhere in a land of darkness. He foretells things; He declares them; He utters words that will never be revoked. The message is so clear; one of the things that delineate the Living God from all idols is that He is a communicating God. As Francis Schaeffer puts it so succinctly in his writings, “God exists – and He is not silent!”

But we Christians, with our theology in all its correctness, still have trouble with the notion of a God who actually speaks. It’s probably not without reason that we hesitate to share experiences we regard as instances of God’s speaking to us. It’s similar to those who believe they have seen a UFO or those who have had a near-death experience. They learn to keep their mouths shut out of fear that they may be regarded as eccentric or misguided.

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They do not wish to go public with something that might be a mistake on their part. Or they may be afraid of being thought of as arrogant, as taking themselves to be special.

Similar doubts sometimes plague people who feel that they have been spoken to by God. “Why is it,” comedian Lily Tomlin asks, “that when we speak to God we are said to be praying, but when God speaks to us we are said to be delusional.” Tomlin may be a comedian and not a theologian, but she raises an interesting point. If we are not willing to accept that God speaks, why should we believe that He hears? Hearing and speaking are both functions of communicating. They go together. As a child of God, I expect that my prayers are actually being heard by my heavenly Father - but it is also eminently reasonable for me to expect a response.

Now, as Christians we stand in a millennia-long tradition of humans who have been spoken to by God. God spoke to Abraham, telling him to “go to a land I will show you.” Later, we find Abraham in a very conversational relationship with the Lord. In Genesis 18, the Lord says to Abraham, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?” (v. 17). What follows is a fascinating two-way conversation in which Abraham pleads for the city of Sodom.

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“Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?” asks Abraham. “What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? ... What if there are forty-five? Forty? Thirty? Twenty? What if there are only ten?” And the Lord answered, “For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it.” (v. 32).

Later, God spoke to Moses from the burning bush. “Do not come any closer. Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob” (Exod. 3:5-6). Did Moses imagine all that? Was he delusional? Of course not! That conversation was as real as the Exodus out of Egypt, which is an accepted fact of history. No, the instructions Moses received from the Lord were just as real and were what led to the Exodus. Moses did what he was told by the Living God who confided in Moses his divine plans for deliverance. (What about Job?)

Then, there are those who are much nearer to us in time who have “heard” from the Lord. Dr. Ken Taylor, who produced the widely used version of the Scriptures known as *The Living Bible*, told (in a 1983 television interview) how he had been concerned about children having a Bible that they could easily understand.

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According to Dr. Taylor’s own testimony, one afternoon God “revealed” to him “the idea of a thought-for-thought translation instead of word-for-word.” This idea worked so well that now such versions have been published in many languages around the world. I have no difficulty believing that Dr. Taylor did indeed “hear” from the Lord.

Or I think of my own father-in-law, Captain Don Leach, who was working quietly in the church office in Uxbridge one day. Bev was pregnant with Jennifer, our youngest daughter. Straight out of the blue a voice spoke into his mind telling him to put his work to one side and get down to Whitby (my mother-in-law was already there with Bev). Dad pulled into the driveway exactly when he was needed, just in time to rush Bev to the hospital. She delivered three weeks early.

There’s no doubt in my mind that throughout the long centuries of the Christian era, right up to the present moment, there have been untold thousands, nay, millions of similar stories; believers receiving direct communication from the Living God. And I am convinced that this is just what Jesus intimated would happen.

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On the evening before His crucifixion Jesus assured his little band of followers that although he was leaving them, he would continue to manifest himself to all who loved him. Judas, who was also called Thaddaeus (not Iscariot), then asked the right question: How would this manifesting take place (John 14:22)? Our Lord’s reply was that he and his Father would come to them and make their home with them (14:23). In other words, God would abide in the very heart and soul of His followers.

Now listen! Dallas Willard argues persuasively that it is absolutely inconceivable that two persons so intimately related as a believer and their indwelling Lord would not explicitly speak to one another. Certainly God’s abiding in us involves more than communication, but it does not involve less. The Spirit who inhabits us is not mute, restricting himself to an occasional nudge, a hot flash, an image, or a case of goosebumps. There is much more to our relationship with the Lord than that. How could there be a personal relationship, a personal walk with God – or with anyone else – without individualized and person communication?

Once again, Willard makes a point worth noting: “Sometimes today it seems that our personal relationship with God is treated as no more than a mere arrangement or understanding that Jesus and his Father have about us.

5

Our personal relationship then only means that each believer has his or her own account in heaven, which allows them to draw on the merits of Christ to pay their sin bills.”

I find myself in full agreement with Willard. The danger he's describing is that one can find him/herself treating Jesus as nothing more than a ticket to heaven. But there has got to be more to a personal relationship than that. A mere benefactor, however powerful, kind and thoughtful, is not the same thing as a friend, and Jesus says to us, "*I have called you friends*" (John 15:15) and "*Look, I am with you every minute, even to the end of the age*" (Mt. 28:20).

In Psalm 25 there is a wonderful insight to the nature of the relationship between the Living God and the true believer. Verse 14 says, "*The Lord confides in those who fear him; he makes his covenant known to them.*" Then, in Amos 3:7, the prophet makes this bold statement: "*Surely the sovereign Lord does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets.*"

"Well," you say, "I'm not a prophet." You don't have to be one. In Psalm 139 we learn that God has access to our minds and innermost thoughts: "*O Lord, you have searched me and you know me ... you perceive my thoughts from afar ...*

6

*... before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O Lord.*" Then the Psalmist invites the Lord to probe his heart and mind: "*Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*" Now the Lord has many ways of leading, and one of those ways is by speaking directly into the mind that has been so opened to His searching gaze.

Now, I think you people already know these things. But there is an unfortunate paradox in our contemporary experience and understanding of hearing God. On the one hand, we have massive testimony to and widespread faith in a God who guides and directs us by communicating personally with us. Our faith isn't in fate or blind forces. It's not "the Force be with you," as in Star Wars. It's God be with you! And you all expect to hear from God in some way or another. Even now! You have not come here today expecting me to teach or preach and lead the people of God on the basis of my education, and natural talents alone. Authority in spiritual leadership derives from a life in the Spirit, from the minister's personal encounter and ongoing relationship with God. You have a right to expect that before I get into the pulpit I have heard from God, first through the written Word of God, and then through the Holy Spirit who speaks into my mind things concerning the Word.

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But the other side of the paradox, the unfortunate side, is that we also find a pervasive and often painful uncertainty about how hearing God's voice actually works today. And that is what we are going to explore over the next three weeks. How does God guide and direct us? What is the context in which we learn to actually "hear" the voice of the Lord? We will find that God is not limited to our meager perceptions of how He speaks. We will find that He communicates exactly what we need to hear. He breaks the silence, entering our situation when we least expect it.

Robert McFarlane was a well-known businessman in the Los Angeles area. He had moved to California from Oklahoma in 1970, and within a few days of his arrival, due to a disastrous misunderstanding with a close friend, he had to take control of an insurance agency. He didn't want it, but he had to make it succeed in order to save the large amount of money he had invested in it.

By the spring of 1973 he was in his third straight year of constant stress and strain in the operation of the business. He had recently been converted through the ministry of the Rolling Hills Covenant Church in Southern California in answer to the prayers of his wife, Betty, and her many Christian friends.

8

One day that spring, the continual danger of defeat, the daylight and dark hours of effort, the frustration at every turn and the hardened memories of the cause of his financial difficulties came upon him with overwhelming force. Robert was driving to the office, facing yet another day of futility and failure, but having to accomplish the absolute necessities to keep the business afloat.

Suddenly he was filled with a frantic urge to turn left onto the road out of town – and just disappear. He was ready to make that turn, and how far he would have gone is unknown. But into the midst of his inner turmoil there came a command: “Pull over to the curb.”

As he relates it, it was as if the words were etched upon the windshield. After he pulled over there came to him, as though from someone with him in the car, these words: “My Son had stresses and strains that you will never know, and when he had those strains, he turned to Me, and that is what *you* should do.”

McFarlane just sat at the wheel for a long time, sobbing aloud. He then drove to his Long Beach office, where he faced twenty-two major, outstanding problems.

9

All the most significant problems, company disagreements, clients deciding whether to remain with his agency, payments by clients of sizable late premiums, all of these were substantially resolved by the end of that business day.

This is life with Jesus as it was meant to be. When we are in the midst of our loneliest moments, when all the weight of life clamps down upon our hearts, He is with us – and He is not silent. When we are facing an uncertain future, like a solitary sojourner peering into the fog, He is with us (for us) – and He is not silent.

To those of you who have opened yourself to this invisible reality and actually experienced it, no explanation is necessary. But to those of you who have not opened yourself to the God who speaks, no explanation is possible. This morning I invite each of us to listen as we have never listened before. The invitation is for us to enter fully into a conversational relationship with the Lord, day by day, in which we both speak and listen. In the context of such a relationship we will discover the wonderful truth of the old hymn:

*He walks with me and He talks with me,  
And He tells me I am His own,  
And the joy we share as we tarry there,  
None other has ever known.*

10