

GOD STILL SPEAKS**1 SAMUEL 3:1-10; 1 KINGS 19:9-13**

Does God still speak to people? I can recall three distinct occasions when I believe God spoke to me. I didn't hear an audible voice on the first occasion, but I might as well have. God spoke into my inner spirit in a very direct, powerful way. It was shortly after my first marriage ended in divorce. I was completely devastated by the experience. I can still recall taking a long walk along a country road one afternoon – sort of praying and thinking – wondering where my life was going and what was going to happen. Here's what I heard. "Rick, you're 35 years old. In five years, you will be remarried." That was it. I wasn't seeking a message from the Lord and, at that point in time, remarriage was the last thing I desired. Why do I think it was God who spoke? At the time, I didn't know if it was God who spoke. All I can tell you is that five years later when I was 40 years old I married a lovely woman named Cheryl who's sitting right out there.

The second time has a story behind it. Between my older sister and myself, my mother miscarried three times. Some of you know personally how emotionally devastating that experience can be. God impressed a verse of Scripture upon Mom's heart that she believed was a promise that she would have another child. As a result, she told me often that she believed I was a promised child. She meant it to be a positive statement about my destiny in life, but it had a different effect on me. I constantly wondered if I was measuring up to God's expectations or fulfilling this promise He gave my mom. It became a kind of negative thing for me personally. Again, I remember exactly where God spoke to me. I was at the intersection of Powell Road and 315 right where the bridge goes over the Olentangy River. Again, I was sort of praying and thinking about this promise, about what it was supposed to mean for my life, when all of a sudden the following statement came into my mind and heart in a powerful way: "The promise was for her, not for you." That was it. I believe God told me then that He gave Mom that verse as a comfort to her in a time of deep sorrow and anguish. It was not so much a prediction about me, but rather a promise meant to bless her. When I heard that, an emotional weight was lifted off of me.

The third time I believe God spoke to me in a direct way occurred in my first year here when I was serving as your interim Senior Pastor. I became intrigued by this congregation: a 100 years old... a great heritage... planted with deep roots in a changing community... facing some significant challenges ahead. Again, I can remember where I was – just standing alone out in the hallway next to my office. I suppose I had been thinking about this church and its future – sort of mulling things over - when, once again, I believe God spoke directly into my inner spirit. I wasn't asking for or expecting a message from God. Here's what I heard: "This church has ten years." Now, frankly, I don't know how to interpret that message. That was back in 2006. Does it mean the church will cease to exist by 2016? I hope not! What I believe God was saying to me is that God had given our church a ten year window of opportunity to discover and begin to live

into a new mission and vision given by God. Time will tell, I suppose, if that was indeed a message from God and if I'm interpreting it correctly.

Has God ever spoken to you? I'm confident that God speaks to you and me in a variety of ways every day. Sometimes it can be very direct and powerful like the three incidents in my life, but at other times it can be seem much more routine, gentle and suggestive. So does God speak? If so, how does He speak? Why does He speak? As we begin this series of messages, I want us to read two stories from the Old Testament. The first one is about how God spoke to a little boy named Samuel. Before we read the passage, here's some background. A woman named Hannah was unable to have a child which was often interpreted as God's judgment in Old Testament times. This was in the time of the judges – a period of several hundred years between the conquest of the land of Canaan under Joshua and the first king of Israel. Hannah prayed earnestly to God and He allowed her to bear a son named Samuel. She was so grateful to God that she brought Samuel, then just a young boy, to the Tabernacle so that he could become a full time helper to a man named Eli, who was acting as the high priest for the people of Israel at that time. Now, let's read what happened one evening after Samuel had serving the Lord under Eli's direction.

The second scripture is about how God spoke to a prophet named Elijah. Now this happened several hundred years after Samuel. Elijah had just been used by God in one of the most spectacular stories in the Bible. God had used Elijah to defeat and humiliate the false god, Baal, and then personally kill 450 priests of Baal. After this event, Elijah was physically, spiritually and emotionally exhausted so much so that when evil Queen Jezebel threatened his life, he took off for the wilderness. That's where God spoke to him. Let's read what happened. Let me ask and try to answer three questions today.

DOES GOD SPEAK?

My first answer to that question is this: the Bible itself demonstrates that God speaks in ways you can understand. God is a Person who relates to people by speaking to them and by guiding them into His will. The stories we read are just two examples that demonstrate that truth. The Old Testament is full of stories of how God spoke to people: Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, and all of the prophets just to name a few. Likewise, the New Testament is full of stories of how God spoke to ordinary people like Zechariah (John the Baptist's father), Mary, Joseph, Peter and Paul. We serve a God who loves to communicate – a God who knows well how to use words. God uses words to create, to heal, to encourage, to rebuke, to guide, to predict the future and to express His love for us and His comfort towards us.

The question should never be whether God still speaks, but rather if we have ears to hear what He is saying. Samuel did not know it was the Lord who was speaking to him at first. Why? It was the first time it had ever happened!

Certainly God can speak in dramatic, powerful ways. But, the Lord's manner of speaking to you can be so ordinary and commonplace that you can mistake it for something or someone else. Here, Samuel thought Eli was calling him. Sometimes we need someone like Eli who's known the Lord longer than we have to say, "I think the Lord is trying to say something to you." The story of Elijah seems to suggest that while God can certainly speak in a wind, in an earthquake and in a fire, He often comes to you and me with a whispering gentleness.

God wants to speak to you. God didn't lose His voice after the first century. Most of the time we think of prayer as talking to God rather than listening to Him speak. Lilly Tomlin, the comedian, asked a provocative question: "Why is that when we speak to God we are said to be praying but when God speaks to us we are said to be schizophrenic?" Listening to God speak to you through His Holy Spirit is not only normal, it's essential. Many Christians will readily admit that they feel or experience the presence of God in their lives. But the idea of God speaking to us seems bizarre, weird, flaky or hyper-religious to some of us. Followers of Jesus today are meant to live in an ongoing conversation with God, speaking and being spoken to. We can't abandon faith in our ability to hear from God. To do so is to abandon the reality of a personal relationship with God.

That brings me to a second answer to the first question. Does God speak? Yes, because the Bible demonstrates that God desires a relationship with you. We believe God is a Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. At the very core of who He is, God is relational. Furthermore, because of Jesus' death on the cross and resurrection, there's no longer any red tape between you and God. Why should it surprise you that God would want to have a daily, intimate, conversational relationship with you? If you think about it, it would be far more surprising if God didn't want to speak to you! What is the Christian faith, after all? Just a collection of ideas about God? A set of beliefs to be memorized and doctrines to be mastered? Several rituals to be followed? A moral code of personal conduct to be maintained? Most of the other major religions of the world can give you all of that. For them, God is impersonal and non-relational. What makes the Christian faith distinctive is that from Genesis to Revelation, the constant theme is that God is personal and relational. In other words, God listens when you speak to Him and you need to learn how to listen when He speaks to you. God is available and approachable; He stands ready to talk and listen to you now. God does speak to His people, but we have to be prepared to hear what He's saying. We have to learn how God communicates and how to respond appropriately.

HOW DOES GOD SPEAK?

The first answer to that question is that God speaks in many different ways. We're actually going to spend the next two messages in this series talking more about that question and its answer. But, you should know and recognize today, that an examination of the Bible will lead you to only one conclusion: God has multitudinous ways to speak into your life and mine. For instance, God has

spoken to His people through creation, nature, angels, prophets, dreams, visions, casting of lots, a burning bush, preaching, acts of judgment, miracles, a donkey, thunder and lightning, a fleece which is the skin of a sheep, signs and wonders and prayer just to name some of the ways. I'm going to suggest that there are two primary ways that God seems to speak to His children today: the Bible and inner impressions or leadings of the Holy Spirit upon your human spirit. We'll talk about those much more in upcoming messages, but I just wanted to get that out there today for your consideration.

One question that often comes up is whether God speaks in an audible voice. Sure! When God spoke to Samuel in the story we read, it's hard to conclude that His voice was anything but audible at least to Samuel. The story about God speaking to Elijah suggests that as well. Now, I've never heard God's voice in an audible way myself, but that doesn't mean He doesn't or He can't. By the same token, my sense is that God rarely speaks to people today in an audible way. Why not? Perhaps you've thought or said, "If God just spoke to me in an audible voice, I would do exactly what He said to do." Well, maybe and maybe not! The best answer to that question that I've heard has to do with God's passion to see faith in Him become the guiding action of our lives in everything. If He always spoke aloud to you audibly, you wouldn't need to learn how to walk by faith.

We need to avoid two extremes when it comes to God speaking. The first one is the idea that God is sending you messages all of the time. Just like any other person, God can choose to be silent. There's no evidence in the Bible that people like Peter or Paul were constantly receiving communications from God. The union that Jesus had with the Father was and is the greatest that can be conceived of in this life, but no one can know for certain if even Jesus had constant, every minute revelations of what He should do or say next. The second extreme is the notion that everything God has said or will say is already in the Bible. We have to tread carefully here, but here's what I would suggest to you. God has spoken finally in the Bible. That means that the Bible is God's objective revelation that everything else you think God might have said to you has to be measured against. Some people get a little nervous about this idea of God speaking today. They see it as a threat to the Bible's authority. And certainly there have been a lot of abuses – a lot of "God told me to do this" and "God told me to do that" - which have nothing to do with God whatsoever. But the question remains: Is the Bible itself the only means God has at His disposal for speaking to people? The Bible itself suggests the answer, "No." While there have certainly been abuses, does that discount other avenues through which God might speak?

How does God speak? A second answer to that question is that God speaks uniquely and personally. In other words, He speaks in exactly the way that you need to hear Him at that moment in time. God spoke to Samuel in such an ordinary way that he at first mistook him for Eli. If God had spoken to Samuel in thunder and lightning like He did on Mt. Sinai to the people of Israel, Samuel would likely have died then and there from sheer terror. Elijah, the prophet, had

just seen God speak through fire literally falling from Heaven. He had no problem with a God who could speak through awesome might and power. But when He was on the edge of physical, spiritual and emotional exhaustion, God approached His servant in a gentle whisper. Instead of a rebuke or a command, God opened up the lines of communication with a question: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” There’s no formula to how God speaks. It’s perfectly suited to who you are and what circumstances you are living through at that point in time.

WHY DOES GOD SPEAK?

First and foremost, God speaks in order to reveal His character and purposes to you. How does pastor and author Rick Warren put it? “Life is not about you.” Well, in just the same way, God speaking to you is not about you. He wants you to know, or learn or remind you of something about Himself: His love, His grace, His holiness, His peace, His forgiveness, His truth, His standards. He also wants to reveal to you His purposes. God’s ultimate purpose is not to guide you, to lead you or to solve your problems. God doesn’t exist to help you find a job, get a spouse, have more money, enjoy better health or figure out your future plans. His purposes are always and forever about redeeming a lost world to Himself by drawing you and others to Himself. He wants to build His Kingdom and He wants to use you to help build it. He wants to transform your life in every way possible. If you’re trying to hear God for selfish reasons, you will be disappointed. F.B. Meyer made this wise observation, “So long as there is some thought of personal advantage, some idea of acquiring the praise and commendation of men, some aim of self-aggrandizement, it will be simply impossible to find out God’s purpose concerning us.” God spoke to Samuel and to Elijah because He wanted each of them to know who He was and to get both of them involved in His purposes.

Gladys Aylward served as a missionary to China during and after World War 2. On one occasion she was on a mission trip in a very remote part of China. No Christian missionary had shared about Jesus in that part of the country. She came upon a group of Buddhist monks who welcomed her into their monastery as a visiting speaker. Gladys was stunned by how receptive these monks were to her message about Jesus. She was interrupted repeatedly during the night as monks – one by one – came to ask her questions about the things she had told them. Eventually she went to the head of the Buddhist monastery and asked him why his fellow monks were so open to the good news about Jesus. He showed her a frame containing a torn piece of paper. It was a fragment of a gospel tract the monks had found several years earlier. Just about the only thing left on the piece of paper was John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life.” The monk said, “We have revered this sacred message for many years. And we have longed to learn of a God who loves the world. So when you came, we knew that this God must have sent you.” God’s primary reason to speak into your life and mine is to reveal His character and His purposes.

Why does God speak? God speaks in order to prompt my obedience to His ways. When you read everything the Bible tells you about the old priest, Eli, you discover he had some good points and some bad ones. This might have been his finest hour. I love what he says to the little boy, Samuel. “Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. The LORD called Samuel a third time, and Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, ‘Here I am; you called me.’ Then Eli realized that the LORD was calling the boy. ‘Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, “Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.”’” (1 Kings 19:7-9 NIV) That’s a prayer we could offer up every day, yes? “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening. Lord, I’m here taking up space on planet Earth for just one reason: to know and serve You. Please speak now, Lord. Please speak today, Lord. I’m listening, Lord.”

Why is this so important? Years ago now an ordinary Christian couple received a prompting from God – a leading of the Holy Spirit – to invite a neighbor family to come to church with them. The husband and father in that family said no. Actually, he said more than a polite “No.” He told the Christian couple at his door, “We want nothing to do with your God. We want nothing to do with your church. We want nothing to do with you. Now leave us alone.” While the head of the home spewed out this response, one of his kids – a young boy at the time - happened to be standing there in the entryway of the house hearing every discourteous word. He walked up to his dad, yanked on his dad’s untucked shirt and said, “Hey, Dad, I’ll go.” In a flash of insight, it occurred to Dad that if he allowed his son to go to church, he’d get free babysitting for much of the day. “You will?” Dad asked his son. The son nodded sincerely. “Oh. Well, then... okay. I guess you can take our boy with you, if that’s what you want to do.” Every week – week after week – that Christian couple took that boy every Sunday all through his junior high years. Once he got into high school, that young man surrendered his life to Jesus. From there he went to college, earned his degree and decided to start a church – a church that now includes thousands of worshipers on the east coast of our country. It all traces back to one ordinary couple who heard God speak into their spirits and obeyed. They made it a priority to live life with one ear open to Heaven, and because of their impact on one young man many more have come to faith in Jesus.

That why this matters. “Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.” Way back in 1874, James Drummond Burns, wrote a hymn. Part of it is as follows. I invite you to join me and let it be the prayer of your heart today.

*Oh! Give me Samuel’s ear,
An open ear, O Lord,
Alive and quick to hear
Each whisper of Thy Word;
Like him to answer to Thy call
And to obey Thee first of all.*