

HOW GOD SPEAKS (Part 1)**ACTS 8:26-35; 9:1-19**

Has God ever spoken to you? If so, how did He speak to you? Was it through the Bible, a conversation with another person, a dream, a set of circumstances, a strong, inner impression on your spirit? What did God say? Was it a message of comfort, challenge, guidance or insight? What effect did it have on you? Did you then go and do something that you would not have done otherwise? Did it change you in some way? Those and other questions are what we're thinking about in a message series I'm calling, "Does God Still Speak Today?" Last week we saw that the Bible itself demonstrates that God speaks. In fact, the question should never be whether God still speaks, but rather if you have ears to hear what He's saying. God desires a relationship with you because He's a personal and relational Being.

We also touched on the question, "How does God speak?" last week and I want to return to that question and its answer this morning. One conclusion we reached is that the Bible itself demonstrates that God speaks in many different ways. Let's look at two Bible passages just now that underline that fact. The first one is the story of an early Christian leader named Philip who God used in a remarkable way in the life of a stranger – a governmental official from Ethiopia. As we read this story observe the different ways God speaks. Now, just in that one story, you can observe several different ways that God speaks. First, God speaks to Philip through an angel. Second, God speaks to Philip through the Holy Spirit – or we might call it an inner leading or prompting of the Spirit. Third, God speaks to the Ethiopian through the Bible – specifically, Isaiah 53. Fourth, God speaks to the Ethiopian through a human; in other words, through Philip's explanation of how Isaiah 53 points to Jesus.

Let's look at another story in the next chapter – Acts 9. It gives the account of how Saul – who became a great Christian leader and apostle and changed his name to Paul – met Jesus and became His follower. Again, look for the different ways God speaks. First, God speaks directly to Saul through a miraculous encounter with intense light, and, secondly, in an audible voice. Third, God speaks through visions: one to Ananias about Saul and another to Saul about Ananias. Four, God speaks into the life of Saul through a human instrument, Ananias. So, then, how does God speak to you and me today?

GOD SPEAKS THROUGH ONE OBJECTIVE VOICE.

What do I mean by "objective" here? This way of God speaking to you has its own independent existence or authority. It's outside of you. Other people can look at this same message from God and receive it as God's message for them as well. There's only one voice that fits that description: the Bible. The Bible is the unique, written voice of God. You can be utterly confident that the Bible gives you all the information you need in this life to begin and to grow in an eternal relationship with God. Here's what God says about His Word. "I don't

think the way you think. The way you work isn't the way I work... The words that come out of my mouth [do] not come back empty-handed. They'll do the work I sent them to do, they'll complete the assignment I gave them." (Is 55:8,11 MSG) Over in the New Testament we read, "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work." (2 Tim 3:16-17 NLT)

Second, the Bible is the authoritative voice of God. Meaning what? There is something final and absolute about it. Every other message you think that you've received from God has to measure up against the standard of the Bible. If it falls short of what the Bible says, you can be sure it wasn't God who spoke to you after all. God doesn't contradict Himself. Sadly, there are people who will tell you in so many words that they felt led by the Holy Spirit to commit adultery when the Bible teaches absolute faithfulness in marriage. Other people try to justify telling a lie, being irresponsible with money, or engaging in gossip when the Bible clearly condemns such behavior. You can be quite sure that when you're tempted to go against a general principle or a specific instruction written down in the Bible, it's not the voice of God speaking into your life.

But how does the Bible actually become the voice of God into your life and mine? It doesn't happen by just reading the words on the page. It's more than just downloading it as an app onto your phone or tablet and physically carrying it around with you everywhere. No, the Bible's voice must be applied to be truly heard. The most predictable way for God to speak to you is to read and then apply God's Word. When you read what it says and you do what it says to do, you increase the odds dramatically that you'll actually hear from God. That's when it's more likely that the Bible will become, as the psalmist says, "... a lamp to guide my feet and a light for my path." (Ps 119:105 NLT)

The Bible has the power to speak directly into a person's heart. By the Holy Spirit, God takes His written Word and applies it to your life and the specific circumstances of your life. There are times when God will take a Bible passage and just almost knock you over the head with it. It becomes the voice of God to you specifically at that moment for that issue. When Martin Luther, the great reformer back in the 1500s, was trying to figure out how a holy God could forgive a miserable sinner like him, it was Romans 1:17 (NIV) that gripped his heart. "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'" A man by the name of George Muller got a burden for all the homeless kids in his city of Bristol, England in the late 1800s. He wanted to build an orphanage but he didn't know how or where the money would come from. God impressed Psalm 81:10 (NIV) upon him. "I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of Egypt. Open wide your mouth and I will fill it." That began an incredible story of supernatural supply for the needs of Muller's orphanage. My nephew is serving in Afghanistan as an Air Force physician. Of course, my sister and brother-in-law

were understandably anxious when he was first deployed, but they told us recently that God impressed Psalm 118:17 (NIV) upon them. "I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the LORD has done." That verse has given them victory over their fears for their son's safety.

What kind of a need do you have or issue are you facing? It's likely that God will speak to you directly through a verse in the Bible. If you struggle with a sense of shame for sins you've committed and find it difficult to believe God can forgive you, how about this verse? "So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus." (Rom 8:1 NLT) Are there times fear grips your spirit? How about meditating on this verse? "Don't be afraid, for I am with you. Don't be discouraged, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will hold you up with my victorious right hand." (Is 41:10 NLT) Each and every one of us is going to go through trials, difficulties and hard places along life's journey. Here's a wonderful promise to take with you. "And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them." (Rom 8:28 NLT) Many of you here today are involved in ministry to others either in this church or outside of it. Have you learned yet that ministry can be very stretching? Sometimes you wonder if your efforts are making any kind of a difference whatsoever. How about marinating in this verse for awhile? "So, my dear brothers and sisters, be strong and immovable. Always work enthusiastically for the Lord, for you know that nothing you do for the Lord is ever useless." (1 Cor 15:58 NLT)

Again, it's in applying God's Word to your life directly that you will hear God speak to you at a very intimate, powerful level. In other words, to hear God's voice requires your effort and discipline. The best way to hear God speak to you is to spend regular time reading, studying and meditating on His Word. There God speaks to you in clear, understandable language. It means more than just reading one verse quickly and getting on with your day. No, stop and invite God to explain His Word to you. Spend some time on it and in it. Stay with a Bible passage until the Holy Spirit enlightens your understanding to its meaning and how it applies to your circumstances.

If applying God's Word to your life doesn't demand something of you, it's probably not going to be very helpful. For example, some people like to use the "open and point" method to discern God's will whenever they get into a crisis. They just close their eyes, open the Bible, and put their finger on any verse hoping there's a message from God in that verse. Be very cautious of trying to hear God's voice like that. Such a method presumes on God. It's really an insult to God when you think about it. After all, God is sovereign and He'll speak to you in His time and in His way. You can't force God to speak to you by picking a random verse just because you want some insight right then and there. God isn't your servant. You're His servant. It's far better to read God's Word regularly with an open heart and then allow Him to speak to you through it as He chooses.

To hear God's voice requires your submission as well. The Bible isn't just a collection of helpful insights that you get to then pick and choose from to motivate you to live a more successful life – like the Christian version of a horoscope. Develop the habit of reading it with a submissive attitude – with an attitude of complete surrender. When you do that God's life and power will start to be released into your life. When you disobey God's Word, you block the blessing He wants to give you. When you obey God's Word, you invite His blessing upon your life. I believe the promise God spoke to Israel is one you can also claim. "Now listen! Today I am giving you a choice between life and death, between prosperity and disaster. For I command you this day to love the LORD your God and to keep his commands, decrees, and regulations by walking in his ways. If you do this, you will live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you...." (Dt. 30:15-16 NLT) It's also just as true that ...

GOD SPEAKS THROUGH MANY SUBJECTIVE VOICES.

How am I using that word "subjective" here? In this context, I mean ways that God might speak to you that are very personal, very unique and aren't intended for anyone but you. They can't be verified or authenticated by others. I want to point out several major voices, but this is by no means an exhaustive list. The first one is creation or nature. You can see something of God's majesty and power in what He has made at the beach or up in the mountains. You can see something of His love for beauty viewing a sunset or all the stars at night. The Old Testament says, "The heavens proclaim the glory of God. The skies display his craftsmanship. Day after day they continue to speak; night after night they make him known." (Ps 19:1-2 NLT). The New Testament says, "For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature...." (Rom. 1:20 NLT)

Maybe it's never happened to you, but the Bible is full of stories of how God speaks to people in dreams and visions. God directed Joseph, Jesus' stepfather, through dreams on three specific occasions at very critical moments. The first time was to encourage him to abandon his plan to divorce Mary. The second time was to take Mary and the newborn Jesus to Egypt to escape murderous King Herod. The third time was to return from Egypt to Nazareth. Does God still speak through dreams today? I was fascinated to read that between 1991 and 2007, Fuller Theological Seminary's School of Intercultural Studies conducted a survey among 750 Muslims who had converted to Christianity. Those surveyed represented 50 ethnic groups from 30 different countries. One of the nine most cited reasons for conversion to the Christian faith was God speaking to them through dreams and visions.

The Bible isn't very precise in telling us the difference between a dream and a vision. You could say that when God chooses to speak to you while you're asleep it's a dream, while a vision occurs when you're awake. In Isaiah 6, the

prophet Isaiah had an incredible vision of God Himself in the throne room of Heaven. Peter, Jesus' disciple and a great leader among the first Christians, had a powerful vision in Acts 10 that led to sharing the good news about Jesus with non-Jews. Do you have to go into a kind of trance-like state for God to speak to you in a vision? Perhaps. But I also think that God can speak to us through what you might call visual imagery. I remember someone telling me that when he was a kid, he stole a baseball glove. Every time he was in church, or tried to pray or just connect with God, that visual image of that baseball glove came into his mind. That continued until he confessed his sin and made it right. Or perhaps God will keep bringing a person into your mind – not just the person's name but his or her visual image. Could God be trying to speak to you about that person – to pray for or to reach out to him or her in some way? Probably.

God speaks through signs and wonders. When the second Gulf War began, the US military started by bombing Baghdad and called it "shock and awe." Well, God is more than capable of His own "shock and awe"! In the Old Testament, God appeared and spoke to His people from Mt. Sinai. "On the morning of the third day, thunder roared and lightning flashed, and a dense cloud came down on the mountain. There was a long, loud blast from a ram's horn, and all the people trembled." (Ex 19:16 NLT) Jesus' miracles fall into this category. They tell us important truths about God. God has absolute power – over nature, over illness, over supernatural evil, over death. God is full of compassion. God's kingdom has arrived. The Bible says, "The disciples saw Jesus do many other miraculous signs in addition to the ones recorded in this book. But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in him you will have life by the power of his name." (John 20:30-31 NLT) God is still fully capable of speaking to us through miracles today.

God speaks through angels. They're very prominent in the story of Jesus' birth. Angels appeared to both Mary and Joseph as well as to the shepherds. There's an intersection between Heaven and Earth through the coming of Jesus, and angels are frequently found at the intersection. There are numerous stories today about people who believe they have been spoken to by angels. Many of the stories are believable. It's also wise to be very discerning. Satan is himself an angelic being and the Bible tells us that He can disguise himself as "an angel of light" and try to deceive people. Any angelic message needs to be measured against - what? The Bible – God's one and only objective voice.

God speaks through other people – particularly His people. One example in the Old Testament were all of the prophets. We read this verse there, "Indeed, the Sovereign LORD never does anything until he reveals his plans to his servants the prophets." (Amos 3:7 NLT) In the New Testament, it seems that the emphasis shifts to how God speaks through the Church – the gathering of God's people. Because the Holy Spirit now indwells every believer, God can speak into your life through any believer regardless of age, education or gender. But it's also true that He speaks most often through those who have walked with Him the

most faithfully. By the way, don't limit yourself to hearing God through just one fellow believer. There's wisdom in being open to how God might speak through many different people who walk with God. The Bible says, "For lack of guidance a nation falls, but many advisers make victory sure.... Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed." (Pr 11:14, 15:22 NLT)

Pastor and author, Gordon MacDonald, tells about a time when he was in Japan on a speaking tour with a close personal friend. This friend was a number of years older than Gordon. As they walked down the street in Yokohama, Japan, the name of a common friend came up, and Gordon said something unkind about that person. It was sarcastic. It was cynical. It was a put-down. His older friend stopped, turned, and got right up in Gordon's face. He said, "A man who says he loves God would not say a thing like that about a friend." He could have put a knife into Gordon's ribs, and the pain would not have been any less. But Gordon says that there have been many times since that uncomfortable rebuke that he's been saved from making a jerk of himself. When he's been tempted to say something unkind about a brother or sister, he hears his friend's voice say, "Gordon, a man who says he loves God would not speak in such a way about a friend." I can tell you from personal experience that God has saved me from many mistakes because at strategic, critical times He sent godly people into my life with a message from Him.

And then, God speaks through circumstances. Circumstances take many forms – a job offer or a job loss, a marriage proposal, a divorce, a promotion, a natural disaster, a sudden death, a car accident, an unexpected gift, a serious illness, a failure or a success. The key is not the circumstance itself but what God wants to tell you about Himself, or you or just life itself through that event. I'm not referring to every last circumstance in life, but a special kind of occurrence because it becomes the platform or the medium by which God wants to send a message. If you've been a follower of Jesus for any length of time, you've probably had discussions about "open and closed doors." Where did that come from? It might go back to something Paul wrote about his ministry at Ephesus in one of his New Testament letters. "There is a wide-open door for a great work here, although many oppose me." (1 Cor 16:9 NLT) Another verse in the Bible says, "To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open." (Rev. 3:7 NIV) Open and closed doors is an image that refers to discerning God's will by observing what circumstantial doors God opens or closes. If God opens the door to a new job, that's because it's God's will for you. If God closes the door to move to Tahiti and live on the beach full time, it's because it's not God's will for your life!

Hearing God speak through your circumstances isn't foolproof, however. It can be confusing! Not every "open door" is necessarily God's will. By the same token, some "closed doors" can seemingly thwart God's plans for you and you might come to understand why only many years after the event. All of life's

circumstances have to be looked at through the lens of the Bible – the principles and truths that we find there. Focus on Jesus rather than your circumstances. Don't allow any circumstance to make you question God's love for you – especially the hard, painful stuff that comes your way. Don't try to figure God out based on your circumstances, instead go to God and ask Him to help you see your situation from His perspective. Be willing to wait on the Holy Spirit when you don't understand what God is trying to say in your circumstances. Be patient and trust God at all times. When He does make His message clear, then adjust your life to God and, by all means, do whatever He wants you to do.

Back when the telegraph was the fastest means of long-distance communication, a young man applied for a job as a Morse code operator. When he arrived, he entered a large, noisy office. In the background a telegraph clacked away. A sign at the receptionist's desk instructed job applicants to fill out a form and wait until they were summoned to the interview. The young man completed his form and sat down with seven other applicants. After a few minutes, the young man stood up, crossed the room to the door of an inner office, and walked right in. The other applicants wondered what was going on. Why had this guy been so bold? What did he know that they didn't? Within a few minutes the young man emerged from the office escorted by the interviewer, who announced to the other applicants, "Gentlemen, thank you very much for coming, but the job has been filled by this young man." The other applicants began grumbling to each other. One of them said, "Wait a minute--I don't understand something. He was the last one to come in, and we never even got a chance to be interviewed. Yet he got the job. That's not fair." The employer responded, "I'm sorry, but all the time you've been sitting here, the telegraph has been ticking out the following message in Morse code: 'If you understand this message, then come right on in. The job is yours.' None of you heard it or understood it. This young man did. So the job is his." Does God still speak today? Indeed, He does speak in many different ways. The real question is, "Do you have ears to hear?", "Are you listening?" and "Are you doing what He says?"

*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.*