

**HOW GOD SPEAKS (Part 2)****JOHN 10:1-6, 14-16, 27; ACTS 13:1-3**

Charlie Frank raised an elephant named Neeta from birth and trained her as a circus performer. Once he retired, he gave Neeta to the San Diego Zoo. They had not seen each other for over fifteen years when Charlie went to visit Neeta at the zoo. Across a distance of about 100 yards, Charlie called Neeta. Immediately, she recognized his voice, came to him and performed her old routines on command. Maybe you don't like being compared to an elephant, but Jesus compared you to a sheep. Just like Neeta, the elephant, recognized the voice of her old trainer, every true follower of Jesus can recognize the voice of the good shepherd. That was Jesus' point in the first scripture passage I want you to read with me from John. When it comes to hearing God speak, what's Jesus' point? Like a shepherd, God has a voice and, like sheep, His people come to recognize and respond to the sound of that voice in their lives.

Does God still speak today? Yes, the Bible is very clear about the fact that we have a God who loves to communicate with us and does so in a variety of ways. A couple of weeks ago I shared with you the first part of this two part message on how God speaks. You might recall that I said then that God has one objective voice, the Bible, and many subjective voices: creation or nature, dreams and visions, signs and wonders, angels, other people and the circumstances of life itself – just to name some of the major ones. There was at least one other subjective voice I've left for consideration today: leadings of the Holy Spirit. In my humble opinion, this is probably the way that God communicates or speaks to us most often; therefore, I wanted to spend an entire message on leadings of the Holy Spirit. One way to get at this subject is to ask and try to answer three key questions, so here's the first question:

**WHAT ARE LEADINGS AND WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?**

The Bible is full of conversations between God and ordinary people like you and me. Did they actually hear God speak to them in an audible voice? Sometimes, yes, but in most cases it appears to have been a strong impression, an inner prompting or a leading of the Holy Spirit upon the human spirit of an individual or a group. Here's one example in Acts 13:1-3. That description doesn't suggest to me that everyone heard the voice of God audibly. Instead, they all were given the same strong, inner spiritual impression or leading. Now, the process of being prompted by the Holy Spirit is never explained, analyzed or described in detail in the Bible. Two weeks ago we looked at the story of how Philip, an early Christian leader, was used by God to share his faith with an Ethiopian government official. At one point in the story, we're told, "The Spirit told Philip, 'Go to that chariot and stay near it.'" (Acts 8:29 NIV) That's it. It's simply reported in a very matter of fact way. The Bible says that God in His essence is Spirit meaning He doesn't have a physical body. It seems that He has chosen to communicate with us most of the time through strong impressions and promptings of His Holy Spirit

upon our human spirits – through and by what goes on in our minds, our thoughts, our emotions, the inner, unseen parts of who we are.

Now, why is it important to pay attention to these inner promptings? Well, your eternal destiny is determined by your response to God's leadings. Jesus said, "For no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them to me...." (John 6:44 NLT) That statement tells me that every true follower of Jesus has heard God speak, because it was His voice that brought to you an awareness that you needed to acknowledge Jesus as your Lord and receive Him as your Savior. Without the Holy Spirit's leading you would never have put your trust in Jesus. Why are leadings important? Your sense of assurance that you belong to God depends on listening to what the Holy Spirit speaks into your spirit on this matter. The Bible says, "For his Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God's children." (Rom 8:16 NLT) Why are leadings important? Your growth as a follower of Jesus depends in part on your being able to receive and respond to the Holy Spirit's promptings. Jesus said, "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth...." (John 16:33 NLT) So many of life's major decisions and choices - marriage, employment, what church you're going to be a part of - depend on being able to discern the leadings of the Holy Spirit accurately. Now, here's a second question:

### **WHAT ARE GOD'S LEADINGS ABOUT?**

Let me suggest three major kinds of leadings that God gives His children. The first one is a word of comfort. In the midst of a problem or a crisis situation, God might take a Scripture verse and impress it deeply upon your spirit. At other times, He might simply speak a message deep into your spirit reminding you of a great truth about Himself. A man named Troy decided to jump on his motorcycle and head to his health club to relieve some job stress. Minutes later he found himself lying in the intersection of two roads in his neighborhood – his skull fractured and his brain exposed. He'd been hit by a 16 year old girl who pulled out into the road without looking both ways. She'd been fighting over a cell phone with her friends in the car. Troy only remembers a woman kneeling over him, grabbing a shirt from his gym bag, lifting up and holding his head together until the emergency crew arrived. The woman would be unaccounted for in the police record, but Troy knows she was God's messenger of tender care at that critical moment in his life. God impressed this verse upon him whenever he thinks back on that situation, "But you, LORD, are a shield around me, my glory, the One who lifts my head high." (Ps 3:3 NIV)

The second kind of leading is a word of correction. God is faithful to warn you when you're about to sin and convict you after you've sinned. The Holy Spirit can speak words into your spirit that can encourage an attitude adjustment instantaneously. A young woman name Fara tells about a time when she was sitting in her car crying her eyes out over a painful breakup she'd just gone through. She was feeling devastated at a deep level. At the time, she wasn't

even a follower of Jesus yet, but for some reason, she cried out, “God why does it hurt so much when I’m just trying to love someone?” To her surprise, God impressed this message on her spirit, “Fara, that’s exactly how I feel when I keep trying to love you.” Thud. Fara says that leading hit dead center.

A third kind of leading is a call to action. It might be the most common kind of prompting of the Holy Spirit. God wants you to do something for Him – bring healing to a relationship, impact a neighborhood, encourage a friend, give a tangible resource, seize an opportunity to serve. After all, the Bible says, “For we are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.” (Eph 2:10 NLT) It might be a relational action where God moves you to repair a broken relationship or to speak a word of encouragement into a discouraged person’s life. It might be a financial action. The Holy Spirit prompts you to meet a financial need in someone else’s life or to support a specific ministry or missionary. God’s leading might be to take a spiritual action towards another person. I love the story of how the Holy Spirit directed a woman named Verna to invite her difficult and degrading boss, a man named John, to visit her church. At first, Verna said, “No way.” She went back and forth with the Holy Spirit but finally she got up out of her chair, walked into John’s office and invited him and his wife to join her and her husband at church. Much to her amazement, a few days later, Verna’s boss said yes to the invitation. John and his wife not only attended the next Sunday but eventually they surrendered their lives to Jesus, got baptized and become active members of the same church!

And then there’s a fourth kind of leading which is a call to service. A woman named Bev rented her condo to her own daughter. One night some kids accidentally broke a window at the condo. Her daughter got the name and phone number of the boy who broke the window, but when she finally reached the kid’s mother, it became apparent very quickly that the woman didn’t have the funds to pay for a replacement window. Bev had to pay to have the window repaired. Several months passed and Bev felt prompted to call the woman a few days before Thanksgiving. Instead of pressuring her to repay her for the cost of the broken window, Bev said to the woman, “I was just heading out to the grocery store. May I bring you a Thanksgiving meal?” A few hours later with a deep sense of joy, Bev dropped off overflowing grocery bags at the woman’s home. The Bible says, “If someone has enough money to live well and sees a brother or sister in need but shows no compassion—how can God’s love be in that person? Dear children, let’s not merely say that we love each other; let us show the truth by our actions.” (1 John 3:17-18 NLT) Now, here’s a third question:

### **HOW CAN YOU BE SURE IT’S GOD’S VOICE YOU’RE HEARING?**

You think you’re getting a leading of the Holy Spirit, but how can you be sure it’s really from God? Maybe it’s your own sinful, subconscious desires seeking fulfillment. Worse yet, maybe it’s the Devil messing with you and trying to

deceive you. There's really only one good answer to this question. It demands experience. Think again of Jesus' analogy of hearing the shepherd's voice. When a lamb is born, it doesn't know who the shepherd is or his voice. It learns these things through experience. By the time it becomes a mature, adult sheep, it knows the shepherd is there to protect and care for it and it has learned how to recognize many different aspects of the shepherd's voice. It's much the same with you and me. You will likely not recognize God's voice the first time He speaks to you. Many times God speaks to us in gentle, unremarkable ways. Someone might have to tell you it was God who spoke to you, like Eli had to tell the boy Samuel in the Bible story we looked at a few weeks ago. Only later will you develop the confidence to distinguish and recognize His voice as His voice without assistance. That ability only comes through experience.

Here are two thoughts about experience. First of all, you can develop your spiritual ears. How do you do that? Well, sincerely begin to ask God frequently and fervently to speak into your life and improve your hearing. Then, reduce the noise in your life. Shut off the TV, the radio, your I-Phone, get off of Facebook, and learn how to be quietly available to God. And, by all means, start to fill your brain with Scripture. Read it. Memorize it. Study it. Marinate in it. Secondly, you will make mistakes. Hopefully, not major ones on major life issues, but you will get it wrong sometimes. So, relax. That's how we learn. You will think God spoke to you about something and He didn't, or you will hear Him speak and ignore it or fail to act upon His leading. When that happens have the humility to say, "Wow, Lord, I really got it wrong that time. I messed up. But please keep speaking into my life and please keep helping me to discern Your voice."

Another answer to this question is simply that leadings demand discernment. That's clearly implied in the Acts 13 passage we read earlier today. It says, "While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off." (Acts 13:2-3 NIV) These Jesus followers got a joint leading from the Holy Spirit while they worshiped and fasted. What did they do next? The text implies that they fasted and prayed some more. In other words, they tested this leading to make sure it was really the Spirit speaking to them. Then, they obeyed. Practicing discernment is encouraged in the Bible. It says, "...test everything that is said. Hold on to what is good." (1 Th 5:22 NLT) It also says, "Dear friends, do not believe everyone who claims to speak by the Spirit. You must test them to see if the spirit they have comes from God. For there are many false prophets in the world." (1 John 4:1 NLT)

When you think you're receiving a leading from the Holy Spirit, here are a few discerning questions to ask and try to answer. First, is it scriptural? Everything God says is consistent with His Word. God doesn't contradict Himself. Now, be careful here. Just because a leading comes wrapped up in a Bible verse, doesn't mean it comes from God. Satan's temptation of Jesus reveals that Satan

probably knows the Bible better than you do and can twist it for his evil purposes. So, ask yourself, "Does this leading match up with the broad principles and truths found in the Bible?" Second, is this leading wise? Sometimes foolish Christians have bought into the idea that if it's odd, it must be God! For example, be careful when a leading demands that you make a major, life-changing decision quickly. Proceed with caution when a leading requires you to go deeply into debt or put someone else in a position of awkwardness, compromise or danger. Yes, there are times God asks us to do unusual things, but most of the time His leadings pass the general wisdom or common sense test.

Third, is this leading consistent with God's character? God's leadings usually involve being a servant in some way. They're usually invitations to humble yourself, serve someone or give something away. Any voice that promises you total exemption from suffering or the possibility of failure is most certainly not God's voice. Ask yourself, "Can I see Jesus doing what I'm being led to do right now? Is this about exalting Jesus or about meeting some ego need in my own life?" Fourth, is this leading consistent with your personal, internal wiring? Be careful about following a leading that is totally foreign to the person God has made you to be: your natural talents, your education, your experience thus far in life or what you enjoy doing. Yes, God can endorse a 180 degree turn in life, but it will likely need to be affirmed in a variety of other ways. Finally, can godly people affirm it? Test leadings within the context of honest, loving relationships with other Jesus followers. When you think you get a leading to do something, but it creates a sense of unrest in the spirits of mature Christian friends, watch out! These are the people who want God's best for you.

Before refrigerators, people used ice houses to preserve their food. Ice houses had thick walls, no windows, and a tightly fitted door. In winter, when streams and lakes were frozen, large blocks of ice were cut, hauled to the ice houses, and covered with sawdust. Often the ice would last well into the summer. One man lost a valuable watch while working in an ice house. He searched diligently for it, carefully raking through the sawdust, but didn't find it. His fellow workers also looked, but their efforts, too, proved futile. A small boy who heard about the fruitless search slipped into the ice house during the noon hour and soon emerged with the watch. Amazed, the men asked him how he found it. "I closed the door," the boy replied, "lay down in the sawdust, and kept very still. Soon I heard the watch ticking." The question is not whether God is speaking, but whether we are being still enough and quiet enough to hear His voice.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He has a voice and He speaks with it. The more you hear His voice, the more you will come to recognize it, expect it and follow it. He's speaking. Are you really listening? *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.*