

## **WHEN GOD SPEAKS, DO YOU OBEY? DEUT. 30:11-20; MARK 4:23-25**

There's nothing automatic about hearing God's voice. It's like the child who was told by his dad during a symphony orchestra concert, "Listen for the flutes in this song. Don't they sound beautiful?" The child, unable to distinguish the flutes, replied with a puzzled look, "What flutes, daddy?" The child first needed to learn what flutes sound like on their own, separate from the whole orchestra, before he was able to hear them in a symphony. It's much the same with us as children of God. We must tune our ears to hear God's voice. Unless we take the time to hear His voice in the quiet moments of life, we'll never be able to hear Him in the full symphony of sounds that daily life offers.

This morning I conclude a four part message series entitled "Does God Still Speak Today?" I want to leave you with five simple principles that the Bible both assumes and proclaims in many places. Let's consider just two texts this morning that underline those five principles. The first one is in the Old Testament: Deuteronomy 30:11-20. What's the scene and situation here? Moses, the godly leader of the people of Israel, was about to die. But before Moses passed into eternity, he took the opportunity to renew the covenant between God and the people of Israel. A covenant is similar to a contract – a formal agreement between individuals or groups. Israel had entered into a covenant with God at Mt. Sinai forty years before. God promised to protect and care for the people and lead them into full possession of the land of Canaan – present day Israel. But God expected something in return: the people's worship and obedience. Almost immediately, the people of Israel failed to keep their part of the covenant. As a result, God refused to let them enter Canaan and He allowed all the adult generations of Israelites to wander around in the desert wilderness for 40 years until they died off. In Deuteronomy 30, Moses is encouraging a new generation of Israelites to renew this covenant with God that their parents and grandparents had rejected.

Now turn with me to the New Testament and to something Jesus said in Mark 4. Again, what's the scene and the situation? It's early in Jesus' ministry. In chapter 4, Jesus tells a story about a farmer who goes out and plants seed in his land. Some of the planted seed produces a wonderful crop while other seed, for a variety of reasons, never germinates and never produces anything. Then Jesus explains the meaning of this story to His bewildered disciples. The seed is God's Word or His voice. The land or the soil is people's lives. Some people hear God's voice, they respond and they end up living incredibly productive lives. Other people ignore or resist God's voice. As a result, their lives amount to nothing in the end. And as a kind of a summary, Jesus says the following in v. 23-25. Those two texts underline five simple – but important – principles when it comes to God speaking and our hearing. Here's the first one:

### **PRINCIPLE #1: GOD SPEAKS.**

Both Moses and Jesus assume that God speaks to us, don't they? Moses is a bit "in your face" about it, actually. "Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, 'Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?' Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, 'Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?' No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it." (Deut 30:11-14 NIV) Jesus is a bit more subtle, but His assumption is exactly the same. "If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear. Consider carefully what you hear..." (Mark 4:23-24 NIV) Of course, God speaks. Of course, God has a voice. The Bible is utterly clear about this matter. God is a Person who loves to communicate with His creatures and does so in a variety of ways. God has spoken and still speaks to us in His Word, the Bible. God has spoken and still speaks to us in dreams, visions, nature, signs and wonders, through angels, in circumstances, through other people, and in inner promptings or leadings of the Holy Spirit. The real question is not, "Does God still speak today?" The real question is "Are you listening?" Just because you don't hear God speak to you doesn't mean that God isn't speaking to you. It's far more likely that the problem is that your spiritual ears aren't attuned to God's voice. Let's move on....

## **PRINCIPLE #2: GOD SPEAKS IN ORDER TO ACCOMPLISH HIS PURPOSES.**

That's definitely an assumption by both Moses and Jesus. God had called out the people of Israel for a specific purpose: to be the channel of God's revelation and salvation for the rest of the world. That's why God had spoken to them. In Jesus' story, the purpose of the seed – God's Word or His voice – is to produce spiritual fruitfulness. "Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown." (Mark 4:20 NIV) It's important to remember why God speaks to you. Yes, of course, God often speaks to us in order to bring comfort, reinforce a wonderful truth or provide a necessary perspective. But God's ultimate purpose is not to amuse or entertain you. It's not even to guide you, to lead you or to help solve your problems in life. 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 just trying to hear God for selfish, self-centered reasons, you'll be disappointed. If your life isn't devoted to His purposes, why should God speak to you much at all? Are you here to do God's will or do you think God exists to do your will? Are you just trying to use God to advance your own projects and plans in life? If so, don't expect to hear God speak much into your life.

The sad reality is that very few human beings really want to hear what God has to say to us. The fact is that we rarely want to listen to His voice unless we get

into serious trouble or until we're faced with a difficult decision. But if you're a person who sincerely wants to hear God's voice, you're just as eager to hear from Him when life is uneventful and kind of dull. Let me ask you, do you seek God's voice only when life's circumstances become uncomfortable? On the one hand, your failure to hear His voice when you want might be due to the fact that you don't in general want to hear it, but only when you think you need it. On the other hand, when your life is truly devoted to doing God's will first and foremost, He has every reason to speak to you and He will.

### **PRINCIPLE #3: TRULY HEARING GOD MEANS OBEYING GOD.**

Can you hear God's voice and ignore it, reject it or twist it? Of course, it happens every day all over the world! Even as followers of Jesus indwelt with the Holy Spirit, it probably happens in your life and mine more often than we would care to admit. Both Moses and Jesus assume that you have a kind of choice in how you hear God's voice. Moses says, "No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it. See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction." (Deut. 30:14-15 NIV) He points out the wonderful benefits of doing whatever God wants you to do. Then, he spells out the dire consequences of hearing God's voice but not doing what God says to do. Again, Jesus said, "If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear. Consider carefully what you hear..." (Mark 4:23-24 NIV) You make the choice to hear God authentically and correctly. The bottom line? Truly hearing God means obeying God. That's how you prove that you have truly heard the voice of God.

However God might speak into your life – a Bible verse He impresses on your mind, a divinely orchestrated circumstance, a piece of advice from a godly friend, a gentle leading of the Holy Spirit you receive in a time of prayer – it will likely require you to adjust yourself to God. It will not be about God adapting Himself to your plans and desires. It's impossible to truly hear God and then obey God without making some kind of adjustment or change in your life. I think of Jesus' story about the prodigal – or the lost – son. There was that hungry, dirty young man living with a bunch of pigs after squandering his inheritance on prostitutes and parties. How did Jesus put it? "When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, 'At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! I will go home to my father and say, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.'" So he returned home to his father..." (Luke 15:17-20 NIV) The voice of God spoke into that young man's life and he obeyed! Truly hearing God always means that you obey God.

### **PRINCIPLE #4: DISOBEYING GOD'S VOICE INVITES DISASTER.**

Both Moses' challenge and Jesus' story underline that truth clearly. Moses tells the people of Israel and us, "But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship

them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed....” (Deut. 30:17-18 NIV) In his story about the four kinds of soil, Jesus makes it clear that three kinds of soil – or three ways of disobeying God’s voice – end up in disaster.

When you disobey God’s voice you invite disaster upon yourself. That’s a principle that runs through the whole of Scripture. I wish that even God’s people would realize the truth of that principle to a greater degree than we do. Let’s talk about money and sex, for example! What does the Bible say about money? In general, it says work faithfully to earn a living. Learn how to live within your means. Manage and save your money responsibly. Avoid debt like the plague. Return to the Lord as a beginning minimum the tithe or 10% of your income. Have enough extra to help those in need. And yet over the years as a pastor, I’ve seen so many Christians ignore God’s voice in the area of money. As a result they invite financial disaster upon themselves which often leads to other disasters in other areas of life. What does the Bible say about sex? It’s God great and beautiful creation reserved for a husband and a wife. Sex outside of marriage is not an alternative lifestyle choice according to God; it’s disobedience to His voice. Yet again, I’ve seen too many Christians over the years listen to the voice of our culture rather than the voice of God in this area of sex and they invite disaster into their lives – spiritual, relational, emotional and physical disaster.

Disobeying God can have other disastrous effects. Did you know it can increase the probability that God will stop speaking to you? God is a Person and many of the laws of relationship apply to your relationship with Him as well. If you’re speaking to someone and he or she persistently and stubbornly ignores you, what do you do? You stop speaking to him or her! You conclude it’s a waste of time and energy. May I suggest that an entrenched, rebellious, stubborn attitude towards God’s voice invites Him to stop speaking into your life? I actually think Jesus alludes to that possibility in Mark 4. He says there, “Consider carefully what you hear,’ he continued. ‘With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.” (Mark 4:24-25 NIV) I’ve thought the last part of that passage refers to giving God our time, our talents and our treasure, but I wonder now if Jesus was in fact referring to this whole matter of hearing and obeying God’s voice. In other words, if you listen to the voice of God and obey it, you will start to hear it more. But if you resist His voice by ignoring or rejecting it, even the little that you still hear from God will be taken from you. What could be a greater disaster then God no longer speaking to you?

Pastor and author, Henry Blackaby, writes about the first funeral he ever conducted. It was for a beautiful three year old little girl. She was dearly loved by her family, but she was spoiled. He’d observed how she loved to ignore her parents’ instructions. When they told her to come, she would run away. When they told her to sit down, she’d stand up. Foolishly, her parents thought her behavior was cute and they’d just laugh at her disobedient antics. One day the gate in their front yard was left open accidentally. The little girl took off at full

speed through the gate towards the street. To their horror Mom and Dad saw a car racing down that road towards her. They both screamed at their little girl to stop. She paused for a moment, laughed gleefully, and then turned and ran directly into the path of that oncoming car. “Today I have given you the choice between life and death, between blessings and curses. Now I call on heaven and earth to witness the choice you make. Oh, that you would choose life, so that you and your descendants might live! You can make this choice by loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and committing yourself firmly to him. This is the key to your life....” (Deut. 30:19-20 NLT)

### **PRINCIPLE #5: OBEYING GOD’S VOICE INVITES BLESSING**

Obedying God’s voice – we do what we hear Him say – is the choice we all need to make every day. Obedience to the voice of God invites His blessing. Moses says, “For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess....” (Deut. 30:16 NIV) Jesus tells us about the one soil that produced a bumper crop. In other words, blessing everywhere! Submissiveness to God’s voice invites God to continue to speak into your life. Jesus says, “With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more.” (Mark 4:24 NIV)

Just a clarification about that word “blessing”, however. Yes, in general, if you obey the voice of God, you will probably have less problems and enjoy a happier life overall. But, we have a human tendency when we hear that word – “blessing” - to equate it with no problems, no challenges, great health all the time, ever increasing financial wealth, and everything going our way. Blessing, from a biblical perspective, is all wrapped up with whatever advances the Kingdom of God in this world, not what makes life easy and pleasant for us. Last week we looked at how Saul (who changed his name to Paul) and Barnabas – two early Christian leaders – heard the voice of God along with other leaders. The Bible says, “...the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’” (Acts 13:2 NIV) So, off they went to share the message of Jesus with lost people in cities and communities in what are now the countries of Cyprus, Turkey and Greece. What an incredible blessing!

If you’ve read the book of Acts, you know the rest of the story, don’t you? In some places, Paul and Barnabas were warmly embraced and lives were transformed, but in other areas people weren’t thrilled by them at all and these two faithful servants of Jesus were persecuted. In one city, Paul was almost stoned to death. Meaning what? The blessing and the reward is in knowing that God is using you to further His kingdom and release His grace into this world. Don’t ever buy into the idea that everything God prompts you to do will be uncomplicated or low cost. Sometimes God will ask you to carry heavy loads and He’ll call you into difficult assignments. To put it another way, obeying God isn’t always easy, or fun or pleasant. But it is, nevertheless, always a blessing.

When God speaks into your life and asks you to do something for Him, it will often mean some kind of giving up: your agenda, your finances, your priorities, your comfort. Sometimes the safe and the predictable have to be given up. This is what a life fully surrendered to God looks like. Obeying the Holy Spirit will lead you into places you've never been, challenge you in ways you've never been challenged and invite you into levels of sacrifice you never dreamed you would make. Why do it, then? Because you love Jesus! Also, it's the knowledge that you're helping to build what's most important and what will never end - the Kingdom of God. It's the promise that God will indeed reward all those who have not just heard His voice but have obeyed that voice fully and freely.

At age five or six, Aaron McManus, began to ask his dad, Erwin, a pastor, "What does God's voice sound like?" Erwin didn't know how to answer. A few years later, Aaron went off to his first junior high church camp. In the middle of the week, Erwin went up to see the kids from the church. He learned that his son, Aaron, had started a fight with another kid but had been held back by his friends. He was unrepentant and wanted to leave camp. He'd pulled together his stuff and shoved it into the car. Erwin suggested they talk before driving away. Father and son sat on two large rocks in the middle of the woods. "Aaron," Erwin asked, "is there any voice inside you telling you what you should do?" "Yes," he nodded. "What's the voice telling you?" "That I should stay and work it out." "Can you identify that voice?" "Yes," Aaron said immediately, "It's God." It was the moment his dad had waited for. "Aaron, do you realize what just happened? You heard God's voice. He spoke to you from within your soul. Forget everything else that's happened. God spoke to you and you were able to recognize him."

Aaron's response was: "Well, I'm still not doing what God said." Erwin explained to him that that was his choice, but this is what would happen. If he rejected the voice of God coming from deep within and chose to disobey his guidance, his heart would become hardened, and his ears would become dull. If he continued on that path, there would be a day when he would never again hear the voice of God. But if he treasured God's voice however it came to him—through the Scriptures, through his conscience—and responded to him with obedience, then his heart would be softened, and his ears would always be able to hear the whisper of God into his soul. Aaron chose to stay. It was a critically important decision. If he had chosen differently, he would have begun walking down the path toward nominal discipleship. Perhaps he never would have rejected the Christian faith overtly. He might have even still attended church faithfully and be considered a good man by most. But he would begin to lose the ability to discern the voice of God and the precious relationship that goes with it.

*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.*