

Learn to Discern the Voice of God

Many people claim to hear the Lord speaking, but what they hear is sometimes questionable. Here are some simple rules to help you discern His voice.

Arriving at my hotel room in New York after ministering at a conference, I crawled into bed completely exhausted. My plan was to get a good night's sleep. But God had another idea.

In the middle of the night, the Lord woke me out of a sound sleep and told me to go to the lobby. I hurriedly got dressed and went downstairs.

The clerk working the night shift at the front desk was bored and delighted for someone to chat with. She did not yet know the Lord, and we had a great conversation as I shared the gospel with her.

I also shared some of the wonderful things the Lord had done on my recent trip to the United Kingdom and how He had spoken to me there about something very specific. Suddenly my new friend interjected: "I wish I could hear God clearly like that!"

But then her face fell. After a thoughtful pause she continued, "Actually, no, I don't." She was sure she would not like the things God would say to her.

This young lady had just expressed the secret fear of many Christians: They would love to hear their Lord's voice more clearly, but they are afraid of what He might say. What these fearful believers don't realize is that there is a warmth in God's voice when He speaks to His children. He has many wonderful and encouraging things to say to us.

It seems as if one person after another comes up to me and says: "Teresa, that is fine for you. But I can't hear God's voice like you do."

Sure you can. You are God's child. He has created you with ears to hear His voice (see John 10:3, 16, 27). It is God's desire that every Christian recognize His voice. And this is something you can learn to do. God wants to communicate with you even more than you want to hear Him.

The first step in learning to hear God's voice is understanding the things He does not say. You can eliminate certain "words" because God simply would never say them. Knowing what the voice of God does not sound like will eliminate confusion and help you hear Him clearly.

That's Not God

First and foremost, God never says anything that contradicts Scripture.

God has spoken to us through the Bible—this is His word. He would never say anything that would contradict what He has already said in the Bible.

You don't have to be a Bible scholar to hear God's voice clearly, but the more you know the Bible, the easier it will be to discern His voice. By studying Scripture, you will get to know how He thinks, and you will become familiar with what He has to say. Then it will be easier to hear Him clearly when He speaks directly to you.

If you ever think you've heard God tell you something that contradicts Scripture, then you have heard wrong. Go back to God and tell Him what you thought you heard; then ask Him to show you what He really has to say about that issue.

Second, God's voice is not the voice of anxiety, unsettledness

or exhaustion.

Have you ever been in a situation in which you were extremely tired? Perhaps your friend was trying to talk to you, but you had a hard time concentrating and listening because you were so exhausted. When you are tired, it is much harder to follow a conversation.

The same principle applies when we listen to God. God desires for us to walk in His rest and peace. But when we are anxious, unsettled or exhausted, it is harder to hear His voice.

There have been many times in which I have cried out to the Lord for clarity on something, desperate to hear from Him right away. But instead of answering immediately, God put me to sleep. I woke up rested, and then I could hear His voice much more clearly. And that is when He would speak to me on the matter.

I remember the time I was organizing an overseas ministry trip. I was trying to make all sorts of decisions, such as who should be on the team, how long we should go for and what travel arrangements should be made. I could not seem to hear God's voice on any of these matters.

Meanwhile, a close friend and I were in the midst of a serious disagreement. Each time I would try to pray for direction about the trip, I would start thinking about my friend and worrying about our relationship. I was in turmoil because of this, and it was affecting my ability to hear God.

I telephoned a prophet friend and asked him to seek God for a directive word about the trip. The word he came back with surprised me.

He said that I needed to sit down and find peace with God about the situation with my friend. After that, I would be able to hear God clearly for direction.

I spent the rest of that evening praying, and I finally did receive peace about the relationship. That night I had a wonderful and restful sleep.

The next morning I woke up with a clarity about every detail of the trip. Everything fell quickly into place. This happened because I dealt with the thing that was making me anxious and unable to hear God. Then I could hear Him clearly, and I got the direction I needed.

God does not speak to us from a place of anxiety and unsettledness. Instead He helps us deal with the things that brought us to that state, and He has us rest and get our balance back. Then He speaks to us clearly.

Third, God's voice is not the voice of obscurity.

Sometimes people make it a lot harder to hear God than it should be. They think that God is going to talk to them in obscure riddles or other cryptic means. They assume He will be hard to understand and that it will be a test to see whether or not they can discern what He has to say on a particular matter.

That is not what the Bible says. God speaks clearly to those who seek Him (see James 1:5).

In the film *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, Harrison Ford's character was on a quest to find the Holy Grail. He finally discovered a series of cryptic clues in some ancient language. They turned out to be a series of obscure riddles leading to the Grail. The catch: You had to be incredibly clever to figure them out—the average man didn't have a chance.

To make matters worse, a very high price tag was attached to the riddles. If you guessed wrong, or if you weren't quick enough, you'd pay with your life.

One of the riddles was, "Only the penitent shall pass." Indiana walked along a passage in a dark cavern, muttering: "Only the penitent shall pass. Only the penitent shall pass." He finally realized penitent men approach God on their knees, so he dropped to the floor.

A giant axe suddenly came swinging out from a wall. It would have chopped him in half if he had been standing, but it passed over his head. He had figured out the riddle in just the nick of time. If it had taken him a second longer, he would have died.

Some of us view God's voice like this obscure set of riddles. We think God is very mysterious and that it is some type of major, difficult test to figure out what He desires to communicate. We think hearing His voice is far beyond the average Christian's ability.

This simply is not true. There is a test that comes with hearing God, but it is not about our ability to discern what He is saying. God is willing to communicate clearly to us. The test is in our willingness to obey God after we have heard Him clearly.

Jesus said, "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15, NKJV). God will communicate clearly with us if we will listen to what He tells us and obey Him. And His ability to communicate clearly is greater than our ability to "miss it" or "hear wrong."

Fourth, God's voice is not the voice of gossip.

God will not tell us other people's faults and problems unless He intends us to be part of the solution, either through prayer and intercession or by taking action on their behalf.

The good news is that if God won't gossip to you about others, then He won't gossip to others about you! You don't have to be afraid of what God is going to say about you to your friends.

God is not going to tell you other people's dirt, and He is not going to tell other people your dirt. He's just not like that.

One day, about a week before Christmas, God told me to give a friend of mine some money because she did not have enough to buy Christmas presents for her family. He also gave me a word of encouragement for her.

While it is true that God told me this woman was experiencing financial hardship, He only did so because He wanted me to be part of the solution. He was not gossiping. He would not have revealed information about her if He was not going to ask me to assist by giving to her in His name.

The Voice of Condemnation

Finally, God's voice is not the voice of condemnation.

The enemy is quick to try and condemn us. Our own hearts are quick to try and condemn us. But the Bible says clearly: "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death" (Rom. 8:1-2).

Does this mean the Holy Spirit won't ever convict us if we need it? Of course not. But conviction and condemnation are not the same thing.

Condemnation is vague and abstract. It says: "You are not OK. Something is very wrong with you." Conviction is specific. It says: "What you said to your wife just now on the phone was insensitive."

Condemnation discourages and breeds hopelessness. It gives you the feeling that nothing can ever fix your problem. But conviction encourages us. It gives us solutions to our

problems.

Condemnation pushes us away from God. Conviction draws us to God. The goal of condemnation is to make us give up. The goal of conviction is to help us reach our maximum potential, to be all we can be in Christ.

There are times when we need correcting, and God is faithful to correct us. The Bible says that God, like any loving father, corrects His children for their own good (see Heb. 12:5-10). But His correction is not punishment—it is helping us fix a problem so that we can be closer to Him.

I remember when God really showed me that He does not condemn us and push us away. It was about a year ago. My husband, Ed, and I had a rather strong disagreement, which is rare for us. We both were unkind and said things designed to hurt each other's feelings.

I felt sinful about what I had said to my husband. And I felt horrible about what he had said to me. Then it came time for my evening devotions. Guess what? I did not want to get near God when I felt so sinful and dirty.

I knew that God would speak to me when I went to bed (He always does), so I found a "solution." I stayed up all night watching television, finally falling asleep on the sofa in some awkward position that gave me a neck ache.

The next morning I had to rush to get ready for work, again avoiding my morning devotions. It was a miserable day. I am used to having God meet me many times during the day, and He did not meet me once. I began to really miss Him.

By the end of the day I wanted to be right with God no matter what His terms and conditions were. When I got home from work, I told Him so. He instructed me to get a piece of paper and a pencil and to write what He was saying to me. Here is a part of what He shared:

“Welcome, daughter. Come into My presence. You should not have allowed the incident to push you away, Teresa. Who moved? Did I pull away from you, or did you pull away from Me?

“Don’t withdraw your presence from Me. It is not good for you. It causes you unnecessary pain and suffering. It is not My way. Never punish yourself by deciding you are too dirty to come to Me.

“Instead come to Me and let Me cleanse you. Let Me shine My light on you and dispel any darkness. Let Me shower you in My truth.

“Teresa, it is much safer to run to Me when you feel dirty than it is to run away from Me. You cannot survive apart from Me. Don’t even consider it.”

When we realize how much God loves us—and when we understand how much He wants to talk with us—we won’t struggle with hearing His voice. And we will enjoy the freedom of His presence like never before. *

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