



DOES GOD STILL SPEAK TO US TODAY?

Sermon preached by Pastor C. John Steer
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No. 3: Hot Potatoes
Scripture: Acts 16:6-34

Does God only talk to people in scripture or is he still doing it now? That is our Hot Potato question for today.

We know that God spoke in the Bible and also to the great heroes of history like Luther, Wesley and Edwards but **DOES GOD STILL SPEAK TO US TODAY?**

To answer that question let's remember what Christianity is. It is not just a religion or a set of rules.

It is a relationship and the foundation for a good relationship is communication.

So yes, God does speak to us today and we are going to examine why, how and when he speaks and how we can improve our ability to hear his voice. There is an outline in your RidgeLines if you would like to follow along.

God communicates with us because he loves us and has a plan for us. Scripture shows us that there are certain times in life when we can expect God to talk.

GOD SPEAKS TO CALL US.

He spoke to Lydia in that passage we just read from Acts 16.

He spoke to the Philippian jailer and his family so they were able to believe.

Now it is hard to describe this communication.

Think of the time you became a Christian.

Perhaps you had an overwhelming sense of the presence of God and you felt he was speaking just to you.

The same thing can happen when he calls us to service. Isaiah, **"Heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send?'" (Isaiah 6:8)**

Jeremiah had a similar experience.

He writes, **"The word of the Lord came to me saying, 'before I formed you in the womb I knew you . . . I appointed you as a prophet to the nations'."**
(Jeremiah 1:4-5)

Then **GOD SPEAKS TO GUIDE US.**

We come to a crossroads in our life.

We are not sure which direction to take.

Isaiah describes this, **"Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it'."**
(Isaiah 30:21)

The Psalmist has experienced this guidance on many occasions and tells the Lord,
"You guide me with your counsel." (Psalm 73:24)

Then **GOD SPEAKS TO ENCOURAGE US.**

Think of Elijah in the depths of depression praying that he would die and God speaks encouragement into his life.

A person who was grieving the death of their spouse and beside themselves with sorrow told me how God came to comfort them saying, "Your loved one is with me."

Then **GOD SPEAKS TO WARN US.**

We see him doing this repeatedly in the Old Testament where Yahweh warns Israel of the consequences of their wrongdoing saying, **"Hear, O my people, and I will warn you." (Psalm 81:8)**

God speak to deliver us from sin.

He will also sometimes warn us of danger.

Members of this church have described how God told them to avoid a certain course of action.

They realized afterwards that God had protected them.

But exactly how does God speak to us?

It is not usually in an audible voice.

Our Heavenly Father uses a variety of means.

Let's look at five of them.

GOD'S VOICE IS HEARD IN HIS LIVING WORD.

The Bible is the main means that God uses to speak to us. All of it is his divinely inspired revelation.

Hebrews tells us that God's word is living and active.

Having said that we can read scripture in a mechanical way from which we get very little or in an expectant way when the Bible comes alive.

A man was thinking of starting a business.

In his devotions he was reading Genesis chapter 1. He had read it many times before but on this particular day the words **"In the beginning God"** shouted at him.

He realized that right from the beginning of his business he must have godly values and treat his employees and customers in a God-honoring way.

A young lady was trying to decide whether to accept a proposal of marriage. She was sitting in church and the scripture reading was from 2 Corinthians. Suddenly she heard this verse, **"Do not be yoked together with unbelievers." (2 Corinthians 6:14)** She realized that God was speaking to her because the man she was thinking of marrying was not a Christian. She understood that God did not want her to share her life with him.

Then **GOD'S VOICE IS HEARD IN IMPRESSIONS IN OUR MIND**

Jesus promised the Holy Spirit will lead us into the truth. One of the ways he does this is by impressing certain truths on our mind. The impression might be a picture or an idea.



That is how Prison Fellowship got started. Chuck Colson woke up one night with the strong impression that he should not go back to his law firm but instead start a ministry to people in jail. Prison Fellowship is the result. It is now working in 113 countries.

This week a physician in our congregation was treating a patient. There did not seem to be much wrong but God impressed on his mind there was more to it. To the surprise of colleagues he became very assertive. Eventually it emerged that the lady had cancer that was removed by surgery that had not been planned. He writes "It was not luck or skill. It was the wisdom that comes from God."

Earlier this year God laid a person on my mind. So I contacted them. I was surprised at their response. They said, "It is amazing you are calling now. I have a very important decision to make and I was praying that God would send someone." I was totally unaware of this, but we met for lunch, prayed together and the Holy Spirit gave them clarity about their decision.

Then **GOD'S VOICE IS HEARD IN PROVIDENCE.**

Providence is the theological term. Some people call it circumstances. As Christians we believe that God directs our paths. Perhaps we have several choices facing us.

We are not sure which path to take but God blocks one way and beckons us to another.

I wonder if providence is behind Paul's words when he said, "The Holy Spirit kept them from preaching in Asia and the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to enter Bithynia." Maybe the authorities wouldn't allow the missionaries to go to these places or there was no transportation. Whichever it was, Paul understood this refusal as the voice of God.

Providence has played an important role in my own life. I intended to make a career as a pilot in the Royal Air Force. I spent two marvelous years flying planes. This photo was taken just after I went solo which explains why I am looking so pleased with myself.



I was about to enlist for another 16 years. Part of the process was a full physical. I had these physicals every six months and I had passed them with flying colors but on this occasion they found astigmatism in my eye. This disqualified me from being a pilot.

I was absolutely devastated. At the time it seemed like my life had come to an end. I was enormously disappointed. But a year later I felt called to Christian ministry and it all made sense.

Perhaps you have just experienced a shut door in your life. It may be that God is planning to launch you in a new direction. That is a journey you couldn't have taken if God in his providence had not closed the door.

Then **GOD'S VOICE IS HEARD IN THE COUNSEL OF OTHERS**

The church in Antioch sent out Paul and Barnabas as the first missionary team but it is interesting how it happened. We are told that, **"While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them'."** (Acts 13:2)

There is no mention that Saul and Barnabas had an individual call. They may have, but the emphasis here is on the church hearing the voice of God and sending out this pair.

I turned to the Elders for help in preparing this message and asked them how they heard the voice of God. A number of them said it was through listening to a preacher or a Christian friend or their spouse. I have discovered the same thing.

Our first bold initiative is our partnership with the Compassion Evangelical Hospital in Guinea. Let me tell you how that came to be.



A number of years ago Steve Merry and Rob McBane took me to lunch at Michael's.

There they tentatively suggested that our church might want to help a hospital come into being.

They didn't try and strong arm me.

They even admitted their own uncertainty as to whether we should do this. But I had a powerful sense that God was speaking and saying "Do it."

I became excited as the project seemed to play to many of the strengths of our fellowship.

But I couldn't make this decision on my own.

So I asked them to present the idea to three groups.

The first was the pastoral team and they said yes.

The second was the Missions Council and they said yes The third was the Elder Board and they said yes.

With the recommendation of the church leadership we brought this to the congregation and you voted to make it our first bold initiative.

God spoke through his people and we have been helping Compassion Evangelical Hospital ever since.

This week the very first Christian Medical Conference in Guinea will be held there.

It is made possible by your giving. Rob McBane and Bob Stanhope will be teaching.

During the Conference the surgical wing will be dedicated to God. That was paid for by the \$150,000 you gave in our Sharing Hope Campaign.

Then **GOD'S VOICE IS HEARD IN SUPERNATURAL EVENTS**

God is very sparing with his miracles but at times he does speak to us in extraordinary ways.

God gave Paul a vision of a man from Macedonia. Missionaries in Islamic countries report that many Muslims have come to Christ because God spoke to them in dreams. These were not vague dreams where the meaning was unclear but rather an encounter with Christ who told them to follow him.

One of our Elders had a dream when he was ten that he has never forgotten because God spoke his name and told him that the Lord was watching over him.

My call to the ministry came when I was walking along the River Tyne in England. I heard an audible voice speaking to me and calling me to full time ministry.

I am a pastor today because of that moment.

There have been a number of occasions I have been tempted to leave the ministry but I dare not dismiss that divine call.

It has never happened to me since.

I have often reflected on why it was necessary.

I think it was because the very last thing I wanted to do was be a pastor. To get my attention God had to do something quite incredible.

So what does God's voice sound like?

It is usually quiet. God speaks in a still small voice.

Elijah describes it as, "**A gentle whisper.**" (1 King 19:12) Bill Hybels' latest book is called "The Power of a Whisper". In it he describes how God's whispers to him brought the ministry of Willow Creek Community Church into being and made the Willow Creek organization one of the most significant church planting strategies in the world today.

Because God whispers it is easy to confuse God's voice with other voices.

It is sometimes hard to tell the difference between an impression made by the Holy Spirit and our own intuition. Some of us are suspicious of people saying that God spoke to them because we can't believe that God is so daft.

Therefore it is important we apply some filters to what we think is the voice of God before we rush off to do something foolish. I suggest four tests.

First **GOD'S VOICE CAN BE TESTED BY SCRIPTURE**

God will never contradict himself.

He has revealed his general will in scripture and therefore his specific will for us will always be in line with his divine word. From time to time a person will tell me that God has told them to leave their spouse and move in with someone else. I tell them that is not the Spirit of God.

It may be the spirit of lust but God would never speak like that.

Second **GOD'S VOICE CAN BE TESTED BY OUR SKILL SET**

Imagine that I think that God is telling me to give up preaching and instead go into gospel music.

It doesn't fit my giftedness.

My mother insisted that I took five years of piano lessons. At the end of that time I only mastered the C major scale. Music is not part of my skill set.

Moving into music would not be a wise decision.

Third **GOD'S VOICE CAN BE TESTED BY OTHER BELIEVERS**

If God is really speaking, other Christians will be able to confirm it. That is particularly true of our spouse.

I had a fellow come to see me once who told me God had called him to be a missionary.

I said what does your wife think?

He replied, "Oh, she's dead against it."

Well God brought that couple together and he is not going to tear them apart. If God wants that man to be a missionary he will also call his wife as well.

This is one of the values of belonging to a local church as opposed to just watching a service on television.

You can come and talk about these matters with one of the pastors or with members of your small group.

Together we can discern the will of God.

Running an idea by others and heeding their counsel can save us from a lot of pain. Some years ago a man I knew announced that God had told him he was to sell his house, give up his job and join a group of people who were going to travel from London to Jerusalem.

They planned to witness to people along the way. They were going to take several years for the journey.

This man did not ask for input but a lot of people in his church gave it to him. They cautioned against this course of action saying it seemed unwise to them. They pointed out that once he left England he wouldn't be able to speak any of the languages that he would encounter between France and Israel and therefore the ability to witness would be very limited.

Others counseled that the whole project was ill planned. No preparations had been made for where the group would stay. But the dear brother was insistent.

He sold his house, bought an RV with the money and set off. Once the group reached Belgium they all started to squabble and the whole thing fell apart.

The man returned to England.

He had lost his job and never did get another one.

He was homeless and penniless.

The whole thing was a farce and frankly an embarrassment to the cause of Christ.

It came about because he would not listen to wise counsel.

There are a lot of really stupid things done in the name of Christ. God gets blamed for all sorts of nutty ideas simply because people will not run what they think it is God's voice through reliable filters.

The Thessalonians thought they had heard God telling them Christ was coming in the near future so Paul instructs them, **"Test everything." (1 Corinthians 5:21)** John writes, **"Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God." (1 John 4:1)**

GOD'S VOICE CAN BE TESTED BY WAITING

If we are not sure whether the impression we have is from God or is the after effects of last night's pizza, we can wait. God's call on our life is persistent. If the feeling goes away it is probably not from God. If this is something God wants us to do, the feeling will grow with intensity.

That is why there is tremendous emphasis in scripture on waiting on the Lord. David was not sure what to do in a time of crisis and so he writes, **"I waited patiently for the Lord, he turned to me and heard my cry." (Psalm 40:1)**

Perhaps you are thinking. "God has never spoken to me, I wish he would." This is an ability that we can learn. We can get better at recognizing God's voice over time.

I asked the Elders what they would say to a Christian who wanted to hear God's voice. One said, "Immerse yourself in scripture. Read it daily. You won't go long before God speaks to you." Brother Lawrence calls this "practicing the presence of God."

A number of others recommended doing two things. Interestingly they are the same two actions found in the story of Samuel that was read earlier in the service.

There are two interesting editorial comments in this narrative of young Samuel. It begins with the statement, **"In those days the word of the Lord was rare." (1 Samuel 3:1)** Then we are told, **"The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to Samuel." (1 Samuel 3:7)**

Maybe we feel that describes our situation. The word of the Lord is very rare in our life. It hasn't yet been revealed to us. So what should we do? We follow Samuel and our Elders example.

GOD'S VOICE CAN BE EXPERIENCED BY ASKING.

Samuel prayed, **"Speak."** We have a God who is not silent. He wants to communicate to us.

GOD'S VOICE CAN BE EXPERIENCED BY LISTENING.

Samuel continued, **"Speak, for your servant is listening." (Samuel 3:10)** Perhaps we don't hear God speak because we are not listening.

Prayer isn't just talking to God. It is listening to God. We can do this in our own devotions but we can also do it in corporate worship. At the beginning of each service ask God to speak to you through the worship.

Does God still speak to us today?

Yes, he does.

We long to be a congregation to whom God speaks.

We want him to speak to our Elders, our pastors, our members and our children.

This is what makes faith come alive.

The Bible tells us to share our faith.

But with whom and how?

God's whisper provides the answer.

The Bible tells us to send missionaries.

But where and what should they do?

The voice of God will tell us.

So let's ask God to speak to all of us this week.