

Leadership Letter 21

(Note: this is the 21st in a series of "Leadership Letters." You can read previous letters at our web-site. Go to www.GraceGlobalNetwork.org and look under the "encouragement" section.)

Learning to Hear God's Voice

Dear friends,

Back in the 1960s *Time* magazine came out with a headline that said, "God is dead." The next day reporters lined up at Billy Graham's home and said, "Is God dead, Dr. Graham?" He said, "Are you kidding? I just talked to Him!"

Any of us can talk to God – and God wants to talk to us. The Bible says that God wired you in a way that you can hear Him speak, that He created you with the ability to tune into Him, to hear Him, to listen to Him, and to talk back to Him. Job 33:14 says, "God does speak, sometimes one way and sometimes another, even though people may not understand it."

The problem is not that God isn't talking. The problem is our perception. Sometimes we're just not tuned in to God. God wants to communicate with you because you can't have a relationship without communication. God wants to have a relationship with you. He wants to talk to you. He created you with the capacity to hear His voice.

God is not limited to any single way of talking with us. Look at the many ways He spoke in the Bible: through a cloud, an audible voice, a burning bush, prophets, a pillar of fire, and many, many more. He even spoke to Balaam through a donkey.

Today I want us to look at four of the most common ways that God speaks to us.

1. God speaks through the Bible

2 Timothy 3:16-17 says:

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

Circle the word *inspired* in your Bible. It literally means "God-breathed." The Bible's words are spoken by God – right from His mouth. You can trust the Bible. There is no other book in the world that is reliable like the Bible. It can be counted on to guide you, to correct you, to comfort you, and to help you. The Living Bible translates that last phrase as "It is God's way of making us well prepared at every point."

But you must open it up. You must read it. I just read a survey where it stated that 70% of pastors only studied the Bible to prepare for their sermons. To me that means that God is not speaking to their souls. They are not going to the Bible for soul-nourishment and soul-refreshment.

Some people say God never speaks to them. But they aren't in the Bible. They don't

have a regular quiet time. Let me state it clearly and forcefully: ***the primary way God speaks to us is through the Bible.***

Why is that important to know? If I told you that the President of the United States wanted to meet with you at 6 am tomorrow morning, would you get up and go to the meeting? Sure you would. Why? It's someone important. Even more important, God wants to meet with you. The creator of the universe wants to meet with you each and every day.

The Bible can be an intimidating book to many people. It's comprised of history, poetry, prophecy and some things called *epistles* that we have no idea what they are. And instead of *sentences*, it has *verses* – and they all have numbers in front of them! But this book is God's manual for us for knowing Him and living life.

My oldest son Brandon just bought a new car. In the glove compartment, Honda put an *owner's manual*. At first, you might think that's quite audacious – who are they to tell Brandon how to operate his own car? Well, they're the ones who designed it! And if Brandon reads the owner's manual and follows what it says, his car will last a lot longer.

That's what the Bible does. It tells us how to know God personally. It tells us how to live life as God designed it. It's the owner's manual for life.

So how do you get started in this book? Do you start in Genesis and just starting reading through it? That's not what I would suggest. Start with Jesus. Pick one of the four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke or John) – I would suggest Mark because it's the shortest and simplest to understand. Get a modern translation. Three good ones are the *New American Standard Bible*, the *English Standard Version*, and the *New International Version*. There are also some good paraphrases like *The New Living Translation* and *The Living Bible*. There are also Bibles that come as "study Bibles" that are helpful to explain background, customs and give good insight.

Set a regular time in the Word. Read it regularly. Read it perceptively. Read it asking good questions. You might get a copy of Rick Warren's new book, simply called *Rick Warren's Bible Study Methods*. Howard Hendricks' classic book on Bible study methods is *Living By The Book*. Both of those books give you step by step instruction how to get into the Bible.

2. God speaks to us through gifted teachers

Have you ever sat in a church service and left like God was speaking directly to you, that nobody else in the audience mattered, that God was speaking directly to your heart? He was. At that moment God was speaking through a gifted teacher to tell you what He wanted to say to you. God often uses other people to speak to us.

1 Thessalonians 2:13 says, "*When we preached to you, we didn't think of the words as being just our own, but you accepted it as the very Word of God – which, of course, it was – and it changed your lives.*"

God speaks through teachers, preachers and pastors. Listen to what Rick Warren said about a time he heard God speak to him:

Many years ago when I was a teenager I remember one church service. I was sitting on the back row of a very small church next to my girlfriend and I was not interested at all in what the preacher was saying. I was very interested in who was sitting next to me. I don't remember a single thing that the pastor said in that service until he got to the end. At the very end of the message he said something like this: "What are you going to do with your life? Are you going to make it count or are you just going to waste it? You'll never be happy until you do with your life what God made you to do. And until you be with your life what God made you to be." Bam! That was right on the forehead to me! It got my attention and it was a turning point in my life. That one simple message. God spoke to me through a gifted teacher. If you had told me 25 years ago that I would be pastoring in a church, much less a big church, I'd have said "You're crazy!" I had a promising career as a rock star! I had no intention of ever being a pastor! I often look back and think, "What if I had missed that message, that turning point in my life?" That's why I hate to miss church. Even when I go on vacation, if we're going through a town and it's Sunday, I'll try to find some little church of some kind. I always wonder, "What if God had that pastor prepare that message directly for me and what if I miss it?" I don't ever want to miss God talking to me. I want to show up whenever I can.

God gives us gifted pastors and teachers to communicate His word. I've had many people come up and tell me, *"Today's message was exactly what I needed to hear."* *"It's as though you were reading my mail."* *"God spoke to me today through what you said."* When that happens, I know it wasn't my wonderful words of wisdom and insight. I'm just not that smart to know what people need to hear. My fellow pastors, we need to pray: *"God, You already know in advance who You're bringing to church next Sunday. You know who's going to be there and You know what their needs are. Would You give me something to say to the people You're planning on bringing to the worship celebration. Help me to have something to say on Sunday that's going to help them on Monday."*

2 Corinthians 2:13 states, *"We do not speak in words taught by human wisdom, but in words taught by the Spirit, as we explain spiritual truths."* When gifted teachers teach, they are talking the words of God, what God wants to say to us. The more teaching you hear, the more God can talk to you. Obviously, the more teaching you hear, the more God will have the opportunity to speak to you. Regular intake from the Word of God – and regular exposure to sound, relevant biblical teaching – gives God the opportunity to speak to you.

The first way God speaks to us is absolutely infallible ... the trustworthy Word of God. The second way God speaks to us is through gifted teachers. And to the extent that they teach the biblical truth of the Word of God, their message can be trusted to be from God. The next area is much more subjective, yet equally important.

3. God speaks to us through impressions

God puts ideas and impressions in our minds. There are two extremes you need to avoid when thinking about impressions. One is the rationalist, the other is the mystic:

The rationalist denies that God ever speaks to us through our minds. He says God only speaks through the Bible and never gives you any impressions.

The mystic thinks that every impression they get is from God. That's obviously wrong also.

I feel sorry for both of these extremes. The rationalist, who thinks that God never gives men ideas, misses out on God's counsel, God's comfort, God's care, God's concern, God's challenges and guidance in the ways of life. On the other hand, the mystic who thinks that every impression they get is from God tends to make a lot of stupid mistakes and embarrass themselves. They say, "*God told me to do this*" and then they go bankrupt. What happened? They mis-read God.

TV Preachers are well known for manipulating people. They say, "*God told me there's somebody out there in the TV audience supposed to give me a million dollars.*" And the world mocks. Never let a religious nut keep you from experiencing the real thing.

Anytime you find something counterfeit, there is evidence that there is a real thing somewhere. Have you ever seen a counterfeit three dollar bill? No, because there's no such thing as a real three dollar bill. Wherever you find counterfeit teaching, there's good evidence that there are also genuine Christian spiritual leaders. The existence of something phony, fake and counterfeit implies there must be something real.

Job 33:14 and 18 says, "*God speaks again and again in dreams and in visions at night when the deep sleep falls ... as people lie on their beds, He opens their ears in times like that and gives them wisdom and instruction.*" Notice it says God sometimes speaks in dreams and in visions. Why? Why would God speak to us when we're asleep? Because we're relaxed, undistracted, and our defenses are lowered at that moment.

But here's a warning: always test an impression. Never make a decision on an impression alone. You need to test impressions. Impressions must match what the Bible says. If you ever get an impression that is opposite to what God said in the Bible, I guarantee that it's not from God. God never contradicts what He's already said in His Word. He's not going to give you an impression contrary to what's in the Bible.

I've had guys come up to me and say, "*I've prayed and I really feel God speaking to me that I'm supposed to leave my wife and kids and go marry this 16-year-old bimbo!*" Hello? Who are they kidding? Others come up and say, "*I know God wants me to be happy and He's said don't have sex with people you're not married to, but I really love this person. So I'm going to move in with them even though I'm not married. I know God's told me to do that.*" Again, who are they kidding? God has said over and over, for your own protection, for your own benefit, that sex is for marriage only. It's real clear. About 90% of our problems in that area, the emotional scars, the venereal diseases, the broken hearts, wouldn't be there if people would just obey what God says to do. When we say, "*I know God wants me to be happy, but ...*" you better check it out with the Bible. When you ignore the owner's manual, you're going to get hurt. So check your impressions against the Word of God – and follow the truth no matter what.

4. God speaks to us through pain

Are you acquainted with this way of divine communication? C. S. Lewis wrote, *"Difficulties are God's megaphone to get our attention. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains. It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world!"*

Proverbs 20:30 says, *"Sometimes it takes a painful experience to make us change our ways."* Everyone of us know this one by experience. Not all pain is God speaking to you. Not every little hurt, ache and pain that you have is God speaking to you. But some of it is. And God often has to use pain in order to slow us down to get our attention.

Psalm 119:67, 71-72 says, *"Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word.... It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes. The law of Your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces."* Pain is often God's way of getting our attention.

Why is it so important to hear God speak?

1. It assures me that I'm in God's family. Jesus said, *"I know those who are Mine and they hear My voice: (John 10:14).*

2. It protects me from mistakes. Job 33:17-18 says, *"God speaks, that He may turn man aside from his conduct, and keep man from pride; He keeps back his soul from the pit, and his life from passing over into Sheol."* If you listen to God, He will warn you in advance and you'll avoid many mistakes in life.

3. It is the secret of a productive life. Listening to God on a daily basis – moment by moment walking with Him, depending on His guidance, is the secret of a life that honors and glorifies God. He created us to have a relationship with Him.

John 15 is the chapter of the Bible that has made the most impact in my life. Jesus says in verse 5, *"I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing."* The secret to fruit-bearing is abiding in Christ, maintaining a vital, dependent life with Him.

Learn to listen to God. Hebrews 3:15 warns us, *"Today, if you hear God's voice speaking to you, do not harden your heart against Him."*