

Hearing the Voice of God from Without

What is God Saying

The testimony of the Bible and the experience of many Christians throughout history show that God can speak and does speak to his people in ways that are explicit and obvious. God speaks through audible voices, dreams and visions, other people, angelic messengers and through signs given to us in answer to prayer.

Many of us long for God to speak to us in this sort of way. We believe it would help strengthen our faith and give us confidence about what we are meant to do in life.

These sorts of 'signs and wonders' from God are good, however, we usually overestimate how much they would help our faith. Hearing God speak in explicit and obvious ways doesn't guarantee that we'll understand what it is we are meant to do in response or have the courage to do it. And It certainly doesn't help us learn to make God-like decisions for ourselves going forward. Surprisingly, signs and wonders also have limited good for growing our faith. At first they can be an encouragement for us to continue following Jesus, but if they continued as time went on, we would develop a dependency on them. Mature faith is confident of God's presence and goodness at all times, no matter what. An immature faith depends on signs and struggles without them.

For all of these reasons, God's preferred method for speaking to us isn't through the overt and miraculous: audible voices and impossible coincidences. God's preferred method for speaking to his people is through his still small voice.

As we pray (planned or not), read the Bible or worship, God's Spirit can speak to ours as he deposits thoughts, words, images or senses in our hearts and minds. It happens when, seemingly out of the blue, thoughts such as 'you are loved' or 'give Mary a call to see how she is doing' or images such as dove flying over troubled waters appear in our minds as if from nowhere.

In speaking to us in this way - a manner that is subtle, humble and natural - God draws us closer to himself. It also helps to grow in faith and character, as we learn to turn to God out of love rather than for 'pick me up' with a sign or wonder.

The most significant way God speaks to us is through his still small voice, and the most important thing we can do when it comes to discerning the voice of God is to learn how to recognise it - that is, to learn to see which thoughts that pop into our minds are from God and which ones are from us (or something else).

Ultimately, hearing God works best when it becomes intuitive. However, as we are learning, there are a few questions we can ask of thoughts or images that appear to us to discern if they may be from God:

- 1. When and where did it happen?** If it happened when grumpy and tired, it may not be from God. If it came into your mind while praying, worshiping or reading the Bible, it's a sign it may be.
- 2. Did it follow my train of thought?** It is a point toward the thought being from God if it popped into your mind, seemingly from nowhere, rather than logically following your train of thought at the time.
- 3. Was it something I didn't want to hear but needed to hear?** It is rare that we tell ourselves things we need to hear but don't want to hear. Again, if this thought fits that description, it's a point toward it coming from God.
- 4. What was the content of the thought?** Thoughts from God won't contradict the Bible and they probably won't contradict the wisdom of Christians throughout history. Thoughts from God

will push you toward Christ and greater Christlikeness - humility, self-control, gentleness, kindness and love.

- 5. How did the thought feel?** This is the hardest to describe, but thoughts from God have a certain feel to them. They have weight and a goodness - a sort of fresh clarity. Thoughts not from God are more likely to be connected with anxiety, fear or confusion.

Ultimately, there is no real “strategy” for hearing from God. God will speak as God likes. As we give this a go, we’ll make some mistakes along the way, and so it is important to remain humble. God will take any ‘process’ we have and use and reshape it in any way he sees fit - speaking to us in ways that are unexpected, exciting and full of life.