

There is an almost mythic story in 1 Kings 18. The people of Israel, led by King Ahab, have, at least from the formal state-sanctioned perspective, all but abandoned God through the mingling of faiths. Yahweh was still a part of their national identity, but so was Baal, the Canaanite god of rain. Baal worship had worked its way into the formal religious practices of Israel through Ahab's wife, Jezebel. Jezebel was the daughter of the priest-king of Tyre and Sidon, and she perpetuated her father's faith by establishing formal worship of the god who could ensure good soil.

The establishment was comfortable keeping the traditions of Yahweh worship around, foundations of the nations as they were, but they could not be described as faithful or godly leaders. Nevertheless, there was a significant minority in the country that were not apathetic or lukewarm to God, but devout and exclusive in their worship. One of these God-devotees was a prophet named Elijah. Because, as is true in all times, most of the visible religious leaders found it advantageous to be connected with the powers of authority, Elijah consistently thought he was the lone voice in the fight for God's honor. Perhaps it was this idea of being the sole defender of God, and his propensity for the dramatic, that drove Elijah to confront the compromising king of God's people rather consistently.

During one of these confrontations, similar to an afterschool brawl on the playground, Elijah challenges Ahab and the priests of Baal to meet him on Mt. Carmel to prove what god is really the God of gods. Instead of a dance-off, the priests of Baal and Elijah have a sacrifice showdown. Both groups would build altars and sacrifice a bull, thus preparing the way to interact with their gods. Then, as Elijah says, "you call on the name of your god, and I will call upon the name of the LORD, and the God who *answers* by fire, he is God.' And all the people gathered around answered, 'It is well spoken.'" (1 Kings 18:24) Well, to make a long story short, Yahweh is the only God who answers, and the people follow Elijah in revolting against the gods of the system and their priests. At the end of the day, the priests of Baal and Asherah (the queen and eldest deity of the Canaanite pantheon), are dead. And to rub in the humiliation, Yahweh sends a great rain upon Ahab and Israel that will ensure good soil, showing himself to be the true God of rain (see [1 Kings 18](#) for the full backstory).

Elijah, rightfully so, is full of confidence. He acted on behalf of the Lord, the Lord honored and answered his actions, and the pride and power of the oppressive and unholy authority were shown its limits. But Jezebel was not there. She only heard the story but didn't witness the works and words of God. She is told Elijah is behind the massacre of her sacred priests, and so she is a bit put off. Jezebel then does what those in power do; she exercises her influence against the annoyer of the status quo, "the troubler of Israel," Elijah. That's where we pick up the story today, 1 Kings 19:1-18. Read with me.

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, 'So may the gods do to me, and more also if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.' Then [Elijah] was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there.

But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die [crying out in prayer]: 'It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.' [Running from fear and losing faith.] Then Elijah lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, 'Get up and eat.' He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, 'Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.' He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food, forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. At that place, he came to a cave, and spent the night there.

Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' He answered, 'I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.'

God said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.' Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still, small voice [a gentle whisper, a thin silence]. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' He answered, 'I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.' Then the LORD said to him, 'Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Syria. And Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel, and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint to be a prophet in your place...I will leave seven thousand [of my royal priesthood] in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him. [Elijah was not as alone as he thought.]

We said last week that God guides us personally, meaning that God **directs us as persons in our personhood: with our minds in full use and wills intact**. Indeed, God can and does determine our course by arranging external circumstances, causing us to go one way or the other. Yet, He desires not to primarily lead us mechanically, like one drives a car or leads a horse, instead, "We are to be led by—guided by—reasonable, intelligible communication..."<sup>1</sup> Communication which takes the form of non-verbal transmission through a shared active focus ([Ps. 32:8-9](#)), as well as *by personal address*.

Today we begin to look at ***the ways God personally addresses people***. We desire to develop the competency and confidence in Hearing God, to develop the capability and wisdom to converse with our Father as his child and Jesus as a friend. While we could draw from a rich and storied history within our faith traditions on how God speaks to us, we will stick to the Scriptures. In doing so, we remember the guardrail we hold to along this

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<sup>1</sup> Dallas Willard, *Hearing God*, 69.

path of cultivating a conversational companionship with God, that the biblical accounts of people Hearing God should be normative, even today.

Looking at the scriptures, we notice at least six ways<sup>2</sup> in which God addresses people personally. Many of which are highlighted for us in Elijah's story.

- A phenomenon plus a voice
- A divine messenger or an angel
- Dreams and visions
- An audible voice
- The human voice
- The human spirit or the "still, small voice"

Let's take a look at each one in order, seeing its importance in our scriptures and beginning to recognize the varying significance in our daily lives as well.

### **A PHENOMENON PLUS A VOICE |seizing attention to commission**

We see God addressing Elijah in this way in 1 Kings 19. A hurricane smashes the mountain in which the cave of Elijah is burrowed, then an earthquake shakes the mountain, and fire consumes the mountain (like it did in Exodus 20), and then Elijah is addressed directly by a voice. Elijah's attention is seized by a remarkable happening—in this case, a hurricane, earthquake, and fire—and once God has Elijah's attention, there is a discernable voice.

But probably the more familiar instances of this way in which God addresses his people is Moses and the burning bush in [Exodus 3:3-6](#) and Jesus' baptism ([Matt. 3:17](#)). In both events, there are spectacular occurrences, a bush on fire that is not consumed by the fire, and a ray of light striking Jesus in the water with a dove descending upon him. In both instances, the phenomenon is immediately accompanied by a voice commissioning Moses to free God's people and Jesus' affirmation that he would indeed be the freer of God's people. In both instances, **the attention of the one being addressed** (Moses, Jesus & those following John the Baptist) **is seized so that they will listen.**

Other examples of this personal address by God include God's promise to Abraham demonstrated by a pillar of smoke/fire walking through Abraham's sacrifice and God's voice sealing the covenant in [Genesis 15:17-18](#). Or Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus, when he is struck down by a beam of light and hears a voice that the others with him count as thunder ([Acts 9:3-8](#)). In these and other examples in our scriptures, we see spectacular or phenomenal occurrences accompanied by a voice. Almost always, the voice grabs the addressed's attention and then commissions, commands, or confirms a calling of some sort.

Have any of you ever Heard God in this way? Or have you known someone—a friend, a pastor, a family member, a person in our faith lineage—who experienced something similar?

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all quotations in the following section can be found in Willard, 120-152.

## A DIVINE MESSENGER OR ANGEL | warnings and announcements

The second way we see God speaking in the scriptures is through divine messengers or angels. The word *angel* literally means messenger, and these are ones who address humans on God's behalf. These other-than-human-beings are emissaries who speak God's words often as warnings or announcements.

Sometimes, especially in the Old Testament, it is difficult to determine if the divine messenger is an angel or God himself. Again, we see an example of this in Elijah's story. Having run in fear and finding himself alone, "an angel touched him and," spoke with him in verse 5. After accepting the angel's gift of food and sleep, "the angel of the LORD came again" to Elijah two verses later. The "angel of the LORD" is a unique description in the Old Testament for either a mighty angel or God himself. In this case, was it God or an angel or an angel and then God who touched, provided food for, and spoke Elijah?

There are similar stories to Elijah's, like Hagar in [Genesis 16](#) where the "angel of the LORD," appears to her, tells her of the Lord's intentions for her and her son, and then she responds, "I have now seen the One who sees me." (Gen. 16:11, 13). Or the story of Abraham and the three angelic visitors in [Genesis 18](#). In the middle of the chapter, the author switches from referring to the angels as "them" to referring to the visitors as "the LORD." Then chapter nineteen opens with two of the angels appearing to Lot in Sodom. Where the three angelic men God himself, or two angels accompanying God?

Regardless, the point is that God addresses people (all kinds of people) through divine messengers quite regularly throughout our scriptures, **often to reveal something about His intentions and plans. They announce what God is doing or warn people what God is doing.** A brief survey includes God addressing Balaam ([Num. 22:22-35](#)), Joshua ([Josh. 5:13-15](#)), Gideon ([Judg. 6:11-24](#)), the parents of Samson ([Judg. 13](#)), Isaiah ([6:6-13](#)), Daniel ([Dan. 9:20-27](#)), Jesus' earthly father, Joseph ([Matt. 1:20-25](#)), Zacharias ([Lk. 1:11-20](#)), Mary, ([Lk. 1:26-38](#)), the women at the empty tomb ([Matt. 28:2-7](#)), Peter ([Acts 5:19-20](#)), and Paul ([Acts 27:23-26](#)), to name a few.

As a side note, the revealing of God's intentions and plans which the divine messengers commonly convey is what Jesus said he has done for his disciple friends in John 15:15. Perhaps that is why, post-Jesus' ascension, the angelic interactions seem to be fewer, and often are either "the angel of the LORD" or an angel whom Paul worshipped—which means God himself (i.e., Jesus) and not an angel. Just something to think about.

Have or, or do you know of anyone who has heard God speak through a divine messenger or presence? What was communicated?

Anyway, in every instance, the person addressed by a divine messenger is in "an otherwise normal state of mind," in other words, they were not dreaming, even if the conversation left them a bit confounded.

This brings us to the third means by which God addresses people: through dreams and visions.

## DREAMS AND VISIONS | more common, less significant

God has addressed some of us through a phenomenon and a voice, and God has addressed some by angelic encounters. But God has more-than-likely addressed a majority of us in dreams and visions.

Whether we recognized his address in this manner is another issue altogether. Yet, God addressing us in dreams or visions makes sense, since, as we noted last week, the early church experienced as normal the fulfillment of the prophet Joel's words describing life with God in his kingdom,

And it shall come to pass...that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh. Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see **visions**, and your old men shall **dream dreams**. Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit. (Joel 2:28-29)

Walking with the Spirit and being led by the Spirit, as Paul encourages us, it is not surprising that we experience this form of address.

Now. Scripture does not "sharply mark out" the difference between dreams and visions. Sometimes, like Paul's Macedonian call in [Acts 16](#), there is an overlap being a vision that occurred at night. The primary delineation of this form of address is that,

"Both visions and dreams involve some degree of trancelike condition, a certain detachment from the person's actual surroundings, which marks them off from ordinary waking consciousness."

Some visions are clearly not dreams, like the ones we looked at in [Acts 9](#) with Ananias and [Acts 10](#) with Peter, but there are also a large number of sleeping visions or dreams in our scriptures as well. Examples include: Abimelech's warning in [Genesis 20](#), Jacob's ladder in [Genesis 28](#), Joseph and the dreams about his brothers in [Genesis 37](#), the dreams of Joseph's cellmates later in his life in [Genesis 40](#), Pharaoh's famines in [Genesis 41](#), Nebuchadnezzar's humbling in [Daniel 4](#), the warning to the wise men and Joseph's warning to leave for Egypt in [Matthew 2](#), Pilate's wife's nightmares about Jesus' suffering in [Matthew 27](#), and Paul's encouragement to speak without fear in [Acts 18](#) and encouragements for those with whom he is shipwrecked in [Acts 27](#), just to name a few.

As you can see, God's addressing through dreams comes to all kinds of people, for a variety of reasons. While dreams and visions are common in our scriptures, we see through the history of God's people being addressed by him, that over time,

"the dream is regarded as a lower form of communication from God than a vision. Both are unusual states of consciousness [as we have said], but the dream characteristically requires greater interpretation, often with considerable difficulty, in a manner that the vision does not. (Consider Joseph and Daniel's special wisdom in interpreting dreams [vs. Ananias and Peter's visions in Acts]

[We see,] By the time of Jeremiah, [that] the understanding of the ways in which God speaks had progressed to the point where the dreaming prophet was treated with some disdain [at least by God]."

Here is what God says in Jeremiah 23:23-32,

Am I a God at hand, declares the LORD, and not a God far away? Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? declares the LORD.

Do I not fill heaven and earth? declares the LORD. I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, 'I have dreamed, I have dreamed!'

How long shall there be lies in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies, and who prophesy **the deceit of their own heart**, *who think to make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell one another, even as their fathers forgot my name for Baal?*

**Let the prophet who was a dream tell the dream, but let him who has my word speak my word faithfully.**

What has straw in common with wheat? declares the LORD. Is not **my word like fire**, declares the LORD, and **like a hammer** that breaks the rock in pieces?

Therefore, behold, I am against the prophets, declares the LORD, **who steal my words from one another**. Behold, I am against the prophets, declares the LORD, who use their tongues and declare, 'declares the LORD.'

Behold, I am against those who prophesy lying dreams, declares the LORD, and who tell them and lead my people astray by their lies and **their recklessness**, when I did not send them or charge them. So they do not profit this people at all, declares the LORD.

Compared to God's word, the dream has little sustenance and strength. The word of God is the food of substance (wheat rather than straw). The word of God is the fire that consumes and refines. The word of God is the hammer that breaks the heart of stone to free and reveal the heart of flesh. Dreams are too mingled with our unconscious hearts, too much left for interpretation to be used with authority. Some have replaced relationship God the Father with the seeking of dreams, which is no different than the Baal worshipers of Elijah's day. There is a recklessness exhibited by the quick to declare, "declares the LORD," in dreams.

Theologian Gustave Oehler contends that what we see in God's address through Jeremiah, is "the principle that a clear consciousness when receiving revelation is placed higher than ecstasy or other abnormal states of mind." We must keep this in mind as we think about our own experiences of God's addressing us and the significance of the different ways he communicates to us today.

I am not saying that dreams and visions are useless or not from God. Again, as it says in Joel that dreams and visions are expected, what I am saying, is that **having clear consciousness when being addressed by God should carry more weight and significance, especially when developing confidence in a conversational companionship with God.**

As one who has dreamed dreams and seen visions, I am not dismissing their value. But remember the guardrail that hearing God does not make us right or righteous. Dreams and visions can leave a lot of room for

interpretation, so while they may be common, we should not be satisfied with this as the primary means of communication from God. Austentiously missing from our list of dreamers is Jesus. While the Father addresses Jesus in every other way God speaks, we have no account of Jesus dreaming dreams or having visions. We'll talk more about why as we continue to progress through how God speaks to us.

### **AN AUDIBLE VOICE |beneficial...not necessary**

So, God addresses us through a phenomenon that seizes our attention and compels us to listen. He addresses us through divine messengers as warnings and announcements, and he commonly addresses us through visions and dreams. And he also addresses us through a lone audible voice. This means of address is perhaps the one most of us think of when thinking of Hearing God. Like Elijah, who heard that gentle whisper and stepped into the storm and heard a voice, we too want hearing God to be physically auditory. We want the voice like the one Jesus heard in response to his prayer in [John 12](#), a loud and clearly divine word. We want a distinguishable voice to speak our name. We want what Samuel experienced as a young man. The story found in [1 Samuel 3](#) goes like this,

When Samuel was a young child, he was dedicated to God by his mother, Hannah, to “appear in the presence of the LORD and dwell there forever” ([1 Sam 1:22](#)). Being an unexpected gift from God, Samuel would be gifted back to God as a priest in training under Eli. The years go by, and “the young man Samuel continued to grow in both stature and favor with the LORD and also with man.” ([1 Sam. 2:26](#)). Sound familiar? That’s because Luke uses the same words to describe Jesus’ maturation in [Luke 2:52](#). Keep that in mind as we think about this story.

Anyway, Eli’s household is crumbling because his sons refuse to “listen to the voice of their father,” much less the LORD’s voice ([1 Sam. 2:22-25](#)), but Samuel kept maturing. One night, Samuel was lying down near the ark of the covenant, perhaps to safeguard it or as a stand-in for the aging Eli. Either way, “the LORD called Samuel, and Samuel answered,” but thought it was Eli who had called him. Eli said he must be hearing things, and so Samuel went back to lie down. So the LORD called Samuel again, and again Samuel responded to the audible noise heard and went again to Eli. Again, Eli sends Samuel to return to bed. The LORD calls a third time, and for a third time, Samuel responds to Eli if Eli had been speaking. But, this time, “Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the young man” ([1 Sam. 3:8](#)), and so he instructs his young apprentice to once again return to bed. But, Eli says, if Samuel should hear the voice again, reply, “Speak LORD, for your servant hears” ([1 Sam. 3:9](#)).

Samuel returns to the bed, and this time “the LORD came and stood,” and spoke to Samuel ([1 Sam. 3:10](#)). Samuel did what Eli said, and thus began, as one author notes, “one the most remarkable careers of any person who has ever lived before the Lord, fully justifying the use of the phrase ‘conversational relationship.’”

What do we see in this story? We see that God can and does, at times, speak in a way that is recognizable to our ears. We see Samuel, whose character was developing into godliness, needed help recognizing this audible voice of God. God’s lone audible voice—a voice mistaken for his priestly master’s—did not come to Samuel right away in his walk of faith. He had been in apprenticing for a while. We see too that Samuel had to be

instructed to hear it and how to respond to the voice. The audible voice was not familiar, even for the godly Samuel or the priest Eli. But once Samuel recognized it, he knew it always, even in the various forms he would hear God speak to him throughout his life.

Notice also that while Samuel heard a voice in his ears, Eli did not. So, was the voice Samuel heard not audible to all? Or was it a voice that was mistakable for some other noise like in John 12 or Saul's companions on the road to Damascus?

What we see in this story is that God does speak audibly to his children, especially those whose lives are committed to knowing him. Yet his voice requires discernment—even the help of other godly, mature believers—to recognize and respond to, especially at first.

Perhaps this is the reason Jesus, who like Samuel grew in stature and favor with God and with man, said at the shared experience of God's audible voice, that the physical hearing was for our benefit, not his ([Jn. 12:30](#)). **The audible voice is undoubtedly beneficial for those who hear it but is also not necessary in Hearing God normatively.** We'll discover why that is, as we look at the final two means of God addressing us persons: through the human voice, and through the human spirit (or the "still, small voice"), next week!

Let's pray.



## COMMUNION

“God does indeed guide us in many ways, by special acts of intervention in our lives as well as by general providential ordering of the world. But his direct communication with us, by word and by shared activity, is the most important part. This is because we are to become...ones that actively understand and cooperate with God’s purposes, ones that are inhabited through a willing, clear-eyed identification of ourselves with Jesus Christ.”<sup>3</sup>

Or, as Paul describes this willing, clear-eyed identification,

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Gal. 2:20)

May our receiving of these elements of communion, Jesus’ body broken and his blood poured out in love for us, be our willing, clear-eyed, identification with Jesus and the bittersweet reminder of Jesus with us.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 75-76.