

Our attention over the last month has been on one of the goals of apprenticeship to Jesus: [becoming like Jesus](#). Like Jesus, we want to be **daughters and sons whose words and actions are not so much dictated movements but rather the free initiative of those who know and love the Father**. And so, we have set our attention on developing competencies and confidence in [Hearing God](#) as we cultivate a conversational companionship with Him.

When we talk about “Hearing God,” we assume that God communicates in a way that we can understand. Similar to the way we communicate with one another, the way God speaks to us comes in a variety of forms. Some of the types are more like signs posted through the arranging of external circumstances to point the way to a particular destination or objective. Some forms of God communicating are nonverbal, like those we experience when we have a shared active focus with a spouse, co-worker, teammate, or friend. But let’s be honest; what we really want to know when we discuss “hearing God” is **how God personally addresses us**. The ways God speaks directly to us is what we began looking at in detail [last week](#).

Now, remember one of the [guardrails](#) we use to walk steadily along this path of cultivating a conversational companionship with God, is that *God speaks from love to love*. That is to say, **God speaks from his love for us to the maturing of our love for him and others**. Let’s keep that in mind as we wrap up our look at the six ways¹ in which God addresses people personally. Here is a reminder of those six ways that God speaks to us:

- 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”

We concluded last week with this statement: *The audible voice (like the one Samuel heard) is undoubtedly beneficial for those who recognize it but is also not necessary in Hearing God normatively*. Most of us desire to hear God via a distinctly audible voice, or perhaps by one of the other more dramatic or abnormal ways. Maybe that is because we see in the extraordinary something distinct or clear or other-than. I don’t know? I am sure it different for everyone at different points in our life of faith. And, as we have mentioned, God does absolutely speaks to us in these non-ordinary ways. But that’s just it, they are “abnormal,” unusual, and so while beneficial and even necessary at times, they are not primary for cultivating a conversational companionship with God. However, today we’ll discover the normative way in which God addresses us is through those all-too-common means of *the human voice* and *the human spirit* (or how it is described in the story of Elijah, the “still, small voice”).

¹ Dallas Willard, *Hearing God*, 120-121.

THE HUMAN VOICE | the primary objective voice

Certainly, God does speak to his children at times with an audible voice, but, as Dallas Willard argues,

“no means of communication between God and us is more commonly used in the Bible or the history of the church than the voice of a definite, individual human being. In such cases, God and the person he uses speak *conjointly*—God’s speaking *along with* human beings. It may be that the one spoken *to* is also the one spoken *through*.”²

In this way of God speaking to us, the word is at once the word of God, God’s message, and the word of the human being who is also speaking. To say it another way, **God speaks through me, which doesn’t automatically rule out God speaking with or to me.** To be honest, I experience this all the time, often speaking with someone while at the same time being aware that what I am saying is not purely from me, but is also for me. It is a word to me as much as a message through me. Its as if the words are coming from somewhere else. These words are often clarifying something for me, even as I am speaking them to someone else. And this doesn’t just happen in “church” settings. It happens in conversations with my kids at the dinner table and run-ins at the grocery store. I hear God nearly as much in these Spirit-filled, three-way conversations as I do in individual prayer.

The primacy of God speaking through the human voice makes sense from several fronts. As we have mentioned before, if one way we hear God is in a shared activity with him, it would make sense that God would speak to us and through us as we engage in his work. Like the work of loving a neighbor, serving an enemy, peacemaking, protesting, parenting, laboring, spousing all in mutual submission one to another out of reverence for Jesus. Samuel Shoemaker describes this ordinary means of God addressing us this way,

“Something comes into our own energies and capacities and expands them. We are laid hold of by something greater than ourselves. We can face things, create things, accomplish things, [speak things] that in our own strength would have been impossible...The Holy Spirit seems to mix and mingle His power with our own, so that what happens is both a heightening of our own powers, and a gift to us from outside. This is as real and definite as attaching an appliance to an electrical outlet, though of course such a mechanical analogy is not altogether satisfactory.”³

I would wager that all of us have experienced at some point this “electrifying” guidance from God with us. A mix and mingling of the Spirit’s power with our own human abilities and voice. God with us creating, crafting, persevering, speaking to a co-worker, neighbor, family, or friend. **Likewise, I am sure all of us have felt the charge of another person’s words as they spoke with God to us.** We recognized in their words—written, spoken, a direct conversation, or a passing comment—that God was speaking to us through them. Am I right?

The universal nature of this means of address is why Willard contends that **“God speaking in union with the human voice** and human language is the primary *objective* [outside of us] way in which God addresses us

² Ibid., 125.

³ Quotes in Willard, 126.

[rather than via a phenomenon, an angel, or an audible voice]...because [God speaking in union with the human voice] most fully engages the faculties of free, intelligent beings who are socially interacting with God's love in the work of God as his collaborators and friends."⁴

Our scriptures are full of examples of this means of address, people speaking on behalf of God, God speaking through people as he speaks with them. If we think about it, isn't the Bible itself a testimony to the primacy of this means of addressing? Our scriptures are, after all, the words of God through human beings.

Again, this is the case because it most engages the faculties of free, intelligent beings who are socially interacting with God's love in the work of God as his collaborators and friends—people who are becoming like Jesus. And, isn't Jesus the most excellent example of this? He lived his life as one who the Father spoke through even as the Father was speaking to. He reiterates this point over and over again—that he says what he hears the Father say ([Jn. 5:19-46](#), [8:28-29](#), [12:49-50](#)). These are not merely dictated words, but words in unison, in the oneness that Jesus shares with the Father and to which Jesus prays that we would share as well ([Jn. 17:1-26](#)).

You might be thinking that just because Jesus experienced this form of address from God as normative, doesn't mean that I can. After all, Jesus was fully God. Yes, but he was also fully human. Jesus is the norm. If he was not, then why would we even try to become like him? Plus, as we immerse ourselves in scripture, we discover the fantastic truth that the Lord often chooses the unlikely, the inarticulate, the uneducated, and the easily overlooked humans to speak **in union with**. We think of these people as giants in the faith, but reread their stories, and you'll discover, for example, that: Moses is a stutter, terrified of public address; David is a forgotten son and an uneducated shepherd; Ruth is a Moabite, an outsider and poor; Paul is good with written words but not spoken words; Mary is an inconspicuous teenager, and all are addressed through the union of their voices with God's.

God's address to us through union with the human voice, whether that voice is written in our scriptures, from the mothers and fathers of our faith heritage, or comes across the table over dinner, is the primary objective (outside of us) way that God communicates and guides us. We'll talk more over the next couple of weeks about this objective word in our daily lives, but there is one last means of God speaking to us that we need to cover, and that is God addressing us through the human spirit (or the still, small voice).

⁴ Willard, 126.

THE HUMAN SPIRIT | the still, small voice

Remember what we read last week, that God told Elijah to come and meet with him on Mount Horeb? Once there, a hurricane, earthquake, and fire consumed the mountain where Elijah was waiting. Yet, God was not in any of the spectacular. Instead, a “still, small voice” (KJV), a “gentle whisper” (NIV), a “thin silence” (ESV, footnote) sounded, and Elijah heard this faint sound amid the torrent of the extraordinary, and went out and spoke with God.

“Each [way of describing this ‘still, small voice’ as a whisper, thin silence, or a soft sound] emphasizes the **unobtrusiveness of the medium through which the message came.**” Compared to the enormity of the events preceding, these descriptors of the voice that Elijah recognized might be easily be described as, “unremarkable, inconspicuous, unassuming and perhaps not immediately noticed.” Though it was hardly distinguishable, Elijah heard it nonetheless. Unlike Elijah, most of us miss **this most consistent way God speaks to us each day**, probably because we have not been encouraged and equipped to expect this form of God’s address as normal.

Let’s look at how Dallas Willard describes God’s address through the human spirit to help us remedy our issue. Willard says this,

“In the still, small voice of God we are given a message that bears the stamp of [God’s] personality quite clearly and in a way we will *learn* to recognize.

But, in contrast with other [means of addressing], the medium through which the message comes is diminished almost to the vanishing point,

taking the form of thoughts that are our own thoughts, though these thoughts are not from us. In this way...the human spirit becomes the ‘candle of the LORD’ ([Prov. 20:27](#)).”⁵

The human spirit as the “candle of the LORD” might be a new concept for many of us. The idea comes to us from Proverbs 20:27, which reads in the King James Version, “The spirit of man is the candle of the LORD, searching all the inward parts of the belly.” The ESV translates the proverb this way, “The spirit of man is the lamp of the LORD, searching the innermost parts.” But the Jerusalem Bible gives perhaps the best way for understanding the proverb, reading, “Man’s spirit is the lamp of Yahweh, searching his deepest self.”

What the proverb is saying, is that God uses our own thoughts and attendant feelings within us (towards ourselves and—at times— even events and people outside of ourselves) to guide us, to light the way for us, to help us see what is in us and around us. He uses our inward thoughts and feelings to shine a light on what is going on and where to go, especially for those who are living in harmony with Him. **And since we are all thinking and feeling beings, that means we can all be addressed by God through our human spirit.** This is why Willard refers to this way of God speaking as the “primary *subjective* (inward) way God addresses us [in comparison to vision and dreams]...because...[God’s union with the human spirit also,] most engages the faculties of free, intelligent beings involved in the work of God as his collaborators and friends.”⁶

⁵ Ibid., 115-116.

⁶ Ibid., 130.

We read Paul expounding on this idea of this proverb in a letter to the faith family of Corinth, a letter written post-Jesus' resurrection and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit within the believer and believing community by the way. I Corinthians 2:9-16 says this,

as it is written, [probably referring to Isaiah 64:4 and/or commentary on it]

'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the heart of man imagined,
what God has prepared for those who
love him'—

If we were to stop there, we'd think nothing of it. God's ways are higher than ours, and his thoughts are out of reach for us. What he has planned for us, we can generally trust because we trust him, but we cannot know it. To try and understand such things is silly and irreverent, right? Well, according to Paul, the answer is "No." Keep reading in verse 10,

these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.

For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.

Now we have received not the spirit of the world [a spirit that enlightens us only to seen or felt], but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God.

And we impart this with words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit [human voices in union with God], interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual [spirit-filled, Spirit led].

The natural person [disconnected from relationship with God] does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. 'For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?' But ***we have the mind of Christ.***

Wow! Are you listening to what Paul is saying? What God is saying in unison through the written voice of Paul?

In this passage, Paul is making a comparison between humans and God regarding self-knowledge. Only the person's spirit can truly know that person's thoughts and feelings, intentions, and affections. So too, only the Spirit of God can have such knowledge of Himself. Paul points out, however, that we have received the Spirit of God and concludes that we can, therefore, search out and know the very mind of God—what God has prepared for those who love him—by means of the Spirit because of our union with Jesus! Paul is flipping over the coin of Proverbs 20 that emphasized the LORD's use of our spirit, and adds to that we "have the mind of Christ," and therefore can search God's heart as well. Again, wow! What a statement!

“So [according to Paul,] God uses our self-knowledge or self-awareness, which is heightened and given a special quality by his presence and direction [through the Holy Spirit], to search us out and reveal to us the truth about ourselves and our world. And we are able to use [God’s] knowledge of himself—made available to us in Christ and the Scriptures—to understand in some measure his thoughts and intentions toward us and to help us see [God’s] workings in our world.”⁷

Who has understood the mind of the Lord? Well, you can, when you share the mind of Jesus! That is what Paul is saying. But listen, as Paul infers, this means of addressing requires relationship, a maturing in relationship with God (i.e., the spiritual, those walking by the Spirit, being led by the Spirit). God using our spirit and giving us His Spirit so that we might be addressed through our thoughts and feelings describes not just communication from God but union with God—the oneness that Jesus prays that we might have with him and the Father in [John 17](#).

“[So,] As we grow in grace, [abiding in Jesus] God’s [just decrees] increasingly form the foundation of our hearts; his love is our love, his faith is our faith. Our very awareness of our actions, intentions, and surroundings then bears within it the view that God takes, bringing things into the clarity of his vision [from one degree of glory to the next] just as a candle might illuminate what is on our dinner table [as we search out those provisions around us, and also the path before us].

The spirit of the individual truly is, therefore, the ‘candle of the LORD,’ in the light of which we see ourselves and our world as God sees. In this way, we are addressed by him, spoken to by him through our own thoughts.

The soul’s self-awareness [in union and communion with the Spirit] applies to every part of the self: it touches upon one’s family, possessions, profession, and health; it reaches one’s fear of death, attitudes toward God, sexuality, preoccupation with reputation, concern with appearance, and countless other areas of one’s life [, shedding light on how we are to relate and respond faithfully].”⁸

We’ll talk more about distinguishing thoughts in a few weeks. What is import for us to acknowledge and let settle into the ways we are listening or looking to Hear God speak is,

“the thoughts and feelings in the mind and spirit of one who is surrendered to God should be treated as if God were walking through one’s personality with a candle, directing one’s attention to things one after the other. As we become used to the idea that God is friendly and helpful, that he desires to straighten, inform, and correct for our good as well as to comfort and encourage and that he really does love us, then we can begin to pray heartily with the psalmist, ‘Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts’ (Ps. 139:23).”⁹

⁷ Ibid., 131.

⁸ Ibid., 134-135

⁹ Ibid. 135-136.

CONCLUDING REMINDERS & WARNINGS

I want to leave us with a practical application for how to begin to listen for this means of God speaking to us in union with our spirit. However, before I do that, I need to say a few words of reminder and warning.

ABIDE THROUGH THE BASICS | First, what we see in I Corinthians and throughout the scriptures, is that this means of being addressed assumes a personal, intimate relationship with the Father through the Spirit. There is a self-awareness that is void of union and communion with God's Spirit that leads not to understanding but foolishness, and as Peter describes it, our demise. So, if you want to hear God this way, **you have to abide in his love through the most common means available to us: prayer, scripture reading, common worship, and the community of Christ.**

HUMILITY CANNOT BE AVOIDED | Second, hearing God this way—or by any other form—does not make you right or righteous. Though in reality, if you are hearing God normatively in union with the human voice and spirit, then you will be maturing in relating rightly with God and others. But it is easy to fall off into pride and isolation here, which is why the guardrail of necessary humility is to be firmly gripped. Again, if truly maturing in this conversational companionship, you will become acutely—though not exhaustively—aware of your shortcomings, of areas where the testing proves some areas and steps need correction and reform. Regularly conversing with God is a humbling companionship.

INTIMACY IS PRIMARY | Lastly, we see in the primacy of this intimate way in which God speaks to us the very opposite of what culturally and perhaps even personally, we desire. God speaking to us through our spirit—our thoughts and our feelings—in union with His, lacks the pizzazz of the grander means of addressing—even visions and dreams. And yet, in 1 Kings, we see that might just be the point. Having experienced the majesty of the spectacular, Elijah is no better off, no more trusting and dependent on God, no more aware of what God is doing in his life or the people of Israel. He thinks he is alone when there are thousands with him and God. He believes he is finished, and so is Israel, when God has more before him and his people. He lacks awareness of himself and God's actual working. And so when God comes to him, God purposely does not appear in a spectacular grand way, but in the still, small voice. God does this to a mature Elijah and to mature Elijah so that we, too, might recognize the maturity of such conversational hearing. **While we want the grand, God offers the intimate. While we wish for the spectacular, the abnormal, God offers union in the unescapable.**

GETTING STARTED | Pay attention to recurring thoughts & Practice through *Lectio*

We said a few moments ago, that “In the still, small voice of God we are given a message that bears the stamp of [God’s] personality that we will learn over time.” We’ll discover over the coming weeks the importance of that “stamp of God’s personality” that helps us discern the inner voice of union. But for today, let’s start with reoccurring thoughts.

In an old Navigators pamphlet written to help people discern God’s regular guidance, Russ Johnston wrote, “We would see wonderful results if we would just deal with the thoughts that continue in our minds in a godly manner. But most people don’t...” Instead, we often find a way to distract ourselves, dismiss the recurring thoughts and feelings, and just keep trudging forward. However, Johnston encourages that “As thoughts come into your mind and continue, ask God, ‘Do you really want me (or us) to do this?’ [Rather than] just let[ting] those thoughts collapse...”¹⁰

If God communicates to us through our thoughts and attendant feelings, he will help us learn to distinguish when thoughts are ours alone and when they are also his. Paul calls this learning process being “transformed by the renewing of our minds,” in Romans 12:2. So, when thoughts recur, stop, and prayerfully consider whether this may be an appearance of ‘the LORD’s candle,’ or whether the thoughts may have some other significance.

Although reoccurring thoughts are not always an indication that God is speaking, they are not to be lightly discarded. The regular [practice of *Lectio*](#) is meant to help us attend to recurring thoughts. *Lectio* is a time set aside for the renewing of the mind, through being attentive to the recurring thoughts that come up as we engage with God’s written word (his addressing to us through the union of the human voice) and giving the subjective address through our spirit a grounding in relationship and context. So, please pay attention to reoccurring thoughts, and use the [practice of *Lectio*](#) to develop the skills in hearing God through them.

Let’s pray.

¹⁰ Quoted in Willard, 134.

COMMUNION

I don't know about you, but I am pretty self-absorbed. I consider others, but mainly only after I consider myself. I consider God but mainly only in the context of myself. But being in a conversational companionship with God is about union, about being other-oriented.

And, as one author noted, "Union is the heart of communion." One person whose concern was towards others (his Father and his sisters and brothers) who considered them, us, and gave himself. His body broken because of our, my, sin. His blood—his life—poured out so that I might experience union with the Father and with you, forever.

I don't know about you, but before I receive this symbol of the reality of God's union with him and his people of every tribe, tongue, and nation throughout the world, I need to repent of my self-orientation. Maybe you do to? Or perhaps there is something else you need to release before we grab hold of this costly grace?

Let's take just a minute to consider the prayer of Jesus answered through his sacrifice.

Now, let's confess and receive together¹¹:

Most merciful Father,
we confess that we have sinned against you,
in thoughts, in words, in deeds.
In what we have done,
and by what we have left undone.

We have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbors, spouses, friends, enemies, family, and co-workers
as ourselves.

We are truly sorry and we humbly repent,
letting go our preoccupation with self,
and receiving the selfless love of Jesus,

through him, we know we have mercy and forgiveness,
and grace beyond measure.

May we delight in your will, your ways,
in your love received, and love lived out.
For your glory, amen.

¹¹ Adapted from *The Covenant Book of Worship*, 162.