



# Hearing God

## Unclogging our Hearts to Hear

Over the next couple of months, at a time when we need it most personally and nationally, we will be setting our attention on [Becoming Like Jesus](#), on developing the skills of relating rightly to God and one another through our apprenticeship to Jesus. More specifically, we will be focusing our attention on Hearing God.

Now, if we remember, [in Galatians](#), the apostle Paul describes for us the source of the abundant life promised in Jesus, the relational and organic means by which we experience a full life with God, with others, and even within ourselves. Paul describes the source and means of the experiential, spiritual, and eternal life we seek as being “born according to the Spirit” (4:29), walking “by the Spirit” (5:16), and being “led by the Spirit,” (5:18). Notice the physicality of Paul’s description: “born,” “walk,” and “led.” Paul assumes the life we want and the way we live it puts to action all our physiological facilities, summing up his description with the charge, “If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.” (5:25).

The relational presence of the Holy Spirit with and within us is the good news that frees you and me to travel lightly. Jesus (in John chapters 14-16) describes the relationship and presence of the Holy Spirit as God himself (unseen but) here, sharing his life with us as we navigate our daily lives amid all that our senses experience. God communing with us, making us his companions in the story of salvation unfolding in our own stories, and the stories of our neighbors, our friends, the oppressed and forgotten, the wayward and the ones who get what they want and are found wanting. God conversing with us so that we can, as one author contends, live “a life of free-hearted collaboration with Jesus and his friends in the kingdom of the heavens.”<sup>1</sup>

Conversational companionship. Conversational, you and I speaking to God and God speaking to us. Companionship, friendship on a journey, side-by-side, in-step sharing life. This is how you and I are meant to experience the life of faith, the free and light life in the kingdom of God. Such descriptions assume two things. First that we can not only speak to God, but that God can and does speak to us, and that we can understand (discern) his voice. Second, that our relation to God—while reverential—is more like family or friend than a subject or servant.

It is a conversational companionship that is the life assumed by the disciples of Jesus after his death and resurrection. This is the life assumed by Paul as he wrote to his Galatian friends and faith family. And, a conversational companionship is the life that Jesus lived as he showed us how to live. Jesus assumed God’s in-life, familial presence, and discernable voice. Do we?

Oh, I know many of us what such a life, desire it to be true. And I know that many of us think it is true, for others anyway. But, do you believe that because of Jesus, you can have a conversational companionship with Him and the Father; do you assume it is true for you?

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<sup>1</sup> Dallas Willard, *Hearing God*, 14.

Do you live as if what Jesus said is true that he is with us step-in-step each day? Do you live as if hearing God is normative, as normal as a Father speaking to his children or as friends walking with one another along the road?

Dallas Willard describes the conversational companionship assumed by Jesus and the early church. This relationship incorporates the visible and invisible, what we see and what we believe is happening beyond our sight. He says,

“What we want, what we believe God desires for us, is ‘companionship,’ through actual ‘communications’ we have between us and him, communications that are frequently confirmed by external events as life moves along.

Christian spirituality as practiced through the ages takes the form of this companionship with Jesus. *Spiritual people are not those who engage in certain spiritual practices; they are those who draw their life from a conversational relationship with God.* They do not live their lives merely in terms of the human order in the visible world; they have ‘a life beyond.’

...[Jesus’] word pours into our heart, energizing and directing our life in a way that cannot be accounted for in natural terms. The presence of the physical world no longer has to be a *barrier* between me and God. My visible surroundings become, instead, God’s gift to me, where I am privileged to see the rule of heaven realized through my friendship with Jesus.”<sup>2</sup>

To varying degrees, I believe we all want this kind of life. A life where we recognize a reality beyond what we can sense and see. A life where we draw strength and energy from something other than what we can muster from within, purchase, or consume. A full life and abundant life in which we can hear God’s voice, and experience what the old song says,

He walks with me, and He talks with me,  
And He tells me I am His own,  
And the joy we share as we tarry there,  
None other has ever known.

The life we seek after, however, cannot be found by the mastery of a particular set of spiritual practices or religious routines; no matter how beneficial, such things are. The good life we seek after, cannot be found in desperate prayers, expectant pleas, or grand (or even guiding) visions, no matter how often such things pop up in our stories. The life we seek after can only be experienced in its fullest now and forever through a conversational relationship, a “hand-in-hand, conversational walk with God. This is the biblical ideal for human life.”<sup>3</sup>

Developing, maturing, in our **competence and confidence in speaking and listening to God**, in relating to our Father in heaven whose name is hallowed, is one of the goals of our apprenticeship to Jesus, and will be our focus these next few months. We label this orienting aspiration *Becoming Like Jesus*. We follow Jesus—

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 288-289.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 15.

walking with him, working with him, watching how he related to God, himself, and others—so that we can learn to do the same. And, what we see, is that Jesus did not just speak to God, which most of us are comfortable doing; he also heard God speak—which most of us are uncomfortable doing or admitting!

In fact, on several occasions, the conversational relationship between Jesus and the Father is made public for our benefit. For example, in John 12, as his trial and crucifixion draw near, Jesus speaks to the Father saying,

“Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ But for this purpose, I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.” (12:27)

We can all identify with Jesus here. Feeling the weight of what is required of us, we pray. We speak to our Father from the “trouble of our souls,” and “talk-it-out” in prayer. And as we talk, we feel alignment and strength, and we say, “Amen.” But, this is not the end of the scene. Verses 28-31 say,

“Then a voice came from heaven: ‘I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.’ The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, ‘An angel has spoken to him.’ Jesus answered, ‘This voice has come for your sake not mine.’”

While we can all identify with Jesus in the speaking of prayer, even in the reaffirming nature of our speaking, we most likely identify less with Jesus and more with the crowd in the second part of this scene. We hear something but are quick to dismiss it with “natural” explanations, or we acknowledge the “otherworldliness” of what we experience but are unsure of its origin. We dismiss the voice, or we mystify the voice. Jesus, however, recognized the voice and assumed this is a normal part of his life with the Father, acknowledging that the voice is for our benefit, not his. Why? Because “the Father knows me and I know the Father” (Jn. 10:15).

A “hand-in-hand, conversational walk with God,” is our Father’s intention for the life of his children and friends within his kingdom. So why does “hearing God,” learning to discern his voice, seem so extraordinary to us, something reserved for saints or schizophrenics?

We’ll it could be that we are unfamiliar with the variety of ways God speaks, and we can “hear”? Be sure that we will discuss those throughout our series. But I believe more fundamentally, the reason hearing God is not normal for us has more to do with **our misguided understanding of who God is and what he intends of us.**

There is [a familiar story](#) that demonstrates misguided understandings found in Luke 16. It the story of the two sons, which is more commonly known as “the prodigal son.” We immersed ourselves in the story of a son who took his inheritance and left and one who took for granted his inheritance and pouted. These two sons hep us recognize the two things we misunderstand.

First, we misunderstand who God is. We are in this misunderstanding like that younger son in Jesus’ parable who treated the father like an ATM. **He knew the father had the resources for the life he wanted, and so he sought the father primarily to dispense those resources.** Once he got what he wanted, he hurried off to live on what the father gave, *but not in a relationship with the father.*

Maybe we want resources to help at the moment, a word to tell us what decision to make or something to satisfy a craving or simply capital to make ends meet. Maybe we want resources to help in the future, a vision for our career, or a word about a relationship's direction or simply capital to make it to the end. And so we engage the Father and strain to hear his response. And while we are to seek God for our daily bread and all that our hearts' desire, if we are honest, what we tend to do is seek not God himself but what God gives—kind of like a genie. And we all know, thanks to Aladdin, that genies cannot have friends. Ultimately, our motives to Hear God prove to be a preoccupation with self, our well-being, and our future. We misunderstand who God is—a loving and generous father—so, we speak to him like a genie or divine ATM, listening for the words that will grant us our wishes and our resources.

Not only do we misunderstand who God is, but we also have misguided understandings of God's intent for us, and in so doing, we are like the older brother in that same story. We have listened to the father, but not to know him and him to know us, not as a conversational companion, but as a servant would listen to a master. We want marching orders. We want to know what to do to please him and fulfill our responsibilities. We want to be good servants so that we can receive the just rewards for our efforts. Don't get me wrong; at one time, it was probably a genuine desire to please the father that motivated the son, but over time the motivation was not the father's pleasure but the self-justification and validation of the "right" work and of not being like the younger brother. Like his little brother, though, the older son desired the benefits and blessing of being in the father's good graces. The son being upset at the end of the story because he didn't get what the younger son received though he certainly felt he earned it, reveal the misconception of the father's intent for him. The older son's life had been reduced to serving, deprived of what the father said was always his, the benefits of a relationship.

The sons misconceived the nature of the father and his intent for them. The irony for both the sons is that the inheritance was always there; nothing was withheld from either. Still, both sons missed the fullness of what was theirs, which could only be experienced through a relationship with the father. What they wanted could not be found by an acknowledgment of the resources at the father's disposal or mere submission to his authority.

Seeking God for guidance, direction, and favor is not wrong. However, when Hearing God is focused by these motives, rather than necessary to developing a conversational companionship in a life of free-hearted collaboration with Jesus and his friends in the kingdom of the heavens, we will both stunt our maturation as disciples (and humans), as well as limit our experience of the good life that we seek.

"The biblical record," adds Willard, "always presents the relationship between God and the believer as more like a friendship or family tie than merely one person's arranging to take care of the needs of another [(i.e., God as a divine ATM), or as indentured servants merely doing our required duties in suppressed expectation for the full inheritance.]"<sup>4</sup>

Jesus confirms that it is our misguided understanding of who God is and his intent that keeps us from the conversational companionship we seek in the often-overlooked parable shortly after the story of the two sons in Luke 17. Following the story of the two sons, Jesus continues describing the nature of the Father and his

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 27.

kingdom before warning the disciples not to fall for distorted understandings of life with God. On hearing Jesus' warning, like we often do, the disciples ask for an ATM dispensing of more faith. After all, they want the life with God that Jesus describes. Jesus, however, tells them that all they need is a pinch of faith to participate in weaving the fabric of the universe (17:5-6), then tell them this parable in Luke 17:7-10,

“Will anyone of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come at once and recline at table’? Will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, and gird yourself [for service], and serve me while I eat and drink’? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So also, when you have done all you were commanded say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.’”

Because I know most of you, I know that most of you do all kinds of things for God, do everything you can to make sure God is pleased, that your pleas are received, that you are following all the rules, and completing all the tasks assigned. Yet, you wonder why—like the servants in the story, you are not invited to the table to dine with the master of the house.

You don't need more faith, a single grain smaller than a period on this page will do. Could it be, that what keeps you from a conversational companionship that you desire is that you too have misguided understandings of God's intent for us, for how he relates to us and how we relate to him?

What would it do if we simply started this next few months not with a skill or a practice but by admitting our misconceptions about Hearing God...about what and why and how we are seeking to hear God speak...and confess that we want to learn to live in conversational companionship with God and his family?

What if we confess our tendency to treat God as a genie or divine ATM rather than our Father, and go to him for him because all he has he freely gives.

What if we confess our tendency to act as servants (genuinely and self-righteously), ignoring the relational (conversational and companion like relationship) God intends for us, and go to him not for tasks to do on his behalf, but to know him and him to know us.

Before we respond in song and communion, let's take a moment to be still and confess, to unclog our hearts so that our ears can hear.

## COMMUNION

We, all of us, myself included, live out of misguided understandings of who God is and his intent for us. So, let us confess together our tendency and repent together, turning to cling to the one who walks with us side-by-side in conversational companionship.

Take your communion elements and pray with me:

O King and Father, your Son died and was raised up in power.  
Now enable us to die to our sin in repentance so we may rise to  
new life in Him. We confess to you:

Father, though you should guide us by your Spirit, we inform ourselves;  
though you should rule us, we control ourselves;  
though you should fulfill us, we console ourselves.  
We think your truth too high, your will too hard,  
your power too remote, your love too free. But they are not!  
And without them, we are of all people most miserable.  
Now heal our confused minds with your Word,  
heal our divided wills with the law of Christ,  
heal our troubled consciences with your love,  
heal our anxious hearts with your presence,  
all for the sake of your Son,  
who loved us and gave himself for us,  
so that we might love and give ourselves for others.  
Amen.