

# Hearing God

## Have you heard God's voice?

Have you ever asked yourself the question? Perhaps you aren't yet a Christian – you don't have a personal experience of the relationship with God as Father that comes through faith in Christ. Have you heard God's voice? If you have had that inner sense that you need someone greater than yourself to help you with the challenges of life. If you have sensed that Jesus is more than just a man who lived 2000 years ago, that he may indeed hold the answer to life's deepest longings. If you have sensed that some things in your life are wrong and that you need forgiveness, then I believe you have heard the voice of God. The Holy Spirit is the one who convicts people of their sin and their need for righteousness (John 16:8). If you have felt that calling, then I would encourage you to keep on following its leading. Keep seeking God, and keep finding out more about Jesus.

If, on the other hand, you are a Christian already then the answer to the question must, by definition, be yes. According to Christ, every Christian has heard God and learnt from Him:

*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the Prophets: 'They will all be taught by God'. Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me. (John 6:44-45)*

Again, in John 10 we learn that hearing the voice of Jesus and obeying is a defining characteristic of true believers. Jesus said:

*My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand (John 10:27-28).*

As we start this study, then, take a few moments to answer the following questions:

- How did you hear God's voice when you first trusted Him?
- How did you hear His voice the last time that you were certain that you heard it?
- How long ago were you last absolutely sure that you heard and followed the Lord's leading?

## The God who speaks

The message of the Bible is the message of the God who speaks to human beings. We can see this from the beginning until the very end. The Bible opens with God speaking creation into being:

*And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. (Genesis 1:3)*

And it ends with Christ, the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End (Revelation 22:13), speaking a promise that He will return soon:

*He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon." (Revelation 22:20)*

So, it is the spoken word of God that holds together human history. He spoke our Universe into being and on the fulfilment of His promise the end of the ages hangs. His word is the power that upholds and sustains the Universe (Hebrews 1:3), and His revelation of Himself gives purpose to it. From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible reveals God as the One who speaks to us in many different ways:

## GENERAL REVELATION

God has spoken, and continues to speak, to all people through what can be called general revelation.

### Creation:

The voice of Creation is blunt, but it can remind us of God's power, glory and faithfulness:

- Psalm 19:1-4: *The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.*
- Romans 1:19-20: *since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.*

### **Conscience:**

The conscience is an inner voice created by God to guide us in deciding right from wrong. Paul describes it as being the requirements of the law written on our hearts:

- Romans 2:14-15: *Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.*

### **Culture:**

Every culture contains echoes of the knowledge of God our first ancestors had. This knowledge has been passed down through the generations and explains why some Biblical principles (e.g. the importance of marriage and family life or the fact that murder is morally wrong) are common throughout different culture.

General revelation can teach us a certain degree about God, but all three of these means through which God has spoken have been corrupted by sin:

- **Creation** – nature no longer exclusively displays God's glory, power and faithfulness – it is also marked by competition, disease and death. It is, in Tennyson's words, *red in tooth and claw*.
- **Conscience** – the conscience is weakened, dulled and corrupted by the sinful nature within us. In fact, Jeremiah could say despairingly: *The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?* (Jeremiah 17:9). This doesn't mean that the conscience can never guide us to do what is right, but that we are capable of over-riding it, and that it is not infallible.
- **Culture** – every culture is distorted by the effects of sin and incomplete in its expression of God. In fact, there are aspects of our cultures that are hostile to God and present barriers to Him. This is particularly true in cultures that neglect God's foundational design for human life, in particular family life. In Romans 1:18-32, Paul charts this progress of the deterioration of culture. Firstly human beings rejected God, then they replaced Him, and the result was that they began to practice all forms of sin and immorality until eventually their cultures actually approved of these behaviours as being acceptable.

## **SPECIAL REVELATION**

Because general revelation is insufficient to communicate the true nature of God, and because it is so highly distorted by sin, God spoke throughout Scripture in more specific ways. We call these means special revelation.

### **Covenant community:**

God chose one nation whose culture He could shape and to which He could entrust His words. The nation of Israel, beginning with Abraham around 2000 BC, was intended to have an authentic knowledge of the character of God – His absolute holiness and His love and faithfulness – and to bear witness to Him to all nations on earth. God made a covenant relationship with Abraham and his descendants based on His promises to them. In the time of Moses He added to the covenant the Law, and again in David's time he renewed the covenant by adding a promise that David's descendants would be kings forever. The nation did not remain faithful to this covenant relationship, and so God repeatedly sent prophets, who were messengers of the covenant through whom He called them back to faithfulness to Him (Hebrews 1:1). The words of many of these prophets were recorded in Scripture. Scripture, then, is a record of God's words spoken to the community of His people:

- I Peter 1:21: *For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*
- I Peter 1:10-12: *Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.*

It is interesting that it was into the community of His people that God usually spoke (although often through individuals) rather than to individuals.

### **Christ:**

Jesus was the ultimate revelation of God to us. He was truly God made human (John 1 explains this, and describes Jesus as the Word), and He spoke directly to us with the voice of God. In Him we see the character of God perfectly revealed – full of grace and truth (John 1:14):

- John 14:10: *Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.*
- John 14:24: *He who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me.*
- Hebrews 1:2: *but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.*

### **The Counsellor:**

The Holy Spirit is the final way in which God continues to communicate to us. He primarily reminds us of the teachings of Christ, and is not a greater stage in God's revelation through Christ, but a continuation of Christ's presence with His people (John 14:17-18). That is why Christ described Him as "another Counsellor" (John 14:16), in other words someone who would continue His work:

- John 14:26 – *But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.*
- John 15:26 – *"When the Counsellor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me.*

The Holy Spirit:

- Sharpens the voice of conscience, convicting us of sin and righteousness (John 16:8)
- Inspired Scripture, and makes it live to us as we read it with His help (I Corinthians 2:12-14)
- Changes our minds and hearts so we think and feel like God – he sharpens conscience so that God's Law is truly written on our hearts and minds (Hebrews 8:10)
- Changes our character so that we display His fruit (Galatians 5:22)
- Leads us to make God-honouring decisions (Galatians 5:16)

Isaiah 11:2-3 speaks of six characteristics that the Holy Spirit brings to us: wisdom, understanding, counsel, power, knowledge and fear of the Lord. All six of these are vitally relevant when it comes to understanding what God is saying to us.

## **Not all can hear**

Although God is always speaking, and to all people, many people cannot hear His voice. These sad quotations from the Old Testament prophets reveal the extent of the problem:

*To whom can I speak and give warning? Who will listen to me? Their ears are closed so they cannot hear. The word of the LORD is offensive to them; they find no pleasure in it.*  
(Jeremiah 6:10)

Jeremiah was burdened with the word of God, and specifically with a warning message for His people, but they had rejected God's word because they found no pleasure in it. What they heard didn't suit them – it offended them – and so they rejected it.

*But they refused to pay attention; stubbornly they turned their backs and stopped up their ears. They made their hearts as hard as flint and would not listen to the law or to the words that the LORD Almighty had sent by his Spirit through the earlier prophets. So the LORD Almighty was very angry. 'When I called, they did not listen; so when they called, I would not listen,' says the LORD Almighty. (Zechariah 7:11-13)*

In this passage, God is telling Zechariah about the rebelliousness of His people that led to their Exile in Babylon. They kept on ignoring Him, both His written words in the Law and the words He spoke through the prophets, until eventually He stopped speaking and even stopped listening to them.

## **Barriers to hearing God**

Based on the words from Jeremiah and Zechariah above and our own experience, we can identify three major reasons why people cannot hear God speaking:

- **Shut ears:** Because of individualism, pride or selfishness we often do not want to hear God speak, perhaps because we know that His words will challenge us where we don't want to be challenged, and so we shut our ears and refuse even to listen.
- **Hardened hearts:** Often because of a critical spirit, stubbornness or self-pity we may hear God's voice but we will not give in to it.
- **Distraction:** For many people, the problem is not so much a wilful rejection of God's voice, but simply that we do not hear Him because we never stop to listen. We live constantly in busy-ness, surrounded by noise and other voices. Often we must be still and seek God if we are to hear Him, but our modern world has less and less space for silence and reflection.

## Voices we can hear

God can speak to people in many different ways. In the Old Testament, God spoke to individuals through a huge variety of means, including some pretty unusual ones: angels, bushes, donkeys, husbands, fleeces, thunder, wives, prophets, winds, parchments, visions, dreams, and mysterious visitors like the priest named Melchizedek. God's voice is described both as a gentle whisper (1 Kings 19:11-13) and like the rushing of many waters (Ezekiel 1:24; 43:2; Revelation 1:15). Most of the books of the prophets begin with the phrase; *the Word of the LORD came to...* We are often told where this took place, in what year, and to whom it came, but not **how** it came.

In the New Testament book of Acts, people heard God through apparently spectacular means:

- *Angels* (5:20 & 12 – to Peter; 8:26 – to Philip; 10:3 – to Cornelius; 27 – to Paul)
- *An audible voice with a bright light* (9:4 – Paul's conversion)
- *Visions* (9:10 – to Ananias; 10:10 & 19 – to Peter; 16:9-10 & 18:9-10 – to Paul)
- *Prophecy* (11:28 & 21:1-15 – Agabus)
- *An audible voice without visible light* (23:11 – to Paul)

But His voice was also heard through much more mundane means:

- *Preaching* (e.g. Chapters 2, 4, 13)
- *A discussion among leaders* (Ch 15 – the council of Jerusalem)
- *An explanation of the Scriptures* (Ch 8 – the Ethiopian; Ch 17 – in Thessalonica)
- *A careful study of the Scriptures* (Ch 17 – the Bereans)

In addition, we read about people hearing the Spirit's voice (8:29 – to Philip; 10:19 – to Peter; 13:2 – to church leaders), although it is unclear whether this was audible or an inner voice.



The diagram above is an attempt to summarise the different voices we can hear. I have separated them into two types:

### 1. External voices

These are probably the most obvious and perhaps the easiest to identify. They do not come from inside ourselves but influence our thinking nonetheless. There are three sources of external voices:

- **Others** – the words of other individuals may be true or false, helpful or destructive.
- **Society** – what Christians traditionally call “the world”. This is the influence of society through the media, advertising and culture.
- **Satan** – the third external voice is from Satan or evil spirits associated with him. We may not always think about this source of external voices.

## 2. Inner voices

For every Christian there are two competing inner voices:

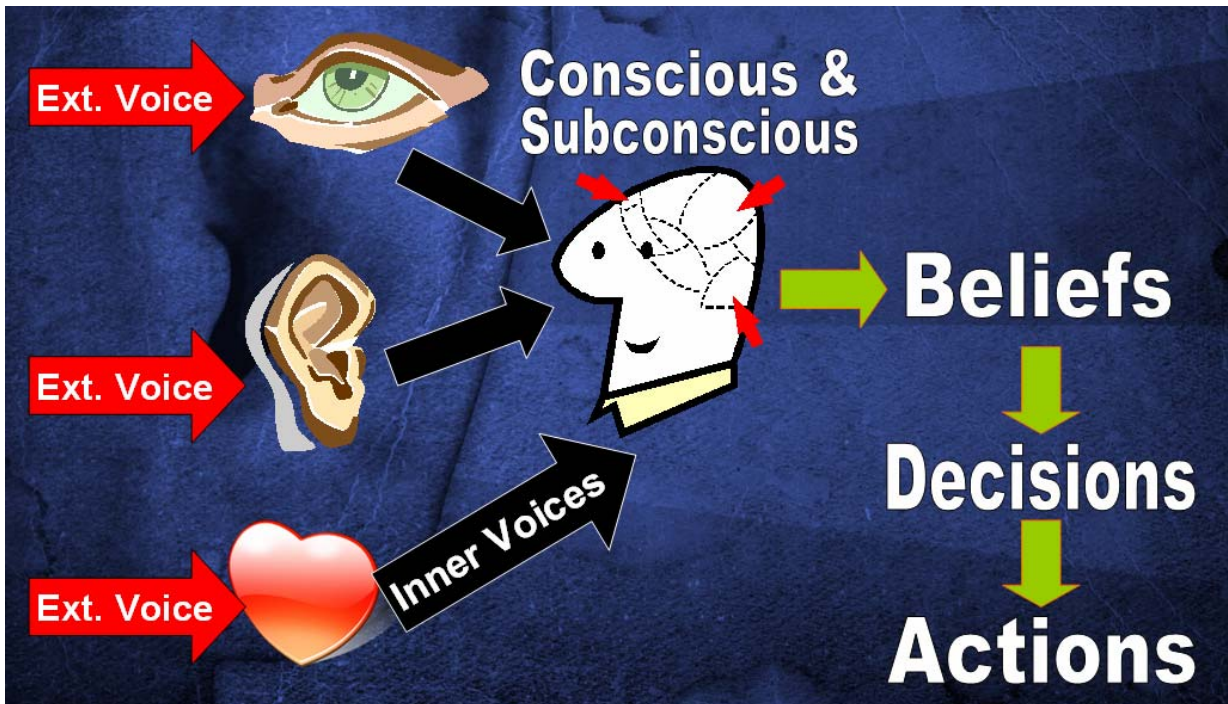
- **The sinful nature** – this is our old nature that has been corrupted by sin. It is dominated by selfish desires.
- **The Holy Spirit** – the Spirit lives in every true believer, and He seeks to remind us of God’s truth and to lead us to make decisions that honour God

There is also an area of overlap in the diagram, where I have put more “supernatural” voices including visions, dreams and audible voices. In this category it can be particularly difficult to say if the voices we hear are from inside ourselves or from external source.

So, then, we are surrounded by voices, bombarded by messages, constantly under the influence of someone or something. The challenge in the midst of all this confusion is to learn to hear and recognise the voice of God. He is always speaking, but we must learn to listen!

### Why does it matter?

So far we have talked about the origin of different voices, but not how we hear them. The following image is an attempt to explain the process by which we hear these different voices:



Probably the most obvious way in which we “hear” voices or receive influences is through our physical senses (primarily hearing and sight), but it would be wrong to think that all external voices are heard externally. External voices can either influence us through our senses or directly through our heart (by which I mean our emotions) or mind (our thoughts). Once we have “heard” them we then internalise them, and they operate on our mind in much the same way that inner voices from the sinful nature and the spirit do. All of these inner and internalised voices can operate at either a conscious (we are aware of them) or subconscious (they have become habitual or we do not exercise control over them) level. If we choose to believe them, these

voices then shape what we believe to be true about ourselves, others and the spiritual and physical world we live in. Based on our beliefs we reach certain decisions and these result in certain actions in word or deed (or inaction). In other words, **the voices we believe shape the person we become**. That is why it is so vitally important that we learn to recognise the voice of God, the voice of truth, amongst all of the voices we hear.

Coming out of this discussion, there are three key points we must understand:

- a) **Not every thought we have originates with ourselves** – this may be obvious in some cases, but can be harder to spot in others. Just because a thought appears to be internal, from ourselves, we
- b) **Not every thought is true** – again this may be obvious, but we can easily be deceived into believing lies. In fact, this is Satan's main weapon against us. He aims to keep us enslaved to believing lies about ourselves, God and the world we live in. These lies can actually become the basis of our beliefs and then influence our decisions and actions.
- c) **Every thought must be tested** – we must test every thought to ask if it is true. This is much more important than trying to figure out what its origin is. This testing will be particularly important when it comes to more "supernatural" forms of voices (e.g. dreams and visions), as these can easily lead us astray. Paul challenged the churches in Galatia to test everything they heard against the truth of the gospel he preached. He warned them that they should even reject an angel or himself if they preached a different message!

*But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! (Galatians 1:8-9)*

## Testing and Weighing

These are two words used by the apostle Paul to describe the process by which prophecy (or messages that claim to be from God) should be assessed in the church, but I believe that the same principles are equally applicable to every voice that we hear, whatever its apparent origin (external or inner):

### a) Test for Authenticity – is it really true and from God?

*do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil. (I Thessalonians 5:20-22)*

*Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. (I John 4:1)*

Every voice must be tested to ask if it really originates from God, in which case it will be completely true. As John Wesley said:

*Do not hastily ascribe things to God. Do not easily suppose dreams, voices, impressions, visions or revelations to be from God. They may be from Him. They may be from nature. They may be from the Devil.*

Believing that God has said something that was really only from others can lead to disappointment with God and side-track a person into waiting for God to fulfil a promise He never actually made. I have personally seen this lead to great frustration and discontent in people.

### b) Weigh for Application – how, when, where and by whom should it be acted on?

*Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. (I Corinthians 14:29)*

Even when a message is accepted to be from God it must still be *weighed* to decide how it should be applied. What action should be taken based on it? Who should take this action? How should they prepare for it? When and where should they do it? There is a clear example of this process of "weighing" in Paul's own life recorded in Acts 21. Paul had become convinced that it was God's will that he should go to Jerusalem, but as he was on the way a prophet named Agabus brought a message from God warning Paul that if he went to Jerusalem he would be arrested by the Jews and handed over to the Gentiles. This was a true prophecy given by the Holy Spirit, and Paul did not dispute its authenticity. The Christians who were with Paul heard the prophecy and tried to persuade Paul to turn back and

abandon his plan. Paul, however, refused to give up as he knew that going to Jerusalem was God's will for him. In fact, the prophecy was fulfilled and Paul ended up in prison, but the result was that he was able to write several of his letters that now form part of our New Testament and to witness for God in Rome itself, even to members of the imperial household. God had not given this prophecy to make Paul turn back but to prepare him for what lay ahead. If Paul had not weighed the prophecy for application he could have made a wrong decision based on it and the results would have been disastrous.

## Learning to listen to God - pre-requisites for hearing His voice

There are certain pre-requisites for being able to hear God's voice. If we want to improve our ability to hear God's voice amongst all the different influences we come under we must take action to limit the impact of the other voices that surround us:

### EXTERNAL VOICES:

**Others** – We must be careful who we listen to. Psalm 1:1 warns about who we allow to influence us:

*Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers.*

**Society** – We must be transformed by the renewing of our minds rather than conforming to this world's pattern of thinking. This depends on offering ourselves as a living sacrifice to God and allowing His Spirit to transform us. Paul writes of this in Romans 12:2:

*Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*

**Satan** – We must be strong in the Lord and so stand firm against the Devil's schemes. Ephesians 6:10-18 describes how we can do this by putting on the full armour of God and being prayerful.

### INTERNAL VOICES:

We must crucify the sinful nature and let the Holy Spirit fill and lead us. Paul writes about this ongoing process in Galatians 5:16-26. We must actively choose to subject our sinful nature to the cross and to listen for the Spirit's leading. As Christ said in Matthew 10:38-39:

*anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*

This wisdom is found throughout the Bible. Psalm 25:9 says that:

*He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way.*

The cross may be painful, but it is only through the cross that we can learn to hear God's voice.

## Five paths to hearing God

As we come to this core section of the study you may be expecting me to present tests to you that will help you decide if a voice is from God or not. The following five things can indeed function as tests, and will be very helpful when we face a dilemma or major decision, but they are also more than that. I have called them paths to hearing God because I believe that they are habits we can develop that will enable us to become people who habitually hear and follow the leading of the Spirit. Too often we take a "crisis management" approach to guidance. We hit a problem and suddenly we cry out to God for help. Instead we need to become people who seek, hear and obey the word of God by nature. These habits will be vital if we are to become those people. All of them are important, and none is a substitute for the others. We must learn to base our decisions on all five:

### 1. Scripture – Saturate your mind and heart with God's word

*and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*

(II Timothy 3:15-17)

Scripture comes first in our list, and it is the most important. It is the written word of God recorded for us, and so is the only objective external standard by which we can test our beliefs and our actions. It is the inspired word of God, and is useful to teach us what is right, to show us where we are wrong (rebuking), to bring us from wrong to right (correcting) and to keep us going on the right path (training in righteousness). If we hope to hear God clearly, we must meditate on His word, immersing ourselves in the Scriptures, basing our thinking upon His Word. The Spirit will take His word and make it live to us, bringing its truth to play in our thinking. As Hebrews says, the word of God will then pierce our hearts and expose our motives:

*For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.*  
(Hebrews 4:12)

Often people think of guidance from God's word in terms of finding a particular verse that applies to their situation. The verse may be found through various means, sometimes even including randomly pointing at a random page of the Bible. Although God may speak through verses like this, and many Christians can testify to how God spoke to them in a time of need through a specific verse or passage of Scripture, even this kind of voice must be tested against the whole revelation of God in Scripture (it is "all Scripture" that is inspired, not just every individual part of it). What does the verse mean in the context of the book it is found in and in the context of the whole of Scripture? How does it apply to my life? If we are to correctly apply Scripture, it is vital that we get to know the whole message of the Bible. Through Scripture we will come to know God's character, purposes and promises and our part in His eternal plan. **God's specific will for you will always further His general purposes for your life.** In addition to this, by seeing how God spoke in Scripture we can learn what things He usually speaks about and what things concern Him most. Often these are quite different from the things that tend to concern us most. By immersing ourselves in Scripture we will learn to be concerned about the things that God is concerned for and to desire the things that he desires.

Often people are concerned to know God's specific will for their lives. My advice would be that the best place to start is by doing the things that Scripture reveals to be God's will for all Christians. Many New Testament passages reveal what we could call "God's standing orders". For example, twice in 1 Thessalonians the apostle Paul speaks about specific things that are God's will for all Christians:

- **Sanctification** – including avoiding sexual impurity (4:3-8). It is God's will that we should be made increasingly like Christ in character.
- **Continual rejoicing, ceaseless prayer and constant thanksgiving** (5:16-18). It is God's will that we should be joyful, prayerful and thankful in every situation.

If we are not taking these commands seriously and making progress in these things that are God's will for all Christians how can we expect to hear God's voice in our specific situation? Two of the greatest barriers to hearing God are:

- **An unrepentant heart** – where there is sin that we refuse to surrender
- **A critical spirit** – where instead of being joyful, prayerful and thankful we are negative, resentful and judgemental.

If these problems have gripped us then we need to humble ourselves again and surrender to God.

## 2. Prayer – Be still and wait for God

Prayer should be a two way conversation. It should be as much about listening to God as it is about speaking to Him. When we believe we have heard from God, whatever the means, we should pray about it. This prayer must be sincere and humble – prayer as Jesus taught, concerned first with God's glory, His rule and His will being done in and through us (Matthew 6:9-10). If we pray in this attitude, we will either have more peace or less peace about the voice and the decision we have made based on it. If we cannot find peace we must continue to test the voice and our decision. The psalms constantly remind us of our need to be still before God and to wait for Him. For example, hear the words of Psalm 37:4-8:

*Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this: He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun. Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; do not fret when men succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes. Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret—it leads only to evil.*

In our modern world with all of its noise and busy-ness we need to learn to be still before the Lord and to wait for Him. We must learn not to rush or be impulsive and must find periods of silence and solitude when we can spend time alone with God. We need these times daily, but when faced with particular crises or important decisions we must make longer times.

### 3. "Sanctified reason" – A transformed mind surrendered to God

*Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.*

(Romans 12:1-3)

As we surrender our lives to God, the Spirit and word of God transforms our minds. Instead of following the pattern of this world's thinking we begin to have renewed minds that think in God's way. The result of this transformation of our minds is that we will learn to have wisdom – to be able to reason in a sanctified way – so that we can "test and approve" God's will for us. This process of reason is vital both in terms of deciding if the message is authentic and determining its application:

#### 1) Testing authenticity:

Is it more likely to appeal to the sinful nature or the Holy Spirit?

- Our glory or God's glory?
- Our good or the needs of others?
- Our empire or God's Kingdom?

#### 2) Weighing application:

- Are you the right person? Does it fit what you know about how God has gifted you?
- Is this the right timing?
- Do you need to prepare in some way before doing it?
- Who else can you work with?

Jl Packer describes this process of sanctified reason in His book, *Your Father Loves You*:

*First, we must be willing to think. It is false piety, super-supernaturalism of an unhealthy pernicious sort that demands inward impressions with no rational base, and declines to heed the constant biblical summons to consider. God made us thinking beings, and he guides our minds as we think things out in his presence.*

*Second, we must be willing to think ahead and weigh the long-term consequences of alternative courses of action. Often we can only see what is wise and right, and what is foolish and wrong, as we dwell on the long-term issues ...*

*Fourth, we must be willing to be ruthlessly honest with ourselves. We must suspect ourselves: ask ourselves why we feel a particular course of action will be right and make ourselves give reasons.*

Ignoring sanctified reason can be disastrous. We must be so careful to test our motivation, remembering the deceitfulness of the sinful nature. The most important thing to remember in this process is that sanctified reason or godly wisdom is always submitted to the cross. It is always on the basis of self-sacrificed and living for Christ. The cross is at the centre of our faith, and it is only when we become living sacrifices that our minds can truly be renewed.

### 4. Fellowship – Live expectantly in authentic community

Fellowship does not always figure highly on the list of advice when people speak about hearing God or receiving guidance from Him, but I am convinced that it is absolutely vital. In fact, it incorporates and enhances all of the three paths we have already discussed:

- **Scripture** – it is in community, through the teaching of God's word by gifted teachers and discussion with people whose personal experience and cultural understanding is different from our own that we will best be able to understand and apply God's word. Whilst we must read and study God's word individually, this must also be balanced with doing so in the context of community. When we meet together as Christians we should discuss the word of God, learning from one another and challenging one another. Obedience to the "standing orders" of God's word must include living in community. Just look at the "one another" commands of Scripture: "love one

another" (John 13:34), "accept one another" (Romans 15:7), "forgive each other" (Ephesians 4:32), "submit to one another" (Ephesians 5:21), "teach and admonish one another" (Colossians 3:16) and "confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another" (James 5:16). These commands cannot be fulfilled except in fellowship with other Christians.

- **Prayer** – individual prayer must be balanced with corporate prayer together with other believers. By hearing their prayers and having them pray for us we will grow to know God more than we can only through our own experience of Him and we are more likely to hear His voice. We need also to be praying for others, since God may speak to them through us.
- **Wisdom** – within the church there are those who are particularly gifted with the spiritual gift of wisdom. By living in community with them we can benefit from their wisdom. We can also learn from the experiences of others as well as our own and are more likely to know other people who may be part of what God has said to us.

Paul speaks about this kind of living in Colossians 3:16:

*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.*

The picture is one of Christ's word (which I take to refer both to His teachings and to His ongoing words to us) living richly in His people as they teach one another, admonish (challenge and correct) one another and sing to one another! Wouldn't it be exciting to be part of a community like that – where God's word dwelt richly in everyone, so that we all heard His word through one another? I am convinced that it is still primarily to the community of His people (now meaning the church) that God will speak rather than to individuals. In fact, the passages about testing and weighing voices that we looked at above were all written to churches, not to individuals. Prophecy in the New Testament was always to be tested and weighed in the community. If you are serious about hearing God's voice then you need to be living in community with God's people.

I have used two words to describe this kind of living:

- a) **Expectantly** – expect God to speak through others when they speak in church! I Corinthians 14 speaks about Christians coming together with an expectation that God would speak and a readiness to test the words that were spoken and to weigh them for their application. Everyone who speaks in church should have the expectation that God will speak through their words, as 1 Peter 4:11 says:

*If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God.*

This is why it is so vital that everything said in church should be based on and directed to Scripture. Sadly, although God will always speak to His people through His word, we will not hear Him if we are not listening. We must be in an attitude of receptiveness when we come together, prepared to hear and obey God's truth even through the tough, challenging words that are spoken.

- b) **Authentic community** – I define an authentic Christian community as one that spans different cultures, generations, sexes, socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. When we limit our fellowships to narrow groups of similar people we limit the likelihood that we will hear God's word and accurately weigh its application. We need to aim to create churches that reflect the full diversity of God's Kingdom. Authentic community also means that we will be in submission to godly elders who are in authority over us, accountable to others, sharing our possessions and our person. In this kind of community we are much more likely to hear God and less likely to be deceived into believing a lie.

It should be obvious that this kind of fellowship will need to be in both a large group setting (for example Sunday Services) and a small group context so that we have both the submission to authority and opportunity to be taught by gifted teachers but also the accountability to others and opportunity to discuss God's word together.

## 5. Advice – From people who know and love both God and you

Proverbs speaks repeatedly about the need to take advice:

- 12:15 – *The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice.*
- 13:10 – *Pride only breeds quarrels, but wisdom is found in those who take advice.*
- 15:22 – *Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.*
- 19:20 – *Listen to advice and accept instruction, and in the end you will be wise.*

- 20:18 – *Make plans by seeking advice; if you wage war, obtain guidance.*

Jl Packer also warns us of the importance of advice:

*It is a sign of conceit and immaturity to dispense with taking advice in major decisions. There are always people who know the Bible, human nature, and our own gifts and limitations better than we do, and even if we cannot finally accept their advice, nothing but good will come to us from carefully weighing what they say.*

I cannot emphasise how important I believe it is for everyone to have a small number (even two or three) of people to whom they turn for advice in important decisions. Too many young people (I am afraid this is particularly a failure of my own generation and younger people) end up facing disastrous consequences because they fail to take advice. There are two key qualities for these people:

- a) They must know and love you** – so that they will advise accurately based on your abilities and character and with pure intentions.
- b) They must know and love God** – so that they will advise in accordance with His will and for His glory.

Where can you start to look for advisors? The obvious place to start is in the church community that you are part of. I would always recommend that at least one of these people should be a leader in your church who is more mature than you (perhaps a small group leader or elder). Particularly for younger people another great place to look is to your parents. You will seldom find people who love you as much and know you as well as they do. There is, however, a challenge for Christian parents that we should be sure to base the advice we give on godly wisdom, not worldly ambition for our children. In particularly important decisions it will be vital to seek the advice of the most mature believers we know, and this should include the elders of the church. As Packer rightly says, we may not always follow their advice, but we will always learn from it, and the advice will always help us to more carefully consider all aspects of the decision and be better prepared for potential challenges and problems along the way.

## Putting it into practice

As we come to the end of this study, it is a good opportunity to begin to put into practice what we have learned. Read Psalm 143, in which David speaks of his longing to hear the voice of God, and then spend at least five minutes in silence expecting the Lord to speak. If you hear a voice, test it and weigh it. Make this your habit every day.