

## How To Hear God's Voice

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**The Holy Spirit: Riding the Wave of God's Spirit Series**

**Acts 13:1-3**

I've been doing a series from some select passages in the Book of Acts. We've been looking particularly at some of the more supernatural aspects of our faith.

I want to begin today by talking about a person who many legends have been written about, and in whose honor beer has been consumed. I'm talking about St. Patrick. Most people know St. Patrick only in relationship to St. Patrick's Day, "The one day a year," according to a person I read about in the newspaper, "in which you can get falling down drunk and not have to apologize." The bars open early and they sell drinks like the Irish Car Bomb, a mix of whiskey, Bailey's Irish Crème Liqueur, and a ½-pint of Guinness Stout.

But typically on St. Patrick's Day, if you are Irish and you live in a big American city, you might drink a couple of pints of green beer and eat traditional Irish fare like corn beef and cabbage. In Chicago they have a big St. Patrick's Day parade and dye the Chicago River green every March 17<sup>th</sup>, at least a shade of green that is only slightly different than the typical green from the industrial sludge that runs into the river. And small Irish men, who have red hair, will dress up like leprechauns. People will talk about four-leaf clovers and sing Irish ballads like "Danny Boy."

But almost no one knows who the real St. Patrick was. Patrick lived back in the 5<sup>th</sup> century and he was a man who heard the voice of God. The story is told in a very short autobiography regarding how step-by-step he was led by God's Spirit to evangelize all of Ireland. When he was 16, he was living in England. And along with many others, he was taken captive and enslaved by the Irish. In those days the Irish used to come across the Irish Sea and capture and enslave people, much like the Vikings did in later centuries. Patrick became a slave and a shepherd in the western outreaches of Ireland.

During the next several years, Patrick began to grow in the Christian faith he was raised in. He spent a considerable amount of time in prayer. One night while he was praying, he heard the voice of God telling him that he would soon go home. Now, I don't know if he heard an audible voice, or more probably, an inner voice of the Holy Spirit speaking to his heart. But sometime after that, he felt that God was strongly indicating to him that he should immediately leave where he was and walk toward the Irish Sea. He had a very strong sense that there was a boat waiting for him that would take him back to England.

So Patrick embarks on this 200-mile journey in response to what he believes God is telling him. When he gets to the Irish Sea, he finds a ship prepared to go back to England. But the captain refuses his request to board. Patrick was completely confused. He wondered if he was mistaken about what he had heard. So he prayed: God, did I hear you right? Did I understand you correctly? He couldn't figure out why God would lead him to walk so far and at the very last moment he would be refused passage on the ship. Well, Patrick kept praying and suddenly the ship's captain called to him and told him that he had changed his mind and that Patrick could get on the ship.

Patrick ends up back in England living with his parents. After about six years of being back in England with his family, Patrick received a vision in which a messenger brings him a number of letters, one of which said, "The inhabitants of Ireland ask you to come back and live among us..." Patrick was absolutely shaken to the core of his being because he realized that God was calling him back to Ireland, the place where he had been enslaved. And this time God wanted him to go as a free man to evangelize his former slave masters.

Patrick felt utterly inadequate to perform this task. So, instead of going to Ireland directly, he headed off to France to get some theological training at a seminary in France. When he got to France, the church authorities were absolutely appalled by what he told them about his vision and about what he heard from God. Had he lived in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they might have diagnosed him as a paranoid schizophrenic who suffered from delusions of grandeur. They basically said to him that there was no way God would speak to someone like you about evangelizing an entire country. So the church authorities essentially said to Patrick: "Forget it. You don't know anything. We'll send someone else, who is much better trained, and much better equipped to bring the gospel to Ireland." The church authorities laid their hands on this other man to ordain him for this task. But that man died just a few days after he was ordained to bring the gospel to Ireland.

At this point, the church officials said: Perhaps we were a little bit hasty. Perhaps we made a little mistake here when we rejected Patrick. So they decided to send Patrick back as a missionary bishop to Ireland. And here was Patrick, years after being taken captive as a slave, voluntarily going back to Ireland as a free man to evangelize the island.

He saw many of the leading families of Ireland, including some of the wealthiest people, come to Christ. Patrick didn't only teach the Bible, and lead people to Christ; he also formed the First Irish Church. But what Patrick emphasized in his autobiography weren't his achievements at all. What he emphasized in his autobiography was that everything happened through his obedience to the voice of the Holy Spirit and his thorough knowledge of the Bible.

Now, what happened to Patrick still happens today. God continues to speak to people through the Holy Spirit today.

God continues to speak today by his Spirit. He wants to speak to you and me and not just great missionaries and apostles like St. Patrick, or the apostle Paul. Most of us are not called to be missionaries to a whole nation. Most of what you and I will hear will be more limited in scope, and probably much less spectacular than what St. Patrick received. But I suspect that most of us will, most of the time, hear things that will be less distinct. We probably won't often hear audible voices. We'll experience impressions. We might get pictures in our minds' eyes.

A few years ago a woman who I will call Jill came to our church, and she was very skeptical about the idea that God might do something supernatural in our day. Jill believed that God probably did the miracles that we read about in the Bible. But the notion that God would, without medical intervention, miraculously heal someone today of cancer or curvature of the spine, or some serious medical condition—forget about it! She just found it absolutely ludicrous to even consider that possibility.

We talked for a few minutes before church. I could feel her skepticism about our church's beliefs. We had a pleasant little exchange. After church, as I was driving out of the parking lot, I saw Jill talking with one of our church members. I decided to drive by them and I intended to just roll down my window and say "good-bye" to Jill and the church member.

So I rolled down the window and unfortunately the church member said: Rich, I was just telling Jill how when you pray for people sometimes the Holy Spirit comes on them and they fall down. Isn't that right? Isn't that what happens?

I thought: Great! I'm sure that really helps Jill to understand what we're talking about by God being active in our day.

And let me just say this parenthetically. One of the toughest things for pastors and for Christian leaders deals with what I call the embarrassing supporter. By the embarrassing supporter, I mean a really well intentioned person who rushes to your defense because they love you, but they do it in a really dumb way. Sort of like Al Gore is doing with John Kerry right now.

I remember when I was doing open air preaching at the OSU oval, a student there began challenging me, nothing really intense. He wasn't really heckling me. But he was debating me and I actually thought: Cool! There's nothing that will draw a crowd better than a little bit of controversy. But then the embarrassing supporter came to my aid and he said to the challenger something like: You better listen to Pastor Rich. He knows what he's talking about. And if you don't listen to him, you are going to be judged and burn in hell forever.

I literally turned and said to him: Thanks for that support, but I don't think your statement is going to win friends and influence people here.

Back to my original story. The embarrassing supporter in the parking lot said: Rich, get out of your car and pray for Jill. You'll see, Jill, something is going to happen.

And so I tried to extricate myself from this situation. I said: Well, maybe Jill doesn't want prayer right now.

They said: Jill, you want prayer, don't you? You want Pastor Rich to pray for you?

Unfortunately, she said: Fine. He can pray for me.

Well, I was absolutely cornered. I had to pray for Jill. I said: Jill, is there anything you want me to pray for?

She just folded her arms across her chest and said: God knows what I need.

I thought: O great! This is going to be fun. I intended to pray one of those prayers: God show Jill how much you love her and that you are for her and not against her. And then I was going to get back in my car and drive home.

Well, the moment I lifted my hand to pray, I had a vivid impression that Jill had hearing loss in her right ear and that the loss of hearing specifically had to do with a high-end frequency range of her hearing. So I looked at her and thought: This is going to be awful. The woman already thinks that I'm a total weirdo and she already thinks that our church is full of weirdos. If I ask her if she has hearing loss and she doesn't, she will just write us off forever.

But I decided nothing ventured, nothing gained. She already thinks we're weird. We probably can't lose esteem in her eyes. So I said: Jill, do you have a problem with hearing in your right ear?

She said: How do you know that?

I knew I was on to something, so I said: Because I just felt like the Holy Spirit told me.

She said: Yes, but how do you know that?

I said: I just felt like the Holy Spirit told me that.

She said: Yes, but...

We went back and forth that way for a little while. And then I said: I felt specifically that you had lost hearing in the higher-end frequency range in your right ear.

She said: It is really odd that you say that because I just went to an audiologist a few days ago because I was having trouble hearing. He said that I had 30% hearing loss in my right ear and specifically that I couldn't hear in the high-frequency range. And this is a problem that has affected my mother and my grandmother. We all have the same problem.

So I said: Would you mind if I prayed for healing for you?

She said: OK.

So I just asked the Lord to touch her and heal her. Nothing spectacular seemed to happen. I got in my car and said: That was cool! I'm glad I really did hear from the Lord. And then I drove home. I have to be honest with you. I did not expect her to be healed.

The next week as I got up to speak, and as I was standing up there, Jill runs down the aisle and she said: Rich, Rich! I have to tell you something. There was about 1000 people watching.

I said: OK.

She said: After you prayed for me, for the next two days my ear just hurt like crazy.

I thought: O great!

And then she said: And then the pain went away and it seemed like I could hear more clearly. I went back to the audiologist and he said that the hearing in my ear was 100% perfect. It was completely changed in the course of a week. Jesus Christ healed me.

I said: That's right! Jesus Christ did heal you.

I've been doing a series on Learning to Ride the Wave of God's Spirit. And today I want to make a simple point, and that is, if you want to see God's kingdom come into this world like St. Patrick to an entire nation, or like me to just one woman standing in a church parking lot, one of the essential elements is learning to hear God's voice. I've called today's talk, "How to Hear God's Voice." Let's pray.

Acts 13:1-4

In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers; Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manean (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

How do we hear God's voice the way that Patrick did, or the way the church in Antioch did? How do we get prophecy operating in our lives? How do you become the kind of person who can begin to pick up on what the Holy Spirit is saying: "Well, out of the whole church I'm calling Barnabas and Saul to world mission"?

You know, the most common way that God speaks to people today is through his written Word, through the Bible. Now, I know that starting here is not very

spectacular. Bible study does not have the sizzle, the sexiness like those spectacular stories you hear about the way God speaks today.

One of the really remarkable stories I remember was when John Wimber, the founder of the Vineyard, was telling about a time when he was traveling cross-country on a plane. He was tired and just relaxing in his seat. As he let his eyes fall on people sitting near him, he suddenly saw the word “adultery” written across a man’s forehead sitting across the aisle from him. John rubbed his eyes and looked again. And as John looked again, in his mind’s eye he saw the word “adultery” clearly written across this man’s forehead and then he got the name of the woman that the man was having an affair with.

Now, John had gotten used to hearing God’s voice in these ways and so he asked the Lord what was he to do with this information. He felt like the Lord said: “You need to share it with this man.”

John leaned across the aisle and said: Does the name [I’ll use the name] Sandra mean anything to you?

All of the blood drained from this man’s face. He said: We need to talk. John’s word to him was deadly accurate. The man said: The reason I got so nervous was that I am sitting next to my wife. I didn’t want her to hear what you were saying.

But through the course of private conversation, the man repented of his sin. He received Christ. Then he went back and told his wife and John had an opportunity to lead her to Christ as well.

Wouldn’t you love to have that kind of an experience? I don’t mean, wouldn’t you love to be the person whose sin is exposed on an airplane. I mean would you love to be the person who gets to reveal the sin so that people experience the reality of God in their lives and they encounter a God who is to be feared and they recognize their need for a Savior. Wouldn’t you like to have that kind of an experience? I would.

Well, friend, the place to start in hearing God’s voice is not by reading words on other people’s foreheads. The place to start is by reading the Word of God as it is written in the Bible. I know it is not spectacular; nobody is going to say, “Ooohhh and ahhhh...you are amazing” because you study the Bible. But the Bible is the most common way that God is going to speak to you. This book is God’s infallible Word. His Holy Spirit inspires it. But before you pick up this book, you pray: “Lord, speak to me personally today as I meditate on your Word.” Very often you are going to have the experience of being personally addressed by God.

The problem with most of us is that we don’t drill deep enough into God’s Word to hit life-giving water. Most of us tend to drill a hundred little holes into the Bible each about a foot deep. We read a verse here and a verse there, a chapter here and a chapter there, a Psalm or a Proverb instead of drilling a deep well into a passage. “Lord, I want to hear your voice through this text.” If you are interested in digging a

well deep enough for you to hear God speak to you personally, you need to do just one thing. You need a plan for regular personal Bible study.

I won't ask you for a show of hands, but just between you and God, let me ask you a personal question: If you are a follower of Christ, do you have a plan for regular personal Bible study? I'm not asking if you read the Bible. I'm asking a more searching question: Do you have a plan for regular personal Bible study that enables you several times a week to dig wells, to dig deeply into God's written Word so that you are able to strike life-giving water?

If not, and I would guess that the vast majority of you would say: no, I have no plan for personal regular Bible study that causes me to drill wells, may I suggest that you do one of two things? Either start doing the Bible studies that are on the back of our outlines each week, or more substantially, go to the bookstore at the end of the service and pick up a little book called *Search the Scriptures*. *Search the Scriptures* methodically takes you through the Bible passage-by-passage, day-by-day. What it does is it has a passage suggested for you to read and then it asks several questions to get you to read more closely and to meditate upon what you've read. Instead of just skimming the surface and digging a hole, a foot deep, *Search the Scriptures* will force you into the discipline of digging into God's Word deep enough and long enough for you to hear what the Holy Spirit is saying.

The reason I start with God's written Word as a foundation for hearing God's voice is because the sort of experience that St. Patrick had, or the experience that John Wimber had on the plane, or even the more minor experience that I had in the parking lot contains a great deal of power for an individual. When you get a word for someone, it can absolutely overwhelm the person you get the word for. It is like firing one of those laser-guided missiles into a person's soul. You don't fire a missile into someone's soul from a canoe. You need a foundation, a deeply laid foundation, before you fire off a missile.

How do you hear God's voice? Dig deeply into the written Word of God.

How do you hear God's voice in your life? Build relationships of trust and accountability with other believers. Notice the Holy Spirit spoke in the context of deep relationship within the church at Antioch. Acts 13:1

#### **SLIDE**

**In the church in Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manean (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul.**

We have all of these folks sharing life together, encouraging one another, correcting one another, and speaking truth to one another. It is in the context of the practice of deep Christian community that we hear the Word of God spoken clearly and accurately in the power of the Holy Spirit. Look with me a moment at Colossians 3. The apostle Paul says in v. 16:

### **SLIDE**

**Let the word of Christ dwell in your 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.**

How do we receive and give Christ's Word to each other? The context for receiving and delivering the Word of Jesus Christ to each other is in Christian community. V. 16 is preceded by eight verses regarding our relationships with one another. We read in Col. 3:8:

### **SLIDE**

**But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.**

And then, having talked to the Colossians about the practice of healthy Christian community, the apostle Paul then goes on and says:

### **SLIDE**

**Let the word of Christ dwell in your 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.**

It is in the context of the practice of deep and genuine Christian community that true prophecy comes. I am very suspicious of words that isolated people get. When someone says: I am not in a small group. I am not in a men's group or women's group. I am somewhat alienated from the church. Other Christians have hurt me. Other churches have hurt me. I have withdrawn from Christian fellowship. I am defensive. I am not easily corrected. People have to walk on eggshells around me. But I believe I have a word from God for you, for leaders of the church, or for the church...The Bible would say: Red Flag! Red Flag! Red Flag!

We do need, as we are going to see, time spent listening to God alone, but if that is not balanced by time spent together in genuine Christian community giving and receiving love, then it is very likely that we will not hear God's voice very clearly. Most of what we are going to hear is the judgment and criticalness that emerges from our own flesh, and not the word that springs from the Holy Spirit. Build relationships of trust and accountability.



Well, it is highly likely that God's Word and God's secret calling is going to be consistent with what the Lord is already doing in your life. You must be obedient now to what we are hearing in order to get further revelation of what God wishes to do in the future. We read in v. 1:

#### **SLIDE**

**In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul.**

Notice that in Antioch the leaders and the people are already practicing multicultural community with one another. Barnabas is mentioned first. He is a Jew from the Jerusalem church. But he was originally from Cyprus. Simeon is a Jewish name, but he is called Niger, which means "black." It is highly likely that Simeon was an African and was very dark-skinned. Lucius was from Cyrene, which was also in North Africa, so we have two Africans on the leadership team. Manaen is a Jewish name. The NIV says that Manaen had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch. But the original meaning of the phrase "brought up with" literally means that he was a foster brother, or close friend. FF Bruce says that this title was given to boys of the same age as royal princes who were taken to the royal court to be brought up with the prince. So Manaen is a man who was brought up among the enemies of Jesus Christ in the court of Herod who beheaded John the Baptist, who helped put Jesus on the cross. And then there is Saul, the Pharisee of all Pharisees, the ultra-zealous Jewish rabbi. We see in Antioch a church that is already practicing multicultural community.

So it is entirely natural that when the Holy Spirit issues a call to send out Jewish missionaries to the Gentile world, that his call would go to a church that is already practicing cross-cultural community, rather than to a church that was completely mono-cultural. Notice this call to the Gentile world didn't go to the Jerusalem church. Let me put this more plainly. Most often the Holy Spirit guides us step by step as we currently practice obedience to the Lord in our present situation.

All of us want the entire plan of God for our lives right now. But God generally doesn't give people the entire plan for their lives because that would cause us to live independently of the Lord. The fact that we only get a little bit of light for the very next step causes us to keep having to go back to God and ask God for a light for today. Lord, today I'm at a crossroads. What do you want to say to me today? Next year I'll be at another crossroads. What are you saying then?

First we pray: Lord, do you want me to go to college? Is that what you are calling me to? And then: Lord, which college? And then when we get there, it's: Lord, what major should I take? And then: Lord, what job? And then: Lord, what career move? And then: Lord, do you want me to leave and do something else? Step by step the Lord leads us as we currently obey his voice.

So when someone says, for example: God is calling me to be a missionary in Africa. I would ask that person: What are you currently doing that suggests that God might say this to you? Before he is calling you to pole-vault 20 feet, you'd better have some track record of being able to pole vault 12 feet. Before God calls you to Africa or China, are you involved in cross-cultural relationships here in Columbus? Has God used you to lead other people to Christ right here in Central Ohio in your job, or in your classroom right now? Right now do you have a healthy, stable walk with Christ in the context of this church?

Listen; there is no magic that happens spiritually to you when you get on a plane. You don't suddenly become an evangelist, or mature just because you are 8000 miles from home. Actually, the reverse is most often true. All of your weaknesses, all the places you are emotionally broken, all the places you are spiritually immature get exposed when the support of a strong church is pulled away.

God's word to you, friend, is most often going to be consistent with what God has already been doing in your life. This is the next step. It is not a radical departure from the things that God is already weaving into your life.

How do you hear God's voice? We hear God's voice when we slow down long enough to listen. V. 2:

#### **SLIDE**

**While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."**

The church took time to seek the Lord. They spent focused time on God. To their prayer was added fasting. They made room in their lives for the Lord to speak. And only after seeking the Lord and focusing upon him did they hear his voice.

Friend, the greatest obstacle to hearing God's voice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is simple busyness. We Americans live overstuffed, over filled, over-stimulated lives. We eat too much. We shop too much. We own too much. And we cram too much into our houses and into crowded lives. And if we were to be honest and authentic, we would say that there is simply no room in our lives for the voice of God. We are, as a culture, addicted to busyness. We obsessively try to cram more and more productivity into less and less time.

Everyone multi-tasks. Just look at what people do when they drive down the highway. Here we are hurtling down the highway at 70+ mph in a 2-3 ton vehicle and what are we doing? We are talking on our cell phone. A woman is putting on mascara in her rearview mirror. Someone is fumbling for a CD in the glove compartment.

One day – true story – my wife, Marlene, and I were driving on the outerbelt on the north side of town. I was in the passenger seat-watching people pass by us in their cars. I noticed that every single driver that drove by us was multi-tasking. I said to Marlene: "Look, he's on his cell phone. Look at her. She is putting on lipstick now in

her rearview mirror. He's drinking coffee. Look at that!" Driving right next to us was a woman who had a bowl of cereal on her steering wheel and she was eating the bowl of cereal while driving 75 mph! She was flying by us and she was eating a bowl of cereal with a spoon and she was steering the car with the bottom of her bowl of cereal.

Now, you are not going to hear the voice of God very well when you are driving 75 mph steering your car with a bowl of cereal and trying not to dump it in your lap.

Our first calling as followers of Christ is to fellowship with Christ. Our first calling is not activity for Christ. Our first calling, friend – your first calling is fellowship with Jesus Christ. The truth is, let's be honest, most churches, including this church at least some of the time, takes the American addiction to activity and brings it right into the church – a lot of activity, but not a lot of intimacy with Christ. We do and do, and then we burn out. We hit a wall. We try a million things to succeed in life, to succeed in our parenting, to succeed in our relationships, to succeed in ministry, instead of simply taking the time to seek God.

If you are stuck right now, if you are frustrated, if you've hit a wall in an area of your life, if you don't have an answer, if you are just spinning your wheels and not making any forward progress, why not slow the rpm's down long enough to ask God and to listen for his voice? You know, the Lord really is smarter than you and me. God is infinitely more creative than we are in coming up with solutions. He sees what you cannot see. He sees the future. He knows the consequences of our decisions. He sees the heart. He sees below the surface. God sees what we cannot see. He has answers for your life, especially, friend, when you are at a crossroads. When you are facing a new stage in your life, why not say the same thing the Old Testament leader Joshua said. When Joshua was facing a new stage in his ministry, he said to the Lord:

**SLIDE – Joshua 5:14**

**What message does my Lord have for his servant?**

Why not pray the prayer of the child Samuel, who grew up to be the leader of the nation of Israel, and was instructed to pray in 1 Samuel 3:9,

**SLIDE**

**Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.**

Unless we slow down and listen, those of us who are married, can't know what our spouses are saying or thinking. Unless we slow down and listen, we can't know what our friends are saying and thinking. Unless we slow down and listen, those of us who are parents, won't know what our kids are thinking and saying. When my son was just a toddler, an old man stopped me in a store. I believe he was sent to me by God. He looked me in the eye and said: Young man, do you know how your kids spell love? They spell it T-I-M-E. You need to spend time with your children. And then he walked away. I absolutely felt like that man in the store was prophesying to me. I

made a commitment to have an individual date with each of my two kids every single week and I tried to keep that commitment with my kids for many years.

I think God spells love the same way that everyone else does – T-I-M-E. You and I are called to love God with all our hearts, with all our souls, with all our minds, and with all our strength. Be honest. Is there space in your life to hear God? Is there room in the midst of all the activity and all the production, and all the purchases, and all the leisure and TV time, is there room for God?

Notice the church not only worshipped and prayed, but they also fasted. It says in Acts 13:2,

#### **SLIDE**

**While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said...**

Fasting is one of the most helpful ways to create space for God. I don't just mean fasting from food. That does create room for God. But I think in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that it is just as important, perhaps even more important, to fast from all forms of media and entertainment for a time. To deliberately fast from TV, videos, and from turning on the radio in your car, so that you can have space for the voice of God.

Finally, we hear in proportion to our willingness to respond to God's voice. We read in vv. 2-3.

#### **SLIDE**

**While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.**

Now, I have no idea how God spoke to the church when it says in v. 2 "The Holy Spirit said..." I don't think that what they heard was an audible voice at Antioch. I think most likely the Holy Spirit's voice came through a prophecy. Someone in the congregation received a revelation from God and they got up and spoke concerning what they believed God was saying. They may have received that prophecy by way of a strong inner impression. They may have received that prophecy by way of a vision. God may have spoken through a dream. Or perhaps the Lord, by his Holy Spirit, gave several people the same impression and this word: Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul was confirmed by 3-4 people. I don't know.

But what we read in this text is that the church was willing to obey God once they heard the voice of God. God said: "Set apart Barnabas and Saul..." the church prayed and fasted and came to a conviction that yes, this prophetic word was from the Lord, and so they placed their hands on Barnabas and Saul and sent them off.

The church at Antioch does not say: "But we already have plans for Barnabas and Saul. Barnabas was going to head up our Christian education department. And Saul was going to evangelize at the university at Antioch, whose football team is named

“The Fighting Lebanese.” We’re got plans for these guys. Call someone else.” They probably did have plans for Barnabas and Saul. But they submitted their plans to the voice of God.

One of the great reasons people miss God’s voice is that we have our plans in place and we won’t submit our plans to God. But do you know friend, the more you obey what you do believe is the voice of God, the more God will speak. Jesus said in Mark 4:24-25,

#### **SLIDE**

**Consider carefully what you hear, he continued, with the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.**

The measure we use is the extent of our openness to what God is saying. If you use a big measure it means that you are open to all that God says in every realm of your life and you’re willing to put what you’re hearing from God into practice. Jesus says if you use a big measure, if you are really open to all that God has to say, and you are willing to put it into practice, God is going to use that same big measure in scooping out his voice to you. He’ll take a big scooper – and God has a big scooper – and he’ll dump his voice on you!

For example, perhaps God will speak to you about tithing, and you hear that and obey. God is going to speak about other subjects to you. The Holy Spirit is going to talk with you about spending time alone with him. He’s going to speak to you about your attitude, your competitiveness, and your need to forgive someone in your past who hurt you or abused you. If you are open to what God is saying, you are going to hear more and more of God.

But if you use a small measure, in other words, if when God speaks, you are closed to his voice – “No Lord, I’m not willing to let you speak about reconciling my relationship with my spouse. That is an area that I have a wall up and a ‘no trespassing’ sign out. I will not hear what you are saying.”

“No, God, I’m not going to let you speak about my sexuality. I’ve made up my mind. I’ve consulted and talked with people who confirm what I want to do.” “I’m not going to let you speak about my most cherished possessions.”

Then, God is going to give you his voice with a very little scooper.

How much of the voice of God do you want? How much of what you hear are you willing to put into practice? When God says: “I don’t want you to say that. Keep your mouth shut.” Do you run through those checks by the Holy Spirit? Or do you listen?

Do you know that when we hear God’s voice and we put it into practice, the results can be truly amazing? As a consequence of this church saying yes to God, the mission to the Gentile world was launched and this was the beginning of the

Christian takeover of the Roman Empire. From this tiny beginning, a church listening to God, and putting into practice what God said, God began the slow takeover of the greatest Empire in the ancient world.

Last week I told you that knowing God's will begins with knowing God. God is infinitely creative. He is the most resourceful person you'll ever get in touch with. Hearing God's voice releases the resources and creativity of God into your circumstance. Let me close with a brief story.

About nine years ago I began going before the Lord because the church was growing, but we lacked high-end leadership sufficient to care for all the people God was giving us. And so I began to ask God to give us more high-end leaders, people who really knew God's Word, and who were equipped to counsel people, pray and evangelize. And so I kept saying to the Lord: Lord, give us leaders. Give us leaders. And when I was praying, the Holy Spirit spoke to me and said: "Rich, you will not be able to reap where you have not sown." I knew that it was the voice of God.

And God began to unfold for me a vision for VLI, our Vineyard Leadership Institute. I began to see that we needed to invest in people beyond simply our normal leadership training and making small group leaders. That's a good thing. But beyond simply our training in making children's ministry workers - that's a good thing. But we needed a whole new level of training to create leaders and pastors and church planters and missionaries. That was about 10 years ago.

Do you know what God has done? Step-by-step, he's given us a little more revelation, a little more insight. Dr. Steve Robbins came here and took the program to an entirely different level. Now VLI is in about 150 churches across America. We're doing a pilot program of VLI in the Anglican Church in England. Next year VLI is hoping to expand its program to 700 students.

God is very wise. God is very resourceful. God has answers for situations and problems you can't solve.  
Let's pray.

## **How To Hear God's Voice**

**Rich Nathan**

**May 29-30, 2004**

**The Holy Spirit: Riding the Wave of God's Spirit Series**

**Acts 13:1-3**

### **I. What Must We Do To Hear God's Voice?**

#### **A. Dig Deeply Into God's Written Word**

- B. Build Relationships Of Trust And Accountability With Other Believers (Acts 13:1; Colossians 3:9-17)
- C. Begin To Walk In Obedience Now (Acts 13:1)
- D. Slow Down Long Enough To Listen (Acts 13:2; Joshua 5:14; 1 Samuel 13:9)
- E. Be Willing To Respond To All That God Wishes To Say (Acts 13:2, 3; Mark 4:24, 25)

## II. The Results Of Hearing God's Voice