

How to Hear God's Voice

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Powerful Encounters in The Book of Acts

Acts 16:1-10

I've been doing a series from the book of Acts to introduce many of you to the powerful work of the Holy Spirit in the life of Christian believers. Many, many people who are churchgoers are completely unfamiliar with how the Holy Spirit wishes to work in the life of the Christian. So, through the course of this series, we've talked about healing, divine appointments. Today, what I want to talk about is hearing from God.

You know, being able to hear God's voice so that we know God's will for our lives, or we know God's will for a particular situation or decision that we have to make is an eternally relevant subject for people who want to follow God. "What is your will for my life, Lord? What do you want in terms of this dating relationship? What am I to do with college or with seminary or with ministry? What do you want to do now in our church? What am I to do with my career, God? Am I to engage in a shift now that I'm middle aged? Do you want us to have more children? Do you want me to be involved in a certain ministry?"

Joseph Bailey, who is the president of a Christian college, said, "If there is one overriding concern of Christian college students today, it is for guidance." He said earlier generations were concerned about, you know, a multiplicity of things, but today's college student is looking for guidance. And, for a Christian, it boils down to, "What do you want me to do, God?" When we speak about guidance, we're talking about knowing God's will for our lives. I would add to Joseph Bailey's statement that hearing from God about the future is not only the passion of young adults, but it's the passion of every Christian believer. It's the theme of what middle-aged people are asking, and what retirees are asking.

You know, there are many middle aged people—and I guess that now that I am 43, I'm solidly middle aged-- but there are many people who are in their 40's and early 50's who are going through a transition that one writer, Bob Buford, called "moving from success to significance." It's a wonderful book called "Half Time." Bob Buford said that the first half of adult life is often about success, it's about achievement and acquisition. Young men and young women are busy building something, building a career, building a family, building a home, building a business. But, there comes a point in life when you're no longer just interested in building something or making something into a success. You're asking questions about significance. "What will I do with the next 30 years of my life to make a valuable contribution to others? What can I do that's really important? That will leave a lasting legacy? As you middle-aged people move from success to

significance, what you need is to be able to hear God's voice regarding what He wants you to be involved in.

And, to those of you who are retiring or who are retired, perhaps you have some retirement income coming through, a pension plan or savings state retirement system, social security, whatever. You need to know, if you're a follower of Christ, what does God want you to do with the rest of your life. My own view is that the Bible knows nothing of retirement if, by retirement we mean spending the rest of our days in selfish indulgence, puttering around on the golf course, in our gardens, collecting some other trinket for our homes, and taking one extravagant vacation after another. Your freedom from career and from family demands is to be used in maximal service of Jesus and other people. Now that you've reached a point in life where you don't have to work any longer, how can you devote your time to something that really makes a difference? The question you always must be asking is am I seeking first the Kingdom of God. Your golf game and the beauty of your garden really don't make a difference, but investing in people does.

You older people need to hear God's voice. So long as you're breathing and you're spending a few more moments here on planet Earth, God has a plan for your life. You have a purpose; you need to hear what God is saying to you regarding how you invest your moments. You know, I think part of the reason hearing God's voice and knowing God's will is such a pressing concern as we enter this new millenium, and it's in fact more of a concern today than it was 100 years ago is because of the range of options that are now available to everyone living in America. 100 years ago, even 40 years ago, there were so many limits on what a person could do, so many cultural expectations. Women were simply not free to pursue careers. Educational limits, geographical limits, transportation limits, financial limits, determined a lot of the track of a person's life. But now many of those limits have been removed and in the global economy it's not necessarily the case that if you go to college you'll end up working in Columbus, Ohio. You may take a job in Australia or India or South Africa.

There is a decreased pressure to marry; you can marry or not marry. With contraceptives, even if you get married, it's not necessarily the case that you're going to have children. You could both work outside the home; you could have a business inside your home. One of you could work, the other one not work. Life as we enter this new millenium is filled with a multiplicity of options. I described for you once before a situation when I had a cold and I went to Kroger to buy some cold medicine. Have you ever looked at the cold medicine aisle of a pharmacy, or any aisle for that matter—the potato chip aisle, the canned soup aisle, cereal aisle? I went to Kroger for cold medicine and, literally, there must have been 300 options. I just stared at this blinding array of, you know, cold medicines, decongestants, antihistamines, expectorants, coughs due to colds, a.m., p.m., 1 step, 4 steps, 4 hours, 6 hour, 8 hour, generic brands, pills, capsules, tablets, drinks, alcohol, non-alcoholic, extra strength, fast acting, slow

acting. I looked at this and I started to read the labels and after a while I was overwhelmed I stood back and just sort of laughed and walked out without buying anything. There were too many options.

I think that's what paralyzes young adults who often hesitate regarding making decisions. Many older adults, frustrated with young adults because they think, "goodness, when I was your age, I made a decision regarding marriage or career or college or majors." Hey, you didn't have 9,000 options. It's pretty overwhelming without guidance, without hearing the word from God. Any, unfortunately much of the teaching regarding hearing from God and guidance for your life is, frankly, misleading. It throws people into even more confusion. I remember listening to a teacher once talk about how God's will was always an offense to your mind. God always contradicted what your common sense told you. For some people, the weirder something sounds, the more outlandish it is, the farther out it is on the spectrum of probability, the more likely it is that it was God. God always offends the mind. You thought God was up to this in your life, uh-uh, you missed it. God's will is a giant shell game. He moves it around, you know, like those guys on the street in New York, find the pea under the shell. You thought it was under this one, no, you're wrong, too bad. Now you'll have to spend a lifetime married to the wrong person. Let's find out what this loser gets. A lifetime of misery is hearing God's voice, just a big shell game. You thought it was this but it's that.

And, the other end of the spectrum, some Bible teachers say that God doesn't even have an individual will for your life. He doesn't lead or guide through visions or dreams. One author, Gary Fresen, in a particularly dreadful book called "Decision making and the will of God," argues for over 400 pages that God does not want to individually lead you toward particular decisions and particular choices. He said He gives broad guidance but everything basically is up to you. And, then, on top of everything, I see lots of people who not only are struggling to hear God's voice, but who are in great bondage after they make a decision and after they think they've heard. Constantly, they're re-evaluating and introspecting; did I do the right thing? Did I marry the person God wanted me to marry? Did I take the right job? Did I move to the right city? Am I involved in the right church? Should I be in this ministry? I prayed and I really thought that God was saying this to me but now it's not going so well. Now I'm meeting some failure or frustration. There doesn't seem to be great success here. This situation is a lot harder than I thought it would be. Have I heard from God?

I believe one of the greatest gifts we can give to each other is help in discerning God's voice. Christians are not called to this process of hearing God's voice in isolation. Followers of Jesus Christ have this great treasure called the Christian church to assist in discerning among the multiplicity of options, what is God saying to you. Well, today, as we proceed forward in the book of Acts, I'd like to give you 5 lessons regarding how to hear God's voice.

Let's pray.

If you have a Bible, I'd like you to open up to Acts, chapter 16, beginning in verse 1 where it says "He," he meaning Paul, "came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was Jewess and a believer, but whose father was a Greek. The brothers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey. So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.

Now, you may miss a very important lesson on how to hear from God that's found in verse 1 where we read "Paul came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was Jewess and a believer, but whose father was a Greek." In other words, Timothy's mother married someone outside of the faith. You might say, well, maybe she became a follower of Christ after she got married. That happens to many women and many men. When they get married, the Christian faith is not of utmost importance in their life in making their marriage decision, and sometime later they discover Jesus Christ and one of them becomes a Christian. Maybe that's what happened with Timothy's mother. But, in her case, that wouldn't eliminate the problem because the command against marrying outside the faith goes way back in the Old Testament to the book of Exodus applies to all Jews. She was a Jewish believer in Jesus even before she believed in Jesus. The command against inter-marriage would have applied to her. God repeats that command over and over again in the Old Testament. Well, maybe she didn't know. You know, there's a lot of people who are raised in Jewish homes and in Protestant homes but they're really not in touch with the principles of their own religion. They're just sort of nominally Jewish or nominally Catholic, nominally Protestant. Some of you may have been like that, or have grown up in homes like that. Oh, yeah, I suppose I could have checked a box regarding what religion I am—I could have checked the Catholic box or the Methodist box but, truthfully, I'm not 100% involved. It's not the preoccupation of my life. Maybe it was the case in Timothy's mother's life that she was, nominally Jewish but didn't really know a lot about what God taught in the Old Testament concerning marrying outside the faith. Just sort of ignorant about God's commandments.

But, if we look at 2 Timothy 1:5, we see that's not the case either. Timothy's mother was raised in the faith by her mother. She grew up in a believing family and a little later, in 2 Timothy it's clear that she knew the Old Testament scriptures because she taught them to Timothy from the time he was small. Seven different times in the Old Testament and several times in the new there is an explicit command to believers that they are not to inter-marry with non-believers. Couldn't be clearer. I could point out 9 or 10 specific commands in the Bible regarding this. This is not one of those obscure areas; when God says

something 10 times, he's serious about it. And this leads to a principle regarding hearing God's voice and that is that people are most likely to hear new things from God when they're willing to listen to him about current issues of obedience. Just this matter of intermarriage; you know, one Christian writer said that the most unpopular text for Christian singles in the entire Bible is the text in 2 Corinthians 6 that tells Christian single people to not be unequally yoked with an unbeliever. I mean, you talk about severely restricting the pool of eligible candidates for marriage, you've reduced it down to 1/10th the size just by saying you're not permitted to date or marry outside the faith. And, this command applied whether you're a young single, an older single, whether you're divorced, have kids, whether you've never been married. Why does God make such a big deal about intermarriage in saying it 10 times. You know, the commandments of God are given to us for our blessing. Jesus came into the world to give abundant life. Following his will is an invitation into more life, not less life. A better life, not a worse life, a happier life, a more fulfilling life. God gives us this command not just to restrict us, to bind us, to ruin us. One reason that God gives the command regarding intermarriages is because he wants husbands and wives to go beyond being just business partners, beyond attraction, beyond sex, beyond even friends. What God intends for husbands and wives is that they be soul mates. That husbands and wives not only be united at the level of their bodies or the level of their thoughts, but that we be united at the level of our souls, at the level of our spirit.

God wants you to be connected. If you're a single person looking around for a possible partner, God wants you to be connected to another person at the level of your soul. He wants you to find a soul mate, someone with whom you can have the deepest form of intimacy. And, I'll tell you, you can never have the deepest form of intimacy with another human being if you are attached to Jesus Christ and they are not. There's always a part of you that is not connected. Part of you that you don't share and anyone who has disobeyed this command knows the pain of not having complete intimacy with a partner. And, anyone who has come to Jesus after they've been married knows there's an ache in their heart for their spouse to also come to a full followership of Jesus Christ because they want to share that with their partner as well.

Friends, God gives us these commands to bless us. How can you build a life together if you're working off 2 different sets of plans? If you're committed to follow Jesus, and the person you're dating or engaged to is not fully, wholeheartedly committed to follow Jesus with the same intensity that you have, then you're starting to build life off 2 different sets of blueprints. And, at hundreds of points, big and little, your lives will not attach. How you think about child raising, what's the most important thing for you to do with your life, where should you give extra money? How do you define the word love? How important is the word, forgiveness? Hearing from God always boils down to whether you're currently obeying him in the things that you do know to do.

Some of you are asking God to speak to you about your future. You're frustrated because, you say, "I'm just not hearing from God. I don't know what He wants me to do in the area of a relationship or the area of school or the area of ministry, the area of career. If I could only hear from God." Let me ask you a question. Is there any area of your life that God is currently speaking to you about that you are not rendering to him full obedience? Is God putting his finger on something in your life where you are offering to him less than complete and full obedience? Psalm 25, and you can just jot this down in your notes, describes the kind of person who hears God's voice. It's the humble person, the person who renders full obedience to God's commands. The person who fears disobeying God, that's the person who hears from the Lord. Is there an area where you're not walking fully in the light? Then your fellowship with God is broken and your capacity is diminished to the extent that you're walking in the shadows. Let me ask you some personal questions. Apply what I'm saying.

Jesus Christ makes a big deal about forgiveness. One of the main areas that he wants his followers to follow him in is forgiving everyone for every offense they've committed against us. Forgiveness is a huge deal to Jesus. Is there anyone in your life at all who you haven't forgiven for something? Someone who hurt you? Or hurt your church? Someone who you feel ripped you off? Someone who damaged your reputation or took something from you? Someone who hurt you financially or hurt your mate or hurt your kids or hurt a loved one. Is there anyone who has offended you? Someone in the past? A former pastor, a leader, a roommate, a girlfriend, a boyfriend, an ex-spouse, someone that you have not yet fully forgiven and released to God so that you're no longer talking about it, you're no longer harboring the offense. God speaks, not just to the forgiven, God speaks to the forgiving, to people who have given up their grudges. Some of you need to forgive some churches from the past that wounded you. Maybe there's a current situation, a current leader that you need to forgive.

Perhaps your area of disobedience regards your mouth. Do you have a disciplined tongue? You talk when you should listen, you speak when you should shut up. Has God put his finger on your speech in the past and you haven't given him full obedience? Maybe you say negative things very often. Maybe you're a complainer. Perhaps you're a gossip. Are you the CNN of the Body of Christ? All news has to do to be broadcast around the country is to get to you. Are you the world's biggest blabbermouth? Do your friends tease you about this? Do you find yourself slandering people? Perhaps there is something as we talked about a few weeks ago that you need to confess to your mate, your husband or wife, that you have been unwilling to confess. Perhaps there's something you need to confess to a pastor or to a roommate, to a small group leader or to a boss, but you've not given God full, complete obedience. Why do you expect God to speak to you about something new when He has spoken to you repeatedly about something old and you haven't listened.

Acts 16:6-10 “Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.”

Now, we’re going to explore these verses in greater depth in just a moment but reading about Paul’s second missionary journey. We read in verse 6 that “Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. Paul wants to go southwest down to what was called Asia was a province back then, an area where the city of Ephesus was but he is blocked by the Holy Spirit. Perhaps the Holy Spirit spoke to Paul through a deep, inner impression. Perhaps the Holy Spirit spoke to them through a clear prophecy. But, however the Spirit of God spoke, they felt restrained from going southwest so they tried to go north. In Verse 7, “When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia,” that’s north, “but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to.” There’s perhaps some reason why Luke makes this distinction between the Holy Spirit, verse 6, and the Spirit of Jesus in verse 7. Perhaps there was a vision of Jesus giving clear direction not to go north. So, they’re blocked southwest, they’re blocked north and northeast. And then Paul gets a vision in verse 9 from a man of Macedonia calling him to come over to Macedonia and help.

There’s been tons of speculation over the years about who that vision was of, whether it was a vision of Luke who was probably from Macedonia and joined Paul’s team apparently at this point because the book of Acts changes from speaking in the 3rd person, “they did this,” “they did that,” to “we” in verse 10 (“After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave.”) Suffice it to say that Paul and his team were spoken to in a number of ways but implicit in their hearing from God is this second principle, People hear from God when they take the time to listen.

Do you know that God wants to be heard? There are literally hundreds of passages in the Bible in which God says, “Listen to me.” Beginning with the 40th chapter of the book of Isaiah, virtually every chapter for 15 chapters begins with the words, “Listen to me.” Chapter 44, “Now listen O Jacob my servant,” Chapter 48, “Listen to this, O house of Jacob who are called by the name, Israel.” Chapter 48:12, “Listen to me, O Jacob, Israel whom I have called.” Chapter 49, “Listen to me, you islands, hear this you distant nations.” Chapter 51, “Listen to me you who pursue righteousness and who seek the Lord.” Chapter 55, “Why do you spend money on what is not bread and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me and eat what is good and your soul will delight in the richest

of fare.” God wants to be listened to, and not just in the Old Testament but in the New.

When Jesus had the veil of his humanity lifted for a moment on that mount called the Mount of Transfiguration so that the people around could see the glory that Jesus, as God the Son, possessed, before he came in the flesh. The first thing that the father says to the people who were standing around is, “This is my son whom I love; listen to him.” Not, “Talk to him,” although that’s important. Not even, “Talk about him,” or “sing about him,” or “sing to him,” or “worship him.” “Listen to him.” The Jewish rabbis were right when before the time of Jesus they made Deuteronomy 6:4 the central confession of Judaism. Deuteronomy 6:4 is commonly called the “shema”. It’s a word that means “hear” or “listen.” Deuteronomy 6:4 says “hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” Every time Jews have gathered together to worship for over 2,000, they’ve said 6 Hebrew words, which begin with “Hear O Israel.”

I meet many, many people who are frustrated about God’s will and hearing God’s voice. They say, “Rich, I have real trouble knowing what God wants for my future.” May I ask you a personal question? Do you take even 5 or 10 minutes a day simply to ask God’s mind regarding your future? And then wait for his answer? Do you take even 5 or 10 minutes a day to hear God’s mind about direction for you in ministry and direction in marriage or direction for your children, direction in relationships or career. People hear from God when they take time to listen, when they make room for God. At some point we need to slow the RPM’s way down and listen. You know, some people find it profitable and are aided in their listening by engaging in the discipline of journaling. What do I do with journaling? You take a notebook and—one Christian writer, a fellow by the name of Gordon Macdonald suggests the following—you write on the top of the page of your notebook the word “yesterday.” “Yesterday.” And then, write one or two paragraphs what did you learn from God yesterday. Reflect on your day. What did you do right? What did you do wrong? What did you learn? What did God show you? Gordon Macdonald, I think rightly, says in quoting another that “we mostly live completely unexamined lives.” We have to be told the same thing 4-500 times from God before we pay attention.

In a journal book you might write some questions. God, what in my life is not in conformity to your will? Write a question on the top of the page. “Is there any area of my life that I am not rendering you full obedience?” “God, is there any relationship that you want to heal in my life?” “Anything in my past that you want to put your finger on?” “Lord, is there any person that I can encourage?” “Is there any area where I can render you service?” “Is there anyone you want me to pray for?” If you begin asking God questions, open-ended questions, and you have a journal book and you listen, I’m telling you, you will hear from God.

But, we need to make room for God by taking a few minutes to listen. One of the ways that Christians throughout history have made room for God is by fasting.

Sometimes we're so full, full of noise, full of entertainment, full of ourselves, full of food. We're so full that there's no room for the voice of God. We fast, as Richard Foster, Christian writer on spiritual disciplines, put it, we fast in order that we may feast upon God. If you are currently really wrestling over God's will for your future on a very significant point—marriage, college choice, career move, ministry move—you really need to hear from God, I would encourage you to make room for God in your life by taking some time to fast. Fast for a day, fast for a few days. Take the time that you would be eating to listen to God, to pray, to take a walk and then maybe get a notebook out; "What am I hearing from you, Lord?" "Where can I be most useful to you?" People hear from God when they're willing to take time to listen.

And, people hear from God when they first get to know him and what his voice sounds like. How did Paul know that the Holy Spirit was restraining him and that he wasn't being kept back by Satan? How did he know? How did he know that it was the spirit of Jesus and not the spirit of the enemy? Some angel of light? Some deceiving spirit? How did he know that the vision of the man from Macedonia was a vehicle for God to speak to him? I think the answer is very simple. Paul knew God and he knew what God sounded like. You know, to be sure that you're hearing from God, you first need to get to know him and what his voice sounds like. Listen to me, in a story of Paul's conversion in Acts chapter 9, we read about Saul who later became known as the apostle Paul. He asked 2 questions as he encountered this blinding light on the road to Damascus. And the order of his questions are of the utmost importance. When you wish to hear from God about some decision, about something in your life. If you need to hear from God, you can't follow in a better order of questions than the questions that Paul asked the Lord in his encounter on his road to Damascus. The first question that Saul asked was "Who are you, Lord?" "Who are you, Lord?" And the second question was "What do you want me to do?" Before you ask, "What do you want me to do," you need to ask, "Who are you, Lord?" "Who are you, Jesus? What do you sound like?" Do you know what Christ sounds like? What he would likely say in a situation? How he would react?

It's like my relationship with my wife, Marlene. I've gotten to know her intimately over 24 years of our marriage. I have known her since I was 17 and I'm now 43. I know Marlene's attitudes, I know her looks. All she has to do is look a certain way and I know that she's worried about the kids while we're having dinner at a restaurant. She glances at me in a group and I know I'm in trouble because of something that I just said. Someone comes up to me and says, "Marlene said such and such to me," I know with a 99.9% certainty whether something sounds like Marlene or doesn't. Often as people will report something that a dear friend of mine or my wife said, I often will have the thought, "that doesn't sound like them." Either what they said is being distorted by memory or deliberately or what's being reported to me is said out of context or there is some information that I'm not hearing.

When you're trying to hear whether something is the voice of your Lord there is no more important question that you can ask yourself than "does this sound like Jesus?" This is the best test of prophecy that I know. Someone comes along and tells you that Jesus wants you to drive around our parking lot 3 times, otherwise he says that he'll kill you, I don't need to pray and fast over that word. It doesn't sound like the Jesus that I've come to know and love and worship over the last 25 years of my life. The words of Jesus, like the words of anyone else are always going to be filled with his character. Didn't Jesus say "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks?" Well, out of the abundance of Jesus' heart, Jesus speaks. Jesus' character, we're told in John 1, he has a character that's filled with grace and truth. And so Jesus' words are always going to be words that are filled with grace and truth. If the word's not full of grace and truth, it's probably not Jesus. If someone's so-called prophecy just appeals to your pride or your greed or your lust or your selfish ambition, it's probably not Jesus speaking to you. Jesus is not going to say to you that you're his favorite person in the world, or this church is his favorite church in the world. He's not going to tell you to leave your current mate and to hook up with a new mate, someone who's more spiritual. He's not going to tell you that there's no hope for you and the only solution is to end your life. He's not going to lead you away from church, away from fellowship or away from service. Jesus' words are always going to be words of grace; they're going to be redemptive words and words of truth. If someone is flattering you, it's not Jesus. Jesus is not a flatterer. He does not appeal to our pride or our selfish ambition or our lust or our greed. If we make a decision out of ambition or lust or greed, let's not spiritualize it and say we've done it as a result of the leading of our Lord Jesus.

If somebody is telling you how to make \$1,000,000 instantly, it's probably not Jesus who's motivating them to sell you this scheme. Do you want to hear the voice of Jesus? Get to know him. Spend tons of time in the Bible getting to know who Jesus is, what he sounds like, what he's likely to say. Spend time in relationship with mature people who know him. Check out your discernment. Does this sound to you like Jesus?

Fourth principle; people hear from God when they trust that God is committed to speak to them. Look at how creative God is in speaking to the apostle Paul. There is some guidance from the Holy Spirit in verse 6, perhaps through a prophecy, perhaps through a deep inner impression, perhaps through some circumstantial restraint and closed door. There is different guidance from the spirit of Jesus. Perhaps it was a vision, I don't know. But, in verse 9 we read of a vision of a man from Macedonia that came in the night. God speaks in dreams. I can give you no greater encouragement that you can hear God's voice in your current situation than this: God speak loud enough for even someone like you to be able to hear because he is more desirous of revealing his will to you than you are in hearing his will. I've said this over and over again in different teachings, but my confidence in discovering God's will is not based on my ability to follow him. It's based on God's willingness to lead. I think the reason why so many

people are afraid of not hearing God's voice is that they have a defective view of God and his commitment to lead his church and to lead us individually if we incline ourselves at all to hear.

At the outset of this talk I was joking about God playing a giant shell game with us but that's the view that so many people have. You're trying to follow God, you're praying, you're obeying him wholeheartedly, you're putting away your sins, you're making time to listen but, oops, you missed it. No pea under there, you picked the wrong door; behind door #2 is the lion. I've heard teachers actually say that we have to nip at God's heels because he's moving so quickly that if you don't stay up with him He's going to bless somebody else; he's going to leave you stranded by the side of the road. Is that the Jesus that we read about in the Bible, someone that we've got to nip at his heels, otherwise forget it?

What does Jesus say to us in John 10? Listen to this: "I'll tell you the truth, Jesus said, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate but climbs in some other way is a thief and a robber. The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them and the sheep follow him because they know his voice." Then Jesus went on to say "the thief comes only to kill and steal and destroy. I have come that they may have life and have it to the full." And in verse 27 of Chapter 10 in the book of John, Jesus adds, "My sheep listen to my voice. I know them, they follow me. I give them eternal life and they shall never perish. No one can snatch them out of my hand."

Do you understand what Jesus is getting at here? Throughout the text he's saying that he takes the same kind of responsibility for his people that a good shepherd takes for his sheep. And, part of the responsibility of a good shepherd is to lead the sheep where the sheep need to go, to better pastures, to cleaner water, into the sheepfold for protection from the night. A good shepherd in ancient Palestine wouldn't race up ahead and basically say to the sheep, "Hey you guys, keep up with me, I'm moving fast. I'm going to wear camouflage like someone in special forces and crawl along the ground so that I blend in with the grass. If you can't keep up with me, forget it. I'm going to trick you by running to the side of the cliff and then suddenly stop, I'm going to turn around and some of you are going to go off the cliff. It was the responsibility of the shepherd to make sure his sheep got to where he was leading. And a shepherd in ancient Palestine would take whatever measures were necessary, short of killing the sheep, to lead them safely from one pasture to another. If one sheep was straying, in ancient Palestine, the shepherd would use a sling and a rock and fling it right by the nose of the sheep so the sheep would be startled and race back to the fold. He's willing to do anything up to and including laying down his own life to see that his sheep are led safely to the place he wants us.

Do you understand the encouragement? My confidence for discovering God's will for my life or for this church is not based on my phenomenal ability to hear, or my great followership of Jesus. It's based on God's incredible willingness to speak and his awesome good leadership in which he's made a commitment to lead me and to lead the church. He's so creative in the way he does it. He leads us through visions, through dreams, through prophecies. Don't dismiss these things. 1 Thes 5 says, "despise not prophesying." Many people say today, "well, we don't need this, we have the Bible. We don't need visions, we don't need dreams, we have the Bible." List to me. No amount of Bible, no amount of studying, would ever have told Paul that he was to go southwest to Asia or north and northeast to Bithynia. He could have read every commentary in the universe on the Old Testament. He'd need a direct leading from the Holy Spirit. And, if the apostle Paul, with all of his brilliance and all of his gifting, needed direct leading from the Holy Spirit in order to plant churches in the ancient world, don't you think that we who are less gifted than Paul, less brilliant, need God's leading regarding what we're to do with our lives and our church planting and our ministry and our missions? Even more than Paul did? If Paul needed this kind of guidance, how much more do we who are not nearly as gifted or as holy as Paul.

To be a new covenant person means that you get to hear God's voice with visions. Ask him for a vision. Don't be ashamed to ask God for dreams or for prophecies. Indeed you are commanded to ask God for prophecy and you jot this verse down: 1Cor 14:1 "Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy." Prophecy is the ability to hear from God and then the ability to articulate what you've heard. God is infinitely creative in guarding the way he communicates his will. Whatever he needs to do to get it across to you, he'll do it if you want his mind.

A.T. Pierson, in his old Acts commentary, drew attention to what he called "the double guidance of the apostles and his companions." Namely that on the one hand we see prohibition and restraint and on the other, permission and constraint. Forbidden to go in one direction and invited to go in another. One time the Spirit of God says, "don't go there," and another time he says, "come." And Pierson in his book lays out numerous examples from the history of missions about double guidance. David Livingstone tried to go to China but God sent him to Africa instead. Before him, William Carey, planned to go to Polynesia in the South Seas but God guided him to India. Adoniram Judson went to India first but he was driven out by the Lord to Burma. God slamming a door in your face is one way that God guides. I've seen this with a missionary couple that we've sent out. They had all their plans set up to go to one country and they were aimed there and had studied to go there and felt led by God to go there. It was restraint and they've been sent on to another place. The double guidance of the Lord. He says no to one thing and pushes us on in another. This is the history of Christian missions and this is the history of the way that God will lead you. But, friend, you can have confidence that you will hear God's voice because he is committed to speak.

Last point, quickly, just because something is difficult, you're encountering hardship or present failure, doesn't mean you didn't hear God's voice in the first place. You know, Paul had a very dramatic leading to go over to Philippi. Next week we're going to consider the rest of the story, as Paul Harvey likes to say. But Paul had very dramatic leadings. He had an encounter with the Holy Spirit, there were closed doors, there were open doors, there were visions. The rest of the community confirmed that Paul indeed heard from God. And what would we expect after this kind of dramatic leading by the Lord. What would we expect? Well, I'll tell you what I would expect. If I were led like that I would expect phenomenal success. I would expect that Paul would lead an instant revival in Macedonia. That he would get there and he would be carried around on people's shoulders. They'd say "we've been waiting for you," and thousands and thousands of people would give their life to Christ and thousands would be healed. Next week, in the rest of the story, we're going to find out that Paul's actual experience was 180 degrees away from the kind of success and promise that I just expressed.

Paul gets to Philippi in Macedonia and what does he discover? He discovers that there's hardly any community to even speak to there. There's no one who wants to listen. He goes out to a place of prayer; there's not even enough men to make up a synagogue. There are a couple of women, one of them gives her life to Christ. But, week after week, no one is listening and then he's chased around the city by a demonized woman. Day after day this demonized woman follows him around and then Paul and Silas are beaten to within an inch of their lives and they're thrown in jail. So, let's think about it for a moment in wrapping this up. You think you've heard from God so you go to another city to plant a church or to give up your job and go into full-time missions. When you get there you find people almost totally non-receptive and then you're chased around by a demonized person, then you're beaten and then you're thrown in jail. At what point would you begin to ask yourself the question, "Have I really heard from God?" You never see Paul ask that question. Now he had some dramatic leading from the Lord but the fact is the more dramatic the leading, the more probable is the bet that you're going to encounter some difficulty.

The fact is, friend, that hardship, failure, that an initial lack of fruit, that pain is no sign that you haven't heard from God. Many, many people have, over the years, given this little refrain "Do not doubt in the dark what you heard God say in the light." If while things were going well for you and you were experiencing fellowship with God you heard God say a certain thing to you and you went ahead and acted on it and then in acting on it you experienced some hardship, you met some initial frustration, you had some initial failure or a lack of entire fruitfulness. Do not doubt in the dark what God told you in the light. Difficulty, pain, and hardship, are not signs that we're out of God's will. These are all things that God uses in our life to bring about his will, to shape us, to mold us.

I'll finish with this. One of the most compelling love stories involved a couple who at the beginning lived an ocean apart. The man was a scruffy old Oxford bachelor, author of best-selling books for children. The woman was an American, much younger, divorced with 2 sons. After their first meeting during her visit to England in 1952, C.S. Lewis who is my favorite Christian author, and Joy Davidson fed their relationship by mail. Sparks from their mind fueled their appreciation and respect for each other. When Joy moved to England with her boys, their relationship got deeper and when it seemed that she was going to have to leave England because her visa was expiring, C.S. Lewis made a decision. At the age of 53, he asked Joy Davidson, a divorced woman, an American, someone culturally different than him, someone raised in a Jewish family who had come to Christ, he asked this much younger woman with 2 sons to marry him. They were married and they were soul mates. But early in their marriage, Joy's body revealed a secret she had kept hidden; she had cancer, it was irreversible. They gave Joy the best treatment available and then C.S. Lewis took her home, committed to her care. She went through a little bit of a remission and then she declined and then one evening after a few brief years of marriage, she look over at her husband one night while she was in bed and said, "I'm at peace with God," and she smiled and died. Did C.S. Lewis miss God's will for his life? Did he not hear God's voice regarding this woman, his soul mate? He heard God's voice. He didn't miss God's will. No way did the pain and the suffering and the heartache erase the simple fact that God had led them and they heard from him at the beginning.

If you felt that you heard from God, especially if what you heard was confirmed by others, and you hit a bit of a rocky patch, don't doubt in the dark what you heard in the light. God loves you and he wants his followers to hear his voice and know his will. He's committed to that end. Let's pray.