

## **The Importance of Hearing God's Voice**

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Holy Spirit: God's Empowering Presence Series

2 Timothy 3:15-16

I have been doing a series on moving in the supernatural, a series that I have called, "God's Empowering Presence" for the last couple months. I want to talk about a subject that is crucial in the church today: the subject of hearing God's voice. A lot of people think that the dividing line in the church (at least the dividing line between conservative evangelicals and charismatics) today is over spiritual gifts and whether gifts still exist, but I think that a more fundamental dividing line may be whether God continues to speak today. Can we hear his voice?

Now, according to the Bible, everything rests on hearing God's voice. The central prayer in Judaism is taken from Deuteronomy 6:4, it is: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." It is the cry of God's heart that his people would be able to hear him and listen to him. Psalm 81:8 says, "Hear O my people and I will warn you—if you would but listen to me, O Israel! You shall have no foreign god among you; you shall not bow down to an alien god. I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of Egypt. Open wide your mouth and I will fill it."

And then the brokenness in God's heart in verse 11,

"But my people would not listen to me; Israel would not submit to me, so I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own devices. If my people would but listen to me, if Israel would follow my ways, how quickly I would subdue their enemies and turn my hand against their foes!"

Do you know what separates the saved and the unsaved? If you were to draw a divide between those who are going to rise from the dead and go to heaven and those who are going to rise from the dead and be condemned to go to hell, you know what Jesus says is the distinguishing mark? The distinguishing mark is whether we hear the voice of Christ or not.

Turn with me to John 8:42. This is so crucial. Everything depends on whether you can hear God's voice. "Jesus said to them, 'If God were your Father, you would love me for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own, but he sent me. Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and want to carry out your father's desire.'"

Then look down at verse 47, "He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God." Here is the dividing

line. If we belong to God we hear what God says and if we do not belong to God we do not hear God.

Is there any other scripture that suggests that our eternal destiny and whether we belong to Christ is wrapped up in being able to hear his voice? A couple of chapters later in John 10:27 Jesus says, "My sheep listen to my voice, I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they shall never perish."

If you look up in verse 16, Jesus says, "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice and there will be one flock and one shepherd."

The mark of one of Jesus' sheep, a person who follows Christ is that you hear his voice. You listen to him. There are literally hundreds of verses in the Bible underlining the absolute need to hear God's voice. You ask, "How do we hear God's voice? If everything rests on hearing it, if the resurrection from the dead rests on hearing God's voice, and whether we belong to God rests on our ability to hear Christ's voice, how do we hear Christ's voice?"

Well, first of all, we hear God's voice in the written Word of God in the Bible. We as a church movement and you as an individual must always begin your listening for God's voice with God's written Word, the Bible. I am concerned in our church movement for two groups of people as we have historically stressed hearing God's voice by way of impressions and dreams and visions and prophecy. I am concerned for two groups of people in our movement, one group are those of you who came to the Vineyard from conservative evangelicals backgrounds and are now beginning to discover the present move of the Holy Spirit, you are starting to move out in charismatic gifts and for the first time in your life, you are being refreshed by the Spirit. I have noticed over many years of seeing conservative evangelicals getting exposed for the first time to the charismatic gifts that people swing in the totally opposite direction from their pasts. They react to their pasts and they take their bibles and stick them up on a shelf. They say, "I am sick and tired of the dryness and dustiness of my past that completely denied the ability to feel." So they react against their past and stick their Bibles up on a shelf. They not only stick their bibles up on a shelf but they unscrew their heads and say, "Forget about thinking. Forget about the history of the church. Forget good scripture interpretation. Forget about getting counsel. We are just going to put our fingers in our mouths and then stick it to the wind to see which way things are blowing."

Some of the flakiest behavior and flakiest beliefs will come from conservative evangelicals who are in reaction to their pasts. We can never take our bibles and stick them on a shelf somewhere and walk away from the daily practice, day in and day out of meditation on God's written Word. What does the book of Joshua say in Joshua 1:8 about the need to meditate on God's written Word? The Lord speaks to Joshua and says, "Do not let this book of the law depart from your

mouth. Meditate on it day and night so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.” Do you want to be prosperous and successful in life? You never put aside the written Word of God.

Psalm 1 says, “Blessed is the man who doesn’t walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers, but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf doesn’t wither. Whatever he does prospers.”

If you want real refreshment and lasting renewal, not just a temporary buzz, but a lasting renewal, you will plant yourself firmly in the written Word of God. Now I’ll tell you, once you begin to experience spiritual gifts and worship, your bible reading will be a whole lot different than it used to be. You’ll read the Bible with new eyes. Lots of texts that you used to skim over regarding God’s spirit or the miraculous or intimacy with God will leap off the page. So if you want consistency and refreshment, set up a regular schedule of reading the Scripture.

I am concerned about conservative evangelicals who swing out against their pasts and I am also concerned about those of you who have never developed a practice of studying the written Word of God. Maybe you’re just beginning your journey with God, maybe this just was not emphasized in your life and you are receiving prophecy and dreams and visions and you are being encouraged to stir up those things, but you don’t have a foundation in the Bible. When you receive revelation and you don’t have a foundation in scripture, do you know what that is like? It is like firing a cannon out of a canoe. You have this incredible blasting power, but you have no foundation. Do you know what is going to happen to your little boat if you start firing a cannon out of it? If you want to move in power, you had better build a big heavy platform. The more power you want to move in, the bigger your platform needs to be. Your foundation better be pretty nailed down and pretty secure.

In order to encourage you towards the study of God’s written word, what I would like for you to do is turn with me to 2 Timothy 3 beginning in verse 10.

<sup>10</sup>You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, <sup>11</sup>persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. <sup>12</sup>In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, <sup>13</sup>while evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. <sup>14</sup>But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, <sup>15</sup>and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. <sup>16</sup>All Scripture is Godbreathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking,

correcting and training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup>so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Now, I want you to see what Paul is saying here to a young man with heavy responsibility. Timothy was the pastor of the church of Ephesus. He was overseeing the work that Paul had planted in Ephesus which may have been an enormous mega-church. There was a particular problem that Paul was concerned about. That problem is in verse 13, evil men and imposters going from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. People were coming into the church with all kinds of confused messages and crazy heretical doctrines and weird view points claiming inspiration from the Spirit and Paul is telling Timothy that he wants him to continue forward in a stable and healthy way and be protected from false messengers.

What does Paul say that Timothy ought to look to as a protection, as a guard against being misled by false messengers into new exotic doctrines? We can apply this to ourselves. What should you look to to protect yourself from exotic doctrines? Paul points to credible people in Timothy's past. Verse 14 says, "As for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it." He tells Timothy that one of his protections will be his history with credible people, people like your parents and your pastor and other Christian leaders who you trust. It is really appropriate in evaluating new messages and new materials to ask who is telling you this, how credible they are and examine your history with them.

But the real protection against buying into false messages is your knowledge of the Bible, not just looking at people and their credibility. Paul goes to the credibility of scripture and says, "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." Now Paul says first of all that the reason you ought to look to the scripture for the foundation of your life is because scripture is God-breathed, that is a much better translation than the King James Version that says all scripture is "inspired" because literally Paul is not saying that the Bible is breathed into by God, or is the product of divine in-breathing, rather it is breathed *out* by God. It is *expired* by God. It is a divine product. It results from the breath of God. It says in Psalm 33:6, "The heavens were made and all the hosts of them by the breath of his mouth." Scripture is the creative product of God. It is the source of the Holy Bible that we read and meditate on.

Part of my difficulty with the word "inspiration" is because in its popular meaning, virtually anything creative is considered to be inspired. You know, Shakespeare was an inspired writer, different music is inspired, and now it is down to the level that the last episode of *Friends* was so inspiring. And people walk out of *Sleepless in Seattle* and they are inspired. So the word "inspired" has been totally watered down to reflect anything that people write that is creative or

progressive or pushes the edge socially. But when we talk about the Bible being inspired, we don't mean that it is inspired in the same way that we talk about inspiring literature like Shakespeare or Plato or the collected works of Aristotle.

Why should you read the Bible and meditate on it? Because it has been breathed out by God Almighty. It has been *expired* by God. Now, God worked in conjunction with people as he breathed out his message into messengers who wrote those things down in the Bible. Each of those messengers had their own temperaments, their own personalities, their own writing styles, their own historical situation, and so the messages in the Bible sound different in style and tone depending on the messenger, much the same way that if we had someone who could play different musical instruments began playing the same tune on different things like a trumpet and a piccolo. So it is that when God breathed in his message into the apostle Paul who was very logical, very learned, Paul's message sounds different than the message that came through the Psalmist and that sounds different than the message that came through Luke or that came through Isaiah. But the source, Paul says, of all scripture is God. That is what gives the Bible authority. In the Bible, we hear God's voice.

Paul doesn't only point to the source of the message as the reason why we ought to study scripture, Paul also points to the Bible's usefulness, the Bible's practical value in our lives. He says "all scripture is God-breathed and it is useful for teaching, rebuking (literally reproving), correcting, and training in righteousness." In verse 15, he told us that the Bible was able to make us wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. The Bible is useful in explaining to you how to be saved. It tells you the way of salvation. It tells you that if you put your faith in Christ and what Christ did for you at the cross in paying the price for our sins and opening up the way for you to God, if you trust in Christ and in him alone, you will be saved.

Then he expands on the usefulness of scripture in a positive and negative way in verse 16 saying that positively, the scripture is useful for teaching us, that is for showing us correct doctrine and negatively it is useful for reproving us, that is in pointing out errors in doctrine. These first two words concern teaching. They concern doctrine. The Bible says, here is an accurate truthful doctrine and here is a heretical false doctrine. The second two words concern Christian practice. Correcting is the negative part of the second pair, correction to straighten out your practice and training and righteousness is the positive part of your practice.

What Paul is saying is that scripture is useful for straightening out your faith on the one hand and your practice on the other. Or to put it in different words, scripture is useful for straightening out your beliefs on the one hand and straightening out your behavior on the other. Paul is talking about orthodoxy and orthopraxis. He is saying that scripture can fill your mind with the truth, what God is like, and clear your head of crazy messages regarding spirituality and Gnostic thinking. Scripture can guide you into the truth about God and angels and about

life and about life after death and how to understand near-death experiences and what the future holds. Scripture provides you with the truth about your beliefs.

Scripture also provides you with the truth about how you should live, how you should relate in marriage. If you want to build a foundation for your marriage, you build it on the Bible. If you want to build a foundation for you child-raising, you build it on the Bible. If you want to build a foundation for friendship and for reconciling a relationship or how to handle your money or how to behave in business or how to relate to the government or personal identity or dealing with depression or any number of practical questions about how to live, you build it on the Bible.

Why should we meditate on the scripture? Well, Paul says, 1) you meditate on the scripture because of its source. It was expired, breathed out, by God and 2) you meditate on the scripture because of its usefulness, because it tells you what is true and it communicates to you how to live.

Now, the test goes on and says, “So that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” Some versions read, “So that the man of God may be perfect or mature and equipped for every good work.” There is an argument from this text made by some conservative writers that if the scripture is useful to make man perfect, thoroughly equipped for every good work, then why in the world would we want to get revelations, visions or dreams? What else do we need? The scripture alone can make you perfect, mature and equipped for everything. Why would you be running after these other things? You are just adding to the words of scripture and that’s dangerous.

Now in dealing with this passage, it does not say that *all* you need to be equipped for every good work is the Bible. It says that the Bible is useful to equip you for every good work, but it certainly doesn’t mean that if you have the Bible alone, you will be equipped for every good work because many people have the Bible and are not perfect. We know that along with the Bible, you must have faith. Along with the Bible, you must have love. The Pharisees had the Bible, but they weren’t equipped for every good work because the Pharisees didn’t believe and the Pharisees didn’t have the Holy Spirit. The Pharisees didn’t have love. So while we would say that the scripture is necessary to equip you, it is certainly not the only thing you need. It is not enough. You need more. It is a fallacious argument to look at 2 Timothy 3:17 and say that because the Bible equips you for every good work, you don’t need anything else. It does equip and furnish you but not in isolation from other necessary components in making a man or woman mature.

Is it the case that if we receive new revelations we are adding to the words of scripture? Some people contend this. They say that if you open yourself up to receiving a prophecy or believing that God speaks to you through a dream or listen to someone’s explanation of a vision they had, you are adding to the words

of scripture. The cannon is closed and you are doing what all of these false teachers like Edgar Cacey and Jean Dixon and the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons have always done by adding revelations. We want to stay with the Word of God alone.

Well, let me share with you something about the way I build my beliefs. I know that the Bible is inspired or expired by God. I am personally glad for people's experiences and glad when they tell me they have gone somewhere and these wonderful things have happened, but people's experiences do not excite faith in me. I will tell you what excites faith in me and causes me to believe something. When I see it in God's written Word. Does God's written Word suggest to us that we ought to expect revelation beyond the written word? Does God's written Word tell us that we ought to expect additional information, additional revelation beyond the text of the Bible?

Turn with me to Luke 12:11-12. Jesus says, "When you are brought before Synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not wonder how you will defend yourselves or what you will say for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you shall say." Listen to what Jesus is saying; it is a most remarkable statement. He says at some point some of you will face persecution and part of the persecution will be that you will be hauled into court. You will be standing before judges, before governors, before rulers, and you will have to defend yourself and defend your faith and the temptation will be to become anxious about what you are going to say. Jesus says don't worry about what you will say at the time of crisis or when you face trials because at that very moment, the Holy Spirit will teach you what to say. Think about this, Jesus doesn't say here that when you are studying the Bible, you will be taught by the Spirit what to say. He says at the moment you are standing in court, the Holy Spirit will reveal to you what you should say.

Or how about this? In Luke 21:12-15, Jesus says,  
<sup>12</sup>"But before all this, they will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. <sup>13</sup>This will result in your being witnesses to them. <sup>14</sup>But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. <sup>15</sup>For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict."

Those who say that there are no continuing revelations end up doing exactly what the Bible, God's written Word tells them not to. For example, in 1 Thessalonians 5:19-20 Paul says, "Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt, but test everything and hold onto the good." Now when he says, "do not treat prophecies with contempt," he clearly could not be referring to the written Word of God and the prophecies contained within because if that was the case, he would never go on and say, "but test everything and hold onto what is good." We don't test the written Word of God and hold onto what is

good. We obey the written Word of God in all of its entirety. We are called to simply believe the Word of God and do it. The prophecies that Paul is talking about must be prophetic revelation apart from the written Word of God. Paul has no problem with prophecy being part of the on-going work of the Holy Spirit in the church.

The Bible simply doesn't have any problem with new revelations as being additions to the words of scripture. If we went through the book of Acts, we could see many, many additions to what was written by way revelation to lay people like Stephen, who before he dies had a vision of Jesus from heaven or Philip in Acts 8. He certainly had an additional word from God about going down the road to a certain point and going over to speak to an Ethiopian eunuch. Nothing Philip read through the whole Bible, nothing in the Bible and no Bible commentary would have told Philip to go over to an Ethiopian eunuch's chariot and stand there and talk with him. That was additional information that could only be received by listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit apart from God's written word.

In Acts 10, Peter is up on a roof and he gets a vision where the Holy Spirit speaks to him and says, "Some men are coming, go down from the roof and go off with those men." I don't care how much Bible Peter studied. I don't care how many commentaries he read. I don't care how long he meditated on the written Word of God. No writing would have told him to get down from the roof and walk off with those men to go to another city to preach the gospel.

Likewise, in the early church, we had additional words from prophets like Agabus and the book of Acts tells us that the church of Antioch got a specific word from the Holy Spirit telling them to send out Barnabas and Saul.

I believe friends, that this notion that if you open yourself up to prophecy, visions or impressions that you are adding to the written word of God is a total paper tiger, make weight argument that undercuts the supernatural work of God in the church today. What is it that evangelicals mean by the sufficiency of scripture and a closed canon? Let me tell you what a closed canon means and what it doesn't mean. When we talk about the scriptures being sufficient and a closed canon and not adding to the words of the Bible, here is what we are saying. 1) We are saying that no new revelation, no new information can ever contradict the written Word of God. Paul says if an angel comes to you and says something contrary to the gospel that we preach, let him be eternally condemned (Galatians 1). We frankly don't care as evangelicals about the awesomeness of someone's experience, what they have seen, that they got golden tablets, or that they were visited and heard Jesus' audible voice; it doesn't matter. If there is a contradiction between that new revelation and the written word of God about any matter, about what God is like, about the way of salvation, about any little thing, then we don't listen to that. That is an anathema, it will lead someone to be condemned in hell forever.



2) Not only are we not open to contradictions to God's Word, but no new revelation can add to either the doctrines you must believe or the commandments you must obey. In other words, I don't care how awesome the prophet is or how many people get together or what the church group is, no church group, no body of men or women, no committee can add to the Bible doctrines regarding the things we are required to believe about God, about life, about sin, about truth. No prophet today can add to the doctrines of the bible.

3) Nor can any group or any prophet issue you a command that you must obey or else you are sinning. In other words, no one can say that you must believe this or you must do this or you are sinning. We have, as children of the reformation, jealously guarded the authority of the scripture over against the authority of the church councils and church hierarchies and so we believe that no church council can come along and say to us, "You cannot eat meat on Friday or else you are sinning," or "I am a prophet and if you don't go to Africa and listen to me, I speak for God, and if you don't listen to me, you are sinning."

We evangelicals say that you cannot contradict the Bible and you cannot add words to the Bible by way of doctrine or by way of commandments that someone else must obey or believe in order to get right with God. No prophet can do that. No church can do that. When churches do it, they are engaged in legalism, making up additional lists of rules like you may not watch television or you may not dance or you may not smoke or something else that the Bible does not forbid. We may not do that. So, in those two senses, contradicting the scriptures and adding commands and doctrines, the canon is closed. But the Bible certainly doesn't answer all questions that we might ask, that we need information from God about, in order to make good godly decisions. The Bible will not tell you who you should marry, what job you should hold, where you should plant a church, what God's calling is on your life. Yet, over and over again, we see people in the Bible getting precisely that kind of non-moral guidance from the Holy Spirit through visions and prophecy that many people deny is possible.

In fact, the Bible tells us to seek revelations and to not treat prophecies with contempt, but to test things. Where did the viewpoint ever arise that any additional information that doesn't contradict the Bible or add commandments to the Bible ought to be gotten rid of because all subjective impressions and visions and dreams are dangerous?

Well, despising all contemporary prophecies is a product of the Reformation. We must understand the historical basis for this great fear of prophecy, to see how these very negative ideas got perpetuated in the church. If you look back at history, this really came from Martin Luther and John Calvin in the Reformation. The perspective is rooted in a historical situation that was occurring at that time where these crazy prophetic types were running around totally upsetting Christians and society. So Luther wrote this book in 1525 called, *Against the Heavenly Prophets* and it was particular aimed at a man named Thomas Munzer

who was leading the peasants in a revolt in Germany, leading riots in the city. Now, Munzer has this really radical view of prophecy. Munzer really upset Luther because Luther tried to bring correction to Munzer and his doctrines but Munzer basically said that he didn't have to listen to any other man, he only listened to God. Then Luther said that if he didn't want to listen to him, then at least listen to the Bible. Munzer reportedly said, "What Bible? I have no Bible other than withdrawing into a corner and listening to God." In other words, these men that Luther was contending with because of their belief in prophecy totally tossed out the written Word of God and they became completely uncorrectable. You couldn't give them brotherly counsel and you couldn't counsel them from the Bible because they would always come back with, "Well, God told me this." The only authority they had was their own views of what God was saying so Luther reacted to these people and said not only to forget what they thought God told them, but forget this whole business of receiving revelation. It is too dangerous. And he threw the baby out with the bath water.

You say today, "Rich why must I learn to hear God's voice and learn to be open to receiving prophecies and receiving God's voice through visions and dreams?" We will look at this next week. But why should you be open to this kind of thing? Why do you need this in your life? Apart from the fact that the Bible in 1 Corinthians 14:1 commands you to pray to receive prophecies, why do you need this in your life?

I would say first of all apart from receiving prophecies and hearing the Holy Spirit speaking to you, you will not apply the Bible to your life. The scripture tells you to forgive as God has forgiven you. The Holy Spirit will come along and say, "Now there is a person that you hurt or that you need to forgive."

Most of the fresh revelation you will ever receive from the Holy Spirit regards the application of scripture. Here is a situation that calls for you to give money. Here is a situation that calls for you to show mercy. The Bible doesn't tell us who, where, when or how. It tells us what to do, but it doesn't tell us where to do it, or when to do it, or to whom to do it. The Holy Spirit comes along and says to us very often, "Now here is the opportunity for you to go and make a disciple, to share your faith. Go do it." I am told to pray in the Bible, but nothing in the Bible will tell me at this moment, while I am driving in my car to pray for my friend in Singapore.

The Holy Spirit's voice is also necessary for us to judge accurately. Jesus says in John 5:30 that "by myself I can do nothing. I judge only as I hear and my judgment is just for I seek not to please myself, but him who sent me." You have to hear God's voice to accurately judge. We judge each other all the time, but we judge each other superficially. We judge based on what things seem like, what someone's motives seem to be. We judge by filling in the blanks what we think someone must have meant. We don't judge accurately. We don't judge or discern the way God discerns and understands. Jesus says in John 5:3 that the

reason his judgment is good and sound is because he hears from God. You must hear from God to apply the Bible. You must hear from God to judge accurately, you must hear from God to do the work of God.

In John 5:19-20, Jesus gave them this answer: "I tell you the truth. The Son can do nothing by himself. He can do only what he sees his father doing because whatever the father does, the Son also does."

Many of us want to be involved in supernatural ministry, but unless we hear from God, we won't know what God is doing in the moment. That is the reason we don't do the words of Jesus. We don't hear from God. God, what are you doing, so that I can do that too?

One of the main reasons why we must hear from God is so we can make godly decisions. The Bible doesn't tell us who to marry or what ministry to get involved in at church, what we should do with our lives, or what career path we ought to take. God is interested in those things in our lives. We see God helping people in the Bible to make those decisions. We need guidance on specifics.

I want to show you how clearly God guides people in the scripture through prophetic revelation that wasn't the result of studying a text of the Bible, but was just the result of hearing the voice of God in Acts 9. This is after Saul is knocked down by the Lord and it says in Acts 9:10, "In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision. (Now this is not Ananias studying the Bible, this is a vision received by a non-apostle. So if someone says to you that the apostles got revelations so that they could lay down doctrine for all time, you can say, "Yes, well Ananias is an example of a non-apostle who received visions, and people at the church in Corinth were not apostles and they received prophecies and revelations. It is simply a lie that only apostles receive revelations.) Ananias received this vision and he said, "Yes Lord." Look at the guidance the Lord gives to Ananias. The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul for he is praying. In a vision, he had seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

Now this is some of the most extraordinary guidance that we can imagine. We may read over these verses quickly, but the Lord tells this lay person, this non-apostle Ananias, a street address! "Go to Straight Street, to the house of Tarsus." Literally it is like saying, "Go to 6000 Cooper Road and there you will meet a man named Danny. And oh, by the way, Danny knows you are coming, because I have given him a vision about you."

Now I can multiply example after example of this very kind of thing in the book of Acts. Extraordinary guidance. We need this kind of guidance today to make good choices. I want to tell you a couple stories in the history of the church of people receiving this kind of guidance.

In Augustine's *Confessions*, he tells the story of the vision that his mother had of his own conversion about nine years before it actually happened. He says that his mother was a wonderful Christian woman, just crying out to God for her son's conversion. In *Confessions* Augustine writes, "That you heard her, O Lord, and despised not her tears when streaming down, they watered the ground under her eyes and every place where she prayed. Yea, you heard her."

And the Lord gave his mother a dream in which she was standing outside and this bright shining being came to her and told her that she didn't have to grieve any longer, but rather, that "where you are, he also will be." In other words, where his mother, Monica, was in her faith, there also she could expect to see her son. And she held onto that word for nine years until her son was converted.

Then, in another episode in his *Confessions*, Augustine tells how his mother followed him over land and sea. (This was a mother who was like a pit-bull when it came to her son's salvation!) She is on a ship in the middle of a storm, his mother and all these seamen and his mother comforts them and tells them, "Don't worry, you are going to be safe because God has told me that I will not die until I see my son converted." She calms all of the passengers and these experienced seamen down!

In the meantime, Augustine had gotten caught up in this heretical movement which further tested his mother's faith, but she kept hanging onto what the Lord had spoken to her about seeing her son's salvation before she died. She finds the best teacher in the world at that time, this guy named Ambrose, and basically gets her son hooked up with him so that he would be converted. This is all recorded in Augustine's autobiography. He certainly believed in these subjective revelations.

Let me tell you the story of St. Patrick who lived back in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. He was a missionary and had this guidance by the Spirit also. Patrick tells this wonderful story in his very short autobiography about how step by step he was led by the Spirit to evangelize all of Ireland. When he was 16, he was living in England and with many others, he was taken captive, and enslaved by the Irish. The Irish used to come across the Irish sea and capture people much like the Vikings and then enslave them. So he became a shepherd in the western outreaches of Ireland.

During the next several years, Patrick grew in the Christian faith that he had grown up with and used to pray very fervently. One night he was in prayer and he heard a voice telling him that he would soon go home. Then one day he had this sense that he should immediately leave where he was and go toward the sea because there was a ship waiting for him to take him back to England. So he takes this 200 mile journey in response. He is walking now understand, he is not going by car or bus. He is walking. He takes this 200 mile journey to the Irish

Sea and sure enough, he finds a ship prepared to sail to Britain, but his request for passage is denied. In his confusion, he prays and says, "God, did I understand you right? Did I hear you right?" He didn't know what to make of it.

He kept on praying and the captain calls him and says that he had changed his mind and that Patrick could get on the ship. So he gets on the ship and departs and goes back to England. He goes through a number of adventures and he ends up living back with his parents again. After a number of years, he gets a vision in which a messenger brings letter, one of which says, "The inhabitants of Ireland ask you to come and live among us." He is shaken to the core because he understands that God is calling him back to Ireland to evangelize Ireland, but he doesn't know very much about the Christian faith.

He takes off for France, going in the other direction, to get some theological training. When he gets to France, the church authorities there are absolutely appalled as he describes his grandiose scheme that he is going to be the one, God has spoken to him and he is going to evangelize Ireland. They say, "Forget it. You don't know anything. You are ignorant." So they lay their hands on some other guy who is much better trained than Patrick to go carry the gospel to Ireland. Unfortunately, this other guy drops dead very shortly after they lay their hands on him. Since there is no one else, they say, "Okay, we will send Patrick back to be a missionary bishop to Ireland." So Patrick, years after he was taken captive as a slave in Ireland, is sent back as a free man. Through lots of different dangers and hostilities from the pagans and obstacles and accusations, Patrick witnesses this huge mass conversion in Ireland, especially among the leading families and the wealthiest people in Ireland. He effectively organizes the church.

In his autobiography, Patrick emphasizes again and again the leading of the Holy Spirit and the instructions given to him along with, his thorough going knowledge of the Bible. While he didn't know the scholastic side of things in the language of the day, he was absolutely a Bible student.

But does God speak today? Well, to answer that let me ask another question. Who in the Bible does not speak? There is one entity in the Bible that does not speak, Look with me at Psalm 115:2,

<sup>2</sup> Why do the nations say,

"Where is their God?"

<sup>3</sup> Our God is in heaven;

he does whatever pleases him.

<sup>4</sup> But their idols are silver and gold,

made by the hands of men.

<sup>5</sup> They have mouths, but cannot speak,

eyes, but they cannot see;  
<sup>6</sup> they have ears, but cannot hear,  
noses, but they cannot smell;  
<sup>7</sup> they have hands, but cannot feel,  
feet, but they cannot walk;  
nor can they utter a sound with their throats.

The entity in the Bible that never speaks, that is always mute, is not God, but idols.

Flip with me to 1 Kings 18. This is the great confrontation between Elijah who was a prophet of God and the prophets of Baal. The people in Elijah's day were following false gods. So Elijah, in order to call people back to the Lord, sets up this amazing test. He bring together all the prophets of Baal and in 1 Kings 18:20 it says,

<sup>20</sup> So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. <sup>21</sup> Elijah went before the people and said, "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him."

We often are wavering between two allegiances – between our God and our addiction, between God and another person, between God and our careers, between God and our boyfriend or girlfriend. We have two allegiances and Elijah challenges and confronts this dual allegiance that is in all of our hearts and he says, "How long will you waver between these two opinions, these two allegiances?"

But the people said nothing.

<sup>22</sup> Then Elijah said to them, "I am the only one of the LORD's prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets. <sup>23</sup> Get two bulls for us. Let them choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. <sup>24</sup> Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD. The god who answers by fire-he is God."

Who is God? The one who answers. The one who speaks.