

Hearing God

By David Sheats

Published by NTChurchSource.com

"Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live" (John 5:25).

"Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts" (Heb. 4:7).

These and many other scriptures tell us that it is essential for us to hear God. But what does it mean to hear God? We need to give serious attention to this matter, because hearing God is the foundation to life, faith, and being led by the Spirit. These few words of encouragement are directed to those who have an ear to "hear God."

Communication, An Essential Element of Relationship

For one person to have a relationship with another, there must be two-way communication. No personal relationship can exist without this communication. We speak often of a "personal relationship with Jesus Christ," and rightly so, but unless there is personal communication, this relationship does not exist. Many have missed this element. They pray to God, but they do not know Him speaking to them. Others read the Bible and assume that God spoke everything He had to say to those who wrote the scriptures. They read the Bible to listen to God, but do not know the personal divine element of God speaking through the scriptures to them. This allows men to "pick and choose" out of the written Word of God what is convenient for their own situation, and ignore other parts as having been written to others.

The scriptures truly were written as men were moved on by the Holy Spirit, but the Lord did not leave us with only a book. He promised that He would not leave us as orphans, but that He would come to us. "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you" (John 14:26). This promise was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost, and Peter made it very plain that it was not just to those who were there on that day, but "to all who are afar off" as well. As we shall see, this was the beginning of a new personal relationship with God that the saints under the Old Covenant did not have.

The New Covenant Brings a New Dimension in Communication

Everything in the New Covenant is new except God. He never changes, but His working with men does change. He has been progressing toward a goal down through the ages--that goal is that He may fill all in all (I Cor. 15:28). The writer of Hebrews points out the difference between God's communication in the Old Covenant and the New Covenant (Heb. 1:1,2). We are told that in times past, God spoke in many different ways to men. If we consider these past communications, we may note several things.

First of all, communication was limited to certain individuals. God most often used a prophet He had chosen, such as Moses. He spoke to this man in various ways, and then the prophet came and told the people what God had said. The people themselves did not draw near to God.

Secondly, there was a heavy emphasis on outward, physical manifestations. The Ten Commandments were written by the finger of God. Men heard the voice of God thundering from the clouds, they saw writing on the wall, they saw fire above the tabernacle, and once God even used a donkey speaking in

human language. All of this was because the price for sin had not yet been paid, so men could not draw near unto God. The veil concealing the Holy of Holies was still in place; thus fellowship with God was very limited.

The whole message of the Epistle to the Hebrews is that the new way is infinitely better than the old, and this is the same message God speaks to us today. In these last days, God has spoken to us by His Son (Heb. 1:2). What does that mean to us? Surely this is a full statement, and we will not exhaust it here, but consider just a few of the implications.

Did not Christ's coming to earth and taking on the form of man speak to us of His concern for mankind more than words could ever tell? Did not the life He lived here speak to us of the nature and character of God in a way we could never have understood otherwise? (John 14:9) Did not His death on the cross reveal to us the seriousness of sin and the drastic measures God had to take, to rescue us out of our state of spiritual death? Does not the resurrection of Christ speak of the supreme nature of the overcoming life of God which He allows us to participate in? And was not the purpose of the whole work of redemption to open up the way for God to come and dwell unhindered among men?

So often we fail to realize that this is a "new and living way." The working of God in the New Covenant is entirely new, and this affects every area of our relationship with God. What God has brought us into has opened up a new dimension in communication which was not possible before. This new dimension is God's primary way of communicating with us in this hour.

The New Covenant, a New Relationship

The Old Testament saints had to stand at a distance, looking forward to the day when all would know God, "*from the least of them to the greatest of them*" (Heb. 8:11). In the New Covenant, a marvelous thing has happened. When we were baptized into Christ by the Spirit (I Cor. 12:13), we were joined to the Lord, becoming one spirit with Him (I Cor. 6:17). God effected a spiritual union that has no other parallel in the natural realm. Marriage, perhaps, is the closest type (Eph. 5:30-32), but even that does not give us the full picture of being joined to the Lord. The apostle Paul says it is a great mystery.

This union is the heart of our communication with God. It is spirit to spirit. "*God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and in truth*" (John 4:24). The union with God that we enjoy by the Spirit brings everything out of the realm of outward types, and into inward reality. This does not mean that God is not concerned with the outward--He is. But everything outward must flow from an inward relationship with God by the Spirit. In this relationship He will speak with us, and take the things of Jesus and make them ours (John 16:15). It is the anointing that will teach us (I John 2:27).

No matter how the Word of God comes to us, in the final analysis we are taught by God only through the Spirit. Apart from the Spirit revealing the things of God to us, we know nothing (I Cor. 2:12). It is important to note at this point that nothing natural will help us here. Read I Corinthians 2 very carefully, noting especially verses 9-12. In verse 9 we read, "*Eye has not seen, nor ear heard...*" The hearing that we now know does not depend on the natural ear. If this were not true, then the educated and wise of this world would have an advantage, and God would be a respecter of persons. But I Corinthians 1:26-31 makes it very clear that the wise of this world do not have an advantage. On the contrary, their natural wisdom often gets in the way, for they tend to glory in what they know, or can do.

Our only glory is the Lord, and in the reality that He has freely opened up the way for all who will come in simple, childlike faith. This new relationship in the Spirit is something that was not known

before the cross. We must see this clearly, or we will try to bring the old--that which God has done away with--over into the new. We will be listening with the natural ear instead of knowing by the anointing. We will miss some essential elements of this relationship if we are not careful, and it will seriously hinder our walk with God by the Spirit.

Union, the Prerequisite for Communion

In order to know this intimate place of hearing God by the Spirit, we first must have entered into the union. We must know in experience what Jesus said in John 14:17, "...*He (the Holy Spirit) dwells with you, and will be in you.*" This is not an automatic transaction because we "believe in Jesus." We must believe in Jesus before we will even look to Him to hear what He has to say, but believing in Jesus is not the same thing as being made one with God in the Spirit.

We are made one with God when we are baptized into the body of Christ and made to drink into one Spirit (John 3:5), and thus are now alive unto God--that is, we are aware of God with spiritual senses. To say it another way, our spiritual ears have been opened so that we can now hear God. This is a work of grace in our hearts which is accomplished by the Lord.

We could say that we must hear God in order to even come to a place of repentance and faith, to partake of the Holy Spirit and be made one with God. But the hearing that follows from that point on is a deeper and more intimate place with God. It could be compared to the difference between courtship and marriage. Before a couple is married, the love they experience is real, and the communication greater than in any other relationship. But when they enter into marriage and are made one, their relationship, love, and communication take on a deeper and more intimate dimension than they ever thought possible.

Quietness, a Necessity for Hearing

If we are going to hear God, there must be quietness. Is this not also true in natural communication? What does it mean to be still before God? Our spirits must not be troubled, upset by some circumstance, or anxiously worrying or fretting. If this is our condition, the only thing God can speak to us is to be still. "*Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God, and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus*" (Phil. 4:6,7). If we are not in a place of stillness, we are not in a place where we can be led.

How do we come to a place of stillness? The scripture just quoted gives us the answer. We take everything to God and leave it there. He is the One who is over all. He cares for us. We cannot make one hair of our heads black or white by worrying. Our place is to trust God. As we come before the Lord in prayer, through all of the noise and confusion we will hear the Lord speaking to our hearts. "Will you trust Me in that? Will you leave that situation in My hands?" Our place is to believe the Lord--to say, "Yes, Lord."

As we respond in active obedience, and leave each thing in God's hands, the storm in our souls will begin to subside. It may not come in one day, or even in one week. But as we continue before the Lord, finding our rest in Him, quietly and surely the peace will come. What a precious place, when we have ceased from our labors! Now, all we want to know is the Lord's direction to our hearts. "What do you want me to do, Lord?" "*In quietness and confidence shall be your strength*" (Isaiah 30:15). To hear God, I must be quiet. That is a great working.

"He That Has an Ear, Let Him Hear"

This was the direction to the seven churches in the book of Revelation. What does it mean to have an ear for God? To have an ear for someone means that we are intently looking to that person for direction. We tune out all other voices and listen for direction from one source only. We will not hear God unless we have an ear for Him. Our attention is focused on God, and we are ready to hear Him. We have shut out all other voices--such as our own reasoning and natural wisdom. We do not put conditions on what God can speak to us. We are ready to acknowledge Him as Lord.

"Why do you call me Lord, if you do not do the things that I say?" (Luke 6:46) No man can call Jesus "Lord," except by the Spirit (I Cor. 12:3). For us to be able to hear God and then to do His will, we must first know the hearing by the Spirit and then experience the ability of an endless life. This brings us to what is probably the most essential element of hearing God, which is the willingness to do His will (John 7:17). There are none so deaf as those who do not want to hear because they know they will have to obey. So many hide behind the excuse, "God has not spoken to me about that." Did they want God to speak to them? To have an ear for God means that we want God to speak to us about anything and everything. We have yielded our wills to His will.

What does it take to bring us to this point? Somehow, we must come to the end of ourselves. We must see that unless we hear God, we are hopelessly lost. Many do not hear God because they are not desperate to hear Him. They feel they can still make it somehow. But when we are brought low, and know that our only hope in every area of life is to hear God and be led by the Spirit, we will hear God. He is there, waiting for us to come to the end of ourselves. The sooner we stop and say, "Unless I hear God, I am not going anywhere," the sooner God can begin to lead us by the Spirit. *"For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God"* (Rom. 8:14).

How Does God Speak to Us?

To many, this stands as a big unanswered question, but to the childlike of heart, the question has been answered. We do not tell God how to speak to us. He made our mouths and ears, and He is able to speak so that we can hear. He speaks through many channels, but in the end He speaks in only one way, and that is by the Spirit. *"But the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you, but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him"* (I John 2:27).

No matter what avenue it comes through, it is the anointing that teaches us. It may come through the written Word of God, or through a teacher (God's gift of grace to the church), or through circumstances, or in a place of stillness before God in prayer. It may come in many other ways according to God's own choosing, but it is the anointing of the Holy Spirit--the Holy Spirit speaking to our spirits--that adds the divine element which separates it from all other communication.

As we go through life's circumstances, normal continuous communication is the "knowing of God." In other words, if we have been brought into the Lord by the Spirit, we are living His life (Gal. 2:20). We are not listening for "voices" or waiting for dreams or special visions. We are responding to the urging of the Spirit in the inner man. This is a continuous working, not a sporadic occurrence. We do not live our day-to-day lives by our own initiative and then pray in special circumstances for the Lord's direction. We live His life, and that is a flow in the Spirit.

The reason so many do not know this experience is that they have never entered into the "rest of God" spoken of in Hebrews 4:11. They still want to live their own lives, and ask God to bless them. God will

not bless our lives apart from Him. We have been crucified with Christ; thus God does not recognize our lives. We have been bought with a price--to live His life. We possess nothing that is of value to God. We were born in sin, dead to God and totally useless. But the miracle is that *"the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God, and they that hear shall live"* (John 5:25). How will we live? We will live His life. Now, everything is of God. Our place is to stay in that abiding place, having ceased from our labors, and to respond moment by moment to His gentle urging. This is being led by the Spirit.

Hearing God, the Basis of Faith

"...without faith it is impossible to please God" (Heb. 11:6). What makes faith real? We hear many people say, "I have faith," but do they? How do we know? James tells us that real faith is revealed by works. These are not works of man, but works of God. They are the evidence that the faith is real and has its source in God. When people say they have faith, often they mean that they hope everything will work out. But even the hope they speak of is unsure. In God, both hope and faith are sure. Our hope is a sure hope, authored by God, who will bring about the thing that is not yet accomplished. We have a hope that is sure in the heavens, and the children of God eagerly wait for the fulfillment of this hope. It will be fulfilled in God's time (Rom. 8:25).

Faith is truly faith when it is authored by the word of God. *"Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God"* (Rom. 10:17). It makes no difference how impossible the situation may be. When God speaks, He is there to bring about what He has spoken, and nothing else matters. Jesus is the author and finisher of our faith (Heb. 12:2). In other words, He creates the faith in a believing heart, and then He fulfills His word in the proper time.

We cannot produce faith; we look to God for faith. The foundation of that faith is hearing the word of God and recognizing it as such. This is what separates faith from wishful thinking. The world may talk about faith, but the only one who has faith is the child of God, because only God can bring it to pass, and without works faith is dead--it is not faith.

When we face a situation that is beyond us, our first place is to hear God. Suppose we do not know how to pray--then we should ask God how to pray. If we are to pray in faith, we cannot know in our natural senses how to pray. If we just pray, "Lord, please do this or that, or whatever your will is," it has very little meaning. It would be better to pray, "Lord, I don't know what You want to do. Please speak to me." Until He does, we should be quiet. Many who name the name of the Lord have brought dishonor upon His name by attributing things to the Lord and "their faith which they had all the time," when even a natural person can see it was void of reality.

What shall we do? We need to be determined in our hearts to hear the word of the Lord. Then we shall be able to move in faith, and this will have results and glorify the Lord. There will be a sureness in our hearts because we have heard God. It may take time for the fruit to be evident, but the timing is God's business. He knows best. Our place is to hear, and then to believe and act upon what we have heard.

Hardness of Heart, Dullness of Hearing

"Today if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts..." (Heb. 3:7) The great danger that is always present is that we will harden our hearts to a point where we cannot hear God. How is this possible? There are perhaps three areas that stand out, among all others. They are unbelief, disobedience, and neglect.

The first thing that we are called to do is to believe the word that God speaks to us. When He communicates Himself to us, our work is to believe (Heb. 11:6, 4:2). Doubting breaks our relationship

with God. He cannot direct us, because we have questioned His character. We cannot receive, because we have shut off the source. On the other hand, when we believe God, it opens up the channel of grace to our hearts and lives. His word is supreme, and God is behind His word to fulfill it in our lives.

He does not consider our ability or natural reasoning. He knows what He is doing, and all He asks is that when He speaks, we believe His word. Scripture is full of examples of those who believed and those who did not believe. It is the same for us--let us believe the word that comes to us, and it will form the basis for obedience.

The second way we can harden our hearts is through disobedience. We believe the word of the Lord at first, but then we do not act upon it. It was good when it came to us, and we said, "Yes, Lord," but then we did nothing. If we do not go on to obey, the word does not feed us. It is the "engrafted word" which is able to save our souls, and the word becomes engrafted only when we obey. This is where we experience God, and know His grace.

If we do not obey, our spiritual senses start to become dull. It happens slowly, and we do not realize what is happening. We no longer have an ear for God. His word seems heavy to us, no longer a delight. Our first love begins to wane. Why? Because we have not acted on His word. God speaks for us to obey. Our love is proven by our obedience (John 14:21).

The third way we can harden our hearts is through neglect. This is actually a form of disobedience, but it is more subtle. We don't directly disobey a known command. We just don't give attention to our relationship with God. We do not set aside time for God to speak to us and commune with us. The days pass into weeks and years, and our hearts become hard and indifferent. We no longer care whether we hear God or not. We are led by our own minds, our own wisdom, and what we want to do. We still acknowledge God in our minds, but our hearts are far from Him. We have left the abiding place, and leave no place for God to speak to us. The opposite of this is attentiveness and alertness in our relationship. Our ear is keen, and every aspect of our relationship with God is given the utmost importance. As our spiritual senses are exercised, we become more alert to His presence and His communication to us. We learn to know His voice. How wonderful that place is, and how the riches of His love are opened to us!

Communion With God

Actually, to say God "speaks" to us takes us only so far in our understanding. A deeper word is communion. A husband and wife may sit together and say nothing, but just enjoy each other's presence. It is more so with God. We enjoy a silence in His presence, saying nothing. It is enough to be with God. That is fullness. Is there communication? As we wait in God's presence, the Holy Spirit brings an awareness of God to our spirit that has no equal in natural thinking. Our response is one of worship and adoration. The future revelation of Jesus Christ in fullness is foretold in the book of Revelation, and all present revelation of Jesus Christ to our hearts is a foretaste of that glorious day when we shall no longer see *"in a mirror dimly,"* but face to face (I Cor. 13:12).

The Holy Spirit is spoken of as the guarantee, or down payment, until the redemption of the purchased possession (Eph. 1:14). Consider the response of the elders, as the Lamb was revealed. They cast their crowns before the throne, and fell down and worshiped the Lord (Rev. 4:11). Jesus is the same, yesterday, today, and forever--the same today as He will be on that day (Heb. 13:8). For us to see Him as He is requires that the Holy Spirit reveal it to our hearts.

This revealing is given to those who draw away to a quiet place with God, and have an ear to hear God. Jesus must apply the "eye salve" to the eyes of our hearts (Rev. 3:18) so that we may behold Him. When we do see Him in His glory, we are likely to hear these words from God: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him." (Matt. 17:5)

"See that you do not refuse Him who speaks. For if they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth, much more shall we not escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven" (Heb. 12:25).

"Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away. For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?" (Heb. 2:1-3)

Brethren, let us hear God.