

Hearing the Voice of God

We have no problem hearing the voice of the world in which we live. During our childhood we hear the voice of our parents and teachers telling us that it is all about competition. We hear the storefront voices as we pass displays of jewelry, electronics, and clothes. The voices virtually jump through the window screaming, "Want me; need me; buy me and your life will be complete." We hear the voices jumping off of billboards and radiating from television, "You must be beautiful; you must be thin; you must be forever young. If not, then buy our makeup; wear our perfume; get plastic surgery." Pretty soon the voice within us whispers, "It's all about me". Amidst this materialism, this self-centered existence, the voice of God is absent. Yet who among us has not felt a yearning or heard in inner murmur suggesting that there is more to life than this? God has given each of us unique gifts. His purpose for us lies within, waiting to be discovered. It is when we tune in to His voice and discover this purpose, and then try to live it, that our life becomes fruitful. It is only then that we can experience the fulfillment of life as God intended. It is what Jesus referred to when He said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (John 10:10)

Hearing the voice of God requires a dramatic attitude adjustment. There is a spiritual energy around us and within us, but tapping into this requires training. We are willing to hit golf balls on a range for hours in search of the perfect drive. We are willing to shop for hours in search of the perfect dress. Why are we not willing to pray or meditate for 15 minutes in search of our perfect God? Why can't we discipline ourselves to read scripture every day? Our brains are wired for spirituality. Functional imaging studies show that specific areas "light up" during mystical experiences, during meditation and prayer. We are willing to use those parts of our brain required for calculation, memorization, and problem solving. Why don't we use that part which is dedicated to connecting with the divine? Our God is not silent. We choose to ignore Him. As Christians, we only begin to hear the voice of God by committing ourselves to the spiritual disciplines. Through reading scripture, praying, and participating in Christian fellowship, worship, and service we attain the ability to detect his voice.

We start to hear God's voice through seeking his word in scripture. It is the most evident indication of God's will for us. Some Christians place equal significance to all books of the Bible. This is a mistake. All areas of scripture contain divine revelation, but as Christians, we ought to focus most intensely on the words of Jesus as found in the Gospels and the early chapters of Acts. We can never truly know God. However, Jesus is the closest we will ever come to knowing the essence of God, and as such, Jesus should be the primary determinant for our beliefs and behavior. Reading scripture should involve less reading and more listening, less interest in finishing a passage and more time in discerning the significance of it in your life. With every verse, or at least every passage, one should stop. Does the message apply to you? Where in your life does this apply? What changes must you strive for to bring your life into accordance with God's will? Put the Bible down. Enter into prayer. Ask God for His guidance and strength as you try to integrate His word into your daily life. Adopting prayerful reading disciplines such as *Lectio Divinia* can be immensely helpful.

Weekly worship is another opportunity to hear God's voice. Through scripture readings, corporate prayer, and preaching, you gain insight into the discipleship path. You should enter

the sanctuary with an open joyful spirit, eagerly awaiting God's message. As the pastor explores scripture and expounds on its message, be prepared to search for its meaning in your life. As you leave the sanctuary, develop a practical plan for applying that message in your life. Leaving with generalities like "be loving" or "forgive others" is not good enough. Who are you going to love? What specific action are you going to take to show that love? Who are you going to forgive? When exactly? What are you going to say? Move these to the top of your "to-do list". You can be sure they're on the top of God's.

One of the best ways to hear God's voice is through other committed Christians. We all know people committed to their faith journey, people who have committed to the discipleship path. People like that are invaluable in helping you through a problem or important decision. Suffering from addiction? Find a 12-stepper who now lives in God's grace. Diagnosed with cancer? Develop a friendship with another faithful person who has faced that battle. Bible study groups, discipleship groups and Christian education classes are also great places to hear the voice of God through others in your faith community.

We also hear the voice of God through service. Social justice is the most prevalent theme found in Jesus' ministry. He expects us to enter into the suffering of others, just as He entered into the suffering of humanity. I hear his voice clearly when serving in the impoverished neighborhoods of Philadelphia. When I see little Juan come every Saturday wearing the same clothes, I hear John the Baptist telling me, "The person with two coats should share with him who has none." When I see children eating twice as much for lunch because they had no breakfast, I hear Jesus whispering, "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink..." When I realize that only half of the children will graduate high school and one third will spend time incarcerated, I hear Jesus reminding me, "So it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish." If you are not hearing God's voice in your life, spend more time with those who are less fortunate. In their presence, His voice is loud and clear.

We sense God's presence on a personal level through prayer and sacred meditation. Remember, however, that prayer is not intended to be an opportunity for you to present a wish list. God is not Santa Claus. Prayer is an opportunity to bring what you have read in scripture, heard in sermons, learned through study, and experienced through service to God. It is a dedicated time for you to open yourself to His presence, allowing Him to speak with you. By ridding yourself of distractions and entering into His sacred space in silent reflection, you begin to discern your purpose and His will. People often ask, "How do I know that I am hearing God's voice and not mine own?" Odds are pretty good that if this inner voice is asking you to move beyond your usual comfort level, to a more profound level of compassion, love, and forgiveness, then it is God's voice. God always challenges us to step out of the boat, just as Jesus challenged Peter to step out of the boat during a storm. He challenges us to assist the vulnerable. He challenges us to forgive the unforgivable. He challenges us to lift up the impoverished. Whenever you are in doubt, check with your pastor, or return to scripture. Seek out the words of Jesus. God's voice will always be consistent with the teachings of His Son.