

How to Recognize the Voice of God

When I call Jo Lynn on the phone and she answers, I don't say, "Hi; this is Jim Robinson." And when she calls me she doesn't say, "This is Jo Lynn." There's no need. We've lived together for almost 55 years. We have a close, intimate relationship; we speak often to each other. She recognizes my voice; and I hers.

When I was minister of youth in the 1960's a young friend named Tommy felt God calling him to ministry. On youth Sunday a nearby church invited him to preach his first sermon, I and took our youth group for his first sermon.

Came time in the service when Tommy stood at the pulpit and announced his text. He read the text and began to stammer around until, finally, with a look of panic on his face, he mumbled, "I guess I wasn't very well prepared," and sat down.

Afterward, he told me, "I thought God was supposed to inspire me. I thought God would tell me what to say. Isn't that how it's supposed to happen?"

That seems the general impression of a lot of people. I've never found it to be like that. Most of the time when I hear god's voice it comes after hours, and even days, of intense study and prayer. For me, almost always it's hard work!

Now, most people will say, "I pray often." That's good. Hopefully, God recognizes your voice when you pray. But do you recognize God's voice? Or when you pray, do you do all the talking? The greatest challenge in communication at any level is not speaking, but listening. It's no different with prayer.

In today's Scripture, Ahab, king of Israel, has married Jezebel, the daughter of the king of Sidon, as a part of a treaty. She brought her gods with her: trinkets hanging around her neck, statuettes on the coffee table, fertility symbols on the bed post... And she brought a lot of priests and built temples to her gods.

Elijah was a prophet of God and he challenged and prevailed against the priests, which embarrassed Jezebel; so, she put out a contract on him, and he ran to the desert, and eventually down to Mount Horeb. We take up the story in ...

<p>1 KINGS 19:9-13 (MSG) <i>Then the word of GOD came to him: "So Elijah, what are you doing here?"</i> ¹⁰<i>"I've been working my heart out for the GOD-of-the-Angel-Armies,"</i> Elijah said. <i>"The people of Israel have abandoned your covenant, destroyed the places of worship, and murdered your prophets. I'm the only one</i></p>	<p><i>left, and now they're trying to kill me."</i> ¹¹<i>Then he was told, "Go, stand on the mountain at attention before GOD. GOD will pass by."</i> A hurricane wind ripped through the mountains and shattered the rocks before GOD, but GOD wasn't in the wind; after the wind an earthquake, but GOD wasn't in the earthquake;</p>	<p>¹²<i>and after the earthquake fire, but GOD wasn't in the fire; and after the fire a gentle and quiet whisper.</i> ¹³<i>When Elijah heard the quiet voice, he muffled his face with his great cloak, went to the mouth of the cave, and stood there. A quiet voice asked, "So Elijah, now tell me, what are you doing here?"</i></p>
---	--	---

In a scene in the movie, "The Ten Commandments," Moses is on Mount Sinai

and God is giving him the Ten Commandments. Remember? God's voice is thundering; in fact, when God spoke to Moses the people down at the bottom of the mountain thought it thundered. In the movie, as God spoke each commandment a big fireball came roaring out of space and crashed into the rock beside Moses, burning the words into the stone. It was spectacular—wide screen Technicolor, with state-of-the-art audio! The theater literally shook with the vibrations of sound!

Hollywood loves scenes like that: take a scene from scripture and embellish it with spectacular audio/visual effects. But, look again at the story of Elijah:

There was an earthquake; but God was not in the earthquake.

There was a whirlwind; but God was not in the whirlwind.

There was fire; but God was not in the fire.

Then there was a whisper (the KJV says a "still small voice"), and God spoke.

So how do we know when God speaks to us? There's a line in Charles Dickens' "Christmas Carol", when Ebenezer Scrooge sees the ghost of Jacob Marley. He said, "You're nothing but a spot of mustard; a bit of undigested ham." How do we know it's the voice of God and not last night's pizza?

Well, first, consider the environment. We live in a razzle-dazzle culture of sight and sound. Sometimes it's hard to recognize each other's voices—voices with which we're familiar.

A small candle outside on a sunny day will go virtually unnoticed. But on a dark and stormy night when the electricity has gone out, that same candle beside the crib makes the difference between terror and calm. Light is most meaningful in a context of darkness; sound in a context of silence. And when the sound is a whisper—a still small voice—how can we expect to hear it with the stereo booming in the kids' room, the TV blaring in the den, and ear buds in our ears?

So, to recognize the voice of God, first place yourself in position to listen. Set a specific time and place—every day; turn off the world; and listen.

For some reason nobody seems to know, a couple of centuries ago the church stopped teaching the Spiritual Discipline of Meditation. It had come to be associated with Eastern mysticism (Buddhism, Zen, etc.), and therefore, many of the more conservative Christian bodies assigned it the status of heresy. Imagine—a form of prayer: heresy.

By the grace of God in a time of intense personal turmoil, I was introduced to the spiritual discipline of meditation—listening for the voice of God. *The first step is to place yourself intentionally in position to listen.*

A second step is to place yourself in a prayerful FELLOWSHIP. After the ascension of our Lord the Disciples were waiting for the fulfillment of his promise

of the Holy Spirit; and Acts 2 describes how they waited: **ACT2 2:42 (GNB) *They spent their time in learning from the apostles, taking part in the fellowship, and sharing in the fellowship meals and the prayers.***

It was in that context, and to that group of gathered, prayerful believers, that the voice of God gave birth to the church. Within such a fellowship is a partnership of encouragement in the quest to recognize the voice of God.

A third element in seeking to recognize the voice of God is also most effective within a fellowship. It has become a cliché: God speaks through the Word; therefore, place yourself within the Word.

You may have mental images of closing your eyes, opening the Bible and putting your finger to the page and opening your eyes to see what God says. That doesn't work for me. It didn't work for my young friend, Tommy, either. Not that God can't speak that way; but I haven't learned to listen that way.

"There is value in simply reading scripture. Whether large print, King James Version, resting on a shawl-covered knee and read through a magnifying glass held in a palsied hand, or a Gideon Bible read through tear-stained mascara in a dingy motel room, there is value in simply reading the words of scripture. But there is a difference between digging into the scriptures and studying them, and drawing our chairs in a circle and each one read a verse and say what it means to me."¹

Sadly, our culture has become too busy to spend time in either meditation or serious study of the Word; and in the all-too-brief time set aside for Sunday School not much of real depth can happen among those who participate. In far too many cases what passes for Bible study is the unprepared sharing of opinion—a pooling of ignorance that may do more harm than good. Hearing the voice of God from scripture rarely happens without disciplined study.

A fourth element in seeking to recognize the voice of God is to trust "the Voice in Your Heart." Alexander Campbell's first wife, Margaret, frequently encouraged him in times of spiritual struggle by saying: "What does 'the Voice in Your Heart' say?" Quakers talk about an "inner light". If you ask God to speak to you, then live as though it never happened, you deny the very voice you seek to hear.

But when you have placed yourself in position to listen—and perhaps have developed some of the disciplines of listening prayer; and when you have placed yourself in a prayerful fellowship and have placed yourself in the Word, and in that context have asked for God to guide you, then trust that God will do precisely that!

It probably won't come wide-screen Technicolor, nor in stereophonic, surround sound; in fact, it more likely will come as a whisper—a still small voice—like the Voice in Your Heart.

¹ A Fred Craddock quote.