Equipping the Church

Part 4: 'Hearing from God'

It's funny how so many scientists and medical experts are amazed at how well we human beings are designed and yet they don't believe in the Designer. The fact is we have been wonderfully and intricately designed for many things, one of which is this: **we are designed to hear from God.** It's in our nature as born-again believers to have faith, but it's in our nature as human beings to hear from God. People will say, *'Well, I just don't hear God speak at all.'* If that is really true then those people may not be born again because our conversion is a response to God's personal invitation - it's never initiated by us. However very often another reason a person may think they do not hear from God is because they have such a narrow view of how God speaks.

It's interesting how you can have a large evangelistic gathering and preach the gospel and people will come to Christ. But very few of them would say, *'I clearly heard the voice of the Lord.'* They just listened to a preacher, they became aware of their unsaved condition and their need for God and they may even say they felt the presence of God. Well all of that is actually the result of them hearing from God. The problem is we tend to put God on the same level as we humans talking to each other and yet God speaks in so many different ways. Sometimes He even speaks things that are so deep and so profound that He speaks directly to our spirit; He may deposit a thought or word that can take days, weeks or even months to unfold and enter our conscious mind.

There are times in our life when we might make a really good decision – one that bears incredible fruit for us or our family or our Church. How did we get to that point? Well there could be any number of reasons but very often it was God's voice speaking into our situation and us not realizing that God actually ministered to us in the night, weeks before the event because He knew what was coming and His presence in our life was His voice to our spirit. God prepared us for that decision which we think was brilliance on our part. It was actually the product of the voice of God.

Many times in my ministry I have heard a brother or sister say, *"I am in a very dry season right now; I'm just not hearing from the Lord very well. I can sense His presence at times but I can't hear His voice."* Again, we reduce God to our human level. We know that a human being can be right in front of us but not say anything because their presence is not the same as their voice. But when God is present in Christ - He is the Word of God. When the Word shows up, so does His voice. We often don't interpret it as His voice and yet it is.

If God is present - God is speaking - and God is always present. So there is a huge difference between God not speaking and us not hearing. The end result looks exactly the same – we don't hear from God – but the problem is always on our end.

The best example I can give here is this. At this very moment, regardless of where you are or what you are doing, there are literally hundreds of voices bombarding you. There are at least ten television stations transmitting their signal; many more radio stations; short wave signals from around the world are also occupying the same environment as you. There are police, fire and ambulance signals and who knows how many mobile phone transmissions. They are all here, all the time. There's only one reason you cannot hear them – you are not tuned in – you have not made a conscious decision to hear those voices and you never will until you are tuned in. So it is with God. He is always speaking collectively to the Church and specifically to each of His children, if only we had ears to hear.

In Luke chapter four, Jesus quotes a verse from the Old Testament, *"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."* (Deuteronomy 8:3). Read that again: *"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."* We are alive, because He speaks. Our life is evidence of His voice. Even if it was possible for someone to not have the ability to hear from God, the moment God spoke, they would have that ability because God creates when He speaks. God spoke the whole world into being.

In Romans 10:17 it says, *"Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God."* Now most of the sermons I have heard on that verse conclude that faith comes from hearing the Word of God. That's not what it says. It says, faith comes from hearing. Hearing comes from the word of God. We listen to God's voice not to find something in addition to Scripture, but to clarify what's been inspired, written and preserved for us by the Holy Spirit. You will recall that many years ago God spoke to Abraham and instructed him to sacrifice his son Isaac. But as the sword is coming down, the Lord spoke again and said, *"Never mind."* Now I am only speculating here, but I think Isaac was forever grateful that his dad kept listening to the Lord!

Many 'Isaacs' have been slain because people listened to what God had said, but not to what He is saying now. It is the present tense voice of God which really builds our faith. The very nature of faith implies I am hearing, you have a situation come up and you just believe God for a breakthrough and it comes because God speaks and you listen. You just may not have realised it was the voice of God before, but in time you will know. My hope and my prayer today is that God will broaden our perception of how He speaks to us. I am sure that many of us have had unique experiences of the voice of the Lord, but what I would like to emphasize today is that you have been intentionally designed to perceive His voice. It's already in your design. In Hebrews 5:14 it talks about us having our senses trained to discern good and evil, having our human physical senses trained as we encounter the presence of God and the voice of God more and more.

You may already know this, but when they train people in banks to recognize counterfeit money, they only study the real money. They never study the counterfeit money. Day after day they immerse themselves in this study and become so exposed to the real thing that the counterfeit stands out. They may not even know at first why a note is counterfeit - they just know there's something wrong with it. That's how you discern good and evil. You don't discern evil by studying evil; you become so immersed in the Person of God that anything that doesn't fit with God's goodness becomes obvious. So I want us to understand today that in essence, God's presence is God's voice. That doesn't mean we go looking for His voice every time we are in His presence. His presence is an end in itself. God longs for us to hang out with Him and enjoy that intimacy the Holy Spirit can bring in worship times, prayer times or when meditating on the Scriptures. Don't be quick to try to figure out what God's doing. Just be a pliable, teachable, hungry and thirsty child. Just be the sailboat with a sail that is set and ready to be moved by the wind of the Spirit, regardless of the direction it takes you. Don't try to work out what the wind is doing – just submit to it.

To put it another way, **you will never discover God through analysis. You only discover God through surrender.** It's not that understanding is wrong - God tells us in the Bible to pursue wisdom and understanding - it's vital. But the problem occurs when we only obey and embrace what we understand. Because then we have a God who looks a lot like us, we reduce Him to our size. God is looking for a people who are yielded to Him and who say 'Yes' before He even speaks and it's that 'yes' before He speaks that will always attract His voice.

I remember hearing this story a number of years ago of a Christian family who were driving on a mountain road when their little boy, just out of nowhere, declares, *"There's a big rock on the road right around the next bend."* His father was driving and was somewhat stunned by the words his son just spoke out of the blue and so he immediately slowed down as he approached the bend. Just as he got past the main curve, there it was, this huge rock in the middle of the road.

Dad was so impressed that his boy had heard from God he said, *"So what else is God saying son?"* Without missing a beat, the young boy replied, *"God said we need to stop at McDonald's when we get to town."* We can laugh at the young boy but that is so like us, isn't it? We get it right once, let's see if we can extend it into our will. Hearing from God is a moment by moment thing. We don't get to determine when He speaks or what He says, but we should not expect it to always come the same way or via the same means, but of one thing we can be certain: God is always speaking. In fact it says in Hebrews 1:3 it that God sustains or upholds all things by the power of His Word.

So the billions of universes out there are actually held in place because God speaks. You have the capacity to sit here because God speaks. It is God's voice that keeps us alive; keeps us engaged. So much of what we understand in life came simply because God spoke to us through the Scriptures; or in our sleep; or He spoke to us through a friend; a circumstance; a situation; He arranged all the players in our life to deliver this insight at this time - all in preparation for a decision we will make which may radically change the course of our whole life.

God is always speaking into our lives; always building into us the ability to become the Word made flesh. Forgive me if that sounds blasphemous, let me explain it. Jesus Christ is the Word made flesh – that's true. But it's also true that we are in Christ. Jesus is always wanting His Word to be made flesh, again and again, which is why He wants people like you and me to model and illustrate exactly what He says so that when people look at our lives, they see the life of Christ; they see what has been written in Scripture. For us to live like that, we must firstly believe that God is always speaking and secondly we must live in continuous anticipation of what God might be saying and doing in us, around us and through us. You may recall the two questions I have encouraged you to ask every single day? *"What are you doing (and saying) Lord?"* and *"How can I be part of it?"*

Now of course there are times when God's word is so clear, He may as well be shouting. But then there are many times when God speaks very softly and that's when we need to focus very carefully. Some people call it 'leaning in.' You know that when you are listening to a softly spoken person and you really want to hear what they are saying because it's important to you .. you literally lean it so you can hear better.

Or you might be standing in a line waiting to be served and you hear a conversation close by which sounds fascinating and before you know it, you find yourself leaning in so you can hear clearly. That's the image I get when I think of a child of God who is committed to hearing every word from God. The whole point is this: when we want to hear, we lean in, we lean in, we anticipate what the Lord speaks to us and we already have the willingness to obey before He speaks. When God encounters that intentional listening and that willingness to say 'yes' before He even speaks – He is delighted and will say more than you ever imagined.

Hearing from God becomes a real struggle for many believers and it shouldn't be. It's your nature to hear from God. It's how He made you. It's who you are. It's in your design. Everything about you was wired and designed to perceive, to recognize and to have fellowship with God. I'm not as good at it as I want to be, but I'm better than I used to be. That's all God expects from us . . . a gradual journey of discovery as we learn to discern His voice. But it's our 'yes' before He speaks which positions us to hear Him better.

2 Corinthians 3:16 *" ... whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away."*

Some think this is a strange verse. *" ... whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away."* You would think that the veil is taken away so the person could turn to the Lord. But in His mercy, the veil isn't lifted until they turn, because there's enough evidence to the voice of God in every human being. We are without excuse.

Romans 1:20 *"For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities - His eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse."*

So we are all created in the image of God and God's nature is revealed in so many ways throughout His creation. But when His people, who are called by His name, decide to intentionally turn to the Lord and 'lean in' to hear His voice – God removes the veil completely. Whatever kept us from our clear perception of the things of God is lifted and we can hear and see clearly. But what regulates that clarity is our 'yes' before He speaks and our commitment to hearing from God.

Now it goes without saying but perhaps the most important pre-requisite to hearing from God is we have to really want to. I know that sounds dumb, but believe me when I tell you that there are millions of prayers rising to heaven right now across the earth from people who really don't want to hear from God. If you listened carefully to the words they are praying, they are really telling God what He needs to do and presenting Him with a list of tasks to complete which we are not able to do ourselves.

We read in Psalm 40:8 where King David cried out to God and said, *"My God, I want to do what you want."* No shopping list. No instructions for God. Just a soft, teachable, willing heart and a loud 'yes' before God even speaks. A lot of people talk to God but rarely hear from God. For them, prayer is a monologue. But you can't have a relationship through a monologue and that's all you will have if deep down you are not absolutely desperate to hear from God. You've got to want to hear from God more than anything else. At that point promises like these become your own:

Deuteronomy 4:29 *"You will search again for the Lord your God. And if you search for him with all your heart and soul, you will find him."*

Jeremiah 29:11-14 *"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you," declares the Lord ..."*

Psalm 46:10 *"Be still and know that I am God."*

That last verse is the key. We live in a fast-pace, crowded, noisy world. We are surrounded by so many sounds, signals and competing voices every day. Being still, so we might discern the presence and voice of God has never been harder than it is today – and it has never been more important that we hear from God than it is today. Let me finish with a story which I hope will remain with you.

Before refrigerators, people in the north of Canada used icehouses to preserve their food. Icehouses had thick walls, no windows and a tightly fitted door. In winter, when streams and lakes were frozen, large blocks of ice were cut, hauled to the icehouses and covered with sawdust. Often the ice would last well into the summer.

One day this man lost his very valuable watch while he was working in his icehouse. He searched diligently for it, carefully raking through the sawdust, but he didn't find it. His fellow workers also looked, but their efforts also proved futile. A small boy who heard about the fruitless searches slipped into the icehouse during the noon hour and soon emerged with the watch. Amazed, the men asked him how he found it. The boy replied, *"The only way I could - I closed the door, lay down in the sawdust, and kept very, very still ... as I focussed only on the watch and listened very carefully. It wasn't long before I could hear the watch ticking and then I knew exactly where it was."*

"Be still and know that I am God."