

## **“Hearing the Voice of God”**

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**So how do I know when God is speaking to me?** That’s the question that we’ve been spending our time with this week. I wanted to spend an entire unit/week on this because I find this to be more and more of a problem in the community of faith: claiming to hear the voice of God without corroboration, without discernment, and without adhering to some very specific biblical principles (that seem to address this topic).

This week has been quite inductive. I’ve led you with a trail of bread crumbs to some specific questions and allowed those questions to carry the discussion forward. But now it’s time for me to be direct—to lay out for you what I think is a comprehensive, biblically-responsible, and proven way of discerning whether I’m following the leading of God. How do I “test the spirits to see if indeed they are from God” (1 John 4:1)? I’m about to unfold for you one of the most valuable pieces that I’ve ever picked up on my own faith journey.

I have dealt with a fair number of very difficult decisions before and after I picked this up. I can tell you up front that this process has been tested in my own life, led me to *huge* disappointment, and then altered into the form that I’m about share with you. Here are the components by which you test the voice of God and God’s will for your life.

### **1. Impressions from the Spirit**

The Holy Spirit guides us, and it’s reasonable to assume that he will impress upon us the right thing to do. This is where it starts. I think it’s clear that we’ve all felt these before. The Bible says that the Spirit convicts us and prods us about righteousness (John 16:5-11). And to be sure, there is some element of feeling here. Perhaps it’s a conviction about a new direction you ought to go, or a bad feeling about something that you are about to undertake.

My father used to talk about this in his decision making process. If he wanted to be clear about the direction God had set for him, he would say, “I have a good feeling internally about it.” And he meant that in a wholly spiritual way. That was his way of saying, “God is giving me peace about this decision.”

But many people stop right here. For many people, discerning the will of God and listening to God’s voice is nothing more than attention to their internal peace. It’s totally possible that we can have a good feeling about something internally and that be the *wrong* direction to go. As we’ve seen, my inner impressions may not be coming from the Spirit, but rather my own desires, fears, and dreams. Feelings are subjective. And *nothing* is more deceitful than your feelings (Jer. 17:9).

So what do you do? You add to impressions from the Spirit . . .

### **2. Scripture**

Impressions from the Spirit, if they are from the Spirit, will always coincide with the clear teaching of Scripture. God is not going to contradict himself in His Word. And yet, you'd be surprised at how many people suggest that the Spirit of God is leading them into areas that are blatantly opposed to the clear counsel of Scripture. I had a lady come to my office a couple a few years ago and suggest that God was leading her to have an abortion. Now whether or not you agree that abortion is murder, I think it's reasonable to assume that God would not *lead* a person to that decision. I had to say to her, "If you do this, God will be angry with you." I was counseling a couple once (members of a local church Body) who were blatantly living in sexual immorality. I had to say to them, "God will be angry with you if you don't stop this right now." And I can't tell you how many times I've heard Christians say, "God is leading me to divorce my spouse" (and these are neither of the two cases for which God grants his approval in divorce). How do Christians claim to hear God speaking to them messages that are opposed to Scripture? God will not contradict himself in his Word.

But what about situations that are not bound up with the explicit counsel of Scripture? Let's say that I'm trying to decide whether or not to take a new job, or what new direction to take in ministry, or whether God is saying to me that I should serve in this area or not, and there are no Scriptural issues at stake. I mean, "Should I have an affair?" is a ridiculously easy questions to answer, because there are explicit commands against this kind of thing. But let's say that I'm working at FCC and someone calls from another college, or a church, and says, "We think God is leading us to ask you if you'd come work here?" Scriptural issues (concerning immorality) really aren't in play. What then?

At that point you add to impressions from the Spirit and Scripture . . .

### **3. Circumstances**

If God really is telling you that the best course of action is to take this particular job, then the circumstances will probably line up for your hire. When I was serving a church in the Detroit area, we believed it was God's will for us to start a church in the growing area between Detroit and Ann Arbor. That impression was given first to Bob Smith, Plymouth, MI Chief of Police. Scripture is massively in play, and there are plenty of biblical mandates for us to spread the message of Jesus. The question was whether or not it was feasible. And the more he got to working on it, it seemed as if the circumstances were lining up for him to undertake this project.

Circumstances alone are not the arbiter of God's will. I know plenty of people who talk about "open doors" and "closed windows." Most of the time we use that as the definitive voice of God. "Well, it didn't happen, so obviously God doesn't want me to go." But it's not necessarily true that if it *was* available that you *should* go. Bob Smith had two other church plants fail before the dream that I mentioned above. In both cases, the circumstances seemed to line up.

It stands to reason that if God wants you involved in a certain thing, or if God is telling you to do this or that, then He will arrange things to make it happen. He will make sure the opportunity is available.

Now, many people stop right here. For many who talk about hearing the voice of God and recognizing it, for many who talk about a process of discernment, this is the ending point. The classic work on this, F. B. Meyer's *The Secret of Guidance*, includes nothing more than these three. Meyer says,

*“The **circumstances** of our daily life are to us an infallible indication of God’s will, when they concur with the **inward promptings of the spirit** and with the **Word of God**. So long as they are stationary, wait. When you must act, they will open, and a way will be made through oceans and rivers, wastes and rocks.”*

Fred Meyer’s book was *the* classic work on the subject of guidance until Dallas Willard published his book, *Hearing God*. Willard, knowing that Meyer’s work was the classic, followed his lead and adopted nothing more than these “three lights.”

*“Many discussions about hearing God’s voice speak of three points of reference, also called ‘three lights,’ that we can consult in determining what God wants us to do. These are **circumstances, impressions from the Spirit and passages from the Bible**. When these three things point in the same direction it is suggested that we be sure the direction they point is the one God intends for us.” (Hearing God, p. 170)*

Willard goes on to admit that there are problems with only using these three. The problem is related to their interdependence. You have to know in any given situation which of the three “lights” to give more authority to.

But in my opinion, they’re both missing something. The counsel of Meyer, followed by Willard, is incomplete. There is one other piece of the puzzle that would complement this process nicely. All three of these elements that we’ve discussed so far are entirely subjective. In each of those things you can assign them weight and meaning based on what you *want* to see. My inner promptings from the Spirit could actually be a strong desire for reasons of personal pride. I can then prop that up with Scripture that I have learned (in spite of the fact that the Scriptures may point to the contrary). And I can look at the circumstances surrounding the issue with an eye toward making it happen. We hear what we want to hear (impressions from the Spirit), see what we want to see (circumstances), and quote favorite texts to justify it (Scripture).

So how do I avoid that? How do I remove my sinful, desire-driven self from the process and listen to the objective voice of God?

I complete this process with . . .

#### 4. Counsel of Godly Peers

If God is leading me in a particular direction, the Spirit of God that lives in you (who is the same Spirit) will either confirm it or deny it for me. I interviewed for a job once in which everything inside of me was telling me, “This is gonna happen for you. Get ready for it.” It was one of those things that just came across my desk. I didn’t really have a legitimate shot at the job, but applied for it anyway just for the interview experience. When the time came for decisions, I was one of the top three finalists. I thought, “Wow! Circumstances are lining up!” I knew of a guy who was looking for a ministry that would have fit perfectly with the job I had at the time, and my sister was interviewing for a university professorate at a university in the same town. It seemed as if my circumstances were lining up, pointing in the direction of me taking this job and moving half-way across the country.

But what I didn’t consider, what I wasn’t willing to listen to, was the counsel of the people closest to me. My wife didn’t want to go. (How did I not pay attention to this for three months?) A friend of

mine, someone involved with the finances of this place I was applying to, told me they were having financial trouble. And when I asked another friend to pray about this for me, his prayer was, “I pray, God, that You would open doors that no man can shut and shut doors that no man can open.” I thought, “How strange!”

In the end, I was told that I was the runner-up for the job. I was *hugely* disappointed because the manner in which I “heard the clear voice of God” had been satisfied. The “three lights”—circumstances, inner impressions, and Scripture—seemed to be pointing in that direction. And in the end, though I was told that I was next in line, and that if the first guy balked that they would call me. They tried to get *two* guys to come without my knowledge, and after they both said no, they *still* didn’t contact me. Now, the point is this: had I listened to the counsel of my Godly peers, I would have been saved the disappointment. It’s clear to me now that God had no intention of me *ever* going there. Had this piece of the puzzle been in place, I’d have known it from the start, and I would have been spared from some major grief and disappointment.

I’ve tested this four-fold discernment process on a number of major life decisions, particularly which doctoral program to pursue and whether I should come to FCC. I’ve found it to not only be helpful and practical, but also very biblical.

Consider that Deuteronomy 19:15 says that “everything must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.” This concept was the bedrock of the Jewish legal system through all of biblical history. Read what Moses says carefully:

*“One witness is not enough to convict a man accused of any crime or offense he may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If a malicious witness takes the stand to accuse a man of a crime, the two men involved in the dispute must **stand in the presence of the LORD before the priests and the judges who are in office at the time.**” (Deut. 19:15-17)*

Do you see that? He seems to suggest that standing before the leaders of the faith community (the priests and judges) IS IN FACT TO STAND IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD. I don’t think that means that the priests and judges are God himself. But I do think it means that when we stand before the collective wisdom of the community of faith (our godly peers and mentors), then the will of God is represented among them—clearly available and easily heard.

Think back to the Discussion Starter for last week, about “where 2 or 3 are gathered, there I am with them.” That text is not about worship. It’s not about “where 2 or 3 are gathered to worship, I will come and be in their midst.” No, Matthew 18 is clearly about disciplinary situations within the church. Jesus says that brethren (and sistren!) who sin are to be confronted, and if they won’t repent, we are to involve the community of faith. In that context—of discipline and the community of faith deciding whether to forgive sins or retain them—Jesus says, “For where 2 or 3 are gathered together in my name, I will be there with them” (Matt. 18:20). It’s not that Jesus comes to meet us in worship. It’s that when we stand before the “priests and judges” (or the community of faith), we are in fact standing in the presence of and discerning the will and counsel of God.

How is it that this concept has gotten lost in our discernment in favor of an individualistic idolatry so prevalent in American culture? Well, that’s it isn’t it: idolatry. We’ve made gods of ourselves and

our feelings. Our desires reign in sovereignty. We do what we want, and use God to justify it. We would do well to pound our hearts over and over with Israel's formative creed: "Hear, O Israel—YHWH is our God, YHWH *alone*" (Deut. 6:4).

### ***Some Final Thoughts***

I do believe God is still in the business of leading us. He led his people day by day through the wilderness, and while I don't see smoke and fire on a daily basis, I think God is very clear with me if I take time to listen, not just to *what* He has to say, but *how* He says it. If we have any intention of faithfully listening to the voice of God, we must pay attention to this four-fold process: impressions, Scripture, circumstances, and the counsel of our Godly peers.

I want to conclude with some valuable lessons I've learned from diligently pursuing this discernment process.

**1. It's objective.** The problem I find with using only the "three lights" is that they are all subjective. Each of them has a built-in tendency to let us see what we want to see. Adding in the counsel of godly peers brings something objective to the process. When I say, "What do you think about this?" I automatically bring in something objective, something that I can't control, a tool by which God can speak to me unfettered. Of course, once the advice is given, it can be denied, manipulated, or ignored. But the giving of the advice itself can't be controlled. It's objective. And for that reason—that it's outside myself—I think it's an indispensable piece of the puzzle.

**2. The four work together.** This is where I think Willard's counsel about the "interdependence" of the various pieces is helpful. I can't use just one of these pieces and expect to hear the voice of God clearly. It won't work to say, "Because I've found this Bible verse that supports what I want, then it's clear God wants me to do this." Satan regularly quotes Scripture (see Matt. 4, Luke 4). But when I put all four pieces together and let them play off one another, my godly peers might say, "You're quoting that out of context." I may think that God is leading me to do mission work, and my godly peers may tell me to go for it, but if my passport is denied and no one will fund me (circumstances), it's probably God's clear direction that you're not to do this.

**3. Choose your godly peers wisely.** I've been using the phrase "godly peers," and I guess I need to say that "peers" isn't all that accurate. That's the term that seems to fit best, because some of your counsel will be peers. But "mentors" and "leaders" also need to be in the mix. Think back to Deut. 19:17; it involved the leaders of the faith community. One of the biggest mistakes you can make in this process is to gather around you the kinds of people who you already know agree with you. Or people who will only tell you what you want to hear. I watch people make this mistake over and over again. I've seen young people play leaders off one another, gathering advice from several sources, and claiming as "the advice of godly mentors" the particular counsel that gives them what they wanted in the first place. This corrupts the process by which God makes his will known to us.

When I was looking to do my doctoral work, I had three options on the table. A Ph.D. in curriculum development from Michigan State, an Ed.D. from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, and a D.Min. in spiritual formation from Ashland Theological Seminary. As I began discerning which option was best for me (which involved lots of prayer and research), I

asked three or four people to help me decide. One of them was a man I knew disagreed with me on just about everything I've ever believed. We seldom saw eye to eye. But as I began discerning, his counsel began to line up with everyone else's. I could have chosen three or four people whom I could have manipulated into telling me what I wanted to hear. How much more clear was the direction of God, though, to know that even those who don't normally agree with me are confirming this direction in my life!

So as you're thinking about the advice of your godly peers, it won't work to just listen to those whom you know agree with you. ("Woe to you when all men speak well of you!") Invite into your sphere of advice those who you know aren't afraid to tell you the truth, even if it means not confirming what you want. Worshiping someone who gives you only what you want all the time is more a faith in Santa Clause than the Living God.

**4. Submission is essential.** I wanted to wait until we covered the discipline of submission before we covered this material because I wanted you to understand the positive benefits of submission. In the midst of the discernment process, you'll soon enough find the counsel of your godly peers running afoul of your intentions. You'll have an idea of what you want to do, and what you think God is calling you to do, only to find your godly peers saying, "No, I don't think so." At that point, you'll have a decision to make, and it really boils down to one of two options: submission or rebellion. And I know this first-hand.

I spent over a year shepherding a young man through his adultery. I had no personal experience at this kind of ministry, so I sought three godly peers who could help me. One was close to the situation, another had personal experiences with adultery, and the third was an outsider to the situation (he'd never met any of the involved parties), but had experience shepherding others through this. Three godly men, from three different walks of life. As I prayed and agonized over how to help this young man, I would settle in on things I wanted to do, things I wanted to say to him to help move him to repentance. When I did, I submitted my decisions to these three men. Most of the time they said, "I think that's a good idea." But one e-mail I wanted to write, when I submitted it to them, they all three—without talking to one another and within 10 minutes of each other—responded with, "Les, you can't send that." At this point I have a decision to make: listen to their counsel as if it were the counsel of God, or ignore their thoughts and send it anyway. My internal impressions were to send it (because I was angry at him), and my circumstances said send it (because I was angry at him) and Scripture tells me that he was wrong and needed to be convicted (yeah, but I was doing so out of anger). My godly peers called me on this and in their different ways said, "You need to talk to him as a friend. Tell him that you love him, and that you hate to see what this sin is doing to him." (And after all, isn't that what the Father wanted to tell him?) So, I listened. I erased that e-mail and started over.

I see so many people, from all ages, ignoring the counsel of their godly peers. Asking for it, yes. But then ignoring it (or, in the case of the many who come to ask my opinion, rationalizing away the advice we've given) and doing what they want anyway. I don't have the space to list them all here. I trust that as you read this you can think of your own situations ... and that you're a bit convicted about where you see you've done this in your own life.