

How To Hear God

Part I

Dear sister or brother,

If you quiet yourself and look into the depths of your heart, you will find a longing to hear God's voice.

A longing that cuts so deep... you won't find the end of it.

We long to hear our names spoken by Him.

We long to know Him not just as a 'miracle worker' who lived thousands of years ago, or an amazing fixture in other people's stories, or a powerful but distant 'face-in-the-sky' who looks down at us from far away...

... but as One who stands nearby, looking at us from *right here*, his face shining as he looks at us, his eyes revealing that he who knows us, and sees every part of us, and feels infinite compassion and boundless Love towards us... and we long to hear THAT "glorious, nearby One" *speak* to us - from his complete understanding of us - words of healing, delight, forgiveness, and acceptance.

But?

Frankly,

For many of us it is hard to hear God's voice.

There are so many other voices speaking into our lives.

The blaring TV set.

The podcasts.

The endless words and images that populate our Facebook feeds.

The pundits and politicians.

The voice of the accuser, who constantly tries to speak shame and fear and a need to self-protect, into our minds and hearts.

The pastors and self-proclaimed Christ-followers who have stopped listening to the tender voice of God - and so their voices and words end up coming from and perpetuating the "kingdoms of this world" rather than the Kingdom of God.

It's all so confusing.

Who can we listen to?

Who can we trust?

Where is God's voice in the midst of it all?

Where can we go and what can we do to begin clearly hearing the tender voice of the One who loves us, who loves every human on this planet, who always has, infinitely, and who greatly desires that none should perish, but that all might be healed?

That is the question I will try to tackle in the next few emails.

And what a necessary question to answer.

In particular because,

as I have already hinted at... I believe many pastors today have lost touch with the voice of God. And this has had a ripple effect into the

wider Christian community in America, where as a result many, many, Christians have also lost touch with the Voice of God. I know that is quite a bold statement, and perhaps something of a generalization - and I am very open to being corrected about this if I am wrong. But as I look around me, and listen to what gets preached from many pulpits and shared on many Facebook feeds... I cannot help but think that the "tone" I hear does not sound like the tone of Jesus.

And I hear Jesus gently but very firmly calling his people back...

... back into a posture of listening. Back into immersion in his words, and his ways, and his forgiveness, and his infinite Love for the world.

In our eagerness and zeal to establish Christian values as the dominant ones in our culture... I am concerned that we are becoming careless, and are beginning to resort to methods for bringing the Kingdom to earth that look and smell more like the "way of the world" than the Way of Jesus.

And all of this

is *intimately* tied

to our ability to hear God's voice.

When we the people of God become cut off from the Voice of God... we perish. Because "HE has the words of eternal life." (John 6:68)

He is speaking.

To me.

To you.

There are many things he wants to say to us.

A wonderful new life he wants to lead us into.

But are we listening?

Really listening?

As you and I pray today and for the rest of this week, let's ask God to open our ears. So that we might hear his speaking more clearly - for again, *he alone has the words of eternal life.*

More in Part II, on how to hear God.

Part II

I know many Christians who long to be able to hear God speak to them. But they feel incapable of knowing when it is God speaking - when it is just their thoughts - or when it is some other voice that is neither themselves nor God.

And the first thing I would like to clear up is:

This "discernment" ability

is *not* something most people are just born with.

Most people have to develop it over time.

I am sure there are some people out there who are just born with an innate ability to discern God's voice from the others - but that was certainly not my own experience, nor is it the experience of most people.

Take the prophet Samuel for example.

Late in his life he was a mighty prophet - one who clearly heard God speak, knew what God was saying, and communicated God's messages to the appropriate people.

But he wasn't born with this discernment ability.

When he was a child,

he lived in the house of the priest Eli.

And in the middle of the night, God called out his name:

"Samuel! Samuel!"

But Samuel did not realize it was God calling his name, and so he got up and went into Eli's room and said, *"here I am, for you called me."*

But Eli told the Samuel he had not called him, and to go back to bed.

This happened again.

God called, Samuel mistook God's voice for Eli's and went to his room, and Eli said "no, go back to bed".

Then this happened a third time.

And the third time Samuel came to Eli, here is what happened:

"Then Eli discerned that the Lord was calling the boy. And Eli said to Samuel, 'Go lie down, and it shall be if He calls you, that you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening.' So Samuel went and lay down in his place." [1 Samuel 3:8-9]

Then Samuel does as Eli instructs, and God speaks to him - and this is the beginning of Samuel's prophetic ministry of hearing God and speaking as God's "mouthpiece".

But do you see?

Samuel was not born with the ability to discern God's voice.

He initially mistook God's voice for a human voice.

And he had to be taught by another more "discerning" human, what the voice of God sounded like - and how to listen - and what to do when God speaks.

And same goes for the rest of us.

We need to be taught "how to hear and discern God's voice".

Either by explicit instruction, like Eli's instruction to Samuel - or by watching other people model discernment for us, and then venturing out prayerfully and in faith into our own attempts at discerning God's voice.

I emphasize this point because

A lot of people feel shame, or disappointment, surrounding the fact that they cannot "hear God" - when others around them seem to be able to hear him just fine. And I am saying, there is nothing to be ashamed about... for almost everyone it starts out hard... but over time anyone can learn to clearly discern God's voice from the others.

How?

First thing to know,

is that you almost certainly *have* heard God speak.

You just didn't realize it was him speaking.

An example I like to use, is that of wine tasting.

When you are just beginning to drink wine,

you cannot taste all the distinctions between different bottles... the "notes of orange" in this one... the "notes of chocolate" in that one... the "notes of beeswax" in another one, yadda yadda. It all just tastes like... wine.

But with time...

And practice...

You begin to notice new aspects of your tasting experience.

What used to be just a big "cloud" of wine-y flavor, slowly begins to turn into a more interesting and complex experience. Where you notice different flavors, and feelings, inside a single sip.

But interestingly... you are not experiencing anything *new*. Even when you were a beginner and everything just tasted like "wine" - you still experienced all the different flavors and notes and textures etc. It's just that you couldn't pick them out within your experience, and "notice" them, and separate them from all the other flavors you tasted.

Learning to hear God's voice is a lot like that.

There are many voices circling around in your head at any given moment.

Echoes from the podcasts, and articles, and pundits who you have listened to.

And, there is often the voice of the accuser. The one who loves to plant fear-driven, anxious, self-condemning thoughts inside your mind.

And, there is the voice of God. Who heals. Uplifts. Restores. Guides us to all Truth, all peace, all joy, all Life.

But when you are starting out, all these voices sound the same.

They just sound like... "voices in your head."

You are not able to distinguish one from another.

So how can you learn to tell the difference?

What does God's voice "sound" like?

What can you do, practically speaking, to strengthen your discernment ability?

I'll tackle these questions in the next section.

Part III

In Part II I ended after raising the following questions:

How can you learn to tell the difference, between the many "voices in your head"?

What does God's voice "sound" like?

What can you do, practically speaking, to strengthen your discernment ability?

Now to answer them:

One of the most practical things you can do to enhance your discernment abilities, is to listen to the words that Jesus spoke in the gospels over and over again.

God came to earth 2,000 years ago.

And when he took on human form,

He used his voice.

To say a lot of things.

So the first recommendation I have, is something I have already recommended for other reasons:

Read the gospels more.

At least read them once a month, for at least a year.

And if you want to 'speed up' your discerning-learning process... read them twice a month. Or if you have the time and desire, more.

What this does,

is it takes the literal words - i.e. the *voice* - of Jesus,

and fills your mind with them.

And these words on their own have a 'renewing' effect on your mind - and your entire life. They contain power. And LIFE. And so the more you immerse yourself in them, the more you fill your mind with them, the more they swish around "up there"... the more they will start to bump into your other thoughts, and your other ideas, and the other things "swishing around up there"... and as they bump into these other things, they shed light on it all. They begin to reveal falsity and lies for what they are. They begin to solidify your correct but hesitant

intuitions about what is right and good. And, as they swish around up there and bump into the walls of your mind... they begin to create a "peaceful" and "quiet" mental atmosphere in which it is easier to discern God's voice from others.

Usually these things do not happen in an instant.

It takes time.

Dwelling.

Returning to Jesus' words, over and over again.

Which is why I recommend you read the gospels (at least) once a month, for (at least) a year.

But if you persist in this work of filling your mind with Jesus' words... it will change you, and prepare you to discern God's voice in your life more clearly.

Ok now the question of,

What does God's voice "sound" like?

It is always tricky and a little bit dangerous to try to answer this question, because once you hear what I am about to say you may feel tempted to create a formula... and then treat the "discernment" process as simply running sentences through that formula, to see whether they are "from God" or not.

That is not a good way to discern God's voice;

But at the same time, it can be helpful to say some general things about God's voice and what it sounds like, so that at the very least you can dismiss voices that clearly do NOT align with these qualities.

Ok here is what I will say about God's voice, in general:

- It is filled with tenderness
- At the same time, it can be very firm - gentle, but firm
- It does not condemn. Voices in your head that shame or condemn you are ultimately from the accuser
- That being said, sometimes the Voice of God convicts. This distinction between conviction & condemnation is extremely important. Conviction can be painful... and scary... but it always shows the way forward, into greater healing and life. Condemnation on the other hand is a dead end. It names something about you, and just holds that "sin" over you, as a reason to hide and feel ashamed. There is no further 'point' to the revelation of condemnation, other than to make you feel ashamed. Conviction leads to confession... repentance... reconciliation... healing... life... joy... togetherness... whereas condemnation leads to shame... hiding... feeling trapped... loneliness... isolation... and despair. God never condemns, but sometimes he convicts
- I've already touched on this, but it's really important: voices that lead you to hide from other people, and especially hide from other followers of Jesus, are almost always from the accuser
- The Voice of God seeks your joy. Always. And forever. Remember that. Some people have trouble hearing God... because subconsciously, they are terrified of actually hearing God. And so their subconscious covers their "spiritual ears"... and is constantly distracting said people from God's voice... because they are terrified that God will ask them to give up something very important, or do something very difficult or

painful. But what their fear cannot see... is that ALL things God speaks to us, ALL things he asks us to do are for our joy. And we are not talking about some intangible, invisible, solemn form of joy so "deep" in your depths you cannot even feel it... we are talking JOY. The kind of joy that lit the disciples up and caused them to sing endless praises in the Temple day after day after day, after Jesus ascended to heaven, for example. THAT kind of joy, is the joy that God's voice always points you towards

Ok in Part IV I will share some more practical instructions on how to get better at discerning God's voice from all the others.

Part IV

Four years ago my wife Tessa felt very afraid of trying to listen to God's voice.

It was the year before we got married.

And whenever she sat down to try to listen to God...

... a voice from somewhere would yell at her, "DON'T MARRY SAM; BREAK IT OFF" - and it would also yell other more personal things at her that made her feel ashamed.

She was terrified of that voice.

Terrified it was God.

Terrified God was asking her to give up the thing she really, really wanted - i.e. to marry me.

And so for months - and really, years, because this voice had started yelling at her long before our engagement - she prayed with only very great difficulty. Fearing what she might find if she listened - and feeling incapable of discerning what was from God and what was not.

Fast forward to today.

Tessa now experiences SO much more freedom in prayer.

She has become a great advocate of prayer among our friends.

She is often the first to suggest we take matters to prayer - and when a group of our friends gathers together to listen to the Holy Spirit, Tessa feels comfortable discerning words and images that God has for people.

So what happened in the past 4 years?

What caused the shift?

Several things.

But here was the most important of them:

Tessa entered a community of people who *have* learned to recognize the voice of God from all the others - and who regularly get together to "listen to God" together. And she watched them. And prayed with them. And got feedback from them. And tried listening to God in *that* context... a context of being surrounded by compassionate and discerning sisters and brothers. And over four years of doing this, her confidence in her own ability to discern God's voice has blossomed.

Or to put it in a way that will offend the tastes of literary connoisseurs, monkey see, monkey do.

This is the most "practical" thing I can say about learning to discern God's voice.

Find a community of believers which regularly practices *listening* to God speak, both individually and as a group.

Watch how members of this community discern God's voice in their own lives... and also when they are with each other.

Watch how they 'test' the things they hear with each other... and in this way they are careful to NOT place words into God's mouth that didn't actually come from God - but at the same time they don't get so bogged down by fear of "misspeaking" on God's behalf that they never try to say or act on what they hear.

And that is key.

You must learn to "go out on a limb" and speak or act according to what you *think* you have heard from God...

... while also maintaining a complete openness to being corrected.

Most of the "mistakes" I have seen Christians make when it comes to hearing God... stem from one of these two things:

Either they feel so afraid of being wrong about what they heard, that they never venture to 'test' what they heard by saying it out loud to other discerning believers...

... or they run SO hard with the assumption that what they heard or felt was from God - *that they stop truly listening*. They close themselves off to other wise and compassionate and faithful voices - and ultimately from God.

And the way forward?

Is humility.

Testing, in the way I have described above.

Abiding in Jesus.

Radical openness to the Truth, wherever it may lead - even if it leads to the conclusion that you have been very very wrong about something for a very long time.

But circling back to the "practical" instruction all this sprang from...

... I have found no surer, or faster way to become comfortable and competent and confident in discerning God's voice, than surrounding yourself in a community of faithful Jesus followers who take time to listen to God, individually and as a group.

I know finding such a community is way easier said than done.

But if you ask God for one,

And persist in that request,

And persist in looking all over the place for such a community...

I feel confident He will eventually lead you to one.

Ok next chapter will be fun.

We're gonna talk about False Prophets.

How you can discern whether public voices... in the media, in the Whitehouse, behind the pulpit, or from a podcast... are trustworthy and from God, or not.

Part V

There are so many voices saying so many things in our culture today - which ones can we trust?

How can we discern between pastors and public speakers and Facebook posters... and know which voices are speaking "from" and "for" and "with" God, and which ones are not?

Hint:

The key is **not** to tally up how many times said voice references scripture.

Throughout history scripture has been quoted to support good AND evil causes.

For example,

Slaveholders during the abolition movement quoted lots and lots of scripture, as a way to prove "from the Bible" that slavery is a good institution ordained by God. In other words, scripture was used to defend the cruel, dehumanizing, and love-less enslavement of Black folk in the 17th-19th centuries. Of course, the abolitionists had their scriptural references too - but that just goes to show my point. Anyone can invoke the authority of scripture. Even Satan did that. When he tempted Jesus in the desert, his main strategy was to just quote a bunch of scripture at Jesus and slyly "misuse" scripture in this way, to try to get Jesus to diverge from the will of God.

Okay, so scripture references aren't the key.

Then what is?

Thankfully,

Jesus offers us a clear answer.

It comes from Matthew 7:15-23:

"Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits." [Matthew 7:15-20]

Ok, so the way to identify a false prophet vs. a true prophet is by looking at their "fruits".

But what exactly does Jesus have in mind here?

What is a person's "fruit"?

He answers this question in the next set of verses:

"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'" [Matthew 7:21-23]

In other words,

Fruit = doing the will of Jesus' Father = putting into practice the teachings of Jesus in your day-to-day life.

But even that is pretty vague, or at least pretty broad, so let's narrow it down more:

This teaching of Jesus about false prophets, falls at the very end of the "Sermon on the Mount."

The most famous of Jesus' speeches.

In this sermon Jesus paints a beautiful picture of life inside the Kingdom.

It is a picture in which all are welcome to enter the Kingdom.

There is a tremendous freedom.

Freedom from worry.

Freedom from anxiety.

Freedom from the bitterness and anger and condemnation that eats away at the souls of most individuals - and nations.

And at the very center of this life, which Jesus portrays so beautifully in His Sermon?

Is Jesus' command to love like God loves:

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the

Gentiles do the same? Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." [Matthew 5:43-48]

This is the central command,

the single defining quality which (over time) begins to characterize all who throw their hearts and lives into following Jesus...

... the central "fruit" from which all the other fruits flow.

In the Sermon (Matthew 5-7) Jesus also talks about:

- Uprooting anger
- Uprooting contempt for others
- Uprooting lust
- Radical commitment to telling the truth
- Refusing to "get back" at others
- Refusing the temptation to "show off" your spirituality
- Laying down our attempts to "look out for ourselves" by storing up lots of money
- Letting go of judgment and condemnation as a way of managing other people's behavior
- Praying faithfully and persistently

... and many other things.

But ALL of this flows from that central command to

Love as GOD loves.

Radically.

Generously.

Truthfully.

Graciously.

Compassionately.

Without regard to "who" the object of love is - or what they have done to you or anyone else.

And THAT is the "fruit" Jesus is talking about.

So now let's take this information and circle back to the question of discerning different voices:

Does the voice you are listening to bear THAT kind of fruit in their day-to-day lives?

Do they love like God loves?

Without regard to who they are speaking to?

Generously, lavishly, compassionately?

Could Paul's description of love in 1 Corinthians 13 rightly be attributed to the person in question?

"_____ is patient, _____ is kind and is not jealous. _____ does not brag and is not arrogant; does not act unbecomingly. He does not seek his own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered; does not rejoice with unrighteousness but rejoices with the truth. He bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. _____ persists in radically loving this way until the very end."

We cannot be legalistic about this... but plugging in the person's name to 1 Corinthians 13 can be a *very* illuminating exercise, in helping you discern where a person falls on the "false prophet / true prophet" spectrum - according to the standard Jesus gives us in Matthew 7.

You will know them by their fruits.

You might also ask to what extent the "fruits of the Spirit" characterize the person in question:

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law." [Galatians 5:22-23]

Or you might ask to what extent the person's life maps onto James' teachings about how to discern whether something comes from "Wisdom from above" or "Earthly Wisdom":

"But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy." [James 3:17]

There are a lot of voices circulating around the internet, and around various media outlets...

... from all sides of the political spectrum...

... whose lives are simply not bearing this kind of fruit.

You can hear it in how they talk about others, especially those they disagree with.

They are not patient.

They are not kind.

They are not gentle.

They are not self-controlled.

They are full of contempt for the "other".

They do not love with the radical kind of "enemy love" which Jesus taught and modeled with his life.

We would do well

To limit our exposure to such voices.

To slowly begin the work of identifying which such voices we have allowed to speak into our lives.

Voices who again may quote scripture. They may quote all kinds of Christian principles and ideals. They may be very "experienced" and "qualified" pastors. They may say some true things. And they may have the best of intentions. But if they are not abundantly bearing the "fruit" of Love, and the "fruit" of the Spirit, in their day-to-day lives?

...

You will know them by their fruits.

...

And as we begin to identify these "unfruitful" voices, who we have allowed to speak into our lives...

... we should find replacements.

We should seek out pastors - writers - friends - public speakers - whose lives bear witness to the shining, abundant, gracious goodness of God.

People who are patient.

Generous.

Slow to speak, quick to listen.

Abundantly kind.

Abundantly gentle.

Abundantly interested in the well-being and joy of those they are speaking with.

People who pulsate with the joyous presence of God.

Yes, these voices are rarer than the other kind.

They don't get much "airtime" in the public sphere... because they are not as entertaining.

But trust me.

If we begin to "weed out" other voices and replace them with these "fruit-bearing" voices...

... amazing things will begin to happen in our lives.

The anxieties and worries which used to run laps in our heads as we lay in bed at night... will begin to fade away.

A wonderful *peace* will begin to fill our entire body, one like we have never known.

Joy will begin to bubble up from our depths, and it will wash away any remaining fears and worries.

In other words,

Your life will begin to bear the same "fruit" that those you are listening to have born.

So pray that God would help you find such gentle, God-soaked, fruit-bearing voices.

And never forget... you can always 'up' the intake of Jesus' voice into your life, by phone-scrolling and channel-flipping less... and reading the gospels more :)

(Yes I'll take any chance I can get to plug immersion in the gospels - it really is a life-changing practice)

Life-giving, from-God voices *are* out there.

But you need to seek them diligently.

And ask God for help.

You will know them by their fruits.

Towards Him,
-Sam Hayashida