

FRIDAY NIGHT SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

HOW TO RECOGNISE GOD'S VOICE

INTRODUCTION

- A.** This is one of the most important theological studies we have yet embarked upon.
- 1.** There is always the temptation, whatever the lesson, to say, 'This is one of the most important, if not the most important.'
 - a.** It is like when I am reading in the Psalms.
 - b.** I tend to think nearly every one I am reading is the most important and best!
 - 2.** But the lesson we are looking at today must not be underestimated.
- B.** Why is this study on hearing God's voice so important?
- 1.** It is ultimately the way we know we are being guided by the Holy Spirit and we are on 'speaking terms' with God.
 - a.** We have had a study on guidance: 'How to know the will of God'.
 - b.** This lesson is a follow-up, if not further clarification, on how to know the will of God.
 - (1)** Recall the acrostic PEACE.
 - (2)** All in this study will cohere with that.
 - 2.** It is a test whether or not we are truly having fellowship with the Father. I John 1:3.
 - a.** The immediate proof we are having fellowship with the Father is that we hear his voice.
 - (1)** It is how to know we are receiving light.
 - (2)** It is how to know we are walking in the light. I John 1:7.
 - b.** One of the most important evidences that we are walking in the light is the fresh discovery of sin. I John 1:8.
 - (1)** When we walk in the light we become more conscious of (a) fellowship with the Father, (b) the cleansing blood and (c) a fresh sense of sin.
 - (2)** Walking in the light results in a discovery of sin we had not been conscious of before.

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- c. That we have been given a fresh sense of sin shows that we are hearing God's voice.
 - (1) We are convicted, and we confess. I John 1:9.
 - (2) A typical reaction is, 'Lord, why didn't you show me that before?'
- 3. Not hearing God's voice is possibly the most ominous (threatening) absence imaginable; we call it a Heb. 6:4-6 situation.
 - a. It means we are becoming deaf. Heb. 5:11.
 - (1) NIV: 'slow to learn'.
 - (2) AV: 'dull of hearing', an accurate translation of the Greek.
 - b. Deafness begins (usually) in stages.
 - (1) At the natural level, people normally become deaf only by degrees.
 - (2) This is true spiritually as well.
 - c. The worst thing imaginable in this area: stone deafness.
 - (1) This is when one does not hear God at all.
 - (2) It is what is meant by not being able to be renewed again unto repentance (Heb. 6:4-6).
- C. We therefore want to learn for sure that:
 - 1. We hear God's voice. Heb. 3:7ff.
 - a. This means recognising his voice.
 - b. This means we know the difference between God's voice and :
 - (1) That of Satan.
 - (2) Our own propensity to think this or that and assume such to be God's voice.
 - 2. We obey God's voice.
 - a. If we don't obey what we hear God will likely discontinue speaking.
 - b. The only way to keep hearing God's voice is to keep doing what he says.
 - 3. We know what we can do to keep an open communication with him.
 - 4. We know what grieves him.

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I GOD SPEAKS TO HIS PEOPLE AND HE WANTS TO BE HEARD

A. This is why he has given us his word - the Bible.

1. Recall: previous lesson on the will of God.

a. Revealed will: the Bible.

b. Secret will: his own opinion on what to do in a particular circumstance.

(1) God's Revealed will is to be sought above his Secret will.

(2) The more we know God's Revealed will the easier it is to know his Secret will.

(3) God's Secret will, will never contradict his revealed will.

2. Hearing God's voice will presuppose two things (almost always in this order):

a. Mastery of God's Revealed will (knowing the Bible).

b. Familiarity with his ways. 'They have not known my ways,' God lamented concerning the children of Israel. Heb. 3:10.

B. There are two areas in which God has spoken and each area is characterised by a corresponding instrument of God's voice.

1. To our forefathers. 'In times past' Heb 1:1 (AV).

a. This refers to people in the Old Testament.

b. The chief way God spoke to them: by prophets.

(1) Canonical prophets (e.g., Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc.).

(2) Prophets who spoke in the Spirit but did not have a book named after them (e.g., Elijah, Elisha).

2. The last days. Heb 1:2.

a. This refers to the present era.

(1) This began with the coming of Jesus Christ.

(2) This era continues to the present time.

b. God speaks today through his Son.

(1) This means the Gospel.

(2) This means the Holy Spirit who honours the Son.

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- C.** The way God speaks today, then, is by the Gospel and that by the Holy Spirit.
1. No-one can receive the Gospel but by the Spirit. John 3:27; 6:44,65.
 2. Once a person has received the Gospel it shows three things:
 - a. He has been convicted of sin. John 16:8.
 - b. He has been pointed to Jesus Christ.
 - c. He has the Holy Spirit. Romans 8:9.
 3. The Holy Spirit in us is our link with the Father.
 - a. He abides with us forever. John 14:16-17.
 - b. He is a person who can be grieved. Eph. 4:30.
 - c. We therefore must be on good terms with the Spirit to hear God's voice. Heb. 3:7-8.
 4. We can have as much of God as we want' (A W Tozer).
 - a. When I first came across those words I had mixed feelings.
 - (1) My first reaction: That is wonderful.
 - (2) My second reaction: It isn't true.
 - b. I have concluded that it *is* true.
 - (1) We tend to overestimate at first how much of God we want.
 - (2) Along the way many of us are loathe to pay the price required (e.g., self-denial) in order to have more of God.
 - c. Question: how much of God do we *really* want?
- D.** The truth is: God wants and longs for fellowship with each of us.
1. This comes only to the degree we hear his voice.
 2. If, when we are talking with someone, we stop listening we put a strain on that fellowship.
 3. The other person will stop talking with us.
 - a. God wants to be heard.

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- b. The question is: do we hear him?

II IN OUR PRE-CONVERSION STATE GOD SPEAKS THROUGH CONSCIENCE

Romans 1:19-20.

- A. All men are born with a conscience. Speaking theologically this is called:
 - 1. General revelation. John 1:9.
 - a. It is sometimes called 'common grace'.
 - b. This is God's goodness to all men, good or bad. Matthew 5:45.
 - 2. Natural revelation. Romans 1:19-20.
 - a. Called 'natural' because one is born with a certain awareness of God.
 - (1) Pascal: 'God-shaped blank in every man'.
 - (2) Augustine: 'Thou hast made us for Thyself; our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee.'
 - b. One does not have to be converted to experience this. Psalm 19:1.
- B. Conscience is the self-conscious sense of right and wrong.
 - 1. All are born with it.
 - 2. The testimony of the conscience is a way of hearing God speak even before conversion.
 - a. It is not sufficient to save.
 - b. But it is sufficient to condemn.
 - (1) It is what vindicates God's justice in punishing men.
 - (2) Those who perish will know they chose evil. John 3:19-21.

III IN CONVERSION THE CONSCIENCE IS SAID TO BE CLEANSED Heb. 9:14.

- A. The cleansed conscience is the result of two things:
 - 1. The Blood of Christ.
 - a. This declares us just before God.
 - b. This enables us to know we are forgiven.

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- 2.** The Holy Spirit.
 - a.** The Holy Spirit applies the Blood of Christ.
 - b.** The Holy Spirit witnesses this reality to us.

- B.** The cleansed conscience, then, means two things:
 - 1.** The carry-over of the same conscience we are born with.
 - a.** We do not lose this conscience.
 - b.** We continue to have this same sense of right and wrong.
 - 2.** The enabling power of the Spirit to explore two things:
 - a.** The deeper understanding of the conscience.
 - (1)** We can get to the bottom of our feelings.
 - (2)** This means total honesty with ourselves, something the unregenerate (unconverted) man is afraid to do.
 - b.** The indwelling Spirit who does two things:
 - (1)** Works through the cleansed conscience.
 - (2)** Reveals the Word and the present voice of God.

- C.** Hearing God's voice therefore means:
 - 1.** Our consciences are cleansed by the Blood of Christ.
 - 2.** We are tuned into God's heart.
 - a.** Two things are required, then, to hear God's voice.
 - (1)** That we have been saved.
 - (2)** That we are walking in the light.
 - b.** This enables us to know what God is up to in the here and now.
 - (1)** We will not only know his Word - the Bible.
 - (2)** We will know his voice via the Holy Spirit.

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IV THOSE WHO MANIFEST THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT ARE SUSCEPTIBLE TO THE DIRECT AND IMMEDIATE GUIDANCE OF THE SPIRIT

- A.** Why? Because the ungrieved Spirit is at work in their hearts and lives already.
- B.** When the Spirit works ungrieved in us:
1. We can hear his voice (positive impulse); there will be liberty to proceed. Acts 8:29.
 2. We can sense his check (negative impulse); you will have no liberty to proceed. Acts 16:6-7.
- C.** God wants to communicate directly with all of us.
1. The Bible was not given to replace direct guidance, which was the common experience of the early church.
 2. The Bible was given to correct abuses.
 - a. Any 'guidance' that is contrary to Scripture is not from heaven. James 3:15-16.
 - b. The Bible will verify or condemn our impulses.
 3. What Philip experienced in Acts chapter 8 can be the experience of all who seek to witness for the glory of God.
 - a. He recognised the Spirit's impulse.
 - b. He followed it; a wonderful conversion followed.

V HOW CAN WE BE SURE IT IS GOD'S VOICE WE ARE HEARING?

- A.** If what we hear coheres with the Bible.
1. Nothing God says in the here and now will contradict the Bible.
 2. Recall earlier study: how to know the will of God.
 3. Recall acrostic PEACE.
- B.** When we are gripped by sound preaching/teaching.
1. God continues to speak through preaching/teaching. I Cor. 1:21.
 - a. This is the way we were converted. Rom. 10:14.
 - b. It is equally what saves those who 'believe' (present tense). I Cor. 1:21.

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2. Note two things:
 - a. That the teaching is sound.
 - (1) This requires that we know our Bible.
 - (2) That is the very reason for our School of Theology.
 - b. That we are 'gripped'.
 - (1) That means stirred within; or warmed. Luke 24:32.
 - (2) It is when our hearts warm to the Word.

- C. When an inner conviction of 'oughtness' seizes us which leaves us with no peace until we obey.
 1. It is when you *know* what you have to do.
 - a. But is this not highly subjective and vulnerable to vain imagination?
 - b. Answer: Not if it is set in the context of what is clearly revealed in the Bible.
E.g.:
 - (1) Personal witnessing.
 - (2) Tithing.
 - (3) Absence of worldliness - that which cools your love for the things of God.
 - (4) Absence of sensuality - that which dominates your thinking with regard to sexual sin.
 - (5) Dignifying the trial.
 - (6) Total forgiveness.
 - (7) Commitment to and involvement with the church.
 2. When that sense of duty is embraced:
 - a. You will feel peace within.
 - b. The presence of God will be real.
 - c. Inner liberty will be felt.
 - d. The person of Jesus will be real.

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- e. Greater confidence in life generally will follow.
- D.** When by following that feeling of 'oughtness' there actually comes a sweet inner peace and ease. Rom. 14:19.
- 1. The fruit of the Spirit is always love, joy and peace. Gal. 5:22; cf. James 3:17.
 - 2. If that sweet peace is absent after following the feeling of 'oughtness' we must be willing to back up and reassess what we did.
 - a. Sometimes 'oughtness' is motivated by pseudo-guilt.
 - (1) Pseudo-guilt is false guilt.
 - (2) Sometimes an 'overly scrupulous' conscience is taking something (or someone) more seriously than what God requires.
 - b. When we are driven by pseudo-guilt there will not be a lasting peace as a result.
 - (1) A temporary relief may result.
 - (2) But eventually an uneasiness sets in.
 - c. It shows we were not being true to ourselves.
 - (1) 'To thine own self be true' (Shakespeare).
 - (2) God will never lead us to do that which is not true to ourselves.
- E.** When lasting peace follows. Col. 3:15.
- 1. Temporary peace may come from giving in to feelings of guilt not put there by God.
 - a. People may make us feel guilty.
 - b. Satan may make us feel guilty. Rev. 12:10.
 - 2. The peace that God gives stands the test of time.
 - a. Going against what God shows us will result in a loss of peace.
 - b. The only way for that peace to return is to do what we know in our heart of hearts God said: 'This do.'
 - c. Sometimes trial and error must be experienced before we are completely and finally sure.
- F.** When, by following all of the above, you are 'renewed again' to repentance.

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1. Repentance: change of mind.
2. The Christian life is one of continual change of mind.
 - a. It is grace upon grace: one blessing after another (John 1:16).
 - b. It is being transformed into his likeness with ever increasing glory (II Cor. 3:18).
3. When God continues to reveal himself to you by fresh conviction of sin and new spiritual insight you are in pretty good shape!

VI HOW DOES GOD SPEAK TO US AFTER WE HAVE DEVELOPED FURTHER SPIRITUAL MATURITY?

A. The Bible.

1. We never outgrow the Bible.
 - a. 'The unfolding of your words gives light' Psa. 119:130.
 - b. 'How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!' Psa. 119:103.
2. Any impression, 'prophetic word', 'word of knowledge' or utterance by any person - even if he or she is a church leader - that diminishes your respect for or need to lean on the Bible is not of God.
 - a. The maturer you are the more you will love the Bible.
 - b. The maturer you are the more you will need the Bible.
3. When you are found walking in the light you will discover how often:
 - a. God quickens a verse to you - making its truth shine like letters of gold.
 - b. This is a sign of the immediate witness of the Spirit.

B. Worship at church.

1. God may break through to your heart through the singing.
 - a. It may come through an old hymn you have sung a thousand times.
 - b. It may come through a contemporary song.
2. It may come through the public reading of scripture.
3. It may come through the public prayers.
4. It may come through the preached Word.

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- C.** A prophetic word or word of knowledge (not necessarily *to* or *from* a spiritually mature person). I Thess. 5:20.
1. God may use someone to speak directly to you.
 2. How can we know such is truly from God? See I Thess. 5:21: 'Test everything. Hold on to the good.'
 - a. If it coheres with Holy Scripture.
 - b. If it rings true.
 - c. If you have every reason to trust the person giving you this word.
 - d. If it gives genuine confidence.
 - e. If it brings peace.
 - f. If it makes you want to be more like Jesus.
- D.** Worship Alone.
1. Through your own quiet time you can develop a genuine, unfeigned (you won't be deceived) sensitivity to the Holy Spirit.
 2. There is more than one way it may emerge:
 - a. A feeling of 'oughtness'.
 - b. A sweet peace.
 - c. A burden for someone.
 - d. A spirit of sublime worship and intense gratitude to God.
 - e. A sense of God's presence so real you hardly want to move or speak.
 - f. An impression to turn to a verse in the Bible.
 - g. (Rarely) a vision or an immediate word.
 - (1) In this case share it with your pastor before acting hastily or talking a lot about it.
 - (2) Never by-pass your leadership or develop a feeling you are more 'spiritual' than most.

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- h.** Note: any sense of spirituality that does not result in humility and meekness must be suspect; you should develop sufficient objectivity about yourself to see this!

VII HOW TO DEVELOP A SHARPER SENSITIVITY TO RECOGNISING GOD'S VOICE

A. Stay grateful. Philippians 4:6; I Thess. 5:16-18.

- 1.** A negative, complaining spirit grieves God.
 - a.** Learn to dignify every trial and adverse circumstance.
 - b.** God allowed this as a test. II Chron. 32:31.
- 2.** There is nothing that God likes more than a heart which is continually grateful and thankful.
 - a.** This keeps the devil at bay.
 - b.** This keeps the unrieved Spirit on speaking terms!

B. Keep a warm heart. Heb. 3:12. Stay teachable.

- 1.** A cold heart will never do, e.g.:
 - a.** A critical, cynical spirit.
 - b.** A heart that hasn't heard from God lately.
 - 2.** Proof of a warm heart:
 - a.** You are approachable; people will not be intimidated by you or walk on eggshells round you.
 - b.** You are open to the direct and immediate ways of God.
- (1)** If you do not believe God speaks like this you have already quenched the Spirit.
- (2)** It is highly unlikely therefore that God will be intimate with you.

C. Learn to recognise and resist the devil.

- 1.** The devil's ways usually appear in this order:
 - a.** Doubt or unbelief.
 - b.** Accusing you.
 - c.** Irritability and a cross spirit.

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- d. Speaking in a way that makes another upset.
 - e. A self-justifying attitude, a desire to blame others.
2. How do we resist the devil?
- a. We `stand'. Eph. 6:11ff.
 - (1) Don't fall - or run.
 - (2) Don't go backwards or even try to make a lot of progress.
 - b. We refuse to speak or give in to the sudden negative impulse.
 - (1) When we speak when we are agitated we probably will be sorry.
 - (2) Learn to do or say nothing in the evil day.
 - c. The devil will eventually give up. James 4:7; I Pet. 5:8.
- D. Remember the elementary lessons regarding grieving the Spirit.
- 1. Refuse to be bitter. Eph. 4:30.
 - 2. Never hold a grudge; totally forgive.
 - 3. Do not say anything that diminishes anyone's credibility.

CONCLUSION

- A. All of the above in this lesson is designed to keep us from grieving the Holy Spirit.
- B. When the Spirit is himself (ungrieved), who knows in what manner or how often he will speak intimately and powerfully to you!