



HEARING THE VOICE OF JESUS

BY PAUL LESSARD

TEXT:

Acts 16:6-10

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A few years back a friend of mine, Mark, told me about driving his family home in the middle of the night. They were heading back to their place in Michigan. Mark loves to drive at night when there are few drivers on the road because he likes to drive fast. He told me that on this particular night all his family were sleeping in the van, and he was driving in the left-hand lane on the interstate, as he tended to pass more than be passed.

Mark had recently been challenged in his faith to learn to listen for the voice of Jesus. Though a follower of Christ for many years, he was skeptical when people told him they had heard the Lord's voice. On this night, as his family was sleeping and he drove through the night, he determined he would give listening a try. Basically, he said to Jesus, "If you've got something to say, well, I'm listening." No sooner had he thought this than he felt impressed upon his mind that he should move into out of the left lane and into the right-hand lane. As quickly as that thought came, Mark expressed doubt—and the impression came back, even stronger: move into the right-hand land. Mark signaled moved into the right-hand lane. He looked up in time to see a vehicle passing them, going the wrong way at high speed in the lane he had just vacated. While Mark did not hear a literal voice, the impression he received was clearly from Jesus.

We are of a people that believe that God does indeed speak to us personally through the Holy Spirit, though maybe not always as clearly as how my friend Mark experienced it. Canadian theologian and author Dr. Gordon Smith, writes in his book *Hearing the Voice of Jesus* that there are two questions every believer must be able to answer: What is Jesus saying to me? And how do I know it is the voice of Jesus? It is a part of our maturing as followers of Christ to more clearly discern the voice of Jesus and know with confidence what he is saying to us.

We find many examples in Scripture of people listening for the voice of God to discern God's will for them. In Acts 16:6-10, we see the Apostle Paul seeking to hear and understand what God is saying to him. The Scripture tells us:

Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

This passage relates a significant turning point in the second missionary journey of the



Apostle Paul, for he clearly believes that the Holy Spirit is directing him not to just visit churches he and fellow missionary Barnabus planted on their first mission trip, but to visit new countries as well. Places in which they are to plant new communities of faith—specifically Mysia and Bithynia and the province of Asia, regions in modern-day Turkey.

Paul is a classic missional leader in many ways: he feels he has a clear sense of where God would have him go, and he feels confident to act upon that vision. And, Paul convinces others to accompany him, in this case Silas, a fellow leader from his sending church in Antioch, and eventually a younger pastor named Timothy whom they pick up along the way. And so, they leave and visit the churches Paul and Barnabus had planted on his first trip. But according to the text, when they come to these new regions where people have not yet heard the good news of Jesus, inexplicably the Holy Spirit blocks Paul and his friends from entering these areas. The text tells us that Paul and friends retreat to the coast, to Troas, uncertain as to their next step.

Remember Gordon Smith's questions every believer needs to answer? What is Jesus saying to me? How do I know it is the voice of Jesus? Paul finds himself frustrated in Troas asking these very same questions, wondering where it was that he went wrong in understanding the call of the Spirit. Had he misheard? Had his own ambition or evangelistic motivations spoken louder than the Holy Spirit as he sought to discern the opportunities of this journey?

Have you had this experience? Where your own ambition or needs seem to speak louder than the Holy Spirit as you sought to discern a path forward? Where the noise of your life and desire for control work against your ability to listen well? It is notable that Scripture tells us that it was actually in this moment of doubt, when Paul is questioning, when arguably he is at one of his lowest moments emotionally, that the Lord does indeed speak clearly to him in a vision as to where they are to go and whom to evangelize next. And the text says they immediately begin to make preparations to leave for Macedonia.

Gordon Smith writes that “the emotional contours of our lives become the soil in which we discern, sift, or determine what is truly from God and what is not.” Smith goes on to say, “Discernment is all about attending to what’s happening to us emotionally in a way that’s informed by the mind, by the breadth and witness of the Scriptures, and by the counsel of other Christians.” These three stops on the path of discernment are important. First, “informed by the mind” is where we use our reason and analytical tools. Second, “breadth and witness of the Scripture” affirms that as an idea or impression comes to us, we can test it against our understanding of God’s word, or we simply recognize its truth because of our familiarity with the Scripture. This is an important step in recognizing God’s voice as we do not simply come to know about God through his word; in a mystery and through the work of the Holy Spirit we encounter Jesus and come to know him better. Third, the counsel of other Christians affirms the communal aspect of discernment where we test what we think we hear with other believers who we trust.

Smith adds a fourth point though when he writes, “But it’s really testing our own hearts to see if this comes from God.” When I asked a friend how she knew what she heard was from Jesus, she said she would sense a lift in her spirit. For some of us it comes as we are reading God’s word. Whether or not we are aware of it, we always bring our whole self to Scripture. Our worries, concerns, and questions, as well as our hopes and joys, are with us as we read. So, we may be reading something written 3,000 years ago, but all of a sudden, the words jump off the page at us and we realize this verse is for us today. And it speaks directly to the situation that has been causing us concern. I call this the “shock of recognition”—where you are reading or hearing something from Scripture and all of sudden you realize it is God’s word for you right now. In other words, it is in paying attention to God’s presence in the everyday events of our lives that the voice of Jesus can often be heard.

There is a sense of immediacy here, where the Spirit



speaks and moves in the moments and spaces of our everyday existence. Author Cynthia Bourgeault, in her book *Mystical Hope*, writes, “The spiritual life can only be lived in the present moment, in the now. When we go rushing ahead into the future or shrinking back into the past, we miss the hand of God, which can only touch us in the now.” There is a truth expressed here where God has plenty to redeem or celebrate about our past, and much to say about our hopes or anxieties around the future, but God through the Holy Spirit is only able to speak to us in the now. If we spend most of our time living in the past or looking to the future, we will miss what Jesus is trying to say. Bourgeault reminds us that our ability to listen for the voice of Jesus is directly tied to our attentiveness in the present moment.

Interestingly, there is a neurological disorder, phonognosia, where people can hear and understand the words someone says, but they fail to recognize the voice, even of someone they have known for many years. This disorder results in an inability to build trust, because they never have the indicators that this person is known to them, reliable and safe. They can’t tell the voice of one they love from that of a stranger.

A number of years ago, Rebecca and I were camping in the Desolation Wilderness in California. It was mid-May, before Memorial Day so the campground was mostly empty. As we drove in, there was only one other family that we could see. It had been rather windy, but as the sun went down, the air stilled and quiet descended upon the campground. All that could be heard was the crack and pop of pine campfires and the low murmur of voices. And, at our campsite anyway, there was the clank of pots as we began to make supper. It was during that time of darkness that exists between twilight and the rise of the moon when across the surface of the evening calm ripped a child’s terrified cry, “Mommy, Mommy, where are you?” The panic was unmistakable in her voice. “Mommy, Mommy!” Her voice was off to the right of my camp. I remember thinking, “She’s probably with the family I saw earlier on the other

side of the campground—which means she’s heading the wrong direction.”

“Mommy, mommy, where are you?” You could hear the growing terror in her voice. And then I heard a woman’s voice calling from somewhere down to my left—her voice was calm, soothing, firm, “I’m here, baby, I’m coming, don’t you worry.” The girl cries out, “Mommy!” in a way that is both scared and hopeful, as she recognizes her mother’s voice and the chance that everything will be okay. And the mom called again, “Turn towards me, honey, and keep walking and I will meet you.” The little girl knew what to do and there was no hesitation in her following the instructions from her mom. I stood up then and could see the bobbing flashlights as they made their way toward each other across the campground.

The gift to the lost girl was not just that her mom was there and heard her cry, but that she in turn recognized the voice of her mom, so she could trust the instructions that she was given, allowing her to find safety. As a result of the Fall, of the brokenness in our world, we can be a people with spiritual phonognosia—the inability to recognize the voice of Jesus as he speaks through the Holy Spirit. The Scripture tells us in John 10:27 that Jesus is the Good Shepherd and that the sheep know the voice of the shepherd and confidently follow him as a result. We become familiar with the voice of Jesus through reading God’s word and meditating on its meaning, from learning to listen in the events of our lives, reflecting on when we think we have heard Jesus in the past and whether or not those intuitions proved true, and checking what we hear with others we trust. Remember, we are of a people who believe that God does indeed speak to us personally through the Holy Spirit. And over time, as we make a practice of listening through reading and in prayer, our ability to discern grows until we are able to recognize the voice of Jesus and know with confidence what the Holy Spirit is saying. So, how is your listening? And, what is Jesus through the Holy Spirit saying to you?