

HOW TO HEAR GOD SPEAK
Learning to Hear God's Voice - Part 1 of 4
Luke 8:4-15
Rick Warren

Luke 8:4-15

"Jesus said.... 'He who has ears to hear, let him hear!'" (vs. 8b)

- * The Farmer - *God*
- * The Seed - *His Word*
- * The Soil - *My Mind*

How To Hear God Speak

I. CULTIVATE _____

"... some seed fell along the path: It was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up."
(vs. 5)

"Those along the path are those who hear, and then the devil comes along and takes away the word from their hearts, so they cannot believe and be saved." vs. 12

The hardened path - _____.

3 Causes

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- *

"Get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent, and humbly accept the Word planted in you, which can save you." James 1:21

II. ALLOCATE _____

"Other seed fell on shallow soil with rock beneath. This seed began to grow but soon withered and died for lack of moisture." vs. 6 (LB)

"Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing, they fall away." (vs. 13)

The shallow soil --

III. ELIMINATE _____

"Other seed fell among thorns which grew up with it and choked the plants." vs. 7

"The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way, they are choked by life's worries, riches, and pleasures, and they don't mature." vs. 14

The soil with weeds -

3 types of weeds

IV. COOPERATE _____

"The seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it and by persevering produce a crop." vs. 15

"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says!" James 1:22

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One of the most basic claims of Christianity is that God speaks to people. All through the Bible you see the phrase, "*And God said...*" Pretty soon you get the idea that God really does speak to people. God wants to have a relationship with you. He wants to have a personal relationship with you. There is no relationship without communication. God has chosen to speak to us.

The problem is communication is often misunderstood. When my wife speaks to me I often, a) don't hear it, and b) misunderstand it. I'm sure I'm the only man that ever felt that way! Men, there are two things you need to understand about women.... and nobody knows what they are! If I have that much difficulty with my wife who I spend my entire life with and love and know and still we don't always communicate clearly, how much should you expect there to be communication problems with God? There are communication problems with God.

Frankly, I am very skeptical of people who always have a clear word from God. A lot of stupid things have been done by people who claim that God has spoken to them. I'm very skeptical when people tell me, "God told me this ..." They always have a clear word. Some people think that pastors always understand exactly what God wants us to do. That's not true. I am often as confused as everybody else about what is God saying, what is God trying to say. Some of you think I have a little red telephone in my library and I pick up the God-phone. God tells me what to say to you and I talk with him that way. God does not send me e-mail. He doesn't send me telegrams. I don't have a fax of God. Sometimes I'm just as much in the dark about hearing God as you are.

On the other hand, there are times in my life when God speaks when I have no doubt at all that God is speaking to me. Just like when my wife calls me on the phone, I don't have to ask who it is -- I know her voice. There are times when God speaks to me when I know exactly who it is, who's putting that idea in my mind. I know where that impression is coming from.

What makes the difference? The difference is attitude.

This morning we're beginning a new series I'm calling, "Learning to Hear God's Voice". Nothing is more important to you than understanding that God wants to talk to you and that you can actually hear Him if you just tune in. Jesus once said in Luke 8:8, "*He who has ears to hear, let him hear!*" Get your ears on! You've got to be tuned in order to hear God speak.

Some cordless phones have different channels on them. If you pick up a cordless phone and it's not real clear, you have a lot of static and noise, you keep changing the channel until you get to the right one and then all of a sudden it's crystal clear. Many times, God has spoken to you, but it hasn't come through crystal clear because you're not on the right channel. Right now the room is filled with radio waves, but you don't hear them because you're not tuned in. They're even going through your body. There are television waves going through the air right now. You don't even see them. If you had a receiver and you tuned it in right, you'd get the picture. Right now, God is speaking to many of you. You don't see it, but He really is. But your reception is a little fuzzy.

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Jesus told the story in Luke 8, a parable, in which He says, Let me explain to you that it's all about mental attitude. There are four kinds of attitudes that will depend whether you get the message clearly from God or whether you don't. This is so important. Obviously, if you can tune into God He can direct you, He can save you a lot of time from making wrong mistakes, He can comfort you when you need comfort, He can guide you, and so on.

So He says, Let me tell you a story. There was a farmer who goes out to sow seed and as he went out to sow seed, his seed scattered all over in different types of soil. Back in the Middle East in the old days they didn't plant one seed per spot and cover it up with dirt. They did what was called broadcasting. A farmer would have a pouch on his side filled with seed and, as he'd walk through the field which he had already tilled, he would toss it out, scattering it. That's where we get the term broadcasting from. Obviously some of the seed falls on good soil and some of it doesn't. He says these four soils represent four mental attitudes. They're not four kinds of people, but actually all of us have been all four of these types. We vary from them from time to time. Sometimes we're very open to God to what He wants to say to us. Sometimes we're very closed.

How do I hear God speak to me?

1. I MUST CULTIVATE AN OPEN MIND.

I've got to want to hear from God, be eager, be receptive. I've got to be ready and willing to hear God. Some of you today are not believers. You're seekers. You're checking out Christ. We welcome you here. We're glad you're here. Others of you are new believers. Others have been believers for many years. But if I were to ask you, Have you ever heard God speak to you? there are many of you who would say, "I can't think of a time in my life where I ever actually heard God speak to me." I'm not talking about an audible voice, but an impression in your mind that you knew that is from God.

Why is that? One of the possible reasons is that you've never been open to the possibility of it. Maybe you didn't even know it was possible that God does want to speak to you directly. You've thought maybe God doesn't speak to you and maybe you don't even believe in that. When you've got a closed mind, obviously, God is not going to get through.

This is the first type of soil. v. 5 *"Some seed fell on the path and it was trampled on and the birds of the air came and ate it up....[v. 12] Those along the path are like people who hear and then the devil comes along and takes away the word from their hearts so they cannot believe and be saved."*

On every farm, in every field there's a footpath that the farmer would walk down. As he went he would sow the seed out onto the land that was tilled. There are two characteristics of a footpath. One, they're hardened because of the constant traffic of people walking. The soil is compacted and it's not fertile and tilled like the field. It's hard. The other thing about a path is it's narrow.

Do you know anybody like that? They're closed minded, narrow minded, hard hearted. They're not even open to the possibility that God might speak to them. As a result, Jesus says the farmer

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sows seed but it can't penetrate because it's hard and compacted. It can't take root, it can't sprout, it just lays on the surface of the ground and the birds come along and eat it. It never even gets a chance.

This is true with us many of the times. God wants to speak to us, but He doesn't even get a chance because our minds are closed, our hearts are hardened, we've made up our mind, we're unwilling to listen, we've already decided what we're going to do so we don't want to hear from God. We've already decided what we're going to do in the situation.

What causes us to have a closed mind?

1. Pride. Pride causes us to have a closed mind. When I think, "I don't need God. I don't need to hear from God. I can make this business decision on my own. I don't need God. I know what to say to my children.... I don't need God. I know how to handle this date.... I don't need God. I can ace this test without praying." Anytime you fail to pray about something, you're basically saying, "I don't need God in this. I can handle it on my own. I can resolve it. I can solve it. I can handle this mess. I can correct this error. I can resolve this conflict. I don't need God." That's called pride. When I'm full of pride, I close my mind to God and He can't get in and say anything to me because I think I've got it all figured out. So I don't pray.

2. Fear. Sometimes we're just afraid of what God might say to us. What if I pray or open my mind to God and God tells me to do something I don't want to do? He might tell me something hard. He might tell me to do something unpopular. He might tell me to do something I think I can't do or I don't want to do. So I'm afraid. If I let God speak to me, I might become a religious fanatic. I'll become like one of those nuts on TV and have to wear a bouffant hairdo! Or wear a shiny leisure suit. And say all kinds of weird stuff. Maybe God will make me some kind of loony religious nut. So I'm afraid. I'm afraid I'll lose my freedom. I'm afraid I'll lose my fun. I'm afraid I'll lose my fulfillment in life. No thanks, God. So I close my mind. Some people close their mind to God simply out of fear.

3. Bitterness. Whenever we've been hurt and we hold on to those hurtful memories, it causes us to close our minds to God. We start saying things like "God, why did You allow this? Why is this happening to me? If You're such a great loving and powerful God, why did this happen?" You're going to be hurt in life. You will have pain in life. This is not heaven, this is earth. God has given us a free choice and so people are free to do wrong things and the result is innocent people suffer. Not everything that happens in this world is God's will. He's given us the freedom to choose. So people get hurt. You're going to be hurt in life. What you do with that hurt will determine whether you become a better person or a bitter person. A bitter life is a wasted life. When we become bitter and when we hold on to our hurts, it only prolongs the pain. What we tend to do is ... "They hurt me so I'm going to close myself off, build up walls, hide in my shell, and I'm not going to let anybody get close to me. Not even God, because God let it happen." We start blaming God for things other people did to us. As a result, we close our mind. People who have been deeply hurt often have a hard time opening up their minds and their hearts to God. They've held in so much and they hurt.

Obviously in a crowd this size, some of you have been deeply hurt in the past. Some of you maybe have lost a loved one, maybe recently, maybe a child, a young child. You still feel that pain. Some of you were abused as children or you were molested. You may have even been

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raped. Some of you were verbally abused, physically abused, emotionally abused. Some of you have known the betrayal of a spouse who was unfaithful to you and that still hurts. Some of you have even been hurt by other people who claim to be Christians. Or you were in a church situation and supposedly Christian people didn't act very Christian, very Christlike. They hurt you and you got burned in a church experience. The tendency is to say, If that's what Christianity is all about, no thanks, God! We blame God for what other people have done to us.

If you have been deeply hurt, let me say two things to you: One, I'm sorry you hurt. I really mean that. I'm sorry you hurt. God hurts with you. He weeps with you. He understands the pain you've gone through. At a funeral one time, a woman said, "Where was God when my son died?" I thought, "The same place He was when His son died. On the cross." God has not promised to exempt us from pain. I'm sorry you hurt. God hurts with you.

Two, I want to say to you, when you are in pain and when you are hurt, don't run from God. Run to God. He's the one who can help. He's the one who can comfort. He's the one who can care. He's the one who can make a difference. He's the one who can bring healing to your emotions and your body and your past. Nobody else can do that. When you run from God out of pain, you're running from the only person who can heal it. Don't do it. Don't turn from Him. Turn to Him in your moment of crisis. Turn to Him with your hurt instead of holding it in. Give it to Him. Never allow any other human being or experience to block your relationship to God. That's dumb. Even if they claim to be a Christian and you've been hurt by that. You can be hurt by them. Give that hurt to God. You don't turn off to God because somebody else did something to you. Give it to God. Don't close your heart and don't close your mind. The tragedy of that hard beaten path is that it is barren. Nothing can grow there. It's unfruitful. A bitter life is a wasted life. It only prolongs the pain. Jesus says the birds come along and eat the seed. That kind of life is for the birds!

Instead, look at James 1:21 *"Get rid of all the moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept [circle "accept"] the word planted in you which can save you."* Let God love you, drop your defenses and open up your mind.

The first step in hearing God speak is I must cultivate an open mind.

2. I MUST ALLOCATE TIME TO LISTEN

I've got to make time to hear Him. I've got to slow down, be quiet, plan it in my schedule. We schedule everything else in life -- vacations, dentist appointments, dates, homework, everything else. Do you schedule time for God in your schedule? Or does God just get the leftovers. The second reason a lot of people never hear God speak is we're in too much in a hurry. Americans are always in a hurry. We're in such a rat race society that we're always in a hurry. *American Demographics* said juice in jars is now outselling frozen concentrated juice because it takes too long to thaw and Americans don't want to put up with thawing anything. Even overnight Federal Express mail isn't fast enough any more. The cyber space, computer hackers call that snail mail because it goes so slow. You can set down at a key board and type it out and it goes in a nano second to wherever you want it to go. We're always in a hurry. This is nothing new. De Toqueville, a french philosopher said 150 years ago, Americans are always in a hurry.

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When we live in a hurried lifestyle, God gets shortchanged, shuffled to the back of the deck. He gets the leftovers of our time. We want to hear God speak, yes, but what we say is, "God, I'm in a hurry, so do it quick! I only have a minute!" As I'm running out the door to my next project or assignment or job I'm saying "OK God, speak to me, but do it right now!" As a result, we miss what God wants to say to us.

v. 6 "Other seed fell on shallow soil with rock beneath. This seed began to grow but soon withered and died for lack of moisture." v. 13 "Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe it for a while, but in the time of testing, they fall away."

Just as the hardened path represents the closed mind, the shallow soil represents a superficial mind. It's shallow. When He talks about rocky soil here He's not talking about soil with a bunch of rocks in it. In much of the middle east and particularly in Israel, much of Israel is built on a bedrock of limestone with about 3-4 inches of topsoil on top of it. That means plants can grow down 2-3 inches but that's about it. So when summer comes and the heat is on, the plants wither. They die because they don't have any roots because there's a bedrock underneath that does not allow them to develop deep roots.

He's saying this represents the superficial type of hearer who hears the word of God. It sprouts up and they're all excited about it but it doesn't last. When the heat is on and when the problems come they will wither and fall away. Likewise we do this. Sometimes we hear God and we get all excited about it and we're superficially moved and we react emotionally and we're moved impulsively. But we never give it the time to sink in to our bodies, to sink in to our minds. I can't tell you how many people have told me, "I was so moved by that message! I was really touched. I was moved to tears!" But a month later there is still no perceivable life change or behavioral difference in their life. They're still living the same way. They got excited about the message but they didn't do anything about it. As a result they are just shallow, superficial. They have no roots. When the heat is on, they're not going to last.

Why is it that we don't have change? The United States Air Force did a study and found that we forget 90-95% of everything we hear within 72 hours. If you want a statistic that will depress a pastor, that's it! We labor to produce these magnificent masterpieces of sermons, realizing that by Wednesday, you've already forgotten everything we've said on Sunday except maybe 5%. I don't remember what I preached on last week! That is why we have the sermon outlines. Write it down and later on review it. The shortest pencil is longer than the longest memory. If you don't write it down, you're going to forget it all. If you forget it, you can't work on it.

This is a problem that all of us have, even pastors. I went to a conference and heard a message. God spoke to me, "You need to work on this area of your life." I thought, "You are right. I really need to work on this area in my life." I was motivated and charged up. But somehow those notes I had taken got misplaced and I found them this week in another pile. When I pulled them out, I realized that in the two months I had done nothing. I had already forgotten what I was so excited and motivated about recently.

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I asked an earlier service, "How many of you would say I accept and believe in the Ten Commandments?" Everybody raised their hands. Then I asked, "Which of you would like to come up on stage and quote them?" My guess is most of you could not even name all ten. How can you say you base your life on the Ten Commandments if you can't even name all ten? Unless you are retaining and reviewing what God says to you, you're just kidding yourselves. How is it that people can come to church year after year and never really be changed? Because it goes in one ear and out the other.

The verse says the second kind of person -- v. 13 -- *"They received the word with joy [circle that] but when they hear it they don't have any root."* In other words, they don't retain it. He's saying you can be thrilled without being transformed. You need to write it down in a journal, or a binder of sermon notes, when you're in a Bible study, you take notes. Then you regularly review those things so you don't have to learn the same lesson over and over.

Some of you say, "I've been a Christian for 27 years..." No, you've been a believer for 27 years but you haven't had 27 years of experience. You've had one year of experience, 27 times. You have to keep relearning because you're not retaining it. You've got to take time to let it sink in. You need to schedule time every day where you set down with your Bible and read, think about your life, maybe review some of the lessons you've learned, write things down and keep growing by reviewing.

Having pastored in this church for sixteen years I've seen many people who have started off great. When they first became believers they were excited and enthusiastic and full of joy. Today you can't find them anywhere. They had enthusiasm but that is not enough to make it in the Christian life. It takes commitment. It takes the commitment to say, "I'm going to set down and regularly review what I'm being taught." Why should God teach me new things if I haven't put into practice what He taught me last week? or yesterday? or last night? Why do people have no roots? Because they don't take the time. How do you get roots? Allocate time to listen. Say, God, I'm going to spend 10 minutes, 15 minutes, 20 minutes every day. It's not the amount of time. Just get started so that everyday you get alone with God and say, "OK God, what's next? What's the next step in my career? What's the next step in my marriage? What's the next step in my family? ..." God can't talk to you unless you slow down.

Cultivate an open mind and allocate time to listen.

3. I MUST ELIMINATE THE DISTRACTIONS

A lot of times we miss hearing God because our minds are crowded with other thoughts. Our minds are filled with concerns of daily living, worries, plans, goals, ambitions, bills, all these different kinds of things. When our mind is full and always thinking and never give God a chance in silence to talk to us, He can't get through.

Many of you did what I did this last Mother's Day. You pick up the phone and dial your mom to say "Happy Mother's Day" and as you were doing it you get the same little message, "Sorry, but all the circuits are busy." Everybody else in America was calling their mother.

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Many times God has wanted to talk to you and He's got a busy signal. Many times God has wanted to talk to you in your life but the line was off the hook and you don't want to do Call Waiting with God. You've got to make time. When you're too busy -- and there are many things that are good but they can distract you -- you're too busy to listen to God.

v. 7 He says, *"Other seed fell among the thorns [weeds] which grew up with it and choked the plants. v. 14 This seed that fell among the thorns stands or represents those who hear the word but as they go on their way they're choked by life's worries, riches, and pleasures."*

The soil with weeds, this third kind of soil that the farmer is throwing seed on, it represents a preoccupied mind. We're distracted. The seed sprouts and grows but it's choked by the weeds before it can bear fruit.

Why is it that so many people live unproductive lives? I talk to people in their 30's, 40's, 50's and even 60's who say, "I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing with my life." That tells me one thing: You're not spending much time with God. God had no intention for you blowing and wasting your life. If you'd spend as much time with God talking about your life as you do worrying about it, you'd have a whole lot less to worry about. God is not playing games with you. He has a plan and purpose for every life. But you're not going to get it watching soap operas or listening to the radio. You've got to get time with God. We get distracted and we allow everything and anything to push God out of our lives. I used to have a sign in my office that said, "Beware of the barrenness of a busy life." Don't ever confuse activity with productivity. There are a lot of you who are on the go all the time. But you're going in circles is what you're doing. There's no focus to your life. There's no rhyme or reason or general purpose. You haven't discovered why God put you here. Why? Because you're not talking to Him and you're not letting him talk to you. You've got to eliminate the distractions.

Jesus says that distractions are kind of like weeds. He gives us three examples. First, worries can distract you from hearing God speak. You can't pray and worry at the same time. Worries are the problems and the pressures of daily life. The Greek word is the word that means to be pulled in different directions. Have you ever felt that? Pulled in different directions. That's the Bible definition of worry. When you're worrying you can't hear what God wants to say to you. You're preoccupied, distracted.

Riches can be a weed in your life. We can be so busy making money we don't have time for God. So busy making a living, we don't really live. We don't really enjoy life. We just get up in the morning and go to work. We work hard to pay the bills and catch up and get even and keep up with the Jones' and we flop into bed at night, get up the next morning and do the same thing. God gets crowded out. God gets the leftovers in your life. In the desire to make money you can forget God.

Another weed can be pleasures. There's nothing wrong with pleasures. Who do you think gave you the ability to enjoy pleasure? God did. God thought up the fun in the world. God gave you the senses and the abilities and the tactile senses you have in order to enjoy pleasure. God wants you to enjoy pleasure. But He's saying you can be so busy having fun that you forget God. When recreation replaces worship -- "It's summertime! I don't think I'll go to church this week end.. . I'll cut that Bible study.... We're on vacation so I won't have a quiet time." Who are you

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having a vacation from? God? You can be so busy having fun (and God wants you to have fun) but when it becomes number one in your life, guess who's getting crowded out?

There are a lot of different kinds of weeds. You can make your own list of the things that tend to crowd out God. It could be a relationship, a responsibility, anything. A weed is anything that distracts me from making time to be with God. To set down, be quiet and pray and say, "God, is there anything You want to say to me today?" Some days He will and some days He won't. But you've got to have the line ready, so He can talk to you.

A very theological question: How much effort does it take to grow weeds? No effort at all. My backyard where I'm growing stuff, I'm starting a weed farm and seeing how many known weeds I can grow. The difference between a plant and a weed -- a flower is something you cultivate, you fertilize, you trim, you water it and it doesn't grow. A weed you do nothing to and it explodes. That's the difference. You don't have to water weeds. They grow! Weeds are a sign of neglect. When I start neglecting time with God on a daily basis, when I start neglecting a small group, when I start neglecting getting together with other Christians in worship, going to a Bible study -- any of those things -- the weeds are going to grow up in my life and the Bible said they're going to choke the spiritual life out of me. I'm going to lose my joy, my peace, my purpose, my sense of calmness, my ability to handle stress, etc. The weeds will choke the life out of you. And they all come just by neglecting spending time with God.

4. I MUST COOPERATE WITH WHAT HE SAYS

God talks to people who decide in advance that they are going to do whatever He tells them to do when He tells them. Most of us want God to talk to us and then we'll decide if we're going to do it or not and God says, "No, no. We don't play that game." God talks to people who are going to do what He tells them to do once He tells them.

I know of a church who had a choir special "Yes, Lord, Yes!" That was basically the whole song. When they finished it, the choir director turned around and said, "OK, God, You've already heard our attitude. Now tell us what to do."

That's what God wants you to do. If you want God to speak to you, you need to say, "OK God, I'm going to do what You tell me to do whether I understand it or not, whether it makes sense or not, whether I'd think I'd like to do it or not, because I know it's the right thing and I know You know what would make me happy more than I do." It's a matter of trust.

The fourth soil represents a willing heart. Willing to do whatever God tells you to do, before He even tells you. v. 15 *"The seed on the good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart who hear the word of God and retain it and by persevering produce a good crop."* Circle "retain". They not only hear God's word but they retain it. They write it down, they listen to it, they think about it and go over it. The result is a productive life.

Would you like to make your life count? Would like to have a productive, fulfilling, satisfying life? Then do what James 1:22 tells us, *"Don't merely listen to the Word and so deceive yourself. You kid yourself if you think you're growing just by going to church. Do what it says."*

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Wendy's testimony on how she's learning to hear God's voice:

I'd like to share with you on how I'm learning to hear God speak to me. We must have the right attitude in order to hear God. We have to cultivate an open mind in order to hear God's voice. This took a long time for me to develop because of some major hurts in my past.

My childhood was peppered with molestation. I grew up thinking the only value I had to give to anyone was sexual. As I became a young adult my lifestyle reflected that belief. This created a deep sense of guilt and feelings of worthlessness in me. Even after I dedicated my life to Christ in 1978, I still struggled with those feelings of worthlessness and guilt. I knew the Bible said I was forgiven for my past sins but I felt like God must be disgusted with me. Every time I would pray I felt like God was saying, "Who are you to talk to Me?" Of course if you think God feels that way about you, it doesn't motivate you to spend much time with Him or listen to Him. I thought I had to be perfect if God was going to love and accept me so I threw myself into every Christian service and ministry possible. I visited the elderly, I taught Sunday School, I sang in the choir, I dragged my husband off to Wednesday night Bible studies and I went to church twice every Sunday. But I still felt worthless.

Slowly God began to soften my heart with His love and open up my closed mind. I discovered that He loved me completely and unconditionally. His purpose for asking me to meet with Him on a daily basis and to do good works was not so that He would love me, but because He already did love me. He wanted me to live in response to His grace and not in pursuit of it. This truth made me want to hear God speak to me.

Next I had to learn to make time for God in my schedule. Since I'm not a naturally self disciplined person, I've tried all sorts of ways to help me develop a consistent habit of listening and talking with God. I've participated regularly in various Bible studies and small groups. I've been involved in Life Perspectives and Word Bible study programs here in our church. As an active mother I haven't always had time for these Bible studies but I'd make time for them. I've learned that when I make time for God's word He helps me with the other areas in my schedule. I can keep my eyes on Him and listen to Him and the stress and problems and worries of life, the distractions, are not so overwhelming. On the other hand, if I look only at my circumstances that's all I see. Some of my attempts to make time to listen to God in my schedule are rather clever I think. For instance, recently I've begun setting the alarm in my bathroom, so I have to get up and go in there to turn it off. Once I'm up I go ahead and do my quiet time. I don't want anything to rob me of the thing that has become most important in my life and my desire is to do whatever it takes to make time to listen to God.

But having an open mind and making time for God is not enough. I've found if I want God to speak to me I must be willing to cooperate with whatever He tells me to do. That isn't always easy. For instance, when I married Tony it created a real problem between me and his little girl. To put it bluntly, I felt like my step daughter hated me. She was hurting, and of course her anger hurt me a lot. I prayed and prayed that God would change her attitude. But nothing happened for years. I began to get a little frustrated with God for not changing

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God then one day God said to me, "Wendy, she's not the one with the problem. You need to go ask her for forgiveness." This was not what I wanted to hear from God. It's my nature, and probably yours too, that I only liked to cooperate with God when He asks me to do what I already wanted to do. I wanted Him to tell me what I liked to hear, but I found that God always tells me the truth whether I like it or not. Finally, I admitted that God was right and I was wrong. I told God that I knew the right thing to do, but He was going to have to give me the desire and the power to do it. The amazing thing is that whenever I let go of my pride and asked God to change my heart, He does. My heart changed. And when I cooperated with God, even though it was difficult, the hurts between us were healed. My stepdaughter is 28 now, she has three children. I'm a Grandma and our relationship is wonderful.

Through the years as I've grown in my relationship to Christ, God's word has become the most valuable treasure that I have. I could put my confidence in God's word without fear of disappointment because it never changes. When I'm hurting or when someone else is in pain it gives me comfort. When I've made a mistake it gives me correction. When I'm not sure which way to go, listening to God's word gives me guidance. I find that I use God's word every day of my life. Recently, I've been impressed with the importance of memorizing God's word so He can bring it to my mind whenever I need it. If the only time that God can speak to me is when I'm reading the Bible, I'm going to miss out on a lot of help. When I have a verse memorized, God can bring it to my mind the exact moment that I need it. I decided though that there has to be a better way to memorize Scripture besides repeating it 4000 times. I thought it would be more fun and interesting to memorize God's word with other people. At first as I began praying about this, I thought it would just be a few women from my Thursday morning small group and we would meet at my house once a week. Then it expanded and a few more women and I thought we might be able to get together at the park. Now we're planning to meet here at the church campus for six weeks this summer. I like things to be fun. I've found several resources such as music, visual aids, memorization techniques rather than repetition, repetition... Not only will we memorize scripture but we'll learn how to memorize. so if you're one of those people who wants to memorize God's word but you think your brain is scrambled, you qualify as memory impaired and this is the class for you -- Scripture memorization for the memory impaired.

If I was able to hook up a machine to your brain right now and show the contents on one of these visual screens, some of you would be embarrassed. Some might have a blank screen. What kind of spiritual brain scan would show up? Would you have a closed mind? Would you have a superficial mind that gets excited about the service and then walk out and forget it all? Would you have a distracted mind that wants to do the right thing but you're just too busy right now? Or would you have a willing mind?

Here's the question I want to close with: What are you going to do as a result of today's message? The Bible says *"be doers of the word, not hearers only."* Do something. The moment you walk out the door, there's a little bird that's going to try to steal the seed of what we talked about today -- the devil. He's going to get you distracted, get you to think about where you're going for lunch, about the jerk who pulled in front of you in the parking lot, or any number of other distractions.

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If you want to make this count, otherwise this morning was a waste, I want to give you a homework project. Do one thing as a result of today's message. It may be join a Bible study, start memorizing a Bible verse a week, start having a quiet time every day -- 5, 10, 15 minutes. Do something! Don't waste it.

Prayer:

Lord, You've told us what to do. You've said that You want to speak to us. Help us to have open minds, not closed minds. Help us to not be shallow minded but to really review and think about and study and to go over the things we've learned and you've taught us through many different ways. When you speak to us help us to care enough to write it down, otherwise we'll forget it. Forgive us for having to learn the same lesson over and over. Help us not to be distracted by good but secondary things that would keep us from spending time in your Word and spending time listening to You and talking to You in prayer. Help us to have an open and willing heart to do what You want us to do. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

HOW GOD TALKS TO YOU
Learning to Hear God's Voice - Part 2 of 4
Job 33:14
Rick Warren

"God does speak -- sometimes one way and sometimes another -- even though people may not understand it." Job 33:14 (NCV)

HOW DOES GOD TALK TO US?

1. GOD SPEAKS THROUGH _____

"The whole Bible was given to us by inspiration from God and is useful to teach us what is true and make us realize what is wrong in our lives. . . It is God's way of making us well prepared at every point. . ." 2 Tim. 3:16 (LB)

2. GOD SPEAKS THROUGH _____

"When we preached to you, you didn't think of the words as being just our own, but you accepted it as the very Word of God -- which, of course, it was -- and it changed your lives. . ." 1 Thess. 2:13 (LB)

"We do not speak in words taught by human wisdom, but in words taught by the Spirit, as we explain spiritual truths. . ." 1 Cor. 2:13 (GN)

3. GOD SPEAKS THROUGH _____

"The Holy Spirit. . . will be your teacher and will bring to your mind all I have said to you." John 14:26 (Ph)

"God speaks again and again, in dreams and visions at night when deep sleep falls. . . as people lie on their beds. He opens their ears in times like that, and gives them wisdom and instruction." Job 33:14 (GN)

Warning: Always _____ impressions!

4. GOD SPEAKS THROUGH _____

"Sometimes it takes a painful experience to make us change our ways." Pr. 20:30 (GN)

"I used to wander off until you punished me; now I closely follow all you say. . . The punishment you gave me was the best thing that could have happened to me, for it taught me to pay attention to your laws." Ps. 119:67, 71-72 (LB)

Why Is It Important To Hear God's Voice?

1. IT ASSURES ME THAT I'M IN GOD'S FAMILY

"Jesus said. . . I know those who are mine and they hear my voice." John 10:14, 16 (Ph)

2. IT PROTECTS ME FROM MISTAKES

"God speaks. . . causing them to change their minds, and keeping them from pride. . . and from falling into some trap." Job 33:17-18 (LB)

3. IT IS THE SECRET OF A PRODUCTIVE LIFE

"The person who shares my life and whose life I share will be fruitful." John 15:5

*"Today, if you hear God's voice speaking to you, do not harden your heart against him."
Heb 3:15*

HOW GOD TALKS TO YOU
Learning to Hear God's Voice - Part 2 of 4
Job 33:14
Rick Warren

Today, we're going to continue in the series on Learning to Hear God's Voice. We're going to look specifically at how God talks to you. When we talk about people listening to God and God talking to people, many people think this is something very mystical, like it's something unusual or extraordinary that God talks to people. But the fact is, He does it all the time. A number of years ago there was a *Time* magazine that came out with a headline that said, "God is dead". The next day the reporters lined up at Billy Graham's home and said, "Is God dead, Dr. Graham?" He said "Are you kidding? I just talked to Him." Any of us can talk to God and God wants to talk to you. The Bible says that God wired you up in order to talk to you, that He created you with the ability to tune into Him, to hear Him, to listen to Him, and to talk back to Him. It's nothing unusual. All of us can do it.

Job 33:14 *"God does speak, sometimes one way and sometimes another, even though people may not understand it."* He's saying the problem is not that God isn't talking. The problem is our perception. Sometimes we're just not tuned in. God wants to communicate with you because you can't have a relationship without communication. God wants to have a relationship with you. He wants to talk to you. He's created you with that capacity to hear His voice.

HOW DOES GOD TALK TO US?

God is not limited to any single way. There are many, many ways. That's why this series is talking about the many different ways that God talks to us. The Bible has some really spectacular ways. I would have been shocked by some of them. God spoke once through a burning bush. God spoke one time through a cloud. He often spoke through angels. One time He spoke through a pillar of fire. Another He even spoke to Balaam through a donkey.

Today we're going to identify the four most common ways that God speaks to us. Honestly, more effective than me explaining it to you is for you to hear a story that illustrates all four of these. But first let me identify the ways.

1. GOD SPEAKS THROUGH THE BIBLE. This is the number one way God speaks.

2 Timothy 3:16 *"The whole Bible was given to us by inspiration from God and is useful to teach us what is true and make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It is God's way of making us well prepared at every point."* Notice it says God's way of talking to us first is through His Bible. The Bible is not just a good collection of wonderful thoughts and ideas of men, just a nice inspired collection. Circle *"by inspiration"*. The word literally means in Greek, "God breathed." That means that the Bible is absolutely reliable. There is no other book in the world that is reliable like this book. It can be counted on. It will guide you. It will correct you. It will comfort you. It will help you. But if you don't ever get in it, how can God talk to you? This is why it's so important to have a daily quiet time where you set down for 5, 10, 15, 20 minutes -- it doesn't matter the amount of time -- and you talk to God in prayer and you let God talk to you

HOW GOD TALKS TO YOU

Learning To Hear God's Voice - Part 2 of 4

through His word. If you're not doing that on a daily basis, you're missing the number one way God wants to talk to you.

Someone says, "God never talks to me." Are you in the Bible every day? This is how He wants to speak to you. If you're not reading the Bible, your phone is off the hook. He's getting the busy signal and He can't get through to you.

If I told you that tomorrow the President of the United States wanted to meet with you at 4 a.m. in the courthouse in Santa Ana, I don't care what you think of the President, you'd get up and you'd go. When somebody that important wants to meet with you, you go. Even more important, God wants to meet with you tomorrow and you don't even have to go to Santa Ana. You can do it in your own back yard, sitting at your coffee table with a cup of coffee, in a big Lazy-Z-Boy chair with your P.J.s on. He is waiting. The creator of the universe wants to have a conversation with you all the time, on a regular basis. You need to get into God's word because this is the number one way that God speaks to us. If the only time you're in it is every other week or so, you're going to miss a whole lot.

I admit that the Bible can be an intimidating book. In the first place, how many other books do you know that are bound in leather? I've met some non believers that don't even want to touch it! How many other books that you know has a number before each sentence? That's kind of strange. And if you use an old translation you have the thee's and thou's and lots of words you don't understand and some strange names and strange places and foreign words and customs that don't make sense. The Bible can be intimidating. But this book is the manual for life. It's the owner's manual.

A couple months ago I bought a new car. When I did, they gave me in the glove compartment, an owner's manual. That is the designer's original intent for the car. If I read that owners's manual and follow what it says, my car is going to last a whole lot longer. It teaches me how to keep from putting my car under stress.

That's what the Bible does. Why many of you are under stress is because you don't know what's in here and you're not following what it says to do. So you're stressed out. This is the owner's manual for life. When in doubt, consult the manual. God speaks through His word.

How do I get started in this book? Do I start at Genesis and just start reading through it? I wouldn't suggest that. Not if you're just getting started in the Bible. In the first place, you need to get a new translation. There are many of them. The Bible was originally written in Greek and Hebrew. I'd suggest you get the New International Version or The Living Bible. There are a number of good ones. Then you might want to get a study Bible that will give you some guides and aids. My favorite is the Life Application Bible. It helps explain some of those customs and things you don't understand.

Then you need to set a regular time in the word. Then get involved in how to study the Bible. I wrote a book a number of years ago, Dynamic Bible Study. It was twelve ways to study the Bible. The book is now in seven languages. It will give you step by step how to get into the Bible. There are a lot of tools you can get and use to get yourself going.

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I would start in the New Testament. If you've never read the Bible at all, I would start with the book of James. James will give you some practical stuff just to get you going in the Christian life. You need to get into God's word because that's the number one way He speaks to us.

2. GOD SPEAKS TO US THROUGH GIFTED TEACHERS.

Have you ever sat in a church service and felt like God was speaking directly to you, that nobody else in the audience mattered, that God was speaking directly to your heart? He was. At that very moment God was speaking through a gifted teacher to tell you what He wants to say to you. God often uses other people to share His word with us.

I Thessalonians 2:13 *"When we preached to you, you didn't think of the words as being just our own, but you accepted it as the very Word of God -- which, of course, it was -- and it changed your lives."*

God speaks through teachers, preachers, pastors. And it changes our lives when we listen to them. Many years ago when I was a teenager I remember one church service I was sitting on the back row of a very small church next to my girlfriend and I was not interested at all in what the preacher was saying. I was very interested in who was sitting next to me. I don't remember a single thing that the pastor said in that service until he got to the end. At the very end of the message he said something like this, "What are you going to do with your life? Are you going to make it count or are you just going to waste it? You'll never be happy until you do with your life what God made you to do. And until you be with your life what God made you to be." Bam! That was right on the forehead to me! It got my attention and it was a turning point in my life. That one simple message. God spoke to me through a gifted teacher. If you had told me 25 years ago that I would be pastoring in a church, much less a big church, I'd said "You're crazy!" I had a promising career as a rock star! I had no intention of ever being a pastor! I often look back and think "What if I had missed that message? that turning point in my life?" That's why I hate to miss church. Even when I go on vacation, if we're going through a town and it's Sunday, I'll try to find some little church of some kind. I always wonder, "What if God had that pastor prepare that message directly for me and what if I miss it?" I don't ever want to miss God talking to me. I want to show up whenever I can.

The Bible says God gives us gifted pastors and teachers to communicate His word. I've had many people tell me "After today's message, I feel like you've been reading my mail." I'm not smart enough to think all this stuff up. I'm not that smart to come in here week after week, Sunday after Sunday, 52 weeks a year for now nearly 17 years and hit it on the head every week. I can't do it! But God is. So I pray. I say, "God, You already know in advance who You're bringing to church next Sunday. You know who's going to be there and You know what their needs are. Would You give me something to say to the people You're planning on bringing. Help me to have something to say on Sunday that's going to help them on Monday morning." And He does. He impresses in my mind certain ideas and truths and as I study God does speak to you.

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Am I saying God speaks through me? I have no doubt about it! I'm amazed by it and I don't deserve it. but I have no doubt about it. An even more amazing factor is if you're a believer, God speaks through you. Many times you don't even know it. How many times, if you could go back over your life, a friend has come to you for counsel or you've said something that was a real turning point thing in a person's life. You didn't think twice about it. It was just an idea that popped into your mind. Where do you think it came from? God was speaking through you. If you are a Christian, God often speaks through you and you don't even know it. It's not some big supernatural thing, it's just the way God wired you. He has an ability to get into your mind without you even thinking about it. He plants ideas. God speaks through gifted teachers.

2 Corinthians 2:13 *"We do not speak in words taught by human wisdom, but in words taught by the Spirit, as we explain spiritual truths."* When gifted teachers teach, they're actually talking the words of God, what God wants to say to us. The more teaching you hear the more God can talk to you. Obviously, the more teaching you hear the more God will have the opportunity to speak to you. That's why once a week is not enough. You need regular input of gifted teachers in your life more than just once a week.

What if you fast six days a week and then on the seventh day you pig out? You'd have a great case of indigestion. Some of you have spiritual indigestion. The only Bible you ever get is for 30 minutes on Sunday morning, the rest of the week you have no more teaching in your life. That's why you need to get into a small group Bible study. That's why maybe you need to come on Wednesday night to our mid week service where we're going, right now, verse by verse through the book of John and learning about the life of Christ. There are some good radio teachers that you can listen to. And you can listen to tapes. I'm not just a book worm, I'm a tape worm! I have about 6000 Bible teaching tapes and I rotate them in my car. I hardly ever get into my car without putting a tape on. I'm filling my mind, learning the word of God, on a regular basis.

A lot of Christians get into the car, turn on the radio and get all news. The problem with America is we know everything about the last 24 hours, we know nothing about our history and we know nothing about the future. We're in this generation that we think we have to know what's going on up to the minute. I know people who listen to the news 3,4,5 times a day. If you listened to CNN all day yesterday, how much does that matter today? Nothing. Anything that happens that is really significant you're going to hear about it more than simply right then. The problem we have today is we have many people who know everything about what happened in the last 24 hours and they know nothing about their past heritage or they know nothing about the future. You don't have to know everything that is going on in the world. But you do have to know the universal principles that God has laid down that will help you cope with tomorrow.

So you make a choice. Am I going to be at a Bible study or am I going to watch television? Am I going to listen to a tape or am I going to listen to the radio? What's going to last over the long haul? God speaks through gifted teachers.

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3. GOD SPEAKS THROUGH IMPRESSIONS

He puts ideas in our minds. When God puts an idea in your mind we call that inspiration. "I was inspired. I got a creative idea." Where do you think that creative idea came from? It came from the creator! God is the creator. When you are being creative you're being most like God. We're made in God's image. God's the creator, human beings have the ability to be creative. When God puts an idea in your mind we call it an inspiration. When the devil puts an idea in your mind we call that a temptation. So He's trying to speak to you.

John 14:26 *"The Holy Spirit will be your teacher and will bring to your mind [circle this] all that I have said to you."* "Bring to your mind" means He gives us impressions. He gives us ideas. He gives us hunches. He gives us these gut feelings. God often does this. Some of your most brilliant ideas weren't yours. They were God's. God was giving them to you. A brilliant business idea, a brilliant family idea, a brilliant relational idea, a brilliant financial idea. Where do you think you got some of those ideas? God, who loves you, who cares about you, who infinitely interested in all the details of your life. It didn't feel like God because it's so natural. You were made to receive ideas from God. A lot of the things you think up, you're just not that smart either. God gives you those ideas.

There's a lot of confusion about how we receive impressions from God. Next week we're going to spend an entire message on it. We're going to look at how to receive inspiration, how to receive impressions from God. Then I'm going to give you how to test impressions from God. How to evaluate them to figure out whether they're really from God or a bad taco last night and it's indigestion.

There are two extremes you need avoid when thinking about impressions: one is the rationalist, the other is the mystic.

The rationalist denies that God ever speaks to us through the mind. He says God only speaks through the Bible and never gives you any impressions.

The mystic thinks that every impression they get is from God. That's obviously wrong too.

I feel sorry for both of these extremes. The rationalist, who thinks "God never gives me an idea" misses out on God's counsel, God's comfort, God's care, God's concern, God's challenges and guidance in the ways of life. They miss it all. On the other hand, the mystic who thinks that every impression they get is from God tends to make a lot of stupid mistakes and they embarrass themselves. They say, "God told me to do this," and then they go bankrupt. What happened? You missed God. Both extremes are wrong.

You look on TV at some of these people getting all these weird ideas and you tend to be skeptical of this. You hear these people say, "There's somebody out there in the audience supposed to give me a million dollars." Sure, I've had that vision too, many times! Never let a religious nut keep you from experiencing the real thing.

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Any time you find something counterfeit, that is evidence that there is a real thing somewhere. Have you ever seen a counterfeit three dollar bill? No, because there's no such thing as a real three dollar bill. Wherever you find counterfeit that means there must be something genuine somewhere. Wherever you find false teachers that means there are true gifted teachers. Wherever you find false leaders, there are also genuine Christian spiritual leaders. Wherever you find false prophets, that means there are also real prophets. The existence of something phony, fake, counterfeit implies there must be something real. Satan does not counterfeit anything that doesn't exist. He's just trying to throw people off track.

Job 33:14 *"God speaks again and again in dreams and in visions at night when the deep sleep falls v 18 as people lie on their beds. He opens their ears in times like that, and gives them wisdom and instruction."* Notice it says God sometimes speaks in dreams and in visions. Why? Why would God speak to us when we're asleep? Because we're relaxed, not distracted, our defenses are lowered at that moment. God speaks through dreams and visions.

The best way to do this is to ask God a question right as you're going to sleep. There are many times I'll say, "God, what do You want me to do about this situation with" I'll ask that and then I'll go to sleep. I say, "God, if you want to tell me, fine. If you don't, that's OK." Many times I don't get any answer at all. But sometimes I do. It's up to God. Sometimes I'll say as I'm going to sleep, "God, what's the next step? What's the next step with my family? What's the next step with our church? What's the next step in my relationship with God, tell me what You want to do. I'm open. If you want to talk to me tonight in my sleep, go ahead." I have done this many times with messages. Hundreds of messages I've given to you. I'd been thinking and praying and studying all week and as I go to sleep I say, "God, You know what these people need. Would You put it together in my mind tonight?" I wake up the next morning and the outline's there. It just comes together.

Ask God a question and you give Him the opportunity. Sometimes He'll say something and many times He won't. Most of your dreams are not God speaking. Scientists tell us when we're dreaming our mind is simply reorganizing information. Just reorganizing all the facts and the sights and the sounds that you've got. You read something and watch a movie and talk to somebody and see something in the paper and hear something on the radio and when you go to sleep at night you dream you're the ax killer! That's not God speaking to you. Not everything that you dream is from God. A lot of times it's just things get mixed up and you get put into pictures or stories you've already heard. It's highly unreliable.

And Satan can speak to you, too. Satan can put ideas in your mind. Not every idea that comes in your mind is from God.

Warning: Always test an impression. Never make a decision on an impression alone. You need to test that impression. Next Sunday I'll give you the seven ways to test an impression. It always has to match what the Bible says. If you ever get an impression that is opposite to what God said in the Bible, I guarantee that it's not from God. God never contradicts what He's already said. He's not going to give you an impression contrary to what's in the Bible. I've had guys come to me and say, "I've prayed and I really feel God speaking to me that I'm supposed to leave my kids and go marry this 16 year old bimbo!" Hello? Who are you kidding? or "I know God wants me to be happy and He's said don't have sex with people you're not married to, but I

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really love this person. So I'm going to move in with them even though I'm not married. I know God's told me to do that." Are you kidding? God has said over and over, for your own protection, for your own benefit sex is for marriage only. It's real clear. About 90% of our problems in that area, the emotional scars, the venereal diseases, the broken hearts wouldn't be there if people would just obey what God says to do. When we say, "I know God wants me to be happy, but ..." you better check it out with the Bible. When you ignore the owner's manual -- If I don't put oil in my car every so many thousand miles, guess what? It's going to wear out. And it's going to die real quick. When you don't do what the Bible says you're not hurting God. This is for your benefit.

4. GOD SPEAKS THROUGH PAIN.

Are you acquainted with this way? We don't change when we see the light. We change when we feel the heat. None of us really like to change and so we fear what it might do to us. We fear change and we don't change until the pain becomes greater than the fear of change. Once the pain is greater than the fear, we change. God is so interested in speaking to you and so interested in having a personal relationship with you and loving you and you loving Him and being able to talk about everything, He will even resort to this in order to get your attention.

Proverbs 20:30 *"Sometimes it takes a painful experience to make us change our ways."*

Everyone of you know this one by experience. Not all pain is God speaking to you. Not every little hurt, ache, and pain that you have is God. But some of it is. And God often has to use pain in order to slow us down to get our attention. I had a friend who was an All Star Basketball player and he had back trouble and had a bunch of disks that went out. I asked him in the hospital, "Why do you think this happened?" He said, "God had to lay me flat on my back to get me to look up to Him." Has God ever had to do that to you?

At the end of 1980, the first year of this church, I emotionally and physically burned out. I was a confirmed workaholic. I worked about 18 hours a day starting this church. I loved every minute of it. The church office was in my home and I'd get up early, sometimes 4 in the morning, and start working and I'd work till about midnight, sleep for about four hours and get up the next day and do it again. I wasn't taking any time off or any time for myself, very little time for my family. At the end of that year, I burned out. It took me about a year to recover from that. It was the most painful time in my life. But it was during that painful season of my life I learned the lessons that prepared me to handle the stress of a church that runs 12,000. I would have been out of here a long time ago if God hadn't taken me through that valley of pain in those early days. They taught me some lessons that became skills and habits until, a few years ago, I won the award for the least stressed executive in Orange County. Why? (The secret is no socks!) There are some lessons we only learn through pain.

"I used to wander off until you punished me; now I closely follow all you say. The punishment you gave me was the best thing that could have happened to me, for it taught me to pay attention to your laws." Pain gets our attention. It's God's hearing aid. God whispers to us in our pleasures. But He shouts to us in our pain. Pain is God's megaphone. When you're hurting God is saying, "Hey! There's somebody here who wants to help! You can depend on Me. I'll help

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you through that tough time if you'll just let Me." Pain is God's way, often, of getting your attention.

Mike had to learn this the hard way, but pain brought him to Christ. Hear his story:

I'd like to share with you how I'm learning to hear God's voice and how it caused me to accept Christ into my life four months ago. God used the Bible, gifted teachers and impressions to my mind to bring me to Him. But He began by using pain to get my attention. I was born in Los Angeles and, while both my parents claimed to be Christians, we never prayed in our home and we never attended church. My first thoughts of God began when I was about twelve when a couple of my buddies died. One died from a battle with leukemia. Another died from a routine tonsillectomy. I asked my dad questions about what happens to us when we die but I don't remember what his answers were. I do remember going into the bathroom, closing the door, lifting the lid on the clothes hamper and challenging God to close it. During the next few years I drifted towards atheism, evolution, and a liberal lifestyle. By the time I left high school I was very rebellious and unmanageable. I wouldn't admit it then but I was also very lonely, afraid, and unhappy. I hated home and school so much that I joined the army and wound up going straight to Viet Nam. It was a rude awakening for a 17 year old who thought he knew everything. In Viet Nam I was faced again with the issues of life and death, heaven and hell, with the loss of friends and comrades. Alcohol was in abundance and was the prescribed medication. I joined in using it very energetically. Why not? What was alcohol going to do to me that war couldn't? After getting out of the army I jumped into the 60's lifestyle. Everything was free. I became anti everything that had to do with structure, rules, traditions, laws. I was also anti God and anti religion. I felt that religion was just another means of control. A failed first marriage and the loss of contact with three sons were just some of the many victims of my beliefs. For the next several years sex, drugs, rock and roll seemed to be so right and fulfilling. Hope I Die Before I Get Old, Strawberry Fields Forever, and other lyrics of the day seemed to be so insightful and prophetic. Then in 1975 I got married again and everything seemed to get better. A new wife, a new family, a new job, new car, new house. I was on a really great roll. For the next 15 years I felt I had all the right answers.

But in 1990 I started encountering some major setbacks. First I chased my daughter away from home and into a life threatening situation because she wouldn't do what I said. She became just like her dad -- angry and rebellious. Next I lost a career job of twelve years and a substantial income that went with it. I suffered the complete loss of three retail stores that were going to provide for my retirement. Bankruptcy and the loss of our home still didn't get my attention. I again lost contact with my three sons, a scolding letter from one of them told me I was a coward, indifferent, and not responsible. It still didn't shake my confidence. How could I be so blind? I even thought I had lost another son to Christianity. He married a Christian girl and moved away to be with her Christian family.

It's still hard for me to believe that in spite of everything that was happening to me, I still didn't think that things were all that bad. God would have to use a sledge hammer to get my attention. He did. My mom died in January of 1995. We had not spoken for over eight years. I was becoming a very bitter man. Finally, my wife told me one day that she didn't like me and was beginning to doubt that we would be together much longer. I was crushed

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and scared. The pain was now too great to ignore. It was finally starting to sink into my head that if I didn't do something I was going to lose everything and everyone that I cared for. I was finally ready to try someone else's way.

In mid 1995 I started to attend Saddleback at my wife's urging. At first, I didn't sing or pray or participate in the Sunday service at all. I just sat through the services. But as I continued coming I sensed that something was going on inside of me. Now that my pain and emptiness had gotten my attention God began to speak to me through the teaching of Pastor Rick, Pastor Tom and other Saddleback teachers. Around September of 1995 I began attending a small group study at Saddleback called Strong Basis to Believe. I went because the announcement in the bulletin specifically invited non believers. I went to check out this study and bring questions. It was very open and non threatening and I was always impressed by the kindness and the respect that I received. God used the teaching in that group to speak to me and for the first time I started challenging some of my long held beliefs. The new things I was learning seemed to make sense. Many times as I drove home after a meeting I wondered what was happening to me. I was starting to experience some really strange thoughts. There were actually times when I would catch myself thinking like a believer. I now know that these impressions were God's voice speaking to my mind. Around that time I also read a book entitled The Purpose Driven Church by Pastor Rick. Even though I wasn't a believer, his book made sense and really changed my perspective on what a church was supposed to be. It exploded many of my stereotypes and misconceptions. I had always viewed Christians and churches as fraudulent, controlling money grubbers who are constantly casting out guilt trips. Most of my perceptions were based on the religious programming I had seen on TV. But as I read Rick's book and reflected on the actual experiences I was having here at Saddleback I began to realize that maybe those guys on TV didn't represent the real picture of Christianity. I knew one thing for sure. I was falling in love with these people -- you -- this church and this message.

On January 1 of this year I accepted the challenge to start reading the Bible. This brought me into direct contact with God's voice. Less than a month into the Bible I realized that God was speaking to me. As I read and discovered what Jesus had done for me I was really touched. As I listened to God speak through His word I began to feel warmth and comfort like never before. A change was taking place in my heart. I said a prayer in front of my small group on February 18th asking Jesus to lead my life. For the record: There were no trumpets, lightning or fireworks. But I clearly knew that my struggle was over.

My submission to God was both full and complete. There will always be a special place in my heart for the people who waited and prayed patiently for me over all those years. God used them to speak to me. My wife, Jay and my family will always be at the top of that list. I will always be very grateful to others for their caring witness and prayers. I thank all of you for every hug I've ever received since coming to Saddleback. I really wanted the warmth and closeness but was afraid and didn't know how to ask for it. Because I finally let Jesus Christ speak to me, my life has changed so much for the better. Before, I was an angry, hurtful, prideful, conceited, cold and emotionally protected man. But now my deepest desire is to be like Jesus and express His love to others. When people see me, I hope they see Him. I ask for the Holy Spirit's direction and guidance in my daily prayers. Every day I thank God for never giving up on me even though I turned my back on Him for

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so long. If today, you feel a gentle nudge to open up your life to Jesus, realize that God is speaking to you. I pray that you'll listen to Him and He will save you just like He did me.

That's what this church is all about, teaching people to hear God speak. When you hear God speak, really, in your heart, you are changed. Nobody can change that much in four months unless Jesus Christ is in your life. Nobody can change that much, have their life turned around so radically for the good unless you get a power greater than yourself in you to do it and develop a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Why is it so important to really hear God speak? Three reasons:

1. It assures me that I'm in God's family.

The proof that you really know Jesus Christ, that you have a relationship, is that you hear God speak to you. Jesus said, *"I know those who are Mine and they hear My voice."* If you've never heard God speak to you, if you've never sensed His speaking to you in your heart and in your mind, you have every reason to doubt that you're really a true believer, that you're in the family of God and that you're on your way to heaven. You have every reason to doubt it because Jesus said *"Those who are Mine hear My voice."*

Some of you may be brand new believers and when you first get started sometimes it's a little bit difficult to figure out "Is this God talking to me or not?" You're not used to His voice. But if you're really a child of God you're going to know your father's voice. When I call my kids I don't have to say, "This is Rick Warren, your father." I just start talking to them and they know my voice. When any of my three kids call me they don't have to say, "This is Amy, your daughter" or "Josh or Matthew, your son" -- I know their voice. Why? Because I have a relationship. If you don't have that, if you don't ever hear God speaking to you, you need to be saved because you're not going to heaven unless you have a relationship with Christ. It's really clear. It is available to anybody who says, "Jesus, I want a relationship with You. God, I want to know You. I want to communicate with You."

Some of you know about God, but you don't know Him. Some of you know about Jesus, but you don't really know Him. You have a religion not a relationship. You may have gone to Sunday School or catechism as a kid and you're here in church every week but you don't have that relationship.

There's a guy who comes to my house every single day of my life except Sunday. He's called the postman. I know who this guy is. I know what he looks like, I know his name, I say Hi to him. He's even brought gifts to my door. But I don't really know him. I know about him. But I don't really know him. That's the difference.

One of the proofs that you know you're a Christian is that God talks to you on a regular basis and you listen and you hear and you talk back. Many people think God only speaks to super saints. No. Those of you who are parents, do you only talk to your smartest kid? (I hope you're going to say no.) God talks to all His true children -- young believers, old believers, baby believers, grown up believers. It assures me I'm in God's family.

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2. It protects me from mistakes.

The Bible says in Job *"God speaks causing them to change their mind and keeping them from pride and from falling into some traps."* If you listen, God will warn you in advance and you'll avoid a whole lot of mistakes in life, if you really start tuning into God. He'll tell you.

A number of years ago I was presented with a business opportunity that seemed really great. It seemed like a terrific opportunity with no risk to it. A lot of Christians I knew were getting into this and recommending it to me. I stayed open and God said to me one day, "Don't." And I didn't. A year later many of those people had lost their shirt financially and the guy who started it was in prison for a scam.

I can't tell you how many times we've been saved from major mistakes here at Saddleback. Why is this church so big? Why are we one of the five largest in America? Because God has protected us from so many mistakes. Because we stay open and we don't move unless He tells us to. When God says "Don't!" we don't do it, even if the whole world and everything else says, "Go ahead and do it!" On the other hand, when God says do it and everything logically says, "Don't do that!" we do it anyway. Because we listen to God in this church. It will save you a lot of mistakes.

There are some of you here that are considering a divorce. God says to you real clearly, "Don't!" Some of you are considering moving in with somebody who's not your husband or your wife and not marrying them. God says, "Don't!" Every time I ignore God's will I get in trouble. Some of you are being challenged to make an unethical decision at work and God is saying, "Don't do it!" Some of you are being challenged to put other priorities ahead of God and your family. God says, "That's foolish! Don't do it." He'll save you from mistakes.

3. It is the secret of a productive life, listening to God on a moment by moment basis.

The more I depend on God's guidance, the more successful I am. Success is knowing God's will and being right in the center of it. If you want to make an impact with your life, if you want to be effective, it's real simple, tune into God and do what He tells you to do.

God is speaking, God wants to speak to you, He'll use many different ways -- these are the four most common but He'll use other ways too. Why does God go to all that trouble to talk to us? Because He loves you. Because you matter to Him. Because you are important. He created you not just to take up space on this earth. You were made to have a relationship with God and if you don't ever establish it you'll die missing your very purpose for living. You will miss the very reason you were created. He wants to have a relationship with you.

Some of you have sensed God speaking to you today. You identified maybe with some of the things Mike talked about in his story. What does God have to say to you today? Hebrews 3:15 *"Today, if you hear God's voice speaking to you, do not harden your heart against him."* No

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matter how long you've ignored God and His voice, He still loves you and He still wants to have a relationship with you.

Prayer:

It's obvious that some of you are in pain today. Some of you are depressed. Some of you are filled with anxiety. It may be over a health issue. It maybe over finances, your marriage, or your desire to get married, or you're in a relationship you're not sure of and you're anxious, fearful, worried. Others of you are fatigued and you're worn out because you're trying to do too much. You just crawled in here this morning -- you're really tired. Many of you are stressed out by innumerable things. Some of you are lonely and that ache in your heart -- that loneliness -- is sometimes almost unbearable. All of these things create pain. God is trying to get your attention. There needs to be some changes in your life and He'll help you make those changes. But you have to have a relationship with Him. Maybe you've let that relationship wane and wan and put on the back burner of your life. Or maybe you've never established one. Would your pray this prayer in your mind? "Jesus Christ, I understand that You want a relationship with me. I want to get to know You and I want to talk with You. Help me to spend some time every day reading Your word. Help me to take advantage of the Bible studies and the classes and the teachers and the tapes that You provide for us. Help me to be open to impressions that You want to give me. Help me to see how that even pain can bring me closer to You. Today, Jesus Christ, I want to open up my life and ask You to be the manager of my life and lead me and guide me and save me." If you prayed that prayer and meant it God heard you. You're beginning a brand new journey called the Christian life. A relationship. The first thing you need to do is tell somebody about it. Tell the closest person to you -- your husband, your wife. "Today I stepped across the line for Jesus Christ."

HOW TO RECOGNIZE GOD'S VOICE
Learning to Hear God's Voice - Part 3 of 4
I John 4:1 (Living Bible)
Rick Warren

1 John 4:1 (LB) *"Don't always believe everything you hear just because someone says it is a message from God; test it first to see if it really is!"*

From myself?	<i>Pr. 14:12</i>
From God?	<i>Job 33:14</i>
From Satan?	<i>2 Cor. 11:14</i>

7 WAYS TO TEST AN IMPRESSION

1. DOES IT AGREE WITH _____?

"Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will never pass away." Lk. 21:33 (GN)

"Even if an angel should preach a different `gospel' than this let him be eternally condemned!" Gal. 1:8

2. DOES IT MAKE ME MORE _____?

"In your lives you must think and act like Christ Jesus." Phil 2:5 (NCV)

"If you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition. . . such `wisdom' doesn't come from heaven. . . but is of the devil. The wisdom that comes from God is . . . pure, peace loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy, impartial and sincere." James 3:14-17

3. DOES MY _____ CONFIRM IT?

"God's intent is that through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known." Eph. 3:10

"The wisdom of the righteous can save you." Pr. 11:9 (GN)

4. IS IT CONSISTENT WITH HOW GOD _____?

"We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do." Eph. 2:10

"God has given each of us the ability to do certain things well. . ." Rom. 12:6 (LB)

5. DOES IT CONCERN _____?

"We will all be judged one day, not by each other's standards, or even our own, but by the judgment of God. . . it is to God alone that we shall have to answer for our actions." Rom. 14:10, 13 (Ph)

6. IS IT CONVICTING RATHER THAN _____?

"If we confess our sins to him, God can be depended on to forgive us and cleanse us from every wrong." 1 John 1:9 (LB)

"Satan is the accuser of believers." Rev. 12:10

The differences between ...

CONVICTION	vs.	CONDEMNATION
from God		from Satan
"you've sinned"		"you're worthless"

7. DO I SENSE _____ ABOUT IT?

"God is not the author of confusion." 1 Cor. 14:33

"Let the peace of God rule in your hearts..." Col. 3:15

HOW TO RECOGNIZE GOD'S VOICE
Learning to Hear God's Voice - Part 3 of 4
I John 4:1 (Living Bible)
Rick Warren

We're continuing in our series on Learning to Hear God's Voice. Last week we talked about four ways you can hear God speak. One of the ways is God gives us impressions in our mind. I told you we would come back to this today and finish up the message because it causes a lot of confusion. If God gives me impressions, how do I know when they're really from God. How do I know I'm not just talking to myself. Do you ever do that? I like to talk to myself. I like to have somebody intelligent to talk to. So I talk to myself all the time! I've found it very easy to confuse my desires with God's will. The Bible says Satan can talk to us. We can read things and they get put in our mind and we think that it's God, but it's just *Time* magazine.

So how do you know when it's really God? This may not be a big issue if you're just trying to decide what restaurant to go to after church. But if you're talking about who to marry or a major career change, this is a major issue. You need to hear from God. God wants to talk to you. So how do I know when it's really God speaking to me?

I John 4:1 *"Don't always believe everything you hear just because somebody says it's a message from God. Test it first to see if it really is."* Circle "test it." The Bible says we must learn to distinguish God's voice. We've got to figure out if it's really God or not.

I want to give you the seven ways to test an impression. Seven ways to know if it's really God talking to you or not. They form a filter and they're all inter related. You can't pick and choose. If an impression does not pass all seven of these tests you know it's not from God. You can disqualify it.

On the other hand if you apply these seven tests to an idea or impression that you've got and it passes all seven, you can know with absolute certainty you've heard from God.

As we're going through this series, it would take us about five minutes to explain these seven things but we thought we'd have some fun and we want to dramatize the most common mistakes that people make when they're trying to hear God.

1. DOES IT AGREE WITH THE BIBLE?

God never contradicts His written word. Luke 21:33 *"heaven and earth will pass away but My words will never pass away."* God will never tell you to violate anything in this book. Never. God will never tell you to ignore or disobey anything in this book. He doesn't say one thing one time, and another thing another time. God is consistent. If He said it in the past, He's going to say it in the future. He is always consistent. He is never inconsistent. The Bible tells us very clearly, "Pay your taxes" so God is not going to give you the impression... "the government wastes your money anyway so just cheat, lie about it because they're not going to use it the right way anyway." God would never tell you that. We always get into trouble when we doubt God's word, when we don't listen to what it says.

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Johnny: Tracy, I want to talk to you about something. You know I've ben struggling at work lately...

Katie: Have you found a job yet?

Johnny: I've found something I think God really wants me to do.

Katie: Great! What is it?

Johnny: It's got great hours, great money. I get to work with a lot of interesting people. The only thing is I won't get to go to church anymore or read my Bible, but I think it will be OK.

Katie: What is this job?

Johnny: I'm going to work for the Maffia!

Katie: Are you crazy? Psalms 1 says not to hang around with crooks and people like that.

Johnny: But that was written a long time ago. I really think God wants me to take this job. Besides, they made me an offer I couldn't refuse!

God will never tell you to do something inconsistent with what He's already said. Most of God's will for your life is already right here in this book. You don't even have to pray about it. Just do what it says. Some asks me "Do you pray about getting up in the morning and going to church?" No, I don't. I just get up. I don't pray about tithing, I just do it. I don't pray about telling other people the good news, I just do it. Because it's right here in God's word. When you build your life on this book, you're going to ask the right questions. If you don't build your life on this book, you're going to miss God's will much of the time.

So the first step is to check it out. It's better to memorize it. Then God can bring those verses to mind.

2. DOES IT MAKE ME MORE LIKE CHRIST?

Philippians 2:5 *"In your lives you must think and act like Jesus Christ."* Jesus is the standard by which we measure everything we do. God says very clearly in the Bible that His goal for your life is to make you like Jesus. Not to be a god but to be godly. To have character, to have love, joy, peace, patience, all the qualities that Jesus had -- in your life. He would never tell you to do anything that contradicts or would hinder you from reaching that goal.

A practical application of what Christ likeness is in James 3 *"If you harbor envy and selfish ambition, such wisdom doesn't come from heaven* In other words, you know that impression doesn't come from God if it causes bitterness, envy or selfish ambition. *The wisdom that comes from God is pure, peace loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy, impartial and sincere."*

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These are filters that you can test the idea. God's wisdom is not selfish ambition. If you get an idea of how to promote yourself in a better way or how to achieve instant fame, instant wealth, instant comfort it's not from God. God doesn't give you ideas for self promotion, self serving, selfish ambition.

On the other hand, if the thought is pure then it's from God. If you get an impure thought that one obviously isn't from God.

His wisdom is peace loving. Ideas from God promote harmony rather than conflict. If you get an idea that's going to promote conflict it's probably not from God. It's considerate. You have to think what would this idea do to other people? Would it hurt them or harm them? Would it build them up or tear them down? Encourage them or discourage them?

If an idea is genuinely from God, the Bible says it's considerate. It's considerate of how other people think. A lot of people say, "God told me to do this" and they just bowl over everybody and don't care how it hurts anybody. Because "God told them to do it." God didn't tell them to do something like that. The Bible says God's wisdom is considerate. So you don't be dogmatic.

It's submissive. If you've really heard from God you're not going to be arrogant and bragging about it. Some people think they've heard from God but their behavior shows they really haven't because they're self righteous, egotistical and always putting everybody else down. "God told me this and therefore you're nothing!"

God's wisdom is full of mercy. If you've really heard an idea from God it's going to cause you to be more gracious towards people rather than judgmental. If after I've heard from God, it makes me more judgmental, and put you down, and tell you what you're doing wrong and always criticizing you, you didn't hear from God. That's not the way Jesus lived. Jesus is our model.

Ask this question: Would Jesus do this? First, does it square up with the Bible? Second, Does it make me more like Christ? Would Jesus do this?

Johnny: Come on, you can do it! Daddy needs a new pair of shoes!

Katie: I'm not comfortable about being here. Would Jesus be here? I don't think so.

Johnny: Relax! It's just a horse race.

Katie: I still don't feel right about being here. I don't think this is a good idea.

Johnny: Look! God told me to come here today! He woke me up and said, "Bet on Lucky Lou in the fifth race!" Why would He tell me to do that if He didn't want me to come?

Katie: Are you sure that was God who told you to do that?

Johnny: Well, it was either God or my buddy Jim. But we're here now so relax.

Would Jesus do it? That's the second way to test an impression.

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3. When I'm trying to figure out whether I've got this idea from God or not, I need to ask **"DOES MY CHURCH FAMILY CONFIRM IT?"**

When you become a believer, a follower of Christ, you not only get a new relationship to God, you get a new relationship to other people. It's called the church, the family of God. You become a member of the family.

God never meant for you to make a major decision in life on your own. He wants you to get help and advise from wise mature Christians, other believers who are grounded in the faith and have a little more Bible under their belt than maybe you have. Check it out over and over. The Bible says, *"Smart people get advise. Fools don't."* Fools just think they know the right thing to do and act on their own intuition without ever checking it out with anybody else who is a mature Christian.

The third question you need to ask is, Does my church family confirm it? Ephesians 3:10 *"God's intent is that through the church the manifold wisdom of God who should be made known."* If God has genuinely spoken to you, you've got an idea, an impression, He's going to confirm it through other believers. The biggest reason people mess up their lives, Christians, too, -- is they try to live their life without any accountability to anybody else, without any support, without any confirmation, any council, any guidance. The Bible says, *"In a multitude of counselors there is safety."* When we try to live a Lone Ranger approach to the Christian life we're going to fall flat on our face. Because this is the third way God works. We need to be open to the checks, the counsel, the correction of mature believers, pastors, Christian leaders, other people in the church who have been believers longer than we have. We ought to check it out. When in doubt, check it out.

If you don't do this then typically you're going to make a lot of unnecessary mistakes in life. Your stress level will be much higher than it needs to be. It doesn't have to be there. You will fumble and fall, waste time, energy, and money on decisions you should never have made in the first place. You need to check it out.

Johnny: Welcome to the small group. I want to ask you a few questions. You've been a Christian longer than I have. I'm getting my hair cut the other day and talking to my barber about politics like we always do. I'm talking about how bad the government is doing and he goes, "Right, like you could do better?" I really think God spoke through him saying, "You can do better!" So I think I'm going to run for president. What do you think?

Katie: Are you crazy? What makes you think you could be president?

Johnny: I was treasurer of my fourth grade class.

Katie: You're my friend and we're in a small group together but I think you ought to rethink that plan.

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Johnny: I think I'll ask someone else. Hey! Susan! I've got a question for you. I think God wants me to run for president. What do you think?

Susan: You've never even taken a political science class. What do you know about politics.

Johnny: So... what's your point?

Susan: Maybe you should ask somebody else.

Johnny: I will. Tracy! I've got a question for you. I think God wants me to run for president. What do you think?

Tracy: President of what?

Johnny: The United States.

Tracy: Since when did they start electing losers to the presidency.

Johnny: I don't need anybody. It's just me and Jesus. The Lone Ranger Christian rides again!

Check it out with other believers. If you don't, you're going to get in trouble. Isn't it typical that what we often do is start asking for advice and we keep asking until we find somebody who will agree with what we want to do anyway? As a pastor, I want you to know, that's happened often to me. A couple will come to me and ask me for advice that clearly God doesn't want them to do and I tell them "Don't do it!" so they go to another church. They find a pastor there but if the pastor is grounded, he'll tell them No, too. I've actually been in a small group of pastors in this area where we've talked about couples or individuals who have been to five or six different pastors trying to get the right answer but nobody will tell them what they want to hear.

Another reason why we don't like to check out major decisions with other believers is because we don't want to be told we're wrong. But it's better to be told you're wrong before you waste the time, energy and money than it is after and you have all the heartache and hurt from a stupid decision. If you've heard from God, really heard from God, other Christians are going to confirm it.

Proverbs 11:9 *"The wisdom of the righteous can save you."* Save what? Money, time, reputation. It is safe to ask mature believers to evaluate impressions. You need to get people who love you enough to level with you.

If you have an idea and you've wondered, Is this really from God and you check it out with other mature Christians, if other mature believers question it, you should too. I'm not saying not do it, I'm saying a red flag ought to go up, a yellow warning light ought to go on that says, Maybe I'm not getting this right. If other mature Christians question it, you ought to also. If you get an idea and you think it's from God and you can't find any mature believers (you might find an immature one -- a brand new Christians or someone not walking with the Lord to agree with it) but if you

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can't find any mature Christian to agree with the decision, don't do it. Drop it! The Bible says God speaks through His word, He speaks if it makes us like Jesus, and He speaks through the body as a whole. We need each other. That's why you need to be in a small group. You can check things out with your small group.

4. IS IT CONSISTENT WITH HOW GOD HAS SHAPED ME?

Ephesians 2:10 *"We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance [circle this] for us to do."* Before you were born God planned your life. God made you for a purpose. You're not here by accident. You're here for a reason. That reason is a purpose and God designed you specifically for that purpose.

Example: A chair is designed in a certain way. It has a back, a seat -- the design was made to fulfill a purpose. The purpose of a chair is to sit in. A microphone has a very different design. It fulfills a different purpose. Chairs were designed to sit on. You weren't designed to sit on a microphone. You speak through microphones, you sit on chairs. Not vice versa.

The design reveals purpose. Design reveals purpose. The same thing is true of you. You were designed a certain way. We call that SHAPE. God has shaped you for a career, a ministry, for life involving your spiritual gifts, your heart (your passions, desires -- some things turn you on, some things you could care less about; some things you love to do, some things you hate to do; some things you're interested in and some things you're bored to tears with). Where do you think you got that emotional makeup. God gave it to you. He gave us all different make ups. Different hearts. Why? He wants all the work in the world to get done. Some people love to do accounting and some people can't stand accounting. Some people love to do mechanics, some people can't stand mechanics. Some people love to cook, some people hate to cook.

He's given you Spiritual gifts, Heart, Abilities. You may be good with words. You may be good with numbers. You may be good with animals. You may be good with people. You may be good with mechanical things. Then He's given you a Personality. You may be extroverted or introverted. You may like routine or you may like variety. You may like to work all by yourself or you might like to work in a team. Who do you think gave you your personality? God did. He was designing you for a purpose. Then He gives you Experiences -- vocational experiences and spiritual experiences and educational experiences and painful experiences. All of these things shape your life.

Just as the design of a chair reveals it's purpose, the design or shape of your life reveals your purpose -- what God wants you to do. For instance, why would God gift you as a great musician and then tell you to be a mechanic. He wouldn't. That would be a waste of the shape He's given you. On the other hand, if you're tone deaf forget trying to become a concert pianist. If you're good at planning then your ministry in life will involve planning. If you're good at art or writing or with numbers or leading, then your life, your career, your ministry, your place, your niche in this world involves what God gave you.

When you get an impression from God you ask "Is it consistent with how God's shaped me?" If God were to say to me, "I want you to resign Saddleback and become a math teacher." I would

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know without a doubt that is not from God because I flunked math. I didn't but I don't know much about it! So God would not have me do something He had not shaped me to do. A lot of God's will for your life has to do with looking at your design. What are you good at? What do you love to do? If you get an impression from God like Johnny's impression of God wants him to be president although he has no shape for it, he's not supposed to do it.

God says you can discover a lot about His will for your life by just looking at what you're good at. Romans 12:6 *"God has given each of us the ability to do certain things well."* God's voice will not contradict how He shaped you to be.

Johnny: I found out what God wants me to do in ministry at Saddleback church.

Katie: Great! What is it?

Johnny: Single Women's Ministry. I feel it fits my heart and my SHAPE.

Katie: Excuse me? What are you talking about? How does the Single Women's Ministry fit your shape?

Johnny: I've been working out lately and I've got the perfect shape for it.

Katie: You said it fits your heart too. How do you figure?

Johnny: I love single women. What could be more fitting?

Katie: You don't even know how really out of shape you are.

God's will for your life will never contradict how he has basically designed you. If you ever sense a leading in your life that is contrary to your basic shape, your personality, your experiences, ignore it. It's not from God.

5. The fifth test is this: **DOES IT CONCERN MY RESPONSIBILITY?**

If it's not your responsibility why in the world should God talk to you about it? In John 21, Jesus is talking to Peter and He tells him how he's going to die. He explains that he's going to have to suffer for being a Christian. Peter, very inquisitively, turns around and points to John the Apostle and says, "What about that guy? How's he going to die?" Jesus says (Warren translation) "It's none of your beeswax! Don't worry about it"

I only have to worry about what's going on in my life, I don't have to worry about God's will for your life. I can't figure out my own motives most of the time, much less figure out yours. If God is going to talk to you, you need to ask "Is He really talking to me or is He talking about something else? If it's somebody else, does it concern my responsibility?" When you listen for God to speak to you, you need to listen for God to speak to you, not your son or your wife. You need to say, "What is God's will for me?"

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Romans 14 *"We will all be judged one day not by each other's standards or even by our own, but by the judgment of God. It is to God alone that we shall have to answer for our actions."* When you listen for God's voice, listen for yourself, not for somebody else.

Johnny: I'd like to have a word with you for a minute if I could. Last night I was praying and God spoke to me.

Katie: Again? What did God tell you to do this time?

Johnny: Nothing. This time it was about you. God told me your secret sin.

Katie: God told you my secret sin? If I know it and He knows it, why would He want you to know it?

Johnny: I guess he just figures I should know everything about the woman who's supposed to marry me.

Katie: Marry you? What's this all this marrying stuff?

Johnny: Oh, yes. God told me you are supposed to marry me. You can try to fight it but God told me it would happen.

You need to be very careful when you think God's told you about something, somebody else should do. It's very dangerous. A lot of well meaning Christians, well intentioned but also presumptuous, have caused enormous amount of damage because they thought God was talking to them about what somebody else should do. For instance, God told me to tell you that you're going to get well. God told me to tell you that you're supposed to invest all your money with me. God told me your secret sin.

Why would God have to tell you my secret sin. I know my secret sin. God knows my secret sin. We all have direct access to God. God can speak directly to each of us through Jesus Christ, His son. You need to be very, very careful about saying "God told me to tell you to do..." Every believer has a direct access to God and you have enough difficult time handling your own sins much less worrying about anybody else's. God can take care of that.

Does God ever speak to me about other people? Yes, He does occasionally. But three qualifications:

1. God will use you to confirm what He's already said to them. It's very unlikely He's going to tell you first. God will use you to confirm what He's already said. I've had God speak to me many times but I wasn't really sure I'd heard from God or not and then another person would say, I really feel this is happening, and it would be a confirmation.

2. If God speaks to you to help somebody else, He'll usually do it without you knowing it. That way your ego doesn't get in the way and you start taking pride and thinking you're some

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super saint. He will usually use you without you knowing it. Many times He will talk through you and you're not aware that what you said is meeting a need much deeper than you could possibly have imagined in their lives.

3. Trust God to speak to that person first before you talk to them.

Katie and Johnny were talking about "God told me that you're supposed to marry me" -- that actually happened in my case. God told me that I was going to marry Kay Lewis four months before I took her out on the first date. Four months! But I did not even mention that to her. I never told her until several months after we'd been engaged and I was sure she was going to take me. Why? It would have been manipulation.

I was speaking in Kay's dad's church in Fresno. Kay was playing the piano for that service. As I got up to speak I looked over and as clear as night and day God told me, "You're going to marry that girl!" I immediately doubted it. Three reasons: God doesn't usually speak that clearly to me. Second, I wasn't in love with her. And third, she was in love with another guy. Just a few minor problems! So I promptly dismissed it. I made no attempt to date her. I thought if that was it, God would work out the details.

My prayer partner, Danny, and we used to pray for an hour every morning. We'd go out between 5 and 6 to a baseball dugout at the college we were going to and pray for an hour. Sometimes we'd stay up all night and pray. At one of those all night prayer sessions, about 2 or 3 in the morning, Danny said, "I feel really impressed that you're going to marry Kay Lewis." Again, I made no attempt to date her. But in a series of circumstances she broke up with the "jerk" she dated and I took Kay out on our first date and eight days later we were engaged. I don't tell that for you to spread to your kids. That's not a model I'd recommend. We married about a year and a half later because right after we were engaged I moved to Japan as a missionary and she moved to Birmingham, Alabama as an inner city missionary and we were apart most of our engagement period. But I didn't tell her what God had told me until long after God had already spoken to her and we had been engaged. Otherwise that would have been a manipulation.

6. IS IT CONVICTING RATHER THAN CONDEMNING?

Conviction is from God, condemnation is from the devil. Conviction points the way to change, condemnation just makes you feel bad. When God convicts you of sin in your life it is always specific. He says, Here's an attitude, behavior, or something in your life that needs changing. He'll be very specific and put His finger right on it. "You're blowing it in this area." He will be very specific.

On the other hand, condemnation which comes from the devil, is very vague and very general and basically says, "You're bad. You're no good. You're worthless. You stink. God could never use you. Forget ever trying to be a Christian." He's very general.

So if you have this very general sense of guilt that's condemnation. When God speaks to you about something that needs changing in your life, He's very specific.

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Conviction always leads to an action to change; condemnation just makes you feel bad. When God is speaking to you, He'll say, "Here's what's wrong in your life and here's what you need to do." He'll give you specific things. The result is it always leads to confession, repentance and then forgiveness and the feelings leave.

On the other hand, condemnation is the devil saying to you, "You're worthless. You call yourself a Christian? Who do you think you are? You should give up trying to live for God because you can't do anything. You just keep falling and falling." He's always putting you down. Conviction comes from God, the Holy Spirit. Condemnation comes from the devil and you need to recognize the difference. Too many Christians, mistake their low self worth for God speaking. What they do is they've taken the voice from their past of an unpleasable parent who, no matter how much you tried it was never good enough, if you got C's they wanted B's, if you got B's they wanted A's, if you got A's they wanted straight A's. You've taken that voice of an unpleasable parent from your past and put it on your heavenly Father and you think God is mad at you all the time. He's not. God is not out to beat you up.

Katie: It's not that bad!

Johnny: It is that bad!

Katie: What's the big deal?

Johnny: I'm scum!

Katie: You are not scum!

Johnny: You're right! I'm not scum. I'm pond scum. I'm not even that good. I'm the fish that feeds on pond scum.

Katie: You are a great guy!

Johnny: No I'm not. If I were a tube of toothpaste, nine out of ten dentists would not recommend me.

Katie: What are you talking about? What have you done that is so bad?

Johnny: That's the thing. I can't put my finger on it. God is just making me feel guilty all the time. I just feel bad about everything! Doesn't it say guiltiness is next to godliness?

Katie: God does not make believers feel guilty. It's all been forgiven and paid for. Maybe you should look at where that guilt is coming from.

Johnny: You're right. I'm scum!

If you are a Christian, if you have put your faith in Jesus Christ and asked Him to forgive all your sins and asked Him to be your savior and Lord, it means this: Everything you've ever done

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wrong is forgiven. Not just the sins of your past but the ones you're going to do today. And the ones you haven't even thought about tomorrow. They were all nailed on the cross. That's why Jesus said, "It's finished! It's paid for! It's done!"

Should a Christian ever feel guilty? Yes! For about one nano second. That's about how long it takes to realize "I blew it!" and you come and confess to God and He instantly forgives and it's taken care of, it's wiped away. Many people think that to be spiritual you should walk around all the time feeling "I'm so guilty! I've really let God down!" No, you don't let God down because you're not holding Him up. He holds you up. You can never even disappoint God because God already knows every sin you're going to commit. He already knows.

So what you do, when you've done something wrong, you immediately breathe in God's Spirit (Say, "God fill me with your Spirit") and breathe out your sin. It's just that quick. You get instantly back into the fellowship. God does not want you carrying around guilt all the time. Say, "God, I blew it. I was wrong! Help me change!" then get on with it. Keep short accounts with God. Don't let it stockpile.

Conviction from God leads to confession, repentance, and forgiveness -- 1 John 1:9 *"If we confess our sins to him, God can be depended on to forgive us and cleanse us from every wrong."* He wipes the slate clean. God does not hold grudges. On the other hand, if you still feel guilty about something you've admitted to God that was wrong and you've asked Him to forgive you for it and you still feel guilty after you've confessed it, that guilt is not from God. It's from Satan. Satan minimizes your sin before you do it, "It's no big deal!" and after you do it he goes "Look at what you did!" He wants you to walk around in constant guilt because guilty Christians are worthless in serving God. He will maximize it after you confess it. If you have confessed it and it is forgiven, any guilt you feel after you've confessed it is not from God. It's from the devil. Revelation 12:10 says Satan is the accuser of the brethren, believers. That means God never tells you that you're worthless. And God will never tell you that you're hopeless. Is it convicting rather than condemning and you'll know whether it's God or not.

7. DO I SENSE GOD'S PEACE ABOUT IT?

1 Corinthians 14:33 *"God is not the author of confusion."* So if you're feeling confused that confusion is not coming from God. It may be coming from yourself or other people, but it's not coming from God. If you feel pressured and overwhelmed and driven to make a hasty decision, a major decision in life, and you're very pressured to make it, question it. That's not the way God works. There's not one single example in the Bible where God says, "Rush!" to a major decision. Not one. So question it. The Bible says God is patient. God would rather have you make the right decision than have you make the quick decision. We even say that when you're considering coming to Christ. Take the time to make the right decision. I believe if you listen to what God has to say, you will inevitably come to the right conclusion that you need to give your life to Christ and live your life the way God made you to live, fulfilling your purpose.

If you're pressured, if you're stressed out, that pressure and stress are not coming from God. Not at all! It's coming from inside you, or from the devil, or from some other source. Do you want your kids to feel stressed out, pressured? No. Neither does your heavenly Father. The only time

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you're going to feel stressed out and pressured is when He's told you something to do and you don't do it. That's going to create stress in your life. That's going to create pressure -- when you know the right thing to do and you keep procrastinating. Satan drives us compulsively while God's spirit draws us compassionately, gently.

Colossians 3:1 *"Let the peace of God rule in your hearts."* If God is genuinely speaking to you and you think this idea is from God, it's going to bring peace to your heart IF you follow it. God's Spirit produces a calm spirit. Worry and anxiety are never from God. Never. In the Bible it says, "Don't worry!" We are commanded not to worry! If you get an idea that is a worry, it's not from God! What if? and you start worrying about it then it's not from God. God would never give you an idea that He's commanded you not to have. You need to look for His peace.

Johnny: God, I feel that You're giving me direction right now but help me with my financial troubles.

House payment!

Johnny: And God, help the kids get better grades at school.

Failing grades!

Johnny: And God, help my wife and I to get through this tough time we're having.

BIG Fight!

Johnny: And God, help me at work.

Gonna get fired!

Johnny: God, I don't know about this whole peace thing. If this is peace it sure doesn't feel like it to me!

I once talked to a lady who every week kept coming up to me and saying, "God told me this!" And every week it was a scolding. Every week it was something she was doing wrong. Every week it was a hyper sensitive conscious. Many of those things weren't even wrong, just questionable. She was always beat up. One day I said, "Does God ever say anything nice to you?"

Some of you have taken the voice of an unpleasable parent and put it in the form of God and you think all God does is set around and beat you up and tell you everything you're doing wrong. You don't understand grace if you think that way. You don't understand that it's all been paid for. It's been forgiven! You want to live for Christ not because God is constantly beating you up saying "Do better!" That's not the way God treats His children. He says I've already forgiven every sin in your life and you're on your way to heaven and in gratitude you want to live for God. I want to live for Jesus because He loves me that much. I want to do it not because He's

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beating me up and making me feel bad, but I want to do it because the peace that comes when I'm in a relationship with God and there's harmony between us.

There is nothing more vital in your life than you hear from God. Nothing. Because you were wired and made to have a relationship with God and if you miss that you miss the purpose you were made for. It may not be a big deal if you miss God on whether you buy Kiks or Cherrios -- that's not that big of deal. But there are many major decisions in your life that you need to hear from God about and if you're out there making decisions without taking the time to listen and saying, "God, what do You want me to do? What's the next step?" and you're checking it out with other Christians and you're reading the Bible and you're doing these seven steps, you are setting yourself up for failure after failure in your family life, in your business, in your parenting, in your finances, in your health and in every other area of your life. It makes sense to listen to your creator.

God does not want to play games with you. God is not trying to confuse you. It's not a cat and mouse game of "Let's see if you can figure out God's will and let's see how hard I can make it!" And God sits up there in the sky and laughs at the maze you keep knocking your head into. That's not the way God acts to His children. He wants you to know His will, so much that He's given us these seven keys in which He says "Here are some ways that you can filter out and know if it's you or is it God talking to you?"

The secret to hearing God clearly is get to know Him better and better every day. The more you understand Him, the better you know Him, the easier it is to hear His voice in a split second when He wants to talk to you. Get to know God better and better every day.

You may think you've never heard God speak to you. That's a good indication that you don't have a relationship to Him. John 8:47 *"He who belongs to God hears what God says."* The reason you don't hear is that you don't belong to God. If you've never heard God it means you need to establish a relationship to Him. And that's real easy to do and I can lead you in a prayer this morning that will help you take that step.

Others of you are believers and in the past God's voice was very clear to you at different times but right now it's been a little fuzzy, a little distant. Maybe there's some static on the line and you haven't heard from God in weeks and maybe months. What's happened? How come you don't hear God as clearly as you used to? You've allowed sin to block the channel in your life. There is something that is wrong in your life that has come between you and God and until you deal with that, the channel is blocked. Your heart has grown hard and you're not as sensitive to God as you used to be. Come home to Jesus Christ. Come home and say Jesus, "I want that relationship that I had before. I want to be able to talk to You and hear You and I want You to lead me and guide me and help me avoid all these mistakes in life. Direct me in the right way." Come home to Jesus.

Prayer:

If you've never opened your life to Christ, pray, "Dear Jesus Christ, I want to hear Your voice. I need it. I need to know the direction You want me to go, God. I want to establish a relationship with You through Your Son, Christ. I ask You to come into my life the best as I

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know how and put Your thoughts in my mind and Your love in my heart. Help me to start growing spiritually in You. I don't understand it all but as best as I know how I open my life to You."

Others of you have Jesus Christ in your life but you haven't heard His voice in a long time because your heart has grown cold and your ears have gotten stopped up. God doesn't have laryngitis. He's still speaking. The problem is on your end. Would you say, "Jesus Christ forgive me for allowing sin to come between me and You. Things I knew were wrong but I've allowed them anyway in my life. I ask You to forgive me and help me to deal with these issues so I can change and make things right where possible. I want to hear Your voice in my life on a daily basis. Speak to me. Help me to sense Your love. Forgive me for having false images of the way You are. You not a god who wants to beat me up but You want to guide me and love me. I want to love You and follow You. In Jesus name. Amen."

RECEIVING GUIDANCE FROM GOD
Learning to Hear God's Voice - Part 4 of 4
Habakkuk 2:1-2
Rick Warren

"I will climb my watchtower and wait to see what the Lord will tell me to say and what answer He will give to my complaint. The Lord gave me this answer: 'Write down clearly on tablets what I reveal to you, so that it can be read at a glance.'" Habakkuk 2:1-2 (TEV)

I. HOW TO REQUEST GUIDANCE

1. Believe God _____

"So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat. . . or drink. . . or wear?' . . . your heavenly Father knows that you need them." Mat. 6:31-32 (NIV)

2. Ask God _____

"If you want to know what God wants you to do, ask Him, and He will gladly tell you." James 1:5 (TLB)

3. Expect God _____!

"... God is always ready to give bountiful supply of wisdom to all who ask Him; He will not resent it. But when you ask Him, be sure that you really expect Him to tell you..." James 1:5b-6 (TLB)

II. HOW TO RECEIVE GUIDANCE FROM GOD
(Habakkuk 2:1-2)

1. _____: Get alone in a quiet place

"I will climb my watchtower..." Habakkuk 2:1 (TEV)

"But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed." Luke 5:16 (NIV)

2. _____: Calm your thoughts and emotions

" . . . and wait to see what the Lord will tell me. . . " Hab. 2:1 (TEV)

"Be still, and know that I am God" Ps. 46:10 (NIV)

"LORD . . . Every morning, I tell you what I need, and I wait for your answer." Ps. 5:3 (NCV)

3. _____: Let God give you a mental picture

"I will look to see what He will say to me." Hab 2:1 (NIV)

4. _____: Record the ideas you receive

"The Lord gave me this answer, `Write down clearly. . . what I reveal to you.'" Hab. 2:2 (TEV)

5. _____: Thank God for speaking to you.

"O Lord, now I have heard your report, and I worship you in awe. . . " Hab 3:2 (TLB)

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Habakkuk 2:1-2
Rick Warren

There are literally hundreds of stories of God speaking directly to people. Pastor Tom read one a little earlier about God speaking to a young boy named Samuel. When I read that I wonder why we don't hear more about that today of God speaking to people. Does God have a cold or laryngitis? What's the problem?

The fact is God does speak to people today. We've been looking in this series about Learning to Hear God's Voice. Today I want us to look at the topic of How to Receive Guidance from God. We said last week that God speaks primarily in four ways: He speaks through the Bible, He speaks through gifted teachers, He speaks through impressions of the Holy Spirit, and He speaks through pain. I'd like to focus this morning on the third way -- impressions of the Holy Spirit. It's a way that has a lot of confusion and misunderstanding with people. How does He do it?

I'm going to give you five ways to tune into God to hear God speak to you when you need guidance. You're saying, "Lord, should I marry this person?", "Should I change jobs?", "How do I deal with my children in this circumstance?", "Should I make this investment or not?" God wants to deal with you on those issues. But you've got to be tuned into Him.

We're going to look at Habakkuk and the five things he did to tune into God.

I. HOW TO REQUEST GUIDANCE

But first three prerequisites on how to make a request of God. When you need to ask God for advice there are three prerequisites:

1. I must realize that God cares about the details of my life.

Matthew 6:31-32 says *"Don't worry about what you eat or drink or wear. Your heavenly father knows you need these things."* That's an amazing verse to me because it says God's concerned about what I wear. God is concerned about what I drink and what I eat. Every little detail in my life. God is more interested in the details of your life than you are because He made you. Until you understand that you won't come asking Him questions about the details of your life because you'll say, "I don't want to bother God." He's interested because He's your heavenly Father and He made you. He's far more interested in it than you think He is.

2. You need to ask a specific question.

When you're looking for guidance from God ask a specific question. The more specifically you ask, the more God is able to answer it. Instead of saying, "God, do You want to say anything?" say "God, what do You think about?" What's the next step? What should I do here? How should I do it? Over twenty times in the New Testament, God says "Ask." He says, "Ask... Seek... Knock" The Scripture says *"If you want to know what God wants you to do ask Him and*

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He'll gladly tell you." James says you have not because you don't ask. God wants you to ask for advise. He's waiting and willing. He wants you to ask for advise about your relationships, about your career, about your health, about your finances. He's eager and wanting to talk to you. So you ask and believe He's interested in the details.

3. Believe He wants to answer.

James 1:5-6 (Living Bible) *"God is always ready to give a bountiful supply of wisdom to all who ask Him. He won't resent it. But when you ask Him, be sure you really expect Him to tell you."* Circle "expect". God is more willing to talk to you than you are willing to talk to Him. Remember He tried four times to get Samuel's attention. When you expect answers to your prayers then you really pray. And when you really pray then you really get answers.

When you come to God, you make a specific request and you ask Him about how He wants to handle the situation and you expect an answer. In the book of Habakkuk, chapter 1, he asks God six specific questions. Then in chapter 2, he waits and listens to God answer and he writes down what he hears. *"I will climb my watchtower and wait to see what the Lord will tell me. The Lord gave me this answer. `Right it down what I reveal to you.'"*

Out of this book we see five steps to receiving an impression from the holy spirit.

1. Withdraw
2. Wait
3. Watch
4. Write
5. Worship -- which is expressing my love to God

1. WITHDRAW

The very first thing if you're going to hear God speak to you is you need to withdraw. That means get alone in a quiet place. Habakkuk says, *"I will climb my watchtower."* That's a Hebrew expression that means, I'm going to get alone, get off by myself, eliminate external distractions so I can hear God speak. Find a quiet place alone.

In today's world that can be difficult at times, especially those of you who are mothers of preschoolers. I recently read this about Susanna Wesley who was the mother of 18 children. Two of her sons, Charles and John, shaped England in their day. Charles Wesley wrote several hundred songs and hymns which churches still sing today. John Wesley was the founder of the Methodist denomination. Both men had a profound affect. With 18 kids, how did Susanna Wesley ever find a quiet place to pray? This was her solution. Every afternoon she would sit in her living room and throw her apron up over her head. The children knew that when mother was in her rocking chair with her apron up over her head she was not to be disturbed. Where there's a will there's a way!

Find a place where you can be quiet and get alone with God and listen. One of the reasons why you don't hear God speak to you more is because you are surrounded by noise. The radio is

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always on, the TV is always on, the fax machine is always on, you've got your beeper on, you walk with a Walkman -- you're surrounded by noise. So you can't hear the still small voice of God.

The first step is you need to withdraw and get off by yourself. Get alone in a quiet place. Luke 5:16 says "*Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.*" Circle "often". Jesus led a very active life, yet in spite of that it says He often withdrew. He made it a habit. If He needed to do it, certainly we do too. We need to get away from the distractions, take the phone off the hook, otherwise you will be called while you're praying. Get alone, removing every external distraction possible.

If that's all that was needed for you to hear God it'd be real easy. Just get off by yourself and you'd hear God every time. But AFTER you get in a quiet spot then you need to quiet yourself, your own mind and your own emotions. That leads us to the second step.

2. WAIT

Waiting means to calm your thoughts and emotions. You need to quiet yourself down. The second thing Habakkuk says is "*I will station myself.*" The Good News says, "*I will wait.*" What does it mean to station yourself? It means don't move, stay put, don't run around, be still. When I station myself it means I'm going to stay there for awhile until something happens.

Habakkuk says, I'm going to station myself so I can hear God. God speaks to the person who takes the time to listen. The one reason why many of us don't hear God is we're just too busy. "God, I've got 30 seconds for you. Go!" Hurry is the death of prayer. If you're going to hear God speak, not only do you need to get in a quiet spot but then you must mentally and emotionally calm yourself down too.

Let me describe to you the reason why most prayer is unfulfilling for people. Here's the typical prayer experience. You're going to pray today and so get off by yourself. Maybe you happen to find a quiet place. But the moment you set down to pray, your mind starts reminding you of everything you haven't done yet. I find because I think at high RPM's about 90% of the time, when I sit down to talk to God, my mind is racing. It just flits from one subject to the next. I find it very difficult to focus unless I wait and I calm myself, by choice, mentally and emotionally. What happens is, You set down and you start thinking of all the unfinished tasks you have, all the responsibilities you've got, all the things you'd better not forget. If you're ever wondering what you have to do today, just set down and start to pray and you'll think of it all real quick. Because the devil makes sure all of those things crowd into your mind instantly.

When your mind starts moving from subject to subject you can't hear God. What do you do? I've discovered if I try to ignore it, it doesn't go away. If I say, I'll think of those things later, and I push them down, they just scream louder. So, I've come up with a real practical solution. When I start to pray I take a pad with me, like a post-a-note pad and something comes up when I pray, "Don't forget this..." I just stop and write it down and go back, pray some more and something else comes up, I stop and I write it down. I may end up with 15-20 things but at least I don't have to worry about forgetting it.

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Most people never get past that mental chaos stage. If by chance you do, then you come up with the second enemy before you hear God, and that is negative emotions. The next voice you usually hear is your conscious. Satan loves to play on your conscious. He is the accuser of Christians. You start thinking of all the things that you're not doing, that you're guilty of, your sins, your faults, your weaknesses. Satan is screaming, "Guilty!" That doesn't make prayer any fun! If every time you sit down with a person to talk to them, they start criticizing you, pretty soon you'd start saying, I don't like to talk to that person. If every time you sit down to pray all of a sudden you'd just start feeling how bad you are and the things that are wrong in your life, then it's no wonder you're not going to want to pray.

That is not the voice of God. That's the voice of the devil and your own conscious which is always putting you down. The Bible says that for a believer *"There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ."* Satan is the accuser. God is a loving Father who wants to talk to you, not sit around and condemn you. To get past this you have got to decide, Am I going to focus on what's wrong with me or am I going to focus on God's love? He wants to encourage you. He wants to lift you up. He wants to love you.

How do you do that? How do you calm your thoughts and emotions? Let me give you a Biblical technique for tuning into God. This isn't something I got out of a meditation or self help book. This is right out of the book of Psalms. David said I do two things mentally and emotionally so I can hear God.

1. Relax your body. Ps. 46:10 *"Be still and know that I am God."* Circle "be still". The first thing you've got to do if you're going to relax your mind is you've got to relax your body. You need to let go, be still, get comfortable. The Bible says David sat before the Lord when he prayed. Get yourself in a comfortable position. Let go of muscle tension. Your body affects your attitudes. If you don't feel good physically it affects your emotions and your moods. Your body does influence your attitudes. They're tied together. As your body relaxes so does your mind. Just relax your body. Be still, the Bible says. Once I've got my body still then...

2. Wait in silence. Ps. 62:5 *"For God alone my soul waits in silence."* Waiting means it takes time. It's difficult to calm down in a hurry. Forcing yourself to calm down quickly does not work. Trying to force yourself to calm down is about as affective as forcing yourself to go to sleep. It doesn't work. You can't force yourself to go to sleep. You just have to wait until you go to sleep. Sometimes that takes a while for your body and your mind to get the RPM's down. It just takes time! God speaks to people who take the time to listen. If you're in a hurry, you're not going to hear God speak. You must withdraw and then you wait in silence, which calms your thoughts and your emotions.

2 Kings 3:15 says that Elijah asked for soft music to be played while he tuned into God to find the answer to a question he had. He said "bring in the harpist" and he had a harpist play while he tuned into God. I've found in my own life sometimes the quickest way to calm down is to put on a praise tape, some slow Christian music. I just start listening to it and it shifts my body, my mind, my emotions into a lower gear so I can learn to hear God. Once your body is still and once your mind is quiet then you become sensitive to hearing God speak. Inner calm opens the intercom to God and you can hear Him.

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Some of you are saying, this sounds like TM -- transcendental meditation. It's the exact opposite of transcendental meditation. TM and humanist meditation says you want to make your mind go blank. That's the goal of it. The goal of prayer is not to make your mind go blank. The goal of prayer is to hear -- tune in -- to the voice of God so you can talk to Him and He can talk to you. Withdraw and then wait.

3. WATCH

Let God give you a mental picture. The third thing Habakkuk says is *"I will look to see what He says to me."* Circle "look". He says, I will look at what God says. It seems to me to make more sense to say I will listen to what God says. You listen to what people say, you don't look at what people say. Why did he say this?

An important key to hearing God is to understand that God's voice is often visual. God often wants to speak through a mental picture. There are hundreds of examples of this in scripture where people were praying and God gave those people a mental picture or vision. It's all through scripture. It's the primary way God contacts people -- through impressions in your mind. He gives you a mental picture or image or vision inside your head.

Examples: Abraham, Jacob, Job, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah... New Testament: Peter, John, Paul.

This is the number one way God speaks to people, by giving them a mental picture. I think that's the reason why Jesus says several times, *"Watch and pray."* There is a visual element to prayer. Some of you have no idea what I'm talking about. But if you'll grasp it, it will open up a whole new area of your life in relationship to Christ.

Some of you are saying, "I thought visualizing was New Age." The counterfeit type is. Satan has never had an original thought in his life. He can't create because he's not the creator. Only God is the creator. Satan can only copy, pervert and counterfeit what God already does. So whatever God does, Satan tries to counterfeit it. For instance, God gives gifted, godly teachers and preachers so Satan comes up with false teachers and preachers. God creates real miracles. Satan comes along and he does phony miracles, fake, counterfeit. The Bible says just because you see a miracle doesn't mean it's from God. There are counterfeit miracles. God creates genuine fellowship. That's what he made the church for so that there is support, love and people helping each other, genuine koinina, genuine fellowship. Satan comes along and tries to create false fellowship such as beer commercials -- "It doesn't get any better than this!" If you think it doesn't get any better than that you've got a lot to learn. That's false fellowship. Beer commercials don't sell beer, they sell fellowship. They show people having a good time. People think if they drink that then they'll have a good time! Everything that God does, Satan tries to counterfeit.

God, in the book of Psalms, teaches us how to tune into Him through Biblical meditation and Biblical visualizing. What does Satan do? He comes along and creates counterfeits of it. New age channelers are simply trying to counterfeit communion with God.

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A counterfeit of anything is simply proof that the real exists. Have you ever seen a counterfeit three dollar bill? No, nobody's dumb enough to counterfeit one because there isn't a real three dollar bill. What about a counterfeit plastic bag? No, because a plastic bag has no value. Counterfeit is proof that something exists and that it has value. It bothers me that satan has robbed many believers from the joy of intimately knowing God in a personal way by getting them to believe that all meditation or visualizing is new age. That's just not true! God thought it up first. Anything that God creates can be perverted or misused. Sex is a good example. God meant sex to be a wonderful expression within the bounds of a committed marriage. Satan comes along and perverts it, misuses it, counterfeits it. But that doesn't mean that the real thing doesn't exist, it does.

I'm simply saying this: God gave you the ability to imagine. Don't let the devil take it away from you.

You withdraw, and then you wait, and then you watch. And you watch for the real thing. What does that mean?

Ephesians 1:18 *"I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened so that you may know the hope to which He has called you."* He says, "I pray that the eyes of your heart will be opened". I thought the eyes were in my head? He's not talking about physical eyes. He's talking about spiritual eyes. Spiritual senses. When you were born physically you got a set of physical senses. Hear, taste, touch, smell, feel. When you were born spiritually you got reborn and got a set of spiritual senses: spiritual eyes, spiritual ears. Have you ever been reading the Bible... you've read a verse a dozen times but all of a sudden it pops out at you? God just opened your spiritual eyes. The Scripture says in John 3 *"Except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of heaven."* There is an unseen part of reality that we don't see that you can only see with your spiritual eyes. But it's just as real. None of you see God here but He's more real than this building which you do see. The building will eventually decay but God's not going to. God is saying, I want you to learn to see from My perspective, from My viewpoint.

Many of you are naturally visual thinkers. There are two kinds of thinkers: visual thinkers and digital thinkers. I don't happen to be a visual thinker; I'm a digital thinker. I don't think in bright beautiful pictures. A lot of you do, though. And that's very normal. God made you that way. Studies have shown that between 50-75% of the population see in pictures. Those of you who do it know what I'm talking about. When you read the Bible you don't just read the story, you see the story in your mind. You can see it happening. You think it that way. That means it's going to be easier for you to let God give you a picture than it is for the rest of us.

But what about the rest of us who don't think that way? The Bible says in Hebrews 5:14 *"Our spiritual senses must be exercised"*. You can develop the ability to see with your spiritual eyes if you'll practice and let God work on it in your life. You can train yourself. When you quiet yourself down and get calm and all the distractions are out of the way, then you can simply say, "Jesus, is there anything You want to show me? Do You want to give me an idea, an impression?"

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4. WRITE

Record the ideas that you receive. Notice what Habakkuk did. *"The Lord gave me this answer, 'Write down clearly what I reveal to you.'"* Get the progression: chapter 1, Habakkuk gives six questions to God. chapter 2, he waits, he quiets himself, and he watches and the Lord says, "Here's what I want you to do, Write down clearly what I reveal to you." In Chapter one he writes down his prayer to God, what his questions are to God. In Chapter two, he writes down God's answers back to him.

What does that have to do with me? Many of you, your prayer life has got in a rut -- it's boring. You don't like to pray because you end up saying the same thing over and over. You're stuck in a rut and a routine.

Solution to break out of the rut: Write out your prayers as you think them. Buy a spiral binder, a three ring notebook, it doesn't matter what it is and as you're praying, write out your prayers while you're praying it. This is called the spiritual habit of journaling. Almost every great Christian in history has journalized. They wrote down their prayers, what they wanted to say to God and then they'd wait and then what they felt impressed of God they'd write that down, what God said back to them. There are many benefits to doing this.

You ask, Is it ok to write while you're praying? Of course. How do you think we got the Bible. How we got the Bible is godly men and women were praying and talking to God and when God talked back to them, they wrote it down. If you want an example of journalizing, there's a whole book on it. It's called Psalms. In Psalms, almost every one, David starts with a question. God, how come my enemies are prospering when I'm trying to live for You, and I'm not making it? And then he waits and watches and he writes down God's answer. We call those the Psalms.

There are many benefits to developing this habit of journalizing. In the first place it keeps you focused. It gives your body something to do while you're praying. It keeps you focused. Your mind won't wander when you're writing down what you're trying to think about.

Another benefit is it allows you to remember what you've said to God and what God has said back to you. You don't have to learn a lesson over and over. Because you wrote it down and you go back and review it.

A third benefit, and we're going to talk about this next week, is that later it allows you to test the impression. The Bible says real clearly that not every idea you get is from God. Some of them are from the devil, some of them are from God, some of them are self inspired. How do you know the difference? Next week I'm going to share with you the six ways to test an impression. but you don't want to go testing and analyzing your prayers while you're praying. That ruins the whole spirit of the thing. So you just pray and receive what God wants to say to you, you write it down, and later you can go back and test it and look at it.

5. WORSHIP

You thank God for speaking to you. Habakkuk 3:2 *"Oh, Lord, now I've heard your report and I worship you in awe."* He says, now that You've spoken to me, I love You and I want to express

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my love to You. When you have received God's loving response, you've asked a question and you've heard an answer in your mind and you write it down, it's going to make you want to love the Lord more and draw you closer. This turns prayer from a monologue into a dialogue, a conversation.

I was bored to death with prayer until I learned how to do this. It was like talking to a brick wall. I never expected an answer. I never expected to hear from God. It was just me talking. It didn't matter if anyone was there or not. I don't like to just talk to myself. But once I realized that God does want to have a conversation with me -- we talk about Jesus wanting to have a relationship, you can't have a relationship without people talking. If you do all the talking, you don't have a relationship. But you've got to take these steps and make time.

Sometimes I've asked God a question and I've waited and sensed that God was saying, "I don't want to tell you right now." That's OK. He knows what's best. It's like sometimes when I talk to my wife Kay. "Is there anything you want to say to me?" She says, "No, everything's OK." Sometimes I go to God and say, "God is there anything You want to say to me?" He says, "No, everything's OK." I don't have to have something every time. But I'll say this: If you'll practice these and begin to develop them in your life, more times than not, God will talk to you. Because He's interested in your life. This is the difference in knowing about God and knowing God.

There are really three kinds of relationships you can have. You can believe in God. That's the lowest form of relationship. Or you can be acquainted with God. That's a little bit deeper relationship. Or you can be the friend of God. Jesus wants that kind of relationship to you. He says, I want to call you My friends, where we commune and discuss and dialogue and converse and know each other. God wants you to be His friend.

If you will begin to practice these Biblical steps it will open up a whole new dimension of your Christian life. It will become a great adventure to you. A great joy. I say that from personal experience.

This is not the only way God talks to you, obviously. But this is a key way that God can get your attention and you can hear Him talk to you.

Next week we're going to talk about How Do You Test God's Voice. 1 John 4:1 says "Don't always believe everything you hear just because someone says it's a message from God. Test it first to see if it really is." Next week we'll talk about those ways to test God's word, to test if an impression is from Him.