



# HEARING GOD



## Sermon Based Curriculum for Small Groups

26<sup>th</sup> September – 17<sup>th</sup> October

## INTRODUCTION

‘Does God still speak to people?’, ‘How can I hear God’s voice?’, ‘Does God only speak to a few chosen people?’, ‘How do I know this is God speaking to me?’. I have been asked these questions many times – especially by younger people. This series is dedicated to answering those questions in a way that is practically helpful, theologically sound and experientially proven.

Hearing God? A daring idea, some would say—presumptuous and even dangerous. But what if we are made for it? What if the human system simply will not function properly without it? There are good reasons to think it will not. The fine texture as well as the grand movements of life show our need to hear God. Isn’t it more presumptuous and dangerous, in fact, to undertake human existence *without* hearing from God. ... Hearing God is but one dimension of a richly interactive relationship, and obtaining guidance is but one facet of hearing God.

The notes for this series are based on two books: *Four Keys to Hearing God’s Voice*, by Mark and Patti Virkler, and *Hearing God – Developing a Conversational Relationship with God*, by Dallas Willard.

A summary of *Hearing God* was found at: *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God by Dallas Willard - Listening To God* (<https://listeningtogod.org/2020/10/07/hearing-god-developing-a-conversational-relationship-with-god-by-dallas-willard/>).

Mark Virkler also has a website that summarizes his book (*Four Keys to Hearing God’s Voice | Christian Leadership University* ([cluonline.com/godsvoice/](http://cluonline.com/godsvoice/)))

Much of the content and ‘voice’ in the ‘further notes on this theme’ sections below come from these summaries.

This booklet is laid out so that your gathering as a home group each week will follow the four W's rhythm of Welcome, Worship, Word, Works. I hope this helps you and makes the journey meaningful. The times in brackets are a guideline that should help to keep you on track.

### **Welcome (10 minutes)**

This is the time of fellowship, mutual concern and 'catch up' with each other.

### **Worship (10 minutes)**

I will suggest a Psalm for this moment. Ask one person to read it slowly and prayerfully. As you listen to it allow this to be a moment of worship, love, devotion, adoration, thanksgiving and praise.

You can do your prayers of intercession for each other and society at this time, or at the end of the gathering.

### **Word (60 minutes)**

Here I guide you through a Bible Study. Then you will reflect on the sermon. I will give you a simple summary of the theme, followed by a number of suggested questions on the theme.

It is up to the group leader to decide whether there is enough time for all of the questions – and to select which questions to discuss if there are too many.

### **Works (5 minutes)**

Here I will suggest an activity that will help you put the lesson into practice in your daily life.

I really pray that this booklet will be a useful tool to help you hear when God is speaking to you (which has been often).



John Wessels

Sunday, 26<sup>th</sup> September

## Four Keys to Hearing God's Voice

### Welcome (10 minutes)

This is the time of fellowship, mutual concern and 'catch up' with each other.

### Worship (10 minutes)

Psalm 62

### Word (60 minutes)

1. Read Habakkuk 2:1-2 and Revelation 1:9-11.
  - a. Because of the very specific use of these passages the questions for this study are below at # 5.
2. Which of the Sunday services did you attend or watch this past Sunday? What was/were the main point/s of the sermon?
3. Which part of the message touched you on a personal level?
4. Here are some further notes on the theme:

Christianity is unique among religions, for it alone offers a **personal relationship** with the Creator beginning here and now, and lasting throughout eternity. Jesus declared, "This is eternal life – that they may *know God*" (Jn. 17:3). Unfortunately, many in the Church miss the great blessing of fellowship with our Lord because we have lost the ability to recognize that voice. Though John 10:27 promises us that "My sheep hear My voice".

**Key: God's voice in your heart often sounds like a flow of spontaneous thoughts.**

Habakkuk knew the sound of God speaking to him (Hab. 2:2). Elijah described it as a still, small voice (1 Kings 19:12). I had always listened for an inner audible voice, and God does speak that way at times. However, I have found that usually, God's voice comes as spontaneous thoughts, or flowing thoughts.

Experience indicates that we perceive spirit-level communication as spontaneous thoughts, impressions and visions, and Scripture confirms this in many ways.

Therefore, when you want to hear God's voice, you tune to chance-encounter, spontaneous or flowing thoughts. Even Satan's thoughts come to us as spontaneous thoughts, which is why we are commanded to 'take every thought captive' (2 Cor. 10:5). I am sure all of us have experienced spontaneous evil thoughts coming to us, even attacking right in the middle of our prayer and worship times. So, I conclude that analytical thoughts are mine, spontaneous good thoughts come from the Holy Spirit, and spontaneous evil thoughts come from evil spirits.

- **God's thoughts** line up with Scripture and with God's various names: Comforter, Counsellor, Teacher, Giver of Life, Healer and Deliverer. God's thoughts edify, exhort, and comfort. They are pure, peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering (James 3:17).
- **Satan's thoughts** line up with his various names: accuser, adversary, thief who comes to kill, steal and destroy. His thoughts condemn and bring despair, rejection, fear, doubt, unbelief and in general, misery. Satan's thoughts bring jealousy and selfish ambition (James 3:14,15).

**Key: Become still so you can sense God's flow of thoughts.**

Habakkuk said, "I will stand on my guard post..." (Hab. 2:1). Habakkuk knew that to hear God's quiet, inner, spontaneous thoughts, he had to first go to a quiet place and still his own thoughts and emotions.

Clear focus provides the purest flow: To receive the pure word of God, it is very important that my heart be properly focused as I become still because the intuitive flow comes out of the vision being held before one's eyes. If I fix my eyes upon Jesus, the intuitive flow is pure and comes from Jesus. But if I fix my gaze upon some desire of my heart, the intuitive flow is affected by that desire. To have a pure flow I must become still and carefully fix my eyes upon Jesus (Heb. 12:2).

**Key: Fix your eyes upon Jesus and ask to receive visions or messages.**

Habakkuk said, "I will keep **watch to see**," (Hab. 2:1,2). Habakkuk was actually looking for a vision as he prayed. We say, 'A picture is worth 1000 words'. I believe that is because pictures are the language of the heart. We notice that Jesus used pictures constantly as He taught (Matt. 13:34). When I use pictures in my prayer time, fixing my eyes on Jesus, I am speaking the language of my heart and that moves me quickly into heart/spirit realities shifting me beyond my mind.

Hear God through illumined Scripture: Knowing God through the Bible is a vital foundation to hearing that voice in your heart, so you are encouraged to have a solid commitment to knowing and obeying God's revealed will that comes to us through journeying deeply with Scripture. We are commanded to meditate on Scriptures (Josh. 1:8). As we pray over Scripture, we find verses leap off the page and hit us between the eyes. This is another very powerful way that God speaks to us. Regular scriptural meditation is commanded by God and is a must for the effective Christian life.

**Key: Journaling, the writing out of your prayers and God's answers, brings great freedom in hearing God's voice.**

God told Habakkuk to record the vision (Hab. 2:2). This was not an isolated command. The Scriptures record many examples of individual's prayers and God's replies (e.g. the Psalms, many of the prophets, Revelation).

I call the process 'two-way journaling', and I have found it to be a fabulous catalyst for clearly discerning God's inner, spontaneous flow. As I journal I am able to **write in faith** for long periods of time, simply believing it is God. I know that what I believe I have received from God must be tested. However, testing involves doubt and doubt blocks divine communication, so I do not want to test while I am trying to receive (Heb. 11:6). With journaling, I can receive in faith, knowing that when the flow has ended I can test and examine it carefully, making sure that it lines up with Scripture (1 Thess. 5:21).

The four keys appear again in Revelation: John used the same four keys that Habakkuk did. In Revelation 1:9-11 we find he was in the spirit (stillness), he heard a voice behind him (tuned to spontaneity), saying, "Write in a book (journaling), what you see (vision)". So, in both Old and New Testaments we find the same four keys being used to receive God's voice. Don't worry about the order of the keys. Just make sure you are using all four keys.

As a **Package** these four keys work (Stop! Look! Listen! Write!): They get the job done! People hear. We trust that if you use these four keys **together**, you will hear God's voice. Try them as a bundle, and see how they work for you.

5. Discuss these questions:
  - a. From your experience what do you know to be particularly true in the four keys outlined above?
  - b. What do you think about the definition “God’s voice in your heart often sounds like a flow of spontaneous thoughts”? What is helpful about this definition?
  - c. Are there steps that you do not understand?
  - d. Is there something you are not comfortable with?

**Works (5 minutes)**

Practise these four keys at least once this week?

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**Sunday, 3<sup>rd</sup> October**

## **Developing a Conversational Relationship with God**

### **Welcome (10 minutes)**

This is the time of fellowship, mutual concern and 'catch up' with each other.

### **Worship (10 minutes)**

Psalm 32

### **Word (60 minutes)**

1. Instead of one passage this week I would like you to read the following:
  - a. John 17.1-3; John 10.27; Revelation 1.4-6; John 14.17; John 15.14; Romans 8.11-17; Ephesians 1.19-20; 1 Corinthians 2: 15 to 16; Isaiah 58: 9, 11. Now answer the following questions:
  - b. How do these passages lay a foundation for a conversational relationship with God?
  - c. Discuss the partnership and oneness we can have with God.
  - d. In the light of these passages, does it make sense to not have a conversational relationship with God?
2. Which of the Sunday services did you attend or watch this past Sunday? What was/were the main point/s of the sermon?
3. Which part of the message touched you on a personal level?
4. Here are some further notes on the theme:

The ideal for hearing from God is finally determined by who God is, what kind of beings we are and what a personal relationship between ourselves and God should be like. Our failure to hear God has its deepest roots in a failure to understand, accept and grow into a conversational relationship with God, the sort of relationship suited to friends who are mature personalities in a shared enterprise, no matter how different they may be in other respects.

### **What exactly is God's presence and how do we experience it?**

Conversational Relationship – Willard calls this the most important form of God's presence in the relationship between God and human beings. Willard



discusses God's guidance and highlights that God's guidance is personal not mechanical: 'Ideally, personal guidance brings things to the desired outcome but, at the same time, allows the other person's mind to be guided to its fullest capacity without coercing that person's will'. God, Willard argues, does not guide mechanically – but personally:

For this purpose, God must communicate with you, the one who is to be guided. This is the only means by which God can have an impact on you and yet still leave you with the mental and spiritual space to retain integrity as a free personality. You can live as God's friend yet also govern your own life.

Dallas says there are two ways that God guides personally:

- Communicating through words – he points to many examples in the Scriptures where God speaks directly to his people.
- Communicating through shared activity – 'we come to understand what God wants us to understand through immersion with him in his work. We understand what he is doing so well that we often know exactly what he is thinking and intending to do. I believe that this is a great part of the condition described by the apostle Paul as *having the mind of Christ*.'

The second is more important and happens 'when we work or play closely with another and know the intentions and thoughts of the other's mind by our awareness of what they are focused on. Someone else can work with me effectively only if they can see what I am doing without having to be told what I am thinking and what they should do to help'.

Dallas examines three mistaken views as to how God speaks to us:

A message a minute: 'God is either telling you what to do at every turn of the road or he is at least willing and available to tell you if you would only ask him.' Not only is this not supported in the life of the Spirit filled apostles, 'extensive observations of individuals who try to live with this model, or at least profess to, show that they simply cannot do it and that any sustained effort to do so leads quickly to disaster.'

It's all in the Bible: For Willard, this view 'is seriously misguided and very harmful.' He asserts that the Bible does provide a lot of direct instructions about how to live our lives but there is no guidance in terms of what song to use on Sunday worship or what the theme and text should be for the

sermon. Nor will it provide the details about many important areas as to how to live your life. 'The principles are all there, however. I happily insist that the Bible says all that needs to be said or can be said, so far as principles are concerned. But the principles have to be applied before they can be lived out, and it is largely at the point of application that almost everything imaginable has been 'proven' from the Bible.'

Whatever comes is God's will: This can be described as 'accept everything that happens as the guidance of God.' 'When we accept whatever comes we are not receiving guidance. The fact that something happens does not indicate that it is God's will.'

5. Discuss these questions:

- a. Have you known people who were so close to God that they were never lonely? What do you think of the prospects of such a relationship for you? For others in the cotemporary world?
- b. Discuss and reflect on some instances where you are sure God acted with you. How can you learn more from this from experience?
- c. Which of the three mistaken views have applied in your life journey? What did you find helpful about this teaching on 'mistaken views'?
- d. What was most appealing for you in these notes?
- e. What is most difficult?

**Works (5 minutes)**

What was it like to practice the 'four keys' in the past week? Resolve to practice them again, adding what you have learned this week.

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**Sunday, 10<sup>th</sup> October**

## **The Still, Small voice and its Rivals**

### **Welcome (10 minutes)**

This is the time of fellowship, mutual concern and 'catch up' with each other.

### **Worship (10 minutes)**

Psalm 46

### **Word (60 minutes)**

1. Read 1 Corinthians 2.6-16 and answer the following questions:
  - a. Discuss what this passage teaches about spiritual communication from God as Spirit to your spirit. There is a lot here. You will need to read the passage a few times – and in various translations.
2. Which of the Sunday services did you attend or watch this past Sunday? What was/were the main point/s of the sermon?
3. Which part of the message touched you on a personal level?
4. Here are some further notes on the theme:

Willard says that God 'addresses us in various ways':

In terms of overall importance, the written Word and Jesus, the living Word, aren't to be compared to a voice or vision used by God to speak to an individual. And from among the individual's experiences of hearing God, the 'still, small voice' has a vastly greater role than anything else. What I think Willard means here is that Scripture is a vital place of God speaking – but the message you 'take home' as the 'still small voice' of God speaking to you is essentially the moment of hearing God.

He defines what he means by the 'still, small voice' drawing from 1 Kings 19:11-13.

The translation might just as well read 'a gentle whisper of a voice' or 'a gentle whispering'. Each expression places the emphasis on the unobtrusiveness of the medium through which the message came. They are all seemingly unremarkable, inconspicuous, unassuming and perhaps

not immediately noticed. The still small voice bears the stamp of his personality quite clearly and in a way we will learn to recognize ... [and] the medium through which the message comes is diminished almost to the vanishing point, taking the form of thoughts that are our thoughts, though these thoughts are not from us.

To hear God's voice, we must seek God. When I seek for something, I look for it everywhere. It's when we seek God earnestly, prepared to go out of our way to examine anything that might be God's overture toward us including obvious things like Bible verses or our own thoughts—that God's promises to be found (Jeremiah 29:13).

It is therefore natural and right that God's word comes to us in forms that we must struggle to understand. This is even true of the Bible, which is very explicit in many respects, but still requires persistent and energetic work to understand.

5. Discuss these questions:

- a. Share your experiences of the 'still, small voice' of God speaking to you. Don't rush this. Share your experiences with each other.
- b. Do you understand the relationship between God speaking to us in Scripture and God speaking with the 'still, small voice'? Why is the latter prioritized? Does that mean the Bible is less important? Make sure you grasp this deep point.
- c. How do you respond to the assertion that it is good that it is hard work to understand God's leading?

### **Works (5 minutes)**

What was it like to practise the 'four keys' in the past week? Resolve to practise them again, adding what you have learned this week.

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**Sunday, 17<sup>th</sup> October**

## **Discernment**

### **Welcome (10 minutes)**

This is the time of fellowship, mutual concern and 'catch up' with each other.

### **Worship (10 minutes)**

Psalm 111

### **Word (60 minutes)**

1. Read John 10.1-30 and answer the following questions:
  - a. It is a fact of nature that sheep recognize and respond to the voice of the one who takes care of them (John 10.3-4). What do you make of how Jesus uses this metaphor to explain the interaction between his voice and his people (John 10.14-27)?
  - b. Compile a list of the qualities of the good shepherd. Then make a list of the qualities of the stranger / hired hand. These qualities are an important start to discerning that which is from God from that which is not. Discuss the list and its application.
2. Which of the Sunday services did you attend or watch this past Sunday? What was/were the main point/s of the sermon?
3. Which part of the message touched you on a personal level?
4. Here are some further notes on the theme:

How do we know whether what we hear is from God? Dallas' simple answer is: 'By experience'. He then re-iterates one of his central themes: the teachings of the Bible, no matter how thoroughly studied and firmly believed, can never by themselves constitute our personal walk with God. They have to be applied to us as individuals and to our individualized circumstances, or they remain no part of our lives.

He then launches into the main subject of the chapter. He writes about how animals learn to recognize the voice of their trainers and how we learn to distinguish colours by experience. In the same way ...

those who have been given the additional birth—the new birth through the redemptive message of Christ that has entered their lives—can learn by experience to hear God as God speaks, to recognize God’s word and confidently interact with it.

We may mistakenly think that if God spoke to us, we would automatically know who is speaking, without having to learn, but that is simply a mistake—and one of the most harmful mistakes for those trying to hear God’s word.

He addresses the three lights often used in helping us discern God’s will:

- Circumstances
- Impressions / Promptings of the Spirit
- The Bible

Dallas doesn’t buy into the three lights completely. Willard doesn’t completely dismiss the three lights, but says: The three lights are simply the factors that we must consider in the process of making a responsible judgment and decision about what we are to do.

The voice of God is not itself any one of the three lights nor is it all of them together. But the inner teaching of which John speaks in his first epistle—the voice or word of God coming to individuals, as repeatedly displayed in biblical events—usually comes to us in conjunction with:

- responsible study and meditation on the Bible
- experience of the various kinds of movements of the Spirit in our heart
- intelligent alertness to the circumstances that befall us

He concludes this line of reasoning with the following:

when God speaks and we recognize the voice as God’s voice, we do so because our familiarity with that voice enables us to recognize it. We do not recognize it because we are good at playing a guessing game...

Dallas believes that we can learn from how we distinguish distinct human voices in learning to recognize God’s voice. There are three factors that we use to distinguish human voices:

Quality, Spirit, Content

Quoting E Stanley Jones: Perhaps the rough distinction is this: The voice of the subconscious argues with you, tries to convince you; but the inner voice of God does not argue, does not try to convince you. It just speaks, and it is self-authenticating. It has the feel of the voice of God within it.

Another distinguishing characteristic of God’s voice is a spirit of exalted peacefulness and confidence, of joy, of sweet reasonableness and of goodwill. God’s voice is not the voice of a bully. It will not run over you and your will.

Next, Dallas says the following: In order to qualify as the voice of God, a thought, perception or other experience must conform to the principles—the fundamental truths—of Scripture. It is the principles, not the incidentals, of Scripture that count here.

5. Discuss these questions:

- a. What has experience taught you about discernment? Share this with the group.
- b. Discuss the ‘three lights’ – their usefulness and their limitations.
- c. Discuss the three things that normally accompany God speaking to us. In other words, discuss the three activities that help us in discerning God’s voice.
- d. How do you think ‘Quality, Spirit, Content’ helps in recognizing God’s voice?
- e. What is the difference between the principles and the incidentals of Scripture? Give some examples.

**Works (5 minutes)**

What was it like to practice the ‘four keys’ in the past week? Resolve to practice them again, adding what you have learned this week.

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### **Want to read and learn more?**

Both of the books are in our Trinity library.

#### Online Videos:

- "4 Keys to Hearing God's Voice" Mark Virkler Pt.1 - YouTube (<https://youtu.be/oqvi8-86Rak>)
- "4 Keys to Hearing God's Voice" Mark Virkler Pt 2 - YouTube (<https://youtu.be/SwkSHuuig3k>)
- Dallas Willard hearing God - Bing video (<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=dallas+willard+hearing+God&FORM=HDRSC4>)