

GOD TOLD ME

Discerning Whether You Really Heard God
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Years ago, in a church I pastor-ed, the son of a member was driving home from east Texas to California. With an aberrant view of faith, he was convinced God told him to just believe and his tank of gas would take him all the way home. He taped an “I believe” sign over the gas gauge and ran out of fuel and faith in the sparsely populated west Texas prairie. “God told me” can be a shield of stubbornness.

Glib use of “God told me” language can also indicate immaturity, insecurity, and pride. Insecurity, in particular, seeks high ground, beyond the reach of probing questions. Yet God does speak. Have you ever noticed that in the first encounters between God and man, God did all the talking?

A Voice with Purpose

The power of God’s blessing comes in the pronouncement—the speaking and hearing. Through hearing God’s voice, Adam received God’s gift of dominion, empowerment, and purpose. But Adam also received life boundaries: “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen. 2:16–17). God tells Adam to *grow* the garden, for it has uncultivated potential. But He also tells Adam to *guard* it, for it faces some unthinkable peril.

Prayer dances with these two—potential and peril. If Adam hears God and embraces the discipline of the boundary, he and the earth will be blessed. If Adam violates the boundary, he and the earth lose the blessing. Hearing God engages opportunity and obedience, dignity and discipline. Experiencing the blessing necessitates a bounded, spirit-controlled life. God longs to speak a blessing over *each* of His children, but our busyness prevents a quality relationship with Him, so we cannot hear Him clearly. Only prepared hearts can hear our talking, relational God.

Intimate encounters are sacred and not to be bantered about. Paul refers to his life-altering moment in the third heaven as an unutterable, sacred thing (2 Cor. 12:2–4). When God speaks so forcefully, He usually does so for the sake of our clarity and confidence. The appropriate response is humility and deep dependence on the Spirit to steward the disclosure toward radical obedience. Peter’s profound rooftop encounter separated him from traditions that prevented the church from embracing Gentiles (Acts 10:9–16). God used a forthright approach to jar Peter from his limited perspective. Still, Peter was not exempt from rigorous inquiry by his peers. When the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul,” the church didn’t immediately respond with, “Great idea. Let’s do it now!” Rather, they prayed and tested the word (Acts 13:2–)

Corporate Discernment and Confirmation

In a culture prone to hyper-individualism, we privatize “words” from the Lord. But we need to learn to hear the voice of God *together*. How do we corporately discern God’s voice, “test” the Lord’s leading, and create relational accountability? We desperately need to cultivate the capacity to hear God and to reflect with trusted friends what they are hearing. In a multitude of counselors emerges the confirmation and correction necessary for spiritual health and protection (Prov. 15:22). The New Testament connects private moments with God and corporate discernment. “Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation” (2 Peter 1:20).

History records a long list of humans who “heard from God,” and with exalted revelation they started movements with devastating consequences. Who can forget Jim Jones? Or David Koresh? Such leaders set themselves apart from the larger Christian community by claiming exalted truth. They increasingly represented the sound of their own voice as God’s voice. And cult followers surrendered their capacity to hear God for

themselves. This tragedy has caused some Christian leaders to reject altogether the idea of God speaking today. What we desperately need is balance because we face a greater problem in ignoring God's voice.

Don't Ignore or Quench

The Book of Hebrews pleads, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion" (Heb. 3:15). Disobedience ultimately causes spiritual deafness. But the more we listen and obey, the more God lovingly speaks into our lives and the Scriptures come alive. Paul anticipated a spirit-energized people to whom God spoke—privately and corporately. To Thessalonica, where some had abused prophetic words, he nevertheless urged, "Do not quench the Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good" (1 Thess. 5:19–21). Paul conceded that not every spontaneous utterance is a good word. So the church needed to test and prove any "words from the Lord." If the essence was good (*kalos*)—worthy, honorable in character, noble, sound—Paul said to seize it. This implies a high level of corporate discernment.

Peter offers us "a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shines in a dark place" (2 Peter 1:19, kjv). The International Standard Version says it is "confirmed beyond doubt." It is "like a lamp shining in a dark place." Peter exhorts us to pay attention to the sure and certain word of Scripture. There should be no war between advocates of contemporary disclosures of the Spirit and those locked in Scripture. They are the same! God speaks consistently and congruently. He does not contradict Himself. He does not speak in isolation. He confirms His intentions in the mouths of multiple witnesses. The Spirit who speaks today is the same Spirit who sealed the revelation into the holy record, and the only One who can unwrap its import for any present hour.

Power of Fresh Hearing

Fresh words—when anchored in the biblical text—propel us forward. The prophets cried, "Thus says the Lord," and they connected the contemporary message with some forgotten truth needing recovery. Notice Peter's alignment with Scripture: "Recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles" (2 Peter 3:2). He cites three markers for testing truth: the prophets, the Lord, and the apostles. The word given by the apostles found a reference point in the Word, Christ. And Christ is the fulfillment of the prophets of old.

Godly words exalt Christ and are consistent with His ministry. They never diminish the finished work of Christ on the cross, His death and burial, or His resurrection, ascension, and present enthronement. A fresh word will be received because others also hear the voice of God. He does not speak in a vacuum. A fresh word will increase faith. It will prepare for some opportunity or challenge. It may direct, but always in ways consistent with Scripture. It will humble those who hear it. It will unify and edify. But at the heart of an aberrant, errant word is pride and division, because a *false* prophet is never a humble, unifying servant.

Simple Steps to Hearing

God still speaks today. We don't need to fear the errant word if we apply practical listening methods.

1. Don't *try* to hear from God! Read the Scriptures. Park an open Bible on your lap. Tell God you want Him in your life. Wait. Listen.
2. If you hear "a word" from God, let it season. Find its connection points in Scripture. Let it grow in clarity and in conviction.
3. Test it. Ask God to confirm it. Share it with a small group. Be open, not defensive. Watch it expand as you discover that others have pieces and perspective you do not have.
4. Obey. Do so with witnesses. Do so humbly. Do so in faith.
5. Leave the results with God.

Twenty-six years ago my wife Barbara and I left pastoral ministry and launched a conference ministry—not as a result of a stark word from God but from a growing sense of awareness. The idea had seasoned for years. We

shared with a small group that we sensed it was time, and confirmation came quickly with financial support. Seven years later, in the middle of a phone call from a friend telling me about one of the earliest pastors prayer summits, God spoke to my heart: "You will do this!" I had no clue what that meant. With the direction of the late Terry Dirks, I began gathering pastors for an area-wide prayer summit. Simultaneously, I stepped into an intense season of spiritual warfare. God proved faithful. Then suddenly, doors opened to represent the pastoral prayer movement. I trekked through 100 cities and saw almost 5,000 pastors in the Southeast spend days praying together for their communities in dozens of cities. I backed into the prayer movement, hearing God and stumbling! I obeyed, sometimes boldly, sometimes reluctantly with breakthroughs and setbacks. Clear, crisp directions came with seasons of silence. We saw God's provision, yet persistence also demanded austere faith and resolve.

We learned that the most important thing in prayer is not what we say to God, but preparing our hearts to hear from Him. He wants to talk to us more than we want to talk with Him. And He is not nearly as disappointed *with* us when we fail to pray, as He is disappointed *for* us! From Genesis to Revelation we see the story of our Creator and Redeemer speaking and blessing. And He speaks His blessing over you and me.

P. DOUG SMALL is president and founder of Alive Ministries: Project Pray. He also serves as the international liaison for prayer ministries with the Church of God, Cleveland, TN.