

Called to Listen to the Spirit

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Preacher: Rev. Dr. Russell Herbert

[0 : 00] Well, so in our series this morning, we continue looking at stories from the book of Acts, where we learn from the early church about different things, different aspects of our calling, what it is to be a church some 2,000 years on. And the specific theme this morning is how we are called to listen to God. There are two phrases that scare the living daylight out of me. The first phrase that frightens me is if I ever come in through the front door at home and Tamara, my wife, is standing there and she's smiling and she says to me, notice anything different?

The other phrase that scares me is anything that begins with the words, God's told me. Now, you might find that shocking. I'm going to suggest there's a sense in which we should all have that sense of rightly positioned fear around that sort of claim. But to a watching world, a lot of people will actually say that Christians actually, we don't want to go anywhere near them because of this conviction that God can and does speak to them. So what I want to share with you are four hang-ups that I have with that phrase. Bear with me if this sounds like I'm a little bit heavy on the cynicism because wait for the second half. But what I want to do is unpack what I think are four things that in me wince a little at the phrase which I think if we're honest actually do with most of the people in the world and I think they are worth thinking about. And the first thing is this, that the hang-up that I have about the phrase God said to me is it's weird. It is. It's weird.

It is a weird, weird claim to say that the God who created the whole universe should actually choose to speak to me as an individual. A psychiatrist, an atheist, a psychiatrist writing actually a long time ago in the 1960s now called Thomas Zas. He was an atheist, he was very cynical and he was fairly controversial. He said this, if you talk to God you are praying. If God talks to you, you are schizophrenic. Now let me reassure you I don't agree with that. I think it's an outrageous thing to say.

But it's the way many people would look at us as Christians. And let's be honest, it is something, it is a claim. The conviction that God should speak to us and that we should listen attentively with the expectation that he would is a weird claim. And people don't think that as Christians we are weird. Therefore, if you ever get on a train and it's fairly busy, you've got a long journey to make and you think to yourself, you know, I really want some space. And there's an empty seat next to you and it hasn't got a reserved ticket there. And so you kind of do the thing where you get your coat or your bag and you put it on the seat next to you. And then when it pulls up at the station, a lot of people pile on. You kind of just, you pretend that you're reading a book and you haven't noticed. And people will think that somebody is in that seat. But they, because we're British, we don't like to ask. Somebody will come along and eventually will actually break your scheme and say, oh, is somebody sitting there? And you have to be honest. Oh, sorry. And then you move it off.

[3 : 52] Have you ever done that? Obviously, I'm the only person that ever does it. Actually, I don't do it because I've got a better strategy. Okay. If you're ever in that situation and you want some space on a long train journey, invest in one of these clerical collars, put it on and get the biggest Bible you can possibly get. No one will come near. It works every time.

If I can be serious, I think back to when I was a teenager and being part of the youth group that I was with and the different places we would go and different people I would meet, where people, adults would say, God has told me this and it would scare me.

I thought it was weird. Until I experienced it for myself. But I'll say a bit more about that in a minute. The second hang-up that I have about the phrase, God has said this to me, is because it can seem to defile logic.

After all, God has given us brains. If God made us, God gave us brains, God is surely the God of logic. So why would it be that he could sometimes apparently seem to defy that logic by saying something that seems to fly in the face of it?

[5 : 17] It appears to many that actually the claim God said to me, even if it's something that behind it is then leading to something that is an inherently good thing, but nevertheless the fact that it has with it the conviction that God has spoken it, can be the thin end of a very thick wedge.

The other end of which is the claim that God has told me to put explosives into a rucksack and get on board a plane. It seems illogical.

Connected to it, there is a third hang-up that I have about the phrase, God said to me. And it's this. It's the best, most effective, foolproof way of winning an argument with another Christian.

Disagreements in churches, and let's be honest, they do happen. If you disagree with another Christian, and you've run out of any kind of common sense or logic in your argument, and you can't find anything theological to back it up, and you can't find anything in the Bible to back it up, then there's the ultimate way of out-trumping the other in a disagreement.

And it's simply to say, well, God's told me to. Where do you go with that? The fourth hang-up is that it would appear to undermine the sense of mystery of God.

[6 : 56] Quite a few years ago now, a preacher by the name of Colin Morris did a series during Lent that was broadcast by the BBC called Let God Be God.

And in the opening talk on the mystery of God, he said this. The greatest challenge to faith in our time comes not from atheists denying God, but from believers diminishing him.

Treating him with sort of cosy familiarity and addressing him as though he were the old pal upstairs. There are Christians who have been modest enough to concede that they haven't the foggiest notion what is going on in the head of their pet budgie.

But they are serenely confident they know exactly what God thinks about the state of the economy, the Middle East crisis and nuclear power. Now, when we diminish God in this way, we devalue all his attributes so that his love is degraded into sentimentality, his power shades into benevolence, his holiness becomes prism.

So what do we make of this then? What is the point of thinking about listening to God if it's a load of nonsense that God could ever possibly speak to us?

[8 : 20] Where do we go with it? Does God speak? Well, of course he does. And it's something that is central and a key conviction to our Christian faith.

I mentioned hang-ups with the phrase. I've deliberately exaggerated it to make a point. But they were hang-ups that I had in a really pretty big way up until the age of when I was 17 years old. And without giving you the full story, I was walking back on my own, reasonably late at night, having been out with friends. And in the course of a few minutes, I felt that God had spoken to me, had challenged me as to where I was going with my life, and told me that I was going to end up as a Christian minister.

When I said I felt I heard God speak to me, I don't mean I heard an audible voice. I didn't hear that. It was more, though, than just a thought or a feeling. It was a genuine sense that something or someone was communicating something to me.

It was something that wouldn't go away. And if what I've just shared with you had never happened, well, I wouldn't be standing here speaking to you now. When we look back at Scripture, we see time and time again of stories where it is claimed that God has spoken to people.

[9 : 43] Indeed, the Bible would not exist were it not for the reality of that conviction. In Acts chapter 13 that we have this morning, we hear of how the Holy Spirit talks to some of the early Christians, how the Spirit, it is claimed, guided them, told them where to go and what to do, told them what to say.

The church would not exist were it not for the conviction that throughout the centuries God can and does speak to us in ways that are real and that are authentic.

So let's go back to those four hang-ups then and let's just think through them a bit more. Firstly, that claim, I started by saying that the claim that God can speak to us is weird.

Now, I stay with that hang-up, it is weird, in the sense that it's not something that would be considered by most people to be part of everyday experience.

It seems to be counter-cultural. But just because something is weird and counter-cultural and considered by many to be very strange, does not in itself make it false.

[10 : 55] And when you think about life, everyday life in general, there's plenty of weirdness around the world already, but because of our familiarity with it, we accept it.

Here's some statistics. In an average lifetime, in the Western world, you can expect to spend a year sat in traffic jams.

That's weird. You can expect to spend 248 days looking for a parking space. And you can expect, if you're into this sort of thing, to spend anything up to three years posting updates about your life on social media.

We live in a weird world. I'll tell you something that's really spine-chillingly weird is that in 10 seconds, one person in the world would have died a hunger-related death.

In those same 10 seconds, 100 iPhones would have been sold. That's weird. It's weird when, with a global population of 7 billion, the eight richest individuals own approximately the same as the poorest half of the 7 billion.

[12:22] It's weird when you and I are part of the 20% of the richest in the world today and that we own 80% of all the baths, 75% of all the cars.

Eight times, we have access to eight times more doctors than everybody else and we earn on average 25 times the wages. It's weird when, despite the fact that we are destroying our planet, we continue to purposefully manufacture jobs, manufacture items that have a limited lifespan.

We have the technology to build washing machines, tumble dryers, dishwashers and all the rest of it that could go on for decades if we wanted, but that will not generate the profits. And therefore, those very same white goods that about 15, 20 years ago were manufactured intentionally to last 10 years are now manufactured intentionally so that at least three sales every decade will happen.

All the time we're ripping one another off by building things that specifically we wish we'll pack in after a certain amount of time because we need to make more profits, we need more sales and we're filling the planet with more and more items.

But we just wreck it. That's weird. It's weird that on a BBC news report that is a news show that will last for 30 minutes, three minutes may be given to one or two different news items.

[14:02] 27 minutes will be devoted to telling the story of a rock star that's died that day on the grounds that he or she was culturally relevant. Yet no mention will be made of the 800 children under the age of five who would have died that day through water-borne diseases.

There's plenty of weird around, but we know these things. We're no longer shocked by them. Why? Because we've become accustomed to them. We've become familiarised. We turn off the telly.

We choose and we make up our own virtual world. But these are the realities with which we live.

Now, I'm not into being weird for the sake of it, despite what you might be tempted to think.

But I am up for hearing some weird of a different kind. I'm up for the possibility that God, in the midst of all the weirdness, could speak into our lives a new type of weirdness that challenges us to retune to a different kind of voice.

A voice that may be pretty weird, but tells us how things don't have to be weird in the way that they are currently weird. A voice that tells us that things can be so much different, so much better.

[15:24] Because the kingdom that he calls us to be a part of building and that is coming to us. The second hang-up I said was about logic.

Of course, hearing God's voice from time to time will defy logic or will appear to. That is because God's view of things is far bigger than our view of things.

And there will be times when God can and will speak to us in a way that speaks of a logic of its own. Because God knows things that we don't know and we can't see. George Muller lived from 1805 to 1898.

He was an amazing evangelist. He ran the orphanage at Ashley Down in Bristol. During that time, he cared for over 10,000 orphans. He was known to live by faith.

And one particular day, the orphanage was completely void of food. They had nothing to give to hundreds of children the next day. In faith, he gave the instructions, nevertheless, to lay up the breakfast tables for the following morning.

[16:24] He said, God will provide. God has told me that he will. The next morning, there was still nothing there. No food until there was a knock on the door. It was a baker. He said, this is going to seem strange.

But I was woken up at 2 o'clock in the morning because I felt that God said to me I had to get up and bake some bread and bring it here this morning. I don't know why. Half an hour later, there was another knock on the door.

This time, it was a milk delivery man whose cart had broken down right outside the orphanage. And he said, I have gallons of milk on board and I have to get rid of them.

Can you use them? It's not logical. We can't prove that it was God, but it's a thumping great coincidence. The third hang-up that I mentioned about hearing God speak has to do with the theme of winning arguments, theological arguments.

Again, God's view of things is bigger than ours. And that is why, at all times, when it comes to this theme of trying to listen to what God has to say to us, we need to remember that it's not something that we do in isolation.

[17 : 31] God doesn't work with us in isolation from others. He gives us the church. That's why church is important. Because when God speaks to us, he can speak to us as individuals but also collectively.

Which is why, no matter how strong that conviction may be that God has given us, we need to bring that conviction alongside those of others. We need to read the Bible. We need to talk to others, pray with others, and bring them alongside.

I don't know how many times I've had a conviction in me that was so strong. And it has only been when I've put it alongside those of others and been able to talk it over and pray it over with others that I've realized, actually, I may have been completely wrong or at least only partially right.

Because God's view of things is bigger than ours. God speaks through one another and we need one another. Which brings me to the last one.

The sense of mystery. The theme of mystery. Does the claim that God can and does speak to us and we should be open to listen to him undermine the sense of mystery of that God?

[18 : 35] I want to say that it doesn't undermine the mystery of God. It actually reinforces the sense of mystery. It deepens it. That God as holy other from us should nevertheless in his grace choose to speak to us in the most unusual ways.

Very often, things will happen that we cannot actually prove. In fact, we can never prove that has the appearance of a coincidence.

And yet, sometimes those things just seem humongous coincidences. The American evangelist and academic, Tony Campolo, told the story of years ago.

He went to preach at a church and they gathered for prayer before the church service. And they went into a room and there was about a dozen of them and they were praying for the day for all the people that would come into the church that day.

Except for one guy who was there who for some reason seemed to be praying a fairly, what appeared to be a random prayer. Well, not random, but he was praying for a family that were breaking up. And he was praying for, particularly for the husband in this family.

[19 : 50] Nothing that unusual about that. But what was unusual was the level of detail with which this guy seemed to be praying. And Tony Campolo in the story said he was just visiting this church.

He didn't know anybody there. And yet, the man who kept praying at length went into the extreme detail. He said, the man's name is Charlie Stolfus. He said, I pray for Charlie Stolfus, Lord, because you know that they've been going through difficulties.

You know that it's been tough and it's not an easy decision, but I know that this morning he's leaving. And then he gave a description of his address and the route that he was taken. And he kept repeating the details of where this man lived.

And Tony Campolo said that he was sat there in this prayer meeting and the guys seemed to go on and on and on and on, giving the most pointless detail in this prayer. All the while thinking, surely, why all the detail?

God knows it. Let's just pray for the man and his family and move on. Well, Tony Campolo went to the services and preached that day. Afterwards, he got in his car and drove.

[20 : 53] And about 10, 20 minutes away from the church, he saw somebody hitchhiking. And he said he would never, never normally pick up a hitchhiker.

On this day, he just felt God speak to him, stop. So he did. The guy got in, he had a rucksack, threw that in the back, got in the car, he started to drive.

He said, hi, I'm Tony Campolo. His passenger said, hi, I'm Charlie Stolfus. Tony Campolo did a U-turn and took him back to his house.

The guy, Charlie Stolfus, was understandably confused. He said, where are you taking me? He said, I'm taking you home. He said, you don't know where I live.

He says, yes, I do. He said, how? He said, God told me. We cannot prove, we cannot disprove that God is behind a story like that.

[21 : 58] It's a thumping great coincidence, if it is. But it's precisely because of that sense of mystery, that sense of we cannot prove that it's by faith, that it only serves to deepen that sense of awe and wonder over the God who can speak to us and who does speak to us.

And so I'm going to pray now. And as I pray, I want to pray a number of different things. Firstly, it may be that, because we're all at different points with this, it may be that as I'm praying, you might be sitting there thinking, you know, I've never heard from God.

I've never, ever felt a sense of God speak to me. But I'd really love to. And so, firstly, I'm going to pray that if that's you, that that will be your experience.

The second thing, it may be that perhaps you've heard God speak or felt God speak to you in the past. It may have been a long time ago, but you just haven't for a long time, and you just long to have that sense of reconnection, in which case we're going to pray for that as well.

It may be that you're specifically praying for something or someone, and you feel you're already listening to God and you're trying hard, but you just long to have that sense that God is hearing your prayer.

[23 : 17] Wherever you're at, let's all pray together now. Let's take a few moments just to be still. Lord God, we cannot see you, we cannot reach out and touch you, we cannot hear you in the same way that we can one another.

But Scripture and the experience of so many people throughout the world, including today, tells us that you speak to us because you choose to, in your mysterious power.

Lord, we come before you as we are, we can come no other way. Lord, firstly, it may be that we're in that place where we feel we've never heard you, but we want to start listening, and we long to hear your voice.

Lord, if we are in that place, help us to listen.

Help us to hear your voice in your time and in your way. Help us to receive, help us to have the courage to be open to what you may have to say to us.

[24 : 41] Lord, some of us may feel that we have heard you in the past, in very powerful ways perhaps, and yet it feels like things have gone quiet.

For whatever reason that may be, but we want to start again. Lord, for those of us that are in that place, help us to do that.

Help us to remember and cherish the past, but help us not to just live off it, but to remember that you are the God of the present and the God of the future. Help us to be open to what you might have to say to us, and to be ready to be surprised.

Lord, there will be others of us here who may have been specifically praying for something or for someone for a long time, something we've been carrying around with us. We find tough, maybe to the point of tears.

We feel that we're listening to you, and yet it feels like there's silence. Lord, if that's where we are, again, give us your grace, we pray.

[26 : 07] Help us to wait on you. Help us to keep on keeping on. We bring those prayers to you.

We bring before you what is on our hearts, and we pray that you would speak to us in your own way and in your own time. Speak to us through one another.

Speak to us through all the different ways in which you do. So, Lord, help us to be open to your spirit now.

And in the days to come. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.