

The Spirit Speaks

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 21 September 2025

Preacher: Rev. Dr. Russell Herbert

[0 : 01] Thinking today about how the Holy Spirit speaks to us, that the Holy Spirit does speak to us! And it's important that we remember that God wants to speak to us probably more than we tend! So learning to recognise this voice of the Spirit means is an enormous challenge to us, but it's an essential thing that we need to learn to do.

There is a voice that we are called to recognise. And the calling of every Christian, every follower of Jesus, is to be open and to grow in that recognition of hearing God speak to us by his spirit. Because a lot of people will hear us make those kind of claims and think, well, come on, hearing God. It was the comedian Lily Tomlin that said, when we speak to God, we're praying. When God speaks to us, we're mentally ill. Now, in the depths of that joke, there's a very serious reality that people will look at anybody that claims to hear from God and think that it's madness. To a world that doesn't know God, it is. But, you know, it's always been central to the claim of authentic Christian faith that if you seek to follow Jesus, you expect to hear from him.

[1 : 50] Jesus himself said, my sheep hear my voice and they follow me.

So, in a world of so many competing voices, so many competing claims to truth, in a world of so much noise, learning to hear God's voice is absolutely essential.

But how? Where do we begin with that? Well, that's what we're going to think about over these next few minutes. So, the reality is, is that as we seek to navigate through life, all of us, and literally all of us, whether we believe in God or not, all of us process competing thoughts, competing ideas, competing voices.

How do we process them and how do we filter out that which, maybe from God, which is of God's Holy Spirit and that which is not? I think the first thing I want to say is that much of the time, possibly most of the time, when we hear God speak, it's not so much in the midst of the dramatic, but rather in that gentle whisper.

Somebody called Carolyn Arends writes this. I have friends who hear God in dramatic ways.

[3 : 39] An audible voice. A vivid mental picture. An unforgettable dream. For the most part, these experiences are foreign to me and when I hear about them, I'm intrigued.

Sometimes I'm jealous. I confessed my frustration about this to my spiritual director, lamenting my thwarted attempts to coax God to speak to me in spectacular modalities.

Sure, I told her, I know scripture is the preeminent means through which God communicates and that all divine conversation will be steeped in and consistent with the written word.

God has revealed much to me in the pages of the Bible. But still, I complained, many Christ followers seem to have scripture come alive for them with a vividness and specificity beyond my ken.

What am I doing wrong? Does God think I'm not ready for anything too direct? Her response stopped me in my tracks.

[4 : 54] She said, you don't have to try so hard. It's God's responsibility to speak to you in a way that you can hear. Her words took me aback and then made me laugh.

Maybe God actually knows my frequency better than I do. See, in my human relationships, anything too theatrical shuts me down.

My perceptions, my ideas and my friendships all tend to develop at a slow burn. So why am I surprised that the God who knows me inside out communicates with me on my wavelength?

A gentle but insistently recurring thought. A well-timed word from a prayerful friend. A fresh bit of context that illuminates a scripture passage.

An encounter with beauty that backdoors into my consciousness and opens me to wonder. Does that mean that I will never hear from the Spirit in dramatic fashion?

[6 : 07] Not necessarily. Looking at the biblical record, God is not only omnipresent, but he's omnilinguistic. Endlessly creative and able to reach each person in just the right way at just the right moment.

I should not be surprised if at some point God surprises me. But it does mean that I can relax and trust that while it's genuinely wonderful that some of my friends frequently encounter the Trinity in the whirlwind or the fire, others of us are no less blessed to most often meet God in the still, small voice.

So how do we discern that? How do we discern it? Whether it's in the fire and the thunder and the dramatic or whether it's in that gentle whisper.

I want to suggest that in the broadest sense there are three different voices that will be perhaps competing. when I say voices I don't necessarily mean audible voices they might be probably most of the time they're not.

But three voices firstly the self secondly the enemy and thirdly God's spirit. how do we recognise the voice of the self?

[7 : 43] Well the self is that negative part of us that will tell us the very selfish stuff that will try to pull us away from God's voice.

Generally speaking it tends to be quite urgent and impulsive and quite comfort seeking. the self that will put ourselves before others.

That voice that says you deserve this. It's a voice that doesn't really want to pray it wants to scroll. Jesus warned us about it when in the Garden of Gethsemane he said that the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.

So we need to be aware of that dimension of the self and to recognise when that voice is actually really just looking out for our own needs.

On the other hand secondly there's the voice what we could call the voice of the enemy. The voice of the enemy is generally very subtle. It tends to be very condemning and it is very deceptive.

[9 : 01] the voice of the enemy tends to speak in half-truths that are laced with lies. I think back to firstly the story in the Garden of Eden of Adam and Eve in temptation where the enemy comes to them and says to them did God really say that you must not eat the fruit?

It questions truth. Or I think of Jesus in the wilderness facing temptation from the enemy that says if you are the son of God do this.

is it the voice of the enemy will always attack identity. It will attack who God is what God is like and it will attack your identity in him.

So if you ever hear a voice that begins to question well God doesn't really love you he's not interested in you. You could never do great things for God. You're not really a Christian.

God isn't really that kind. he's not really worth believing in and it doesn't make sense it's not credible. Well that's not the voice of God telling you that.

[10 : 26] You need to learn to recognise the voice of the enemy. If the voice you ever hear is accusing if it's isolating if it's manipulative that's not God.

The third voice the voice of God's Holy Spirit is peaceful it's clear it's consistent.

God's Spirit will bring conviction but never condemnation. So sometimes we may hear God speak to us in such a way that we'll say to you look this thing going on in your life right now that's not right. It's not right and it's not good. But let's deal with it. it will challenge you but it won't crush you. When you hear the voice of God breaking in like that it will call you out.

If there's something going wrong in your life that needs to be dealt with it will call you out. But most importantly it calls you back.

[11 : 49] Not to condemn. not just to make you feel awful about yourself but to bring you back to that right relationship with God that will give you life in all fullness.

God's spirit never pressures. He never manipulates and he never brings shame. So if there are those three potentials going on all the time then when we hear a voice but it could be the selfish instinct or whether it could be the voice of the enemy accusing or manipulating truth or whether it could be the Holy Spirit of God himself.

How do we make those discernments? I don't think there's any formula for this but I'd share the following three thoughts. Firstly the voice of God will always only ever align with the Bible.

So if there's sensing that there's something that seems to be in tension with what scripture teaches it's probably not going to be the voice of God because God's voice always aligns with scripture.

See if we're to grow as Christians we need both God's word and God's spirit in our lives. There's that old saying if you seek all word but no Holy Spirit then you dry up.

[13:17] In other words if you believe that actually you just read the Bible but you just read the Bible and there's no prayer and there's no sense of encounter with God in a living way. If your approach to knowing God is just a matter of reading verses and verses and verses and digesting it it might be interesting but if it's just a cerebral exercise something you do with your mind so much of that you'll just dry up.

on the other hand on the other extreme if our approach is just seeking the experience of the Spirit but we ignore the word of God if we just go chasing after one experience after another after another well you'll just blow up.

See all word but no spirit you dry up. If you only pursue spirit but never interested in God's word then you blow up. It's only when there's word and spirit working in our lives that we grow up.

And scripture may not always be what we want to hear. When we read the Bible it can be profoundly disruptive. It can challenge us but it will always be what we need to hear.

So if we're serious about hearing God speak we need to seek God's Holy Spirit as a living encounter in a very real personal way but we must always do so with scripture as well.

[14:50] Word and spirit if we're to grow up. The second thing is that when the spirit speaks we can know that it's the spirit speaking if what is brought is peace and clarity.

clarity. You see God only ever brings peace and clarity. Yes he may disturb us but ultimately he brings us back to that sense of peace.

If we hear a word that's speaking to us and it might be rattling us a bit yes it might be rattling us a bit but it's what we need to hear to bring us back to that peace. In 1 Kings chapter 19 we read of how Elijah expected to hear God in the thunder and yet God came in the whisper.

You see God's voice doesn't yell it settles. God's voice doesn't shout to compete but whispers to draw you close. So firstly then God's voice you will recognise it when it aligns with scripture.

Secondly it will bring peace and clarity but thirdly God's spirit will draw us closer. When we hear God's spirit speak to us it may not straight away draw us closer to answers but he will draw us closer to him.

[16:18] When the spirit speaks to us it always leads to a deeper closer connection with God. And often perhaps most of the time that comes with just that thought that image where we're praying and it just comes back to us and it comes back to us and it comes back to us in ever greater strength.

And it won't have neon flashing lights saying this is God speaking to you. But it will come and it will perhaps be confirmed by something that somebody else may say and then you may find yourself reading scripture and you will find that it seems to be confirmed there by something that you read. So long as we handle it with humility and are open to the sense that you know this sense this is God speaking it could it might not be God speaking it could just be the human self but it just could be God speaking if we hold that biblical God prayerfully and ask him to confirm that and I believe the Holy Spirit will confirm that and bring ever greater clarity you see the key thing is is for us to spend time every day in prayer and I'm not just talking here about setting aside a specific time although that is vital that we set time a day to focus on prayer but the purpose of having that time that we set aside to read the Bible and to pray is not that we then have this compartmentalised moment where we do God for ten minutes and then we get on with everything else but rather that it might energise and breathe into the whole of the rest of the day such that through the rest of the day we are practicing the presence of God seeking his presence seeking his voice in the midst of all of the most mundane tasks that we face listening to him in every interaction in every conversation in all that we do expectant to hear from his

Holy Spirit you know there's that old saying isn't there you can become too heavenly minded to be of any earthly good well actually the opposite is true the problem is not being heavenly minded enough that it is when we are truly heavenly minded when we are seeking the presence of God right here right now in the midst of the ordinary that is we are in that poise to hear what he may have to say to us and it calls for discernment I'm going to share one last image with you and then we are going to pray it comes from the fourth century monk John Cassian and John Cassian said that we the primary mark of spiritual maturity is to become an increasingly prudent money changer in the Roman Empire it was quite common for there to be a lot of counterfeit coins around so money changers if they were to be prudent had to learn how to discern the real thing from a fake and if you

were a prudent experienced money changer then you were so familiar with what a real coin was like that the moment a fake one dropped into the palm of your hands you could tell whether it was the wrong metal the wrong weight or the wrong engraving bring a slightly more up to date example I knew somebody worked for Apple and apparently they were so used to handling iPhones all day that somebody once gave them a just was really excited about this really super cheap iPhone they bought in the marketplace and they showed it to him and the moment they put it in his hand he said that's not a real iPhone there's Apple on it yeah but it's not a real one yeah but it says it came all boxed up and you switch it on it's all got all the stuff on yeah but that's not a real one how can you tell that I handled these all day it's the wrong weight it's the wrong feel it's a fake we're called to become prudent prudent iPhone holders money changes you know to go back to that image from the Roman Empire if you are so familiar with dealing with the real thing you can spot a fake very very quickly and this is a lifelong challenge for us it's to grow in the sense of knowing that God's spirit is around us and there before us listening to him searching for him such that when we hear his voice we know it let's pray together now

[21 : 12] Lord God we are so often surrounded by so many competing voices so many claims to truth so many things that get said to us or things we may read things that are broadcast far and wide each day so many messages so many different competing claims to truth Lord we thank you that it is actually your desire that we hear you and that you want to speak to us and that you've shown us that through coming to us in Jesus and through giving us your word so Lord wherever we are at right now in our own life's journey help us to hear you more help us to be ready and to be expectant help us to be like a prudent money changer able to discern that which is false from that which is real give us courage when we hear your voice to hold on to it to follow it and to trust it knowing that we can always trust you because you long for us to live life fully help us to hear your voice even this week in whatever situations we face and wherever we go speak to us and move among us that we may live our lives in the way that you long for us to do in Jesus name we pray
Amen Amen