

Tuning In To God: Testing The Voice - 10th September 2023

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[0 : 00] We are continuing with our second in the series of talks on tuning into God. Last week, Ruth explained to us with Jesus as our shepherd, how he speaks to each one of us individually.

And this morning, we're looking at testing that voice. Is it really from God? So, do you recognize these people?

Do you recognize them? Right, let's have a listen. A history book on the shelf is always repeating itself.

Waterloo, I was defeated, you won the war. Waterloo, I finally faced my one. Waterloo, I was defeated, you won the war.

Or perhaps it's more like this. Waterloo, I was defeated, you won the war. Hello London! Hello London! Southern Texas Take it now, leaving Now is all we can There was something in the air that night The stars were bright, the land of Weed to heaviness The spirit has arrived So when you're near me, darling Can't you hear me, S.O.S.?

[2 : 12] When you're gone How can I even try to go home? Is this really authentic?

Yeah? Is this the real voice of Abba? Or if it is the real voice of Abba, is that how they really look? Never changing? Always the same?

Are they really Bjorn again? Again, these are some of the serious theological questions we'll be looking at today Perhaps we confuse the voice of God for the tribute act Or are we in danger of making God into some kind of avatar?

Sometimes these things seem so real and we tell ourselves what's wrong with that But it's counterfeit And it's not the real thing So, it's difficult to tell whether we're hearing God speak to us or whether it's a result of our active imagination If I go around saying that God has spoken to me you'll either conclude that I'm super spiritual or I'm completely mad Thank you, Sean, for nodding at that The problem is that it could be that God has spoken to me and you don't know whether to believe me or not This is the problem many Old Testament prophets had They were often seen as completely out of tune with the thinking of the day or simply is completely mad How could God possibly say that?

Wise Christian teachers encourage us to follow some rules And I've put some on the screen here We can weigh up and test the voice of God that we think we hear in three ways Firstly, by evaluating the source Is this source trustworthy?

[4 : 27] Do we believe it to be credible? Secondly, by evaluating the content Does it make sense? Does it balance out with what we know from other things?

And thirdly, by evaluating the fruit What's the long-term impact? And only time will tell with that one So, if we look at the source the content and eventually the fruit then we should be able to test out whether this is from God or not So, there we have it It's all sorted Simple And we all know what to do now, don't we?

Okay, that's it Yeah You don't know what's coming Right The problem of people claiming that they've been hearing from God is not a new one In fact, it's been going on from the very early days of the church And the Apostle John gives us some very clear advice Dear friends Do not believe every spirit but test the spirits to see whether they are from God because many false prophets have gone out into the world This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God But every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God This is the Spirit of the Antichrist which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world So essentially don't just take somebody's word for it

test it out Is it contrary to what the Bible teaches?

And when you share it with others who are trustworthy does it make sense? Continually come back to see what's been said and ask the Holy Spirit to guide you Sometimes we simply don't know until time has passed and then what's the impact?

What's the fruit? Here's an example I was somewhere recently and I was inspired moved call it what you want by what I heard and saw I find myself with a number of ideas thoughts moments of inspiration on a particular aspect of church life Now I can dress this up as God has told me spoken to me commanded me or I can tone it down and say I've had an idea or I feel inspired about It is important how we express this as it can easily put people's backs up if we make too grandiose a claim I should not set myself up as a one person committee to whom God sends messages What is important here is the content Too often we look at the messenger rather than considering the content

[7 : 33] But now what? I'd be a fool if I insisted that everyone should follow all that I had to say It needs testing out and this is best done when it's shared with others prayed over chewed over discussed rejected revisited and prayed over again If any of these ideas are any good they'll bear fruit they'll take hold and if they don't well it doesn't mean necessarily that they're rubbish or that God didn't speak to me it just means they may not be for now If I'm honest it all sounds a little bit complicated and confusing and if I'm even more honest it all sounds very complicated and often very confusing Perhaps we need to look at testing the voice rather differently So what you need is an app on your phone that's what you actually need

So as you can see it's only £3 a month so if you want you can download it during the talk now and you'll be ready So Text with Jesus is launched in July of this year by Catlow Software it's £3 a month to get God to speak to you and I think it's an absolute bargain Text with Jesus is not actually the first Jesus using AI artificial intelligence to appear on the market You can go to our website talktohim.org which provides the same function It does however have the additional feature on the website of uttering Jesus' replies in a deep and mellifluous voice underlaid by a celestial hum in the background and Jesus starts the conversation by asking your name and then proceeds to use it regularly so it becomes really personal The instructions given to the AI engine that powers the responses is also a little different between the two things

So the Jesus of talktohim.org is less prone to using passages from the Bible and gives rather gentler responses while if you use the text with the app text with Jesus you get longer answers and they're structured around quotes from the Bible So you can pick which Jesus you want really So it's quite nice isn't it So there we have it Just text Jesus and you can listen to God no problem We'd love it wouldn't we if it was that simple and unfortunately many people will use this app and thinking and believing it is that simple I heard a talk recently by a renowned vicar and speaker he started by saying he'd given the talk before at a well-known Christian event and part of the talk was about how we should care more passionately about the things that God cares for such as the environment environment and the world we live in after the talk he was approached by a man who said that he had no idea what the vicar was talking about he said that it was all pretty much a waste of time as the whole earth will be burnt up as we're taken into heaven and the important thing was to preach the gospel and get people converted so that they can get into heaven there is so much that can be said here about misconceptions and misunderstandings but the point I want to make is that unfortunately so many

Christians have stopped listening to God they substitute knowledge about God for listening to God it sort of goes a bit like this I know the Bible I'm saved all done all sorted it's this kind of mindset that gives no room for listening to God as there's nothing new to listen to God has had his say given his word and we should just accept it this kind of thinking is very widespread indeed and has far reaching consequences perhaps we confuse the voice of God for the tribute act time is not spent listening to God and hearing him speak the answers have already been given God has spoken and they're not changing why listen at all and the upshot of this is if we're honest that many of us have given up listening to God yes certainly we can learn things from the Bible we can gain more knowledge and learn more about

God but the thinking goes that the rules have been laid down and I just need to follow them in some people's minds ideas are so fixed there's no room for God to speak and there is therefore no point in trying to listen listening stopped many have lost the skill of listening and many don't know what to listen to many are not aware that God longs for them to listen to him but why should God speak to

me goes the thinking I'm nobody special and so we give up listening we busy ourselves with activities and noise and simply stop listening is this you I know if I'm honest for a lot of the time this is me so God speaks to Elijah the Lord said go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the

[13 : 27] Lord for the Lord is about to pass by then a great and powerful wind tore the mountain apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord but the Lord was not in the wind after the wind there was an earthquake but the Lord was not in the earthquake after the earthquake came a fire but the Lord was not in the fire and after the fire came a gentle whisper when Elijah heard it he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave then a voice said to him what are you doing here Elijah it's interesting that even the great prophets of the Old Testament times had their doubts Elijah repeatedly wonders is God really speaking to him God uses the dramatic to show Elijah that he's not there in the turmoil and chaos but in the calm gentle whisper notice that Elijah does not do a check of the rules to test if it really is God he knows he knows because he's ready to listen in fact he's desperate to listen perhaps this is our problem too do we do we do we think God wants to speak to us are we looking for the dramatic do we feel on the edges not important enough to be spoken to hiding at the back of the class are we ready for God simply to whisper to us every now and again if we feel God is speaking to us do we simply go and hide and pretend it isn't happening Elijah was depressed and lonely but God was not in his successes with the prophets of Baal God was not in the dazzling firestorms and earthquakes God was in the thin silence that whispers to all of us my child

I've been waiting for you without stretched arms God was in the thin silence that whispers to all of us my child I've been waiting for you with outstretched arms sometimes we come to church thinking that we're here to get God's attention if we show up and sing with gusto perhaps he'll hear us and pay attention to us in Psalm 139 it says where can I go from your spirit where can I flee from your presence the truth is God is present with us but God is more than present with us he knows us he doesn't follow alongside of us he follows inside of us okay I'll say that again he doesn't follow alongside of us he follows inside of us we don't have to attend church to listen to God we don't have to clear out our life from sin to find

God God has found us regardless of our situation regardless of our condition we can feel lost but God is present with us luring us back to himself always whispering in our ear we can choose not to listen to God but he is always speaking to us facing our every situation with us I'm not sure that in the two scenarios I'm about to share that these people would say that they heard God's voice or claim anything dramatic but for me they were listening praying and listening and listening last century when I was young I was a student in Bangor North Wales and attended Penracht Baptist Church after finishing as a student I stayed on in the town as I started my career as a teacher and I was part of the church for 11 years the church was well attended and had a ministry that was far reaching many people from many different countries saw the church as their spiritual home the church deacons were a group of elderly people who had been there for many years if you look carefully at the photo there there's May

Williams with a bit of red there and a blue jacket she's one of the elderly people and they'd seen the church through hard times with a very small congregation but these people prayed and they prayed and the church grew in ways that they had not always envisaged in my early twenties they asked me to be a deacon I've often reflected on this since what on earth were they thinking but they had vision and they wanted to listen to what God was saying they took me under their wing listened to my crazy ideas and tested them out and boy did they test them out but they did it with loving grace that I can't describe guess who ended up being the church's first youth leader guess who the people were who talked and encouraged the youth guess who the people were who forked out the money for the many youth activities all because

[19 : 14] I believe they were ready to listen and to carry on listening carefully weighing up in prayer and talking with each other about all that they heard that church continues to be a beacon of hope to many people to this day so to this one it's been my very great privilege and I do sincerely mean a privilege here at St John's to get to know some of the longer standing members they would never describe themselves as visionaries or God's listeners or stalwarts of prayer or anything like that but that is exactly what they are I remember one of many conversations with the late Steve Taylor who told me all about how this building came to be it was a very detailed guide and there was not much I didn't know afterwards I remember that he told me that every brick yes every brick was covered in

prayer

St John's through the years has been a rich testimony of people who listen to God they took risks and also who continue to listen and take risks who didn't stick to the safe and comfortable but listened and welcomed all the people who God sent them and God continues to send them today at St John's is a result of people who listen pray and have a living faith it's not always comfortable and a lot is asked of them but they carry on listening all because I believe they were ready to listen and to carry on listening carefully weighing up in prayer talking with each other about all the different ways God is leading them I could give a lot more detail here about the things I continue to learn from these long standing members but I won't I'll keep that for another time but every brick every brick here every person every person here is because some people of faith listen to

God so then do we really believe there's no point testing whether God has spoken to us if we often feel that there's no point in listening who am I that God should speak to me I'm nobody special perhaps we fear that God is simply going to tell us off after all he must have a pretty long list by now I'd rather not listen to that I tell myself does our thinking go along the lines of listening and hearing God's voices for other people more important than me like the vicar or the curate or some prophet from the Bible if God's got something important to say he's not going to say it to me is he we tell ourselves but stop we have to stop making listening to God so complicated we must stop thinking that it's been something dramatic it could just be a whisper after all

God is listening to us every step of the way God is listening to us the pianist top corner of the picture there Jan Paderewski once came over to perform a concert in a 4000 seater hall in New York it was sold out months in advance and one woman brought her nine year old son who wasn't doing very well at his piano lessons to hear a great pianist hoping that would motivate him of course he acted like any nine year old would fidgeting and wriggling suddenly just before the concert was due to start he rushed on stage opened the piano and before a shocked audience began playing chopsticks paderewski heard the commotion walked over to the boy got down on his knees put his arms around him and whispered keep on playing he then improvised an incredible concerto around chopsticks as he did so he kept repeating keep on playing don't stop you're doing great keep going that's how

I view the gospel we walk on stage start plonking out chopsticks and God throws his loving arms around us and says keep on playing keep on going meanwhile he plays a beautiful concerto someday we'll all be in heaven together and we'll get to hear the concerto God is playing in all our lives it is who we are in God that matters not what we're doing he just wants to whisper to us I love you we have to start making God's love conditional if we know God accepts us then maybe just maybe we can start listening if we hear God's voice we need to spend time learning to listen and to put ourselves in situations where we can speak to us we need to be careful that we don't have a lopsided view rather like someone who relies on the daily mail for all their news we need to look at different sources being part of a

[24 : 56] Christian community is so valuable in this respect providing the people there are not all like us God speaks to us through so many people let's learn to listen to them we would do well to mix with God's people from other things and in different situations and not just our locality perhaps at a Christian event or holiday or pilgrimage or something like that we need to spend time with God's people from other countries who express themselves in different ways so that we are freed from our mindset of our own culture and it's good to read about our faith there are so many books we have access to and there are many authors who really help us to grow in our faith ask about them if you're unsure most of us most of all we simply need time to sit with God that's not an easy thing to do we need time to sit with

God I know and simply be with him we have so much information coming at us these days and so often so many things to do that our minds quickly reach overload we end up emotionally exhausted and then we conclude how can God have time to speak to me and then we conclude that God doesn't really like us perhaps that's why we don't hear God's voice we should recognize there are very many lonely people who feel isolated and alone and that no one understands or could possibly comprehend who they are do you see why the gospel is such good news in the midst of our loneliness God comes to speak to us and say he understands and knows what we've been through that he wants to come alongside and be right there with us a little boy once walked past a pet shop and saw some black puppies inside he fell in love with them and ran home he raided his piggy bank and asked his parents if he could have a puppy they said yes and he returned to the shop he told

the owner he'd like to buy a black puppy and the owner said there are six of them choose the one you want five were together but the six lay in the corner by itself the boy chose that one and the pet shop owner tried to dissuade him by telling him it had been born crippled you won't be able to play with it or take it for walks it'll just lie around choose another one the boy then pulled up his trouser leg revealing a caliper and said

I'll take that one do you see why I'm a Christian because Jesus came to the pet shop and I was over in the corner and he said I'll take that one Jesus said I was on the cross I know what suffering is and I know what you've been through and what you're going to go through no matter what I love you I identify with you you're not going to be alone you're the one that I choose the greatest day of our lives is the day when the God of the universe speaks loudly and clearly to us and says I choose you that's the gospel he chooses us flawed sickly and messed up and the God of the universe whispers to us I choose you I pray that we would learn to listen To So That il