

Tuning In To God: What Does God Sound Like? - 17th September 2023

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: 17 September 2023

Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] So, as the screens tell us, we're continuing our Sunday series called Tuning in with God this morning, in which we're exploring what it means to hear, see, sense, experience God in our lives and the world around us.

So, we did this a couple of weeks, so just a little bit of a recap. Ruth, who's at Hammerwich Church this morning, but she kicked things off a couple of weeks ago with the picture that Jesus shares of him being the good shepherd and how we, as his sheep, will hear his voice.

Indeed, as Jesus says in John 10, of himself, he says, he calls his own sheep by name and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.

Now, admittedly, the idea of us being sheep is not perhaps the most glamorous of metaphors for us to consider, perhaps slightly smelly too, if you know sheep well. But the point here is not so much that we are sheep, but more that we hear Jesus' voice and Jesus knows us.

Jesus knows our name, our characters, our hopes, our fears. And as Dave was saying last week, not only does God know and understand us, it's not a distant thing.

[1 : 12] He's right here with us, in us, by his Spirit. God who loves us and cares for us and wants us to know that same love in our lives. And yet what's also interesting with this shepherd sheep idea is that Jesus says, we will hear his voice.

Which, if you think about it, is a pretty bold promise to make, really. We, you and I, will hear God's voice in our lives.

That's what Jesus says. So the God of the universe, the God of the galaxies, will communicate, is communicating, in ways which are unique and personal to us.

Now, how does that happen? Well, I guess the starting point to understanding this perhaps stems from verses like this in Romans, where it says this.

It says, The Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. The Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.

[2 : 19] So the Spirit, and whenever there's a capital S in our English Bibles, that means God, the Holy Spirit. The Spirit testifies or confirms with our spirit, little s, you know, our essence, that our true identity is as God's children.

You're my child, says God. You're my son. You're my daughter. And that identity is an eternal bond between us and God that nothing can break.

We will always be God's children. So regardless of however we feel about God, regardless of whether we walk away from God, like the prodigal son, God will always and forever regard us as his children.

And what's more, God will treat us as the father does his son in that same prodigal son parable with unconditional, irrepressible love. Now this testifying between God's spirit and our spirit, it's an interesting idea, I think, in terms of how we can tune in to God.

Because it implies that there's something more going on between us and God than perhaps we realise. It implies there's a kind of residual, constant, spiritual connection between each of us and God that is beyond our five senses, if you like.

[3 : 41] I guess it's a bit like a kind of Bluetooth connection, if you like, between us and God, you know, or between devices. We can't see or touch this Bluetooth connection that's all around us often, but through his spirit, this kind of spiritual Bluetooth, God has enabled or turned on this connection between us and him.

Connection which I'd say is there between God and every human the world over, since we're all made in God's image and have each been given the breath, the spirit of life by God.

Sadly, for many people, maybe ourselves sometimes though, the cares and the priorities or attitudes that we adopt mean that that connection between us and God can become easily drowned out to the extent that we doubt or forget or deny perhaps that there's even a connection there.

Perhaps, therefore, hearing from God is as much about turning all the other voices in our lives down as it is about asking for God to speak more clearly to us.

And yet, since we're told that God's spirit testifies with our spirit, and since Jesus, the good shepherd, assures us that as his sheep, we will hear his voice, I guess a question for us today is what does it actually feel like to hear from God?

[5 : 15] You know, when people talk about God speaking to them, God said this to me, I felt God was saying that to me. What is it they're actually hearing? What makes God's voice distinct from all the other voices and influences in our lives?

Well, I guess in some ways, there are probably as many different answers to those questions as there are people on this planet because everyone's unique and can experience God in their own unique ways.

The way you experience God will be different to the way I experience God and vice versa. Asking what does it feel like to hear from God may therefore prompt a very kind of subjective set of responses.

And yet, at the same time, I want to suggest that there are some common threads with how God communicates and how we experience that communication, which may be of help to each of us as we consider these kind of bigger questions on our own faith journey.

So I want to start with a broad example, and then we'll drill down a bit more specific, perhaps. But thinking broadly, one way that struck me afresh recently is that God often seems to use music and words to get our attention or speak into our lives.

[6 : 36] And I guess that stands to reason. You know, the first quality of God's, which the Bible reveals to us, is that God is a creator. So the creative arts, in general, any form of creativity, has the potential to be a channel for God's voice.

So, thinking of music and words. There's a bit of a random one this morning, but a song which has recently been on my radar for reasons which will become clear is by these guys, by the Scottish group, The Proclaimers.

Yes, yes, the twins, Craig and Charlie. Most famous for the, ah, Woodwork 500 males. That one, yeah, we won't sing that one this morning. It's not that song I'm going to speak about this morning, although we can save that for another time, maybe.

Rather, the song I want to focus on a bit this morning is a ballad that they wrote a good few years ago now called Sunshine on Leith. Leith, some of you know it. Leith, though, is the part of Edinburgh, which is their hometown.

And it's a song of lament, and it's a song of sorrow, but also, as it turns out, as the song goes on, it's a song of immense gratitude and hope as well.

[7 : 53] So, let's have a listen to some of it. My heart was broken My heart was broken Sorrow Sorrow Sorrow Sorrow Sorrow Sorrow Sorrow Sorrow My heart was broken My heart was broken You saw it You cleaned it You touched it You saved it You saved it My tears Tired My tears Tired My tears Tired

Thank you Thank you Thank you Thank you Thank you My tears Are dry My tears My tears are drying Your beauty and kindness My tears clear my blindness While I'm with my room on this earth I will be with you While the chief with sunshine on me I'll thank him for this work And your birth and my birth

Yeah, yeah, yeah And it's a lovely song, I think, with beautiful melody Although it starts with sorrow, it moves to a point Where these lyrics, you know, I'd say this prayer is declared While the chief, while God, shares his light on our hometown, on our lives I'm going to thank him, I'm going to thank him for his works I'm going to thank him for your life and for my life Yeah, yeah, yeah, or you could say, Amen, Amen, Amen You know, I think that's a prayer, it's a psalm, it's a hymn of hope And the interesting thing is that the Scottish football club from Leith, Hibernian You can see their ground in the middle here Well, they've adopted this song as a terrace anthem It's a football club in a community which has been through a lot of upheaval

And not much success over the years But this song of hope, of togetherness, of profound gratitude for life Well, it's become a powerful emotional anthem of praise and solidarity between them Indeed, by way of illustration of that I'm going to play another little clip of Hibernian fans singing the song Sunshine on Leith At Hampden Park, having just won the Scottish Cup by way of a last minute win This was a few years ago, but hopefully you'll get the flow of what they're saying here My heart was born My heart was born You saw it You created You touched it You see that My tears are crying

My tears My tears Are crying Thank you Thank you Thank you Thank you Thank you My tears Are crying My tears Are crying With beauty and kindness Make tears clear from the air While I'm white One room on the sun I will be with you While I'm a chief It's a charm

[13 : 10] On my diamond With this mark And blue bottle And my mouth Yeah, yeah, yeah Now, a few weeks ago Hibernian played Aston Villa In a European match And Hibernian, Hibs They ended up losing the match 8-0 on aggregate Comprehensively beaten by Villa But despite this overwhelming defeat The Hibs fans still sang Sunshine on Leaf At the top of their voices Now, I was chatting to a mate In the Vic Who was at that match And he said that In 50 years Of going to football matches He's never felt The hairs On the back of his neck

Stand up like they did When those away fans Were singing that song Something about that song Moved him It spoke to him And as we were chatting In the Vic He proceeded to put Sunshine on Leaf The song on the pub jukebox A hymn of hope And gratitude to God Playing in the Vic On a Friday night Now, why am I sharing This song This story?

Well, it seems to me That it's an example Of the way In which God's spirit Testifies to the human spirit About our identity As brothers and sisters And as children of God Now, don't get me wrong I'm in no doubt That very few Hibernian fans Nor possibly my mate In the pub Would describe this song Or the emotion it stirs In this way You know, our spirit Connecting with God's spirit That kind of thing But the clues, I'd say Are there The hope And the truth Is in there With the words With the melody For those who have ears To hear it Yet I'd suggest The spirit In which that song Was written It's a celebration Of life Of beauty And kindness You know, the way The words and the melody Channel The creative Affirming love of God I'd say that's why It resonates

So strongly As a song And so if If my mate In the Vic Were to ask me Why I think He got goosebumps Here in that Terrace anthem I'd tell him I think it's because It's a song Which gets to the heart Of our existence It's a song Through which God is able to speak Did I say We often get goosebumps Or The hairs on our necks Or our arms Stand up Because God Is saying to us Do you see Do you hear What's going on here That's how special This life can be With me In fact I'll probably send My mate The recording Of this bit of talk Because I'd love For him to put Two and two together And know how special And loved He himself is By God So I'd say God Is indeed Speaking All the time For example Through a hope Filled ballad Written by a pair Of twins from Leith

Which in time Becomes a football Anthem That's one Collective way I'd suggest We can hear Maybe even Feel God Speak to us But the good news is Alongside that That God speaks to us Perhaps on an individual More personal Private level As well So what might that Sound like?

[17:07] Well one Common belief Is that God speaks to us As individuals Directly Through the Bible You know A book of Humanly written words Written by real people But through which God's breath God's inspiration Brings us life And indeed The Bible Our understanding of God And God's ways Would be Far less informed To say the least Without it So the Bible Is a gift Of God Through which He can speak Directly To us And yet I'd suggest That unless We read the Bible In a Jesus Centred Jesus Focused Way I'm not sure We'll actually hear God Speaking To us Through it Now why do I say that?

Well on one occasion Jesus Was speaking With a group of Pharisees A sect of Jewish folks Who Despite the bad Press They often Receive They knew the Scriptures Backwards And they were Genuinely trying To know and Understand God Through what They read And yet Here's what Jesus says About the way That they used And engaged With the Scriptures He says this He says The Father Who sent me Has himself Testified Concerning me You've never Heard his voice Nor seen his form Nor does his word Dwell in you For you do not Believe the one He sent You study the Scriptures Diligently Because you think That in them You have Eternal life These are the Very Scriptures That testify About me Yet you refuse To come To me

To have life In other words Yes The Pharisees Study the Scriptures And expect to hear God through them But because they Fail To read the Scriptures Through the lens Of Jesus' Life He tells them Starkly That they've never Heard God's Voice It reminds me Of those people Perhaps who Sometimes say I'm a Bible Believing Christian Or we're a Bible Believing church As if that's Somehow The pinnacle Of faith And yet it's a strange Claim to make I think When Jesus himself Tells us First and foremost To believe in him And the one Who sent him The Bible As much of a gift As it is Is not God Jesus is And it seems And it seems That Jesus Is saying Here That unless We read The Bible In the light Of the life Of Jesus That the living Word Of God Well the Bible's Words will Simply remain

As words On a page And not The voice Of God Speaking to us You study The Scriptures He says Diligently Because you Think that In them You have Eternal life Now come to me Come to me For life That's why For us here at church So much of our Bible focus Is on the gospel Accounts of Jesus Life Because unless We know Who Jesus is We won't be able To understand Or interpret Or evaluate The way in which God is presented Throughout the rest Of the Bible The more We know The stories of Jesus The more we understand His context And culture The more we understand His nature His character His suffering His resurrection The more We'll hear And be transformed By the voice of God Speaking to us Through the words Of the Bible But alongside And perhaps even more Than that I'd suggest

That by getting To know Jesus As the living Word of God We'll increasingly Recognize his voice Speaking Directly to us As well Both through the Bible Yeah But in particular In our own prayer lives You know That after all Is a promise Jesus gives us You will We will Hear his voice That's a voice Which I'd suggest Can become part Of our Kind of Inner dialogue We might say Our inner Prayer life So what does That inner voice Of Jesus Sound like In our lives Well again As we've ordered This I can only Speak personally But for me It's an Inner voice With whom I feel I can Have a conversation Yes Skeptics would say It's purely My imagination Or the voice Of a pretend Friend And all that And it may well be

[22 : 01] It may well be But I honestly Don't think That's the case So for me Hearing Jesus How would I Describe it Well for me And perhaps Not surprisingly It's very much Like that Gentle whisper That Elijah heard And that Dave Was talking about Last week So When I pray And I sense Jesus speaking You know The voice in my head Is always Calm Speaks plainly And with clarity There's no Um's or ah's Or hesitation With it Rather it's eloquent But it's not Wordy Though There's a There's a gentleness To it But it has Authority As well And it's a voice That clearly Knows me Inside out This kind of Shorthand That I hear I guess And yet I always Detect A warmth There A kind of Love For me

And a love For the world This voice I hear Well it doesn't Speak to me In ways that Make me feel Guilty But neither Does it suggest That what I do Wrong is of no Consequence Or doesn't Matter Now quite the Opposite Overall though It's a voice Which is optimistic And hopeful A voice Which suggests A better way Ahead And it's a voice Which From all I know Of him Sounds like Jesus To me And in my Prayer life It's been the Same voice That I've heard For as long As I can Remember Now that's That's my Impression Maybe that's The kind of Voice You hear In your head In your heart Too I don't know But it'd be Interesting to Sort of Compare notes On that Now having

Settled that It's not like I hear this Voice all the Time Or I can Turn it on Or turn it Off No I'm not for A moment Suggesting I'm any Different to Anyone else With this But what I Have learned Is that over The years There are Certain things I can do Which somehow Seem to enable Me to Tune in And to Hear this Voice which I Think is the Voice of Jesus More clearly So practically Speaking one Of those Things is For me to Go for a Quiet walk On my Own Said this Before but I do it A lot It's my Way of Turning down All the other Voices and Distractions in My life And it's Almost as if Now the Very act of Solo walking Triggers an Expectancy or An openness In my Spirit It's a bit Like if you Shake a Lead at A dog It knows It's going For a walk And if I Go for a Walk I Know my Aim is to Connect and Hear God But even More importantly

Than that And I find This is crucial For this Inner dialogue To kick in It's if I Ask this voice Who I'm Presuming is Jesus Questions Ask this Voice Questions I guess In some ways It sounds Obvious that If you want To hear from God If you Have a Prayerful Conversation With him We want It to be Two way And that Therefore Involves Asking questions Of God As well as Just saying What you Want to Say But it's Taken me To feel Comfortable Doing this Because often Prayer Prayer is Prayer is Unfortunately Seen as One way Present your Requests Before God Kind of Thing We sort Of splurge It all Out Without Thinking What about If we ask God Questions In this So what Kind of Questions Do I Ask Well again In my Experience It's Simply the Kind of Questions That you'd Ask a Friend Who You're happy To have The chance To catch Up with So in

My prayers In my Inner dialogue With this Voice I Recognize As Jesus I'll often Begin by Asking How he's Doing Or What he's Enjoyed About Today I might Ask what's Made him Sad Or what's Pleased him Lately I'll ask him Who he thinks Might need Some extra Help At the Moment Or I Might ask Him how He felt About the Way I handled Something Or treated Someone And then Things flow On a more Personal level From there And invariably My questions And the answers I hear back In my Prayer life They kind of Morph into Praise Because I'm Grateful to Hear from God But I'm Grateful Most of All For God For Jesus And I end Up telling Him that And how much I love him That kind of Thing It all flows From that Conversation Now I don't Always remember To ask Questions In my Prayers

[27 : 02] Sometimes I'm too Busy Or self Absorbed Or ashamed Or feeling Too down To exhibit Much interest In that Sometimes I haven't Got the capacity If you like To ask God Questions And invite him Into those Things But it's Interesting That as soon As I start With a Question It's as if God has Been patiently Waiting for me To remember To engage And return to Him In prayer Again much Like that Picture of The father In the Parable Waiting for His lost Son To return To him The other Thing to say And again This is all In my own Very limited Experience Is that I Usually hear God's voice Reply Straight after I ask A question And if I Don't Then I've Sometimes found Myself being Tempted to Imagine or Make up a Response As if it Was Jesus Talking to Me But I Always know If I'm Doing that If I'm Making it Up Because it's Much more Stuttering It's much More hesitant

Kind of Response Which is In stark Contrast to The more Fluent Clarity That I was Describing Earlier So that's My experience Of hearing What I Believe Is the Voice of Jesus In my Head In my Heart A voice Which gives Me Guidance And Encouragement A voice Which challenges And corrects Me But a Voice Who Always Speaks In ways Which Are Wrapped In love Now as I Describe all That It's quite a Weird thing To talk about Is we don't Talk about This very Often What does It actually Feel like That may Resonate Or resemble Your experience Equally You may be Like What No way That's not My experience At all You might Think you Never hear From God You might Think I Sound like A complete Nutter To be Honest In terms Of voices In my Head And so On It is Tricky Talking about The way We personally Relate to God Because it Feels

Vulnerable But also Because each Of us Are different It'll all Be unique As I say For each Of us For example I don't Seem to get Direct words For people Very often And hardly Ever get Sort of Visual Pictures Let alone Visions In my mind Whereas I Know others Their language Is much More visual With God Shall we Say None of This is A science It's more Of an art Which is Rooted in Relationship And like Any relationship Can take Years Is taking Years To discover And develop The ways We tune Into God And so I feel Very much A novice In this That's why I'm Slightly hesitant To share It I don't Want to Give the Impression I got This Cracked No way Is that But I Do it To kind Of open The conversation I suppose As I say For me In my Prayer life Going for Walks Turning down The noise Of life Focusing On Jesus And asking Him questions All help me To tune in That inner Dialogue

With God And so What about You What about You What does It mean What might It mean For you To hear From God More clearly In your Life How would You like To hear More clearly From God And if you Could ask Jesus A question Or a series Of questions What would You start With What would Be your First question To Jesus Equally What question Would you Build up To That might Take some Courage To ask And perhaps Most importantly What do you Think Jesus Might say How would Jesus respond To those Questions You ask Him So let's Have some Quiet And maybe Close your Eyes Because We talk About it There's an

Opportunity To do it This morning No pressure Nothing Up front Nothing Public You might Want to Just close Your eyes And I Wonder For you Perhaps If you Picture Jesus In your Mind's Eye Now What does He look Like What's His face Showing I wonder Can you Look Jesus In the Eyes Or is That a Bit Much At the Moment See what I do Know is That the Face of Jesus Will be One of Love And Kindness And we Know that Because the Spirit The spirit Of Jesus Testifies With our Spirit That we

[32 : 05] Are God's Children So perhaps As you Picture Jesus And he's Looking at You Whether you're Looking back At him Or not Is your Business But Jesus Is looking At you I wonder What You would Want to Say To Jesus What Questions Would you Ask him What would Your first Question To Jesus Be And in In the Quiet I wonder What you Sense Jesus Reply To that Opening Question Or Questions Would Be Thank you

Täp And I wonder You Bye For FT Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. We know you promised that we will hear your voice.

And yet for whatever reason, sometimes that voice, however it communicates to us, feels muffled or distant or even absent sometimes.

[34 : 40] And yet judging by what you said, that's not your hope. That's not the reality you promise us. So I pray for each of us, Lord, that in a unique, bespoke, personal way for each of us, whether it's words or pictures or music, whether it's through other people, whether it's through reading the Bible or books or podcasts, whatever it is, Lord.

However you know you will get through to us most clearly. Would you speak to us more clearly and more nearly, we pray, day by day.

And equally, Lord, if this questions thing is perhaps one of the keys for unlocking that experience, would you give us the courage, Lord, to ask you the questions that are on our hearts?

You know we want to ask them anyway, but there's something in the actual asking that enables you to move and work.

So would you help us to trust you? Would you help us to look at your face and see eyes of love, not condemnation, eyes of kindness and welcome and understanding?

[36 : 15] And as we ask the questions, perhaps we've always wanted to ask you, may we wait patiently? May we be expectant of hearing answers and guidance and wisdom and love from you, we pray.

Amen. Amen.