



Hearing God as a Leader

*Notes from Pastor Jim Lafoon's Leadership Session
on March 8, 2014*

I. The Paradigm

Whether you are seeking God as an individual or as a leader, the basic principles of hearing His voice remain the same. There are, however, a number of factors and complexities that can make hearing God's voice as a leader far more difficult.

- The Weight of Responsibility

Unlike hearing God for ourselves, as leaders, the decisions we make can affect multiple lives. This pressure can create multiple problems.

- **Overcautious:** The larger the implications of any decision, the more cautious most leaders become. On the surface, this sounds wise. But if the leader is not careful, they can easily overanalyze to the point that they are paralyzed by indecision.
- **Unrealistic:** Many times leaders can even have unrealistic expectations. They expect, based on the size of the decision they are making, that God will give them some gigantic, supernatural sign or amazing encounter. Unfortunately this is not typically the case. In my own life, I have discovered that God's patterns of communicating with me have basically remained the same no matter what type of decision I am facing.

- The Warfare of the Enemy

Although the tactics the enemy uses to keep us from hearing God remain the same, their level of intensity increases based on the magnitude of the decision we're making.

- The Wealth of Voices

As much as there can be wisdom in the multitude of counselors, there can also be confusion. In every leader, there is a temptation to solicit too many opinions and too much advice for major decisions. Although we must never be afraid to seek expert advice for decisions that involve complexities outside the realm of our experience and training, the people that know and understand us the best are typically the most helpful in discerning how or what we are hearing.

II. The Pictures

1. David at Ziklag

In the story of David and Ziklag, there are a number of powerful insights into the process of seeking God as a leader.

1 Samuel 30:3-8

³ When David and his men came to Ziklag, they found it destroyed by fire and their wives and sons and daughters taken captive. ⁴ So David and his men wept aloud until they had no strength left to weep. ⁵ David's two wives had been captured—Ahinoam of Jezreel and Abigail, the widow of Nabal of Carmel. ⁶ David was greatly distressed because the men were talking of stoning him; each one was bitter in spirit because of his sons and daughters. But David found strength in the LORD his God.

⁷ Then David said to Abiathar the priest, the son of Ahimelech, "Bring me the ephod." Abiathar brought it to him, ⁸ and David inquired of the LORD, "Shall I pursue this raiding party? Will I overtake them?"

"Pursue them," he answered. "You will certainly overtake them and succeed in the rescue."

- Pressure and crisis affect our ability to clearly discern God's will. No matter how spiritual or experienced you may be, when you are stressed, exhausted or discouraged, it is much harder to hear God.
- For the majority of leaders, personal encouragement typically precedes guidance and direction. David didn't even bother to ask God for direction through the ephod until he had strengthened and built up his own soul. Although we can only speculate, knowing David's normal patterns of worship, it's safe to say he was probably worshipping and waiting on the Lord. This form of self-encouragement is critical because it both strengthens our souls and sensitizes us to God's voice.

2. Elijah at Mount Horeb

Although he was an incredible prophet whose job it was to hear the Lord, by the time he got to Mount Horeb, Elijah was in a place of absolute despair and brokenness. As far as he was concerned, his ministry was over and he was ready to quit his job. How God spoke to him at this critical place in his life contains a number of unique insights into hearing God as a leader.

1 Kings 19:11-13

¹¹ The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by."

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains 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. ¹² After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. ¹³ When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

- Elijah was unmoved by the winds, the earthquake and the fire. Even though God had sent them as a sign that He was at work in the nation Elijah was despairing over, Elijah did not fully respond until he heard the gentle voice that God had always spoken to him in. It is no different for us as leaders today. We don't need some earth-shaking sign, mighty wind or fiery omen to confirm the things that God is speaking to us. We simply need to trust God to speak to us in the way he always has before. In my own life, whether it was my call to ministry, my marriage or any of the innumerable crises I've experienced, God's ways of communicating with me have typically remained unchanged. Although this is not to say that God cannot occasionally give us a supernatural confirmation or some other unique form of guidance.

3. Paul at Troas

By the time Paul arrived at Troas, he had to have been deeply frustrated and deeply angry. His strategic plan had fallen to pieces. The Holy Spirit had frustrated him at every point. In this unique biblical account, a number of insight into hearing God as a leader can be gleaned.

Acts 16: 6-10

⁶ Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. ⁷ When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. ⁸ So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. ⁹ During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." ¹⁰ After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

- Timing is essential. Paul's burden to go to Asia was not wrong; it was simply years premature. We know from Acts 19 that Asia proved to be the most fruitful mission field of his ministry. It is also clear from 2 Corinthians 1:8-11 that Asia would also prove to be one of the hardest times in his ministry. God in His wisdom knew that neither Ephesus nor Paul were ready for the harvest he intended.
- Teamwork is essential. When Paul responded to the call to go to Macedonia, God gave him the resources and the team members he needed to sustain the harvest. If

he had disobeyed God and simply gone to Asia, he never would have met Aquila, Priscila and Apollos, who played an integral role in the Asian harvest.

- Tenacity and Patience. It is also critical to remember that in many cases, guidance is a process. Although Paul received the guidance he needed in the middle of the night through a vision, this dramatic moment was simply the culmination of a process that had been going on for months. If Paul simply had grown frustrated and impatient, he could have easily settled for something less than God's best for his life, ministry and the people he was leading.

III. The Principles

Although there are certain principles that are basic to discerning God's voice, I want to take a moment to help you grow in your ability to discern God's guidance as a leader. I have chosen to use an analogy of cellular communications. Unlike earthly cellular companies that promise us limitless coverage and perfect reception but rarely deliver, God has the ability to transmit the heavenly signal of his voice to us no matter where we are on the planet.

John 10:4-5

⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice."

John 10:16

¹⁶ I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.

John 10:27

²⁷ My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.

Furthermore, it is clear from these verses in John that part of being a "sheep" or Christian is hearing and recognizing His voice. If the heavenly signal is as strong as I am suggesting, why do we have so much trouble hearing his voice?

Signal Strength

Within the cellular world, signal strength can be affected by proximity to a cell tower, obstructions such as buildings or trees, destructive interference from other communication towers and the condition of the cell phone.

Proximity Issues

Just as cellular reception is affected by proximity to cell towers, so our ability to hear God clearly is directly related to our proximity to God's person and God's people (the Church).

God's Person

Hearing God is not just a skill; it is a relationship.

Numbers 12:6-8

***He said, "Listen to my words:
"When a prophet of the LORD is among you,
I reveal myself to him in visions,
I speak to him in dreams.
⁷ But this is not true of my servant Moses;
he is faithful in all my house.
⁸ With him I speak face to face,
clearly and not in riddles;
he sees the form of the LORD.
Why then were you not afraid
to speak against my servant Moses?"***

Therefore, the more quality time we spend with God, the better we will hear him. The word "quality" here is critical because without discipline and focus, your time with God will be a waste. When I say discipline, I am not just describing the classical spiritual disciplines. I am talking about the discipline it takes to deal with all the distractions and attractions of our media-driven world. David uses the word "weaned" to describe the process of dealing with the distractions and attractions in his own life.

Psalms 131:1-2

***"My heart is not proud, O LORD, my eyes are not haughty;
I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me.
But I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother,
like a weaned child is my soul within me."***

Once we have dealt with our distractions, we are free to focus on God through His word, worship and waiting on Him.

God's People

Our proximity to God's people is also vital. Without the discipleship, mentoring, fellowship, equipping and accountability provided through a healthy local church, we will not have the foundations necessary to develop an authentic, sustainable relationship with God.

Ephesians 4:11-16

¹¹ It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, ¹² to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

¹⁴ Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶ From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Condition of the Cell Phone

Even as the internal condition and quality of a cell phone can determine call quality, so the condition of our souls is vital to the whole process of hearing God. In my own life, I have discovered that the following factors play a critical role in my ability to hear God:

1. Natural Factors: Am I stressed, fatigued, physically sick, exhausted, distracted, or overwhelmed with busyness? We cannot forget that our spiritual life is deeply impacted by how we are doing physically, emotionally and intellectually.

2. Conscience Factors: Have I injured my conscience through unconfessed sin or condemnation? At this point, I take inventory of possible sin and soul patterns in my life. If they are not the issue, I address what I am feeling as condemnation.

Destructive Interference

Even as cellular communications can be affected by other electronic signals, so the enemy, as the "prince in power" of the air, does everything in his power to impair our ability to hear God's voice.

Ephesians 2:2

² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.

Unlike the sense of defilement created by sin, or the simple absence of God when He is playing Hide-and-Seek, demonic resistance normally comes in the form of a wave or a wall. As a wave, it is typically an overwhelming sense of accusation, defilement, fear, despair or weakness. As a wall, it feels like an impenetrable barrier.

When I face demonic resistance, I will begin to worship God in many forms, but especially in tongues. Tongues are critical because they have the ability to bypass intellect and allow your spirit to express itself in a spiritual language. This enables you to more easily connect with God and the spiritual realm.

1 Corinthians 13:1

¹If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels...

1 Corinthians 14:14

¹⁴For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful.

2 Kings 3:15

¹⁵But now bring me a harpist."

While the harpist was playing, the hand of the LORD came upon Elisha

Dead Zones

Dead zones are areas where cellular service is unavailable because of architectural and geographical barriers, like tall buildings, hilly terrain or thick foliage. Although technically there are no spiritual "dead zones," there are definitely times and places in the life of every Christian where it seems almost impossible to hear God's voice.

Geographical Dead Zones

In my experience, there are definitely certain places on the planet where it is harder to hear God's voice. Typically, this reality is based on the level of demonic strongholds present and/or our operational experience in that place.

Spiritual Dead Zones

Spiritual dead zones are those seasons in our lives when it is simply harder to hear God's voice because of where we are on the road to maturity and transformation. Whether it is a series of spiritual mountains that need to be moved or crossed or an area of brokenness in your soul, it is simply more work to hear God during these periods of time. There is, however, another form of "spiritual dead zone" that some Christian mystics have termed "the dark night of the soul."

"The Dark Night of the Soul" is a poem written by St. John of the Cross, a 16th Century Spanish poet and Roman Catholic Mystic. In this poem he describes the painful pathway to spiritual intimacy with Christ. The poem is divided into two books which discuss the two phases of the soul's dark night: the purification of the soul and the purification of the spirit. "The Dark Night of the Soul" as a concept has re-emerged in popular thought through the book "Mother Theresa: Come Be My Light" which was published in 2007. This book consists of 66 years of previously unpublished correspondence between Mother Theresa and her confessors. In these letters Mother Theresa agonizes over the decades of terrifying dryness, darkness, and loneliness she

experienced in her relationship with God.

“Matter of confession

In the darkness...

Lord, my God, who am I that You should forsake me? The child of your love-and now become as the most hated one-the one you have thrown away as unwanted-unloved. I call, I cling, I want-and there is no One to answer- no One on Whom I can cling-no, No One. -Alone. The darkness is so dark-and I am alone. –Unwanted, forsaken. –The loneliness of the heart that wants love is unbearable. -Where is my faith? -Even deep down, right in, there is nothing but emptiness and darkness.-My God-how painful is this unknown pain. It pains without ceasing. -I have no faith. - I dare not utter the words and thoughts that crowd in my heart- and make me suffer untold agony. So many unanswered questions live within me- I am afraid to uncover them- because of the blasphemy. –If there be God, please forgive me. –Trust that all will end in Heaven with Jesus. –When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven- there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul. –Love- the word- it brings nothing. – I am told God loves me- and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul. Before the work started- there was so much union-love—faith-trust-prayer-sacrifice. – Did I make the mistake in surrendering blindly to the call of the Sacred Heart? The work is not a doubt- because I am convinced that it is His not mine. –I don’t feel- not even a single simple thought or temptation enters my heart to claim anything in the work.”

Although I do not agree with much of the validity of St. John’s comment, it is clear in scripture that serious Christians can experience periods of darkness and struggle.

Deuteronomy 5:22

These are the commandments the LORD proclaimed in a loud voice to your whole assembly there on the mountain from out of the fire, the cloud and the deep darkness; and he added nothing more. Then he wrote them on two stone tablets and gave them to me.

Psalms 88:18

***You have taken my companions and loved ones from me;
the darkness is my closest friend.***

Lamentations 3:1-8

I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of his wrath. He has driven me away and made me walk in darkness rather than light; indeed, he has turned his hand against me again and again, all day long. He has made my skin and my flesh grow old and has broken my bones. He has besieged me and surrounded me with bitterness and hardship. He has made me dwell in darkness like those long dead. He has walled me in so I cannot escape; he has weighed me down with chains.

Even when I call out or cry for help, he shuts out my prayer.

Although I have gone through extended periods of spiritual darkness for the purpose of testing my faith and building my character, I question whether the decades of darkness experienced by some Christian mystics were diabolical or divine. For example, the decades of darkness experienced by Mother Theresa began the moment she left her cloister to tend the poor and sick of Calcutta.

“Your Grace,

... Please pray specially for me that I may not spoil His work and that Our Lord may show Himself-for there is such terrible darkness within me, as if everything was dead. It has been like this more or less from the time I started “the work. “ Ask Our Lord to give me courage.”

Could it be that much of Mother Theresa’s suffering was diabolical in its origins “spiritual warfare”? After reading her letters I believe it was. It is important for us to remember that Jesus, not St. John or Mother Theresa, is the person we are called to emulate. Although he had his own dark nights (the wilderness, Gethsemane, and the Cross) the life of Christ was characterized by joyful intimacy with His Father. It should be no different for you and I today. Times of deep darkness should be the exception, not the norm in our lives. Even when they come, unless we are in sin or facing some form of diabolical resistance, I do not believe it is ever God’s will for us to be without His presence for an extended period of time. Be that as it may, there are a few critical principles involved in surviving these dark periods of time.

First, your trust in the written Word of God is paramount. If you live by your feelings, whether or they are emotional or spiritual in nature, you will end up deeply confused and/or tormented.

Isaiah 50:10-11

Who among you fears the LORD and obeys the word of his servant? Let him who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God. But now, all you who light fires and provide yourselves with flaming torches, go, walk in the light of your fires and of the torches you have set ablaze. This is what you shall receive from my hand: You will lie down in torment.

Second, your commitment to maintain transparent relationships is also essential. If you choose to disregard the few, God-given friendships and relationships that keep you self-aware and encouraged, the pain you experience during this time will be compounded. Even Jesus, when he entered His dark night of the soul at Gethsemane, asked his closest friends to accompany Him.

Matthew 26:36-38

Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."

The proper balance between how much time we spend alone with God versus time spent with our friends is especially hard to achieve during these dark periods. In my own experience, when people hit crisis they tend to spend all of their time with one at the expense of the other. Jesus, however, was able to beautifully achieve this critical balance.

Luke 22:41

"He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed"

The phrase "a stone's throw" captures the balance I am describing. Jesus was close enough to His disciples to stay in contact with them, yet far enough away to maintain His intimacy with God.

No matter which of these problems you are facing, these three principles will help you grow in your ability to hear God's voice:

1. Worship

Worship is absolutely essential to hearing the voice of God. This is the case because it creates an atmosphere for the manifestation of God's presence as well as sensitizing us to the reality of the spiritual world. Although all forms of worship are vital, I want to take a moment to discuss the place of tongues in worship and waiting on the Lord.

Four of the reasons that tongues are important are as follows:

Tongues has the ability to bypass the confusion of our soul

1 Corinthians 14:15

So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind.

Tongues allows us to clearly articulate the pain and wounds of our hearts, even when we do not understand them.

Romans 8:26

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.

Tongues brings connection with God

1 Corinthians 14:2

For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit.

Tongues builds our faith

Jude 1:20

But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit.

The building aspect of praying in tongues cannot be underestimated. I have discovered that it is essential in building up the spiritual stamina necessary to move in the Spirit's gifts for extended periods of time.

2. Wait

Whether it is seconds or hours, waiting on God is absolutely essential to hearing His voice.

Isaiah 40:30-31

Though youths grow weary and tired, and vigorous young men stumble badly, yet those who wait for the LORD. Will gain new strength; They will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary.

Psalms. 40:1

I waited patiently for the LORD; he turned to me and heard my cry.

Psalms 130:5-6

***⁵ I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I put my hope.***

***⁶ My soul waits for the Lord
more than watchmen wait for the morning,
more than watchmen wait for the morning.***

In my own life, I have discovered that over the years, my ability to hear God more quickly has increased. This increased ability, however, can also negatively impact my relationship with God because once I hear His voice I typically quit and go about my business. Unfortunately, when my relationship with God is reduced to this form of utilitarianism, I miss out on the other aspects and benefits of spending time in His

presence. For example, it is clear in Scripture that the presence of God has a positive impact on our emotional state.

Psalm 16:11

“You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.”

Whether it is this promise or others like it, only extended time in the presence of God will bring their fulfillment. Without this, our souls will begin to wither and dry up.

John 15:6a

“If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers”

Fortunately, when we refuse to spend extended periods of time in His presence, God will invite us to play his favorite game: “Hide-and-seek.” When we are prideful, lazy or simply cavalier, God will resist us by hiding Himself. The prophet Isaiah agonized over this phenomenon.

Isaiah 45:15

***Truly you are a God who hides himself,
O God and Savior of Israel.***

I have also found that God is not typically hard to find. Once I have humbled myself, I usually find Him very quickly.

3. War

When the enemy is interfering with your ability to hear God’s voice, worship and waiting on the Lord are not enough. You must make a counter-attack on the enemy. Although there are a number of effective strategies to use against the enemy, let me comment on one of them: angelic warfare.

Some of the best examples of angelic warfare can be seen in the life of Jesus.

Matthew 4:11

Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

Luke 22:43

An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him.

When we consider the promises of Psalms 91:11-12 it is clear that angels play a vital role in our lives as well.

Psalms 91:11-12

***¹¹ For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways;
¹² they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.***

Like Jesus, I have learned to ask the Father to send angelic help when I am in times of darkness, torment and battle.

Matthew 26:53

Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?