

In Genesis 12:1 it says that “The Lord said to Abram, Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go the land I will show you.” At 75 years of age Abram pulled up stakes, took his wife Sarai and all that he possessed and moved to the land of Canaan. Abraham moved at the direction of God. The rest is a story of faith and triumph because Abraham heard from God and obeyed.

Rita and I have our own version of the Abraham and Sarah story moving sight unseen to a new land with only the leading of God.

After I graduated from Messiah College, Rita and I packed up our belongings in a little U-Haul truck and set off for the distant land of Kentucky and Asbury Theological Seminary. We had never visited Asbury, never even set foot in Kentucky, and over the phone had agreed to rent a “Garden Apartment.” We did it all because we *knew* that this was where God wanted us to be. And like Abraham and Sarah’s story, it was filled with faith and triumph, all except for the “Garden Apartment.”

Did you ever “hear from God?” Have you ever felt a prompting from God? Do you wonder at times about people who say they have a ‘word from God?’ And have you ever wished that when it was time to make a decision, a really important decision; that God would just show up and write something in the clouds so you knew beyond a shadow of a doubt?

Discerning the voice of God amid all the other voices can be rather challenging, especially if we don’t know the voice of God.

That was the case of a little boy named Samuel who served in the Temple under the priest Eli. In the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel, the writer tells us something very important in the opening sentence of chapter 3, “In those days the word of the Lord was rare.”

I don’t think it was a lack of God speaking that made the word of the Lord rare; but the fact that people had stopped listening. Eli, the priest is a perfect example. Eli was a selfish individual and his sons the Bible says were wicked. Neither sound like an attitude that would put you in the right place to hear from God.

But Samuel would turn out to be different. Listen to the rest of 1 Samuel 3:

⁴ Then the LORD called Samuel.

Samuel answered, “Here I am.” ⁵ And he ran to Eli and said, “Here I am; you called me.”

But Eli said, “I did not call; go back and lie down.” So he went and lay down.

⁶ Again the LORD called, “Samuel!” And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, “Here I am; you called me.”

“My son,” Eli said, “I did not call; go back and lie down.”

⁷ Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.

⁸ The LORD called Samuel a third time, and Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."

Then Eli realized that the LORD was calling the boy. ⁹ So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

¹⁰ The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!"

Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

Samuel was at the beginning of his relationship with God. Samuel knew that someone was talking to him; he just didn't recognize that it was God.

Here is the first thing we need to learn about hearing from God. If we are not used to hearing from God it will take us time to get to know the voice of God. What we are talking about here is having a personal relationship with God.

Think about it this way. If you've been married a long time chances are good that you and your spouse can often finish off each other's sentences. Why is that? It is because you have spent time together in a relationship where you have learned to communicate with one another and are familiar with the thoughts and ideas of each other.

Well the same is true with God. If we are going to learn to hear from God we need to develop a relationship and the key to every relationship is good communication.

There is a beautiful picture of that relationship in John 10 where Jesus tells the story of the Good Shepherd.

"The shepherd calls his own sheep by name...and his sheep follow him because they know his voice." (v. 3,4)

If you want to hear from God and be able to discern the voice of the Good Shepherd from the other voices; then you need to have a personal relationship with the Shepherd.

And like a good relationship it will take time to develop. That means that you live each day in a continual conversation with God. That conversation involves getting to hear God's voice through the scripture and listening to God in prayer. Remember that prayer, like any good relationship, involves two people speaking and two people listening.

And the way that you and I learn to discern the promptings of God is by obeying. I know when God is prompting me because I've learned by doing. I've also learned by not obeying. I've had several times in my ministry where I've been

prompted by God to make a visit to someone but didn't. Those occasions have taught me that when God prompts I need to obey.

About now some of you have got to be asking the question, "So how do I know if God is speaking to me?" "How do I know the prompting I have is from God or just a bad idea?"

For that answer I turn to Bill Hybels, pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, and the author of the book, *The Power of a Whisper*. (BTW, just to show you how God works, Monday when I started to work on the sermon I got this CD from Willow Creek. It was all about listening to the voice of God.) In the book, and on the CD, Bill shares five filters that we can use to discern if we are hearing the prompting of God.

The first filter is to simply ask God, "Is this message truly from you?" Is the prompting that I am hearing aligned with the attributes of God and consistent with what I know to be the character of God as revealed in scripture? Whenever you receive a prompting— whether from God directly, or through the lips of another— be sure to test it. Take whatever time is necessary to ask, "God, is this message from you? Is this *you* trying to convey something to me, or are there other voices getting into my head?" Before taking a single step to obey the whisper you've received, be sure you get the all-clear that the voice you have heard could be from God.

The second filter is the scripture filter. God always speaks in agreement with the Bible.

If you tell me that God told you to cheat on your spouse or any number of other stupid things people think they hear from God in order to justify or get what they want; then I'll tell you that you didn't hear from God because it doesn't pass the scripture filter.

When you sense a prompting from God a good thing to ask yourself is: Can I imagine Jesus taking this action? If you can't envision Jesus following suit, then it probably isn't from God.

Another good place to start to see if your prompting will pass the scriptural test is Galatians 5:16-26. This passage puts into stark contrast the difference between being led by the spirit of God or by our own selfish, sinful nature.

So check out every prompting to see if it is in accordance with scripture. Messages that contradict Scripture are not from God.

The third filter is what Bill Hybels calls the Wisdom Test.

Scripture is relentless in exhorting us to be wise in all our dealings, to be wise in all our ways. There is a whole book in the Old Testament that is full of wisdom! Proverbs teaches us the value of wisdom and warns us of the outcome of playing the fool.

If the prompting is not wise, then it probably is not from God. If you think you hear God telling you to cash in your investments and buy lottery tickets so you can make a big contribution to the church; just skip the lottery tickets and give your money to the church! Wisdom doesn't encourage foolish risks when the outcome is clearly beyond reason.

The fourth filter is what Bill Hybels calls the wiring test. Here we learn to ask ourselves, "Is it in tune with my own character? Is it consistent with my gifting?"

If you can't sing well in the shower and you feel that God is telling you to quit your job and move to Nashville to become the next great singer; then God isn't speaking. If on the other hand the prompting is right in your sweet spot, swing away!

Finally, "What do the people I most trust think about it?" is the fifth filter.

Do your most trusted friends, who love you and love God, give you a green light, a red light or a yellow? If you are trying to discern the voice in your head and understand if it is from God or just some unfinished part of last night's meal churning in your gut; ask the people that you trust the most about the prompting.

If they tell you that it is consistent with who you are, move ahead. If they tell you it is out of God's character, stop. And if they are uncertain, wait. If the prompting is something major in your life exercise patience especially when others caution you.

If you take those promptings through the five filters and get consistent agreement; then the prompting is probably from God. If at any one of those filters you feel that you are not getting clarity; then step back and take time.

I want to leave you this morning with one final thought. "God tends to speak to people who want to hear from him." If you want to hear from God then you must begin to order your daily life around the idea that you want to receive input from God.

I've told many people over the years that if you want to know God's direction for your life then it begins with you getting to know God. God tends to offer divine direction to those who are willing to order their daily lives around receiving input from him. That means reading his word, coming to worship Him and taking time to listen and obeying the promptings that you know are from God.

As we leave today, I'd like to encourage you to take this outline home and put this verse from an old hymn up somewhere where you are inclined to listen to God and where you mull over the decisions that you need to make. Then make this your prayer each day as you read God's Word and listen to his voice.

*Oh! give me Samuel's ear,
An open ear, O Lord,
Alive and quick to hear
Each whisper of Thy Word;
Like him to answer to Thy call
And to obey Thee first of all.
Hymn by JD Burns*