

THE COMPASS

SIGNAL STRENGTH: Hearing From God, Part 1

The Multilingual God

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Are you familiar with the Gospel According to Cosby, and the story of Noah's ark? Bill Cosby, the comedian, released a classic comedy album years ago, where God speaks to Noah.

"Noah!"

"Who is that?"

"It's the Lord, Noah."

"Right!..."

I want to know if God really speaks to people,
and if he really speaks to people, is he speaking to me,
and if he is speaking to me, how can I be sure it's really him?

If we look down through human history, we find that we're not the first ones to scratch our heads over this issue.

You remember Job — a millionaire — a genuinely good guy. Good husband, family man. Loved God, loved people.

But then the wheels came off. Lost his children, lost his business, lost his possessions, lost his health.

And it seemed like God had gone *silent* on him.

But one Job's friends offers a moment of wise insight:

"God does speak," he says, "— now one way, now another — though man may not perceive it." (Job 33:14)

The problem isn't that God doesn't speak to us.

He does speak.

But he's multilingual.

He speaks one way one day, and another way another day.

He speaks one way to one person, and simultaneously by another means to someone else.

He speaks to me one way when I'm in a certain frame of mind, and a totally different way when I'm not in that frame of mind anymore, I'm in a different frame of mind.

He's not limited to one language.

He could be — he could have decided he was only going to communicate with us by one means, and you either had to get on that wavelength or you were out of luck.

You know, he could have said, "Kids, I am going to communicate with you strictly through pain.

I'm going to set up the world like one of those B.F. Skinner behavior experiments, where the subject has electrodes strapped to his body, and every time he does

something on a list of forbidden behaviors, he gets zapped, and pretty quickly he learns to avoid doing that stuff.
It won't be pretty, but it will be effective."

Or he could have said, "Hey, people, I'm going to give you this book, the Bible, and that's it.
Read the book, memorize the book, and when you bump up against something that the book doesn't specifically cover, you're on your own.
I'm not going to help you. Just coming up with the book took 1,500 years, and I went through 40 writers!"

But God doesn't take this kind of approach. He isn't stingy. He doesn't want to be close-mouthed.
He goes to the other extreme — because he loves people so much, he's willing to communicate in a whole bunch of different ways;
and maybe, just maybe, one of those ways will make it through the haze of our apathy, our confusion, our rebellion, whatever.

It's like in business, where countless man-hours are expended in meetings trying to answer the question, How can we communicate this so the boss will receive it?
Or, How can we communicate this so that the client will receive it?
How can we wangle some way to get a client to hear what he needs to hear, respond the way he needs to respond, for his own good, for the good of his company?
God is just as focused, even more so, on finding ways for us to hear what we need to hear, for our own good.
He makes us the client. He makes us the boss. He gives us a totally free will. But then he pulls out the stops to get through to us, to help us see what's best, to incline us to draw closer to him, to move more deeply into communication and relationship with him, for our own good.
He gives us multiple opportunities, on multiple wavelengths, to hear and receive the truth.

We have evidence that God speaks in all kinds of different languages.
For one, God certainly does speak through the Scriptures.
He makes this claim himself.

2 Timothy 3:

16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness [God's design for life],

17 so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

The Bible isn't just a rulebook. It's a workbook. It's to help you get more out of life, to enjoy the ride!

King David found this to be true centuries ago.

He said to God, *Hey, wow, cool!*

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path. (Psalm 119:105)

I'm doing better because of what I found here in the Scriptures.

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And yet, look at how God deals with us when we blow off the Bible.

He doesn't hate us; he doesn't give up on us.
 He finds other ways to get through to us.
 For example, he speaks to us through ministers.

Ephesians 4:11,12 says that God gives some individuals a special ability to teach his Word in such a way that people are able to love God better and love people better.

In **1 Corinthians 2:13**, the apostle Paul points out that this kind of teaching isn't just the work of really, really good human wisdom, but God is actually speaking and teaching through this gifted teacher.

The teacher can't take any credit for it; he or she is just a willing mouthpiece.
 It's a heavy responsibility, because the teacher has to be sure that he's not sticking his own biases in there.

The Bible says someone who teaches God's Word has to be held to a stricter standard, and this is why.

Somebody who claims to speak for God puts people at risk of believing a lie.
 This is one reason why reading and studying and thinking about the Scriptures yourself is still crucial, even if you're sitting under a steady stream of Bible teaching:
 Everything you're taught needs to pass the litmus test of Scripture. Everything you hear on a Compass DVD should align with the Bible.

If it doesn't, you start asking questions. Talk to a trusted minister and say, Hey, this doesn't seem to square with what I see in the Bible.

[www.CompassFellowship.com; Toll-free 866-DVD-4GOD]

Or email us here at The Compass, or call us, or something. Don't let it go. Get to the bottom of it.

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But thank God, he's not limited to preachers.
 He also speaks through people in all walks of life.
 We're designed for community, for relationships, and God uses the people around us to bring us more deeply into his design for our lives.

Proverbs 12:15 says **The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice.**

Sometimes a friend is the only one who can get me to hear a difficult truth about myself.

Proverbs 27:6 says **Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.**

Not very long ago, a friend came to me and very gently, very lovingly confronted me about the way I was communicating verbally with a mutual friend.

It was hurtful, and I didn't realize it.

I might sit and read the Bible an hour a day, I might listen to sermons on tape every day of the week, and still never recognize that little bit of ugliness in myself — unless someone came and spoke God's truth to me for that situation.

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God speaks through circumstances.
 Sometimes it's so clear! A door just opens before you, or a door simply closes in your face.

You couldn't have engineered it; it was a God thing.

When Paul wanted to go do ministry in Asia province and couldn't get in, in **Acts 16:6,7**, he sensed that it was God's Spirit keeping him from going there.

But sometimes God speaks through circumstances, but it's not clear at all that God is speaking.

You're just tooling down the road, the road bends, you go with it.

But you look back a day or a year or a decade later and you say, God was speaking through that situation. He was guiding me even though I wasn't really listening for his voice.

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Sometimes it's somebody doing you an unexpected kindness.

My family's entire life has been shaped by someone many years ago who simply, spontaneously, recommended me for a certain job.

They didn't gain anything — they just thought of me.

That job re-shaped my future. Introduced me to people who are still among my closest friends today, 30 years later.

God had a plan for my life, and he was calling me into it — but in a language I couldn't understand at the time, and probably couldn't have discerned by any other means.

Sometimes, on the other hand, God speaks through unpleasant circumstances.

Sometimes somebody hurts you, and maybe you reel from the blow. You feel betrayed. You feel kicked in the gut.

But as you stumble around, trying to recover from the shock and the pain, you wind up on a different road, and as you go down that new road you find that God has already hung your name on the door.

When we're endangering ourselves and others by busting God's design, sometimes God speaks through pain because we're not really tuned in on any other wavelength.

There was a guy who was cheating on his wife.

He was headed for trouble.

He was not asking God for wisdom; he was running the other direction.

When he finally got caught, you can imagine the pain — the guy got shredded.

Proverbs 20:30 says Blows and wounds cleanse away evil, and beatings purge the inmost being.

That guy emerged on a different street, heading in a different direction.

He could say to God, along with King David,

Psalms 119:71 It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.

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God speaks through feelings.

There's a whole range of definitions for this.

Once in a while — pretty rarely, but occasionally — you have what we might call an "Aha!" moment.

That's when you suddenly get a clear insight, a flash of inspiration, that you absolutely know is coming straight from the heart of God.

Then sometimes God speaks through what we might call “nudges.”
 This might be what Paul was talking about in **Romans 8:16**, where he talks about God’s Spirit “**testifying with our spirit.**”
 The English language doesn’t quite capture it.
 The New Living Translation of the Bible may actually communicate the concept in terms we can better relate to.
 It says his Spirit **speaks to us deep in our hearts.**
 That’s a nudge.
 It’s something way under the surface, deep down, something you might think of as vibrational. It’s kind of a twinge.
 You just sense in a keen way that God is speaking to you about something.
 It’s not an “Aha!” moment. It’s not big at all. It’s quite small. But you can tell that it’s important.

And then there’s the term “insight.”
 When God speaks by giving you an insight, it’s not emotional. It’s more intellectual.
 And sometimes you gain an insight, and you can’t trace it to God — or at least you don’t trace it to God at the time.
 You gain some new understanding somehow, and maybe way later you come to see that it was God speaking to you, giving you that new perspective on something.
 But it turns out that it lines right up with God’s Word; it strikes you after the fact that this was a God thing.

This kind of phenomenon is no accident; Jesus promised that God’s Spirit would do this kind of work for you.
 He said in **John 14:26** **But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.**
 He’s in the business of offering insights that line up with God’s design.
 And you can tell that it’s him doing this work, because the result is that you feel somehow settled about it, deep down inside.
 In his very next breath (**John 14:27**), Jesus says it’s **Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives.** *[In other words, this isn’t some cheap temporary peace like you get from popping a Valium. This is the real McCoy.]* **Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.** *[Don’t settle for the fake peace. Insist on the brand name.]*

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God speaks in more mysterious ways sometimes.
 He speaks to some people sometimes through dreams.
 When Job’s friend was giving him advice, he used dreams as an example of how God speaks to people:

Job 33:

15 In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on men as they slumber in their beds,
16 he may speak in their ears and terrify them with warnings,
17 to turn man from wrongdoing and keep him from pride.

Paul the apostle had a middle-of-the-night vision of a Macedonian man calling for help, and the next morning he headed to Macedonia.

It happens. God speaks through dreams.

If it's God speaking to you through a dream, it will line up with the Scriptures.

God can speak through art, through music.

He speaks through creation.

Many people really hear from God through the beauty and majesty of geography — the mountains, the oceans.

This was the psalmist David's frame of mind when he wrote Psalm 29:

Psalm 29:

3 The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord thunders over the mighty waters.

Responding to nature is a way of hearing from God. It's not for everybody, but for some of us, it's very real, and very important.

I have a friend who gets back in touch with God by going camping. I don't get that at all! But God communicates with him through the great outdoors.

Some people hear from God through biology! Talk to my friend Warner Lewis about how God reveals himself through the design of the human genome — and it's exciting!

Some of us can look at the ocean or the starry sky or the Grand Canyon and we don't really connect — but some of us do.

For a lot of us, God speaks through his creation.

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And then, I wish it weren't true, but a lot of times, God speaks through silence.

That's what we're going to look at in detail, in our next session.

And later in this series, we'll tackle the question of how to know if what I think is God's voice is really God's voice.

But for now, let it suffice that God loves you ... he loves you so much that he has gone to extremes for you, creating multiple communication streams so he can reach you, and touch you, and talk with you, and care for you, every single day.

He won't speak to you the way he speaks to me; he won't speak to either of us the way he speaks to someone else — and he won't speak to us the same way tomorrow that he spoke to us yesterday.

I have a 16-year-old Natalie, a 15-year-old Kristofer, and a 4-year-old Lydia Charlotte — and to be a good dad, I have to keep speaking new languages.

I may speak softly and lovingly ... I may yell.

I may cry out an urgent warning ... I may mutter to my wife, "Let him hurt himself, see if that will get through to him."

I may speak the language of withdrawn privileges, of suspended allowance, of grounding ... I may banish someone's little butt to the time-out chair.

I may have a very brief conversation about something; I may, as my son Kristofer puts it, "make a big speech."

I may whisper. I may use hand signals. I may just give a certain look.

I may offer an incentive for compliance.

I may just go to a friend of the family and say, “Will you please talk some sense into him!”

And you know what? Down through the years, God has communicated with me in every one of these ways, and more.

Why? Because he loves me so much.

See, I am always looking for some way to get through to my kids, to help them, to protect them, to grow them up healthy, to love them — so I’m communicating in all these different ways.

And God is always looking for some way to get through to *his* kids — to help us, to protect us, to grow us up healthy, to love us — so he’s communicating in all these different ways.

My Natalie and my Kristofer and my Lydia Charlotte are absolutely, without question, mine.

They are absolutely loved. No matter how or whether my communications are received.

Their care is top-priority with me.

And you are absolutely, without question, God’s child.

Absolutely loved.

Your care is top-priority with him.