

THE COMPASS

SIGNAL STRENGTH: Hearing From God, Part 2

Answer Me!

Doug Brendel

Shhh. Listen. What do you hear?

It's unnatural for us to be quiet for very long, isn't it?
It seems strange.

In our culture, we have the radio on in the background, we keep the TV on whether
we're watching it or not.

Silence is something to be avoided.

This is more keenly an issue in our lifetime than ever in human history.

With the advent of electronic recording and reproduction, for the first time people could
effortlessly fill their world with sound.

Before Edison's phonograph, before radio, if you wanted music, you had to sing it or
play it yourself.

And when someone went to the trouble of singing or playing, people gathered around —
because it was a treat. It was unusual.

Silence was the norm.

Today, we're afraid of silence.

If you and I go to lunch, and there's a lull in the conversation, we look for a way to fill it.
Silence is terrible. It's like a signal that there's something wrong in our relationship if
we're not talking every single minute.

But God's first language is silence.

I may spend years and years training myself to tune in to the voice of his Spirit speaking
to my heart and mind — and yet still find that most of the time ... typically,
normally ... I don't hear anything at all.

God isn't saying anything in particular to me.

He's silent.

You know, Jesus said in **John 8:44** that Satan's native language is falsehood. Lying.
God's native language, then, is truth.

And the truth doesn't have to be spoken to be true.

The truth just *is*.

God can be silent, and still be God.

God can be silent, and still be true.

God can be silent, and still be in love with me. Still be taking care of me. Still be working
in the background of my life for my benefit.

It just may not *feel* that way, because I'm accustomed to the jabber, the noise, of my
daily life.

In fact, I've come to believe that God speaks more through silence than by any other method.

I may be missing it — I'm yammering so much of the time myself, I can't hear what he has to say to me — but his presence is just as real.

His love is just as true.

His provision for me is just as seamless as ever.

I think it's possible that the reason I so often wonder "What is God saying to me?" isn't that he isn't speaking clearly enough, or loudly enough — it's that I'm not quiet enough.

I'm not still enough. I'm not patient enough.

There's too much noise in my life for me to tune in to him.

Why is God so silent with me so much of the time?

I think maybe he wants to settle me down, get my attention without having to whack me up side of the head.

When you were in junior high and high school, did most of your teachers raise their voices to get the class's attention?

But then once in a while you'd have a teacher who came in and just stood there and waited for silence.

Or who began speaking so quietly that all the kids would fall silent in order to hear what was being said.

This technique works because as human beings, we're designed to tune in to *contrasts*. Our physical hearing, for example, includes a feature sometimes called the "cocktail party" effect.

This is technically "the ability to be focused on one sound amid many interfering sounds, and the ability to determine the specific location of a sound source, otherwise known as 'sound localization.'"

This is where you can be in a room full of conversations, say a cocktail party, but you're able to distinguish the one voice that you want to listen to.

Your brain is gauging the contrasts between the sounds — the differences between the various voices and noises — and focusing all of its powers of analysis on that one voice.

If everyone were speaking in unison, you'd have a much harder time sorting out whose voice was whose.

(That also wouldn't be a cocktail party; you would be attending a Greek drama.)

In the same way, God uses my natural preference for contrasts when he wants to speak to me.

My life is noisy, so by contrast, he speaks softly — or silently.

Suddenly, in the midst of all the chatter, there's someone saying nothing at all.

It's so different. There's such a contrast. I instinctively tune in.

If God talked to me all the time, my human tendency would be to tune out.

But because he only talks to me from time to time, he has a better chance of getting me to tune in.

And if I come to understand that he will actually speak to me in silence — if I come to understand that there's value in just being with him, just sitting silently with him

— I will look for those times.
I will make time for him.

* * *

Sometimes, of course, I have a question and I want God to answer it.
It's my nature to want answers.
I don't like it when I don't get an answer.
What do I say when my kid pulls this? "Answer me!"
I feel my kid owes me an answer.
When my child responds to my question by asking me another question, I am keenly aware of the fact that I'm the parent and my child is the child, and I don't owe my child an answer — my child owes ME the answer.
"Because I'm your father, that's why!"

Well, there's a part of me that feels God owes me an answer too.
Why aren't you answering my question?
But when I think that way, I have our relationship backwards.
I'm thinking like the parent, with God as my child.
I need to turn my perspective about 180 degrees.
I'm his child. He's my father.
He doesn't owe me an answer.

When Job was going through this terrible troubles, he complained bitterly that God wasn't talking to him.
"If only I knew where to find him," he says in **Job 23:3-5**. "I would state my case.... I would find out what he would answer me, and consider what he would say."
But he wasn't getting any signal from God.
"...If I go to the east, he is not there," says (**Job 23:8,9**); "if I go to the west, I do not find him. When he is at work in the north, I do not see him; when he turns to the south, I catch no glimpse of him."
Job's friend Elihu is listening, and finally he responds with this question, in **Job 34:29**:
"But if he remains silent, who can condemn him? If he hides his face, who can see him?
...He is over man and nation alike."
God is God, and I'm not.

* * *

And God has his reasons.
When my kid wants an answer to a question, and I won't give it, why won't I?
Sometimes I just don't like my kid's attitude. I don't want to reward that kind of attitude. I don't want my child becoming conditioned to believe that this kind of attitude is acceptable.
I can think of some times I've asked God to speak to me when he probably had this kind of response to me.
At the time I was asking, I didn't feel my attitude was bad. I felt my attitude was completely justified. I can only look back and see it now.

Sometimes my kid's attitude is completely OK, but it's a question I don't want to answer because it's something I don't want my child dealing with yet — I want to wait till

she's older, I want to wait till he's more mature.
 I can think of a lot of times when I've wanted God to speak to me, but he correctly felt I wasn't ready for the answer yet.
 At the time I was asking, I didn't feel immature. I can only see it now.

I can't see the big picture the way God can.
 Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has said, when it comes to the intelligence community and the threat of terrorism, we have known knowns, we have known unknowns, and we have unknown unknowns.
 In other words, in some cases we know what we know, and we know what we don't know.
 But what kills you when you *don't* know what you don't know.
 This is the state in which children live: the world of unknown unknowns.
 They don't know what they don't know; they have to be willing to learn.
 And unfortunately, many of us are still children.
 We don't know what we don't know.
 We have to trust God to have the big picture, because we don't have it ourselves.

And then sometimes with my kids, it's not an issue of subject matter, or maturity; it's just not a good time to answer my kid's question.
 You're at dinner at the Petersons' house, and your grade-schooler comes to you and says, "Dad, why does Mr. Peterson have X-rated movies in his DVD collection? Aren't X-rated movies bad for you?"
 "Let's talk about it when we get home."
 Sometimes God wants me to get the answer later — because my issue involves someone else, and God is on a different schedule with that person than he is with me.
 A dinner date at the Petersons' place is probably not the time to deal with Mr. Peterson's pornography addiction.
 I think sometimes God is silent with me just to freeze me in position — like he's saying, "Please! Doug! Shut up!"

I can think of many times when I've wanted God to sort something out for me, but if I had known the end from the beginning, I would have changed my plans, I would have taken different actions than I did — and I would have mucked up what God was doing in a situation, maybe in someone else's life.
 Or I may have moved out of position to receive something myself from God later on.

Other times, I think God is silent with me just to leave me with no choice but to trust him. Sometimes he is just waiting for me to make a decision, take a step, and trust him to keep me safe. Trust him to keep me from doing something stupid.
 We're going to talk about this in detail in our next session.

But in any case, let's get this—
 God being silent is no reason for me to be panicky.
 God being silent is no cause for me to be angry with him.
 God being silent is not the same as God being absent.

The psalmist dealt with these same feelings.

“Oh God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” he asks at the beginning of **Psalm 22**.

“I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, and am not silent.”

Even Jesus dealt with these same feelings.

He actually quoted Psalm 22 when he was hanging on the cross.

God had already answered his question. There was no new information to be had.

God hadn't forsaken him. God just seemed absent because the pain was so great, and there were no new answers available.

On a vacation with your kids in the car, you get the question, “Are we there yet?”

What's the answer? The answer is always no. There is no new answer available.

“No, we're not there yet. When we're there, you'll know we're there, because the car will stop, and we'll get out.”

“Are we there yet?”

When I boil it all down, that's what I'm usually asking God.

“Are we there yet? Am I where you want me to be? Is this the way you want this situation to be? Are you satisfied with this? Because I'm not. Are you still working on this deal, or are you done? Have you given up on this? Are you tuned out?”

What's the answer? The answer is always no.

“This is your captain speaking. No, we're not there yet. Life is a journey. This is not your final destination. I am not satisfied. I am still working. I have not given up. I am tuned in.”

Sit back and enjoy the scenery along the way.

Look out the window. Be still. Be quiet. Keep listening, and keep learning.

After your kid asks “Are we there yet?” enough times, you stop answering.

You've said all you can say. You've said all that needs to be said.

I think God falls silent sometimes when we ask the same question over and over. When we don't get it, after a while. When it's clear we're not paying attention. When it's clear we're not going to accept the answer he's giving us.

He may communicate in some other way — one of the ways we discussed last week — through circumstances or whatever.

But as far as speaking to me directly, in my spirit, clearly and distinctly — nope, he's done.

He's just going to keep driving, and when we get there, we get there.

(Sometimes I think God is saying to me, “Doug, don't make me stop this car and come back there. Just hush for a while.”)

Three thousand years ago, King Saul didn't get it, in sort of the same way that I don't get it sometimes.

Saul wanted to know what was going to happen.

God had already answered the question, but Saul wasn't getting the answer he wanted — so he kept asking, kept insisting on a different answer.

Finally, **1 Samuel 28:6** — you can read it in your own Bible — says, Saul “inquired of the Lord” several different ways, “but the Lord did not answer him.”

He had already spoken. He was done.

So Saul decided to do an end run around God. He hired a sorceress to peer into her

version of a crystal ball, to call up the spirit of the prophet Samuel, who had died some time before, to give Saul an answer to his question.

But when Samuel showed up, he said, in effect, “Saul, what’s up with you? It’s exactly as God already told you.”

Maybe I don’t like my situation; maybe I don’t like the answer God is giving me, or the answer God ISN’T giving me.

But rather than whining and pleading and begging and fighting back — trying to take control, when I can’t be in control, because I’m not God — it’s going to be better for me, healthier for me, more enriching to my heart and mind, for me to console myself in God’s arms, and conform myself to God’s plan.

Truth be told, I’m inclined to claim that God isn’t talking to me when in fact I just don’t like what he’s saying.

If God has already told me something in the pages of Scripture, and I want to do something different, then I have this little trick I play: I pray about it, and then wonder, wide-eyed and innocent, why I can’t hear from God about this issue.

I called this “self-induced silence.”

All the way back when Jesus was working on earth as a man, people were playing this game.

Jesus wasn’t going to play along.

“Why is my language not clear to you?” he said (John 8:43). “Because you are unable to hear what I say.”

I don’t want to be God’s child. I want him to be MY child.

Jesus nailed this in the very next breath (**John 8:47**):

“He who belongs to God hears what God says,” he said. “The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God.”

Well, yeah!

I don’t want to belong to him. I want HIM to belong to ME, to be MY servant.

* * *

In the year 906 B.C., **1 Kings 19** tells us, the prophet Elijah was depressed, or he was pouting, or both. Depends on your definition, I guess.

But he was moping around, and wanted answers from God.

When God finally spoke to him, he spoke in a way that translators have struggled with for centuries.

In the King James Version, it’s described as “a still, small voice.”

In the New Revised Standard, it’s “a sound of sheer silence.”

Mike Yaconelli, in his book *Dangerous Wonder*, tells about a Lutheran missionary friend of his who was translating this Scripture into the local tribal language where he was working in Africa, and he finally settled on the phrase “a thin silence.”

Sometimes I need to recognize that God is with me even in the midst of a “thin silence.” Quiet is a good thing. I need quiet more than I need answers. I need to settle my spirit more than I need to import data.

When a child cries, we pick them up and hold them close and say, “Shhh.”

I think that’s a moment when we’re very much like God.

We’re crying, and he holds us close and says, “Shhh. Be quiet. Don’t cry. I’m taking care of you.”