

THE COMPASS

SIGNAL STRENGTH: Hearing From God, Part 3

Is That You, God?

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When my daughter Lydia Charlotte was real little, she watched those Baby Einstein videos.

She would watch in the background of my life; I wasn't really tuned in.

And in one of these videos, there was a door and a doorbell; and the doorbell on the video sounded exactly like the bell at the front door of our house.

So when the little puppet character or whoever pressed the doorbell, and it went "Ding dong!" — every time, without fail, I would go, "I'll get it!" and head for our front door.

I never learned to distinguish between the actual doorbell and the doorbell on videotape.

Is it live, or is it Memorex? *I don't know!*

Now when people in history heard from God — the Scriptures tells us God spoke to Adam, Abraham, Moses; he spoke to various prophets; he spoke to Paul — it just occurs to me to ask: The first time God spoke to these guys, how did they know it was him?

How did they recognize his voice?

How often has your phone rung, and you picked it up, and the person on the other end of the line says, "Hey, how ya doin'?" — and you go, "Uh ... fine..." — but you have no idea who it is!

You're wracking your brain — *Whose voice is this?*

If we can't even recognize our own friends' voices — how in the world do you recognize God's voice?

We hear all kinds of people claiming that God spoke to them.

Osama bin Laden is on a religious crusade.

A thousand years ago, it was the Christians supposedly hearing from God and slaughtering Muslims.

We could spend hours naming the various ridiculous and often horrible things that people have done in the name of God — claiming to have heard from God: everything from mothers killing their babies to religious organizations making up new rules and regulations.

How does somebody recognize God's voice?

The classic example that comes to my mind is a little boy, about 1100, maybe 1200 B.C., in Israel.

His name was Samuel — in fact, when he grew up, he was the great leader Samuel

who anointed David as king of Israel.

But when he was a little guy, his mom brought him to the temple and dropped him off. Talk about growing up in church!

Eli was the high priest of Israel at the time, and Eli raised Samuel right there in the temple.

It was a good deal for Eli, because he was getting old, he was going blind; so little Samuel could help him with his various chores and duties.

And the Scriptures tell us specifically that in those days, God did not talk directly with average, everyday people like you and me.

He only talked with the religious leaders, and even then, only rarely.

And when he did talk, it was often through visions: the religious leader would wake up and say “Whoa! What a dream! That was God!”

But the people had grown so distant from God, they were so unconcerned about a relationship with him, that God didn’t have much to say to them — and the Bible says, **“In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions” (1 Samuel 3:1).**

So one night in the temple, as the nightlight was burning low — you know, they left one lamp burning when they went to bed, and it would finally burn out after they fell asleep — little Samuel was in his bed, old Eli was in bed in another room, and Samuel heard his name: **“Samuel!” (1 Samuel 3:5-10)**

So Samuel did what he had been trained to do: he answered “Here I am!” and he came running to Eli.

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

So Samuel went back and lay down.

But again the boy heard his name called.

Ding dong! “I’ll get it!”

1 Samuel 3:

6 ...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.”

The Bible tells us Samuel didn’t yet know God; the way the Scriptures put it is: **“The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him” (1 Samuel 3:7).**

He had never heard from God. He was just doing chores in the church or whatever. So he didn’t recognize God’s voice.

But then 1 Samuel 3:8 says:

1 Samuel 3:

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

And it was *then* that Eli realized ... God was speaking to this boy.

1 Samuel 3:

9 So Eli told Samuel, “Go and lie down, and if he calls you [again], 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.”

And God spoke to him.

In fact, when Samuel told Eli the next day what God had said to him — even though it was *bad news* for Eli — Eli affirmed that this was absolutely the word of God. Not something fake or imagined.

How did Samuel learn to distinguish between Eli’s voice and God’s voice?

How can I learn to distinguish between the videotaped doorbell and the real doorbell?

Do I just have to guess, and hope for the best?

All my life, I’ve heard people say, “Well, let’s go ahead with this idea, and if it works out, we’ll know it was from God.”

Do you think that’s a valid litmus test?

If you sense God may be speaking to you to take a certain action, or make a certain decision, do you go ahead and see if this course of action results in success — and based on the outcome, after the fact, you determine whether it was God speaking to you or not?

On the surface, that seems right.

But it’s wrong.

If anybody could hear clearly from God, it should have been Paul the apostle.

Here was probably the greatest Christian who ever lived.

He wrote more of the New Testament than anybody else.

And yet he repeatedly banged his head up against God’s plan, for lack of clear direction.

In **Acts 16** he talks about trying to get into Asia to preach the Gospel.

He wouldn’t head to Asia unless he felt God was directing him to go there.

He heard a *ding dong*, and he was responding with “I’ll get it!”

But afterwards he admits, the Spirit of God himself kept him from going into that region.

Then he tried to go into Bithynia to minister to people.

He wasn’t in it for himself; there was no personal benefit to him to do ministry in

Bithynia. He just felt that’s where God would have him go. *Ding dong!* “I’ll get it!”

But afterwards he admits, the Spirit of Jesus himself wouldn’t allow him to go into that region. As far as we know, Paul never got into Bithynia.

On his final ministry journey, Paul went to Rome.

He heard God calling him there.

In fact, it was definite. It was distinct.

Acts 23:11 says “the Lord stood near Paul and said, ‘Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.’”

But after Paul got to Rome, and talked to the people about God, they bent him over a chopping block and cut off his head.

Had he heard from God? Do we determine this from the success of the outcome? Ehrr ... no.

Let’s not be fooled into thinking that God only calls us to success, to prosperity, to comfortable situations.

The apostle Peter said, **“Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you” (1 Peter 4:12).**

Paul told the Corinthians that **“the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives”** — fortunately, however, **“so also through Christ our comfort overflows” (2 Corinthians 1:5).**

God doesn't call us to trouble and leave us there on our own.

He calls us to difficulty to teach us, to grow us, to mature us — and he remains available to comfort us through the process.

Hebrews 5:8 says even Jesus himself **“learned ... from what he suffered.”**

Peter told his friends to hang in there. **“Those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good” (1 Peter 4:19).**

And that will pay off, he said.

“After you have suffered a little while,” he said, God will **“make you strong, firm and steadfast” (1 Peter 5:10).**

So success is not how we determine if God is speaking to us.

Prosperity is not a good litmus test.

How can I know when God is speaking to me?

How can I know if that *ding dong* is my front door — or the Baby Einstein video?

The answer to this question is surprisingly simple.

It is so simple that many people reject it.

The answer to this question is the same for you and me today as it was 3,000 years ago for that little boy named Samuel.

God will speak to me if I am willing to be spoken to.

When I say “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening,” God speaks to me.

When I consciously and willingly put my life in his hands, he loves that — and he communicates.

I can trust that God is guiding me if I have a heart to be guided.

If I am living the way Jesus lived — **“not my will, but thine be done” (Luke 22:42)** — I don't have to worry about whether I'm hearing from God.

God will speak clearly to me, in a way I can hear and understand and live by.

The psalmist David understood this, and wrote a song about it, which we know as Psalm 37 in our Bibles.

Just **“Trust in the Lord,”** he says (**Psalm 37:3-5**), **“and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will do this.”**

Some of us have heard this Scripture all our lives — “Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart” — and we've understood it backwards.

Sounds like it means whatever we desire, God will give us.

But we know that's not true; it doesn't happen in reality.

What the psalmist David has discovered is that when I just trust God and carry on doing good, living by God's design to the best of my ability, God plants healthy desires in my heart.

I can relax, because the desires of my heart will be desires that God has given me.

God doesn't necessarily call us to a life of success or prosperity.

He calls us to a life of peace.

Even when God is speaking to me and guiding me into a difficult situation, I can go there with an indefinable, unexplainable sense of calm in my spirit, because I know God is the one planting desires in my heart, giving directions, calling the shots, and I know he is going with me.

I can go in peace — not because I got holy enough to hear from God. Not because I got good enough that God decided to speak to me.

But simply because I was willing to be spoken to, willing to be guided.

Simply because I honestly said, "Speak, Lord ... your servant is listening."

God is so eager for communication with us, this is his only requirement!

If I feel a certain impulse — I get a certain idea in my head — and it makes me ill at ease ... if it makes me stop and wonder, "Is this from God?" — I can certainly ask God to confirm it.

I can pause, and pray, and ask God to give me an assurance that this idea isn't the result of my own ego, or some character flaw, or a bit of undigested mashed potatoes influencing the chemistry in my brain.

I can look at the Scriptures and ask God to confirm his word to my spirit.

I can ask mature Christian friends for advice; I can ask them to pray with me. **Proverbs 11:14 (NKJV)** says, "...In the multitude of counselors there is safety."

But I don't have to agonize.

If I'm agonizing, I'm not at peace.

And if I'm not at peace, it ain't God I'm talking to.

God has said he's going to give me desires, not dread.

He's called me to peace, not panic.

When it's God speaking to me, the way my wife Kristina describe it is: It just goes *click*.

It fits. It feels right. It produces peace.

Ding dong! *That's not the doorbell; that's the Baby Einstein video.*

Ever been in a European airport? You hear dozens of different languages.

The gate announcements are made over the public address system in a dizzying array of languages.

Most of them sound like gobbledygook to me.

But the moment I hear English, my brain clears! Hey, I know those words! They're singing my song!

It's an automatic response.

I don't have to wonder if I'm going to hear my own flight announcement; when I hear it, I know.

I have the English language planted in my brain.

You can hear from God in much the same way.

The prophet Jeremiah experienced God's voice this way.

He said in **Jeremiah 20:9** that God's word was in his heart, shut up in his bones.

Actually, at that time in his life, Jeremiah was arguing with God, and Jeremiah said:

“...His word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.”

Jeremiah recognized that even when he didn't want to do what God was calling him to do, it was as if God's voice was springing up from within him, from the inside out. There was no question, no denying that this was God speaking to him.

This means when you're facing a decision in your life, when you have to make a choice, you can relax and choose and trust that God is giving you that desire.

In fact, if I trust God — if I believe that **Romans 8:28** is true, **“that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose”** — then it's going to be hard NOT to hear from God!

Life is not “Let's Make a Deal,” with Door #1, Door #2, Door #3, and you have to choose the right one or you're out of the game.

Once you've committed your life to God, you're God's.

And Jesus said, in the simplest possible terms, **“He who belongs to God hears what God says” (John 8:47).**

Should I take the job in Seattle or stay here in Phoenix?

I don't know; what's God saying to you?

I don't know. I don't hear him saying anything!

Then do what you feel like doing.

You've entrusted your life to him; he's giving you the desires of your heart.

His Spirit is going to be active in me — so if I am choosing badly, I am going to sense a pang of anxiety or uneasiness when I think about going in that unhealthy direction.

If your decision doesn't contradict your conscience, if your decision doesn't contradict what the Scriptures say, then you are free to go for it.

If you don't sense God saying, “Whoa, stay away from Door #2,” then go ahead and make your choice and enjoy the adventure.

This is what the founder of our compass DVD ministry, David G. Brown, calls “inherent permission.”

As God's child, I have inherent permission to do what I want unless I hear otherwise from him.

Our agonizing over choices is a waste of energy. It breaks God's heart to see us wringing our hands.

“...You saw how the Lord your God carried you, as a father carries his son, all the way you went until you reached this place,” Deuteronomy 1:31-33 says. “In spite of this, you did not trust in the Lord your God, who went ahead of you on your journey....”

The psalmist David had to work on this his whole life.

In **Psalm 31:6-8** he says:

6 ...I trust in the Lord.

7 I will be glad and rejoice in your love, for you saw my affliction and knew the anguish of my soul.

8 You have not handed me over to the enemy but have set my feet in a spacious place.

That spacious place is a place of freedom.

A place where we can enjoy life.

A place where we can enjoy the gift of free will that God has given us.
A place where we can make choices, make decisions, take steps without fear —
knowing that God is with us.

Dr. Rebecca Radmacher-Brown likes to say: “If you want God's will, you have it.”
It's his will for us that we would want his will!

Paul wrote to the Christians at Colosse: **“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts,
since ... you were called to peace” (Colossians 3:15).**

Have you entrusted your life to God? Then you are hearing from God. He is guiding
you.

And that's something to celebrate.