

***COMMUNICATING
WITH
GOD***

By

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Second Draft

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Communicating With God---Does it Work?

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my wonderful sister, Anita, a faithful worker and supporter of me and my family, who has discussed the subject of this book with me many times, and has asked the “hard” questions. These honest evaluations, forged through real experience, have challenged my thinking and driven me to further study and discovery. While many questions naturally remain in her mind as well as in mine, I hope that this simple attempt to look at the mysteries of God will improve, even if ever so slightly, some of our understanding of God’s ways and purposes.

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1

Communicating With God---Does it Work?

- “My prayers don't seem to be answered.”
- “God speaks to others but he doesn't speak to me!”
- “What does God really want me to do?”
- “My prayers go no higher than the ceiling. It doesn't seem that God is listening!”
- “If I get no answer, does that mean “yes” or “no?”
- “How do you hear God's voice?”
- “How do I know what God's will is about taking a job or opportunity?”

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- “I think God only speaks to prophets because he has never said anything to me personally.”
- “If God wants me to have a *personal* relationship with him, why is He so impersonal and distant?”
- “God is too busy running the universe to speak personally with me.”
- “I guess I'm too much of a sinner to get God's attention, or maybe I don't have enough faith.”
- “I'll make my best guess on what God wants and assume that it is his will.”

Do any of these questions or observations sound familiar to you? Let me assure you, if they do, you are not alone. At least some of these sentiments have coursed through the minds of a multitude of Christians, and without doubt, through the minds of most anyone who may be reading these words.

These are natural questions. And we must begin by saying they are not bad or evil questions. They are, in fact, real and honest questions. They betray a frustration encountered by thousands if not millions of sincere adherents of the Christian faith. They deserve a straightforward answer.

Disclaimers on how to understand this difficult subject are inevitable. The writer of these pages hastens at the very outset to pose of few.

First and foremost, I am not an expert on this subject. When it comes to “hearing God's voice,” I am most definitely a “work in progress.” Most writers choose to write upon a

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subject they really know about. This is not the case here.

True, it has been my personal quest to hear God's voice in a practical way for decades and years. But I am an impatient learner, and I have not always been successful, and this has led to an obsessive interest in this subject. Even after reading and praying for hours, sometimes, it seems, I have like Peter “fished all night, and caught nothing.”

The “frustration” factor for me has not been that God never seems to communicate with me or answer my prayers. Sometimes it seems he definitely does. But to be honest, a lot of other times it seems that he doesn't. The inconsistency of this on again and off again experience is the great puzzle we must tackle in this exercise.

When I was a young boy our family lived in a house in the country. We were poor when compared to other families, but abundantly blessed on the most important things of life; love, security, and happiness.

On one birthday, maybe my eighth, I was given a plastic wallet with five dollars in it. I thought I “had died and gone to heaven.” That was an unbelievable amount of money for me to use at my discretion. I wore the wallet in my pocket everywhere I went.

One day I was playing with my brothers out in the large yard where there were numerous fruit trees, rows of lilac bushes surrounded by dead leaves, and a large garden and lawn. There was a willow tree way out back with a home-made swing, where we played a lot, as well.

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One day I lost my wallet. I couldn't believe it was suddenly gone. I was too embarrassed to say much about it, because I knew I shouldn't have been so careless as to lose it. I knew there wasn't going to be another one with five dollars in it, anytime soon, at least. I was devastated.

After searching the property for some time I came to the conclusion it was probably stolen or lost forever. In desperation I decided to pray about it. I went back by the willow tree, because I didn't want anyone to see me when I knelt down!

I knelt down near the swing and faced outward toward some bushes and an old fence that was there, and prayed that God would help me find my wallet. Soon I opened my eyes. Because I was in the kneeling position, and only because I was, I was situated to look straight ahead of me under the large bush nearest me. In moments I noticed what looked like my wallet, nested in the leaves, dirt, and stalks at the base of the bush. I dug it out and sure enough, it was my wallet! Apparently while swinging on the old swing it had flown out of my pocket and landed in such a place where it could have, still to this day, escaped normal discovery.

Naturally I was thrilled with this outcome. It seemed like God was very near. He had heard my prayer! He had even led me to have my prayer, in spite of my reasons, right beside the lost billfold. God knew all about me, and for now I even had him on the phone. It seemed like the rest of my life would be one grand walk with the Lord.

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However, even though I have always had some kind of positive relationship with God, I can't claim that every life circumstance after this seemed to always have the same divine involvement in it. I discovered like most Christians do, that most of the time God doesn't seem to be so readily available, or as communicative as this. Lots of the time it seems more like the story of Elijah on Mt. Carmel, who heckled the prophets of Baal about their god, saying, "Maybe your god is on long journey, or he is having a nap." I never figured out why God seems to respond sometimes and other times there is indeterminable silence. I have wondered, "How long can you have faith in a God who seldom shows up or says anything?"

I realize that I am not alone in this difficulty. I have discovered, as well, that even the supposed "experts" have struggles on these issues, and typically give very flimsy and vague answers to the questions posed at the front of the chapter.

This vagueness has greatly frustrated me, and likely many others, because it seems that communicating with God shouldn't be all that complicated, confusing, and problematic. Above all, seasoned Christians, and especially gospel ministers it seems, ought to have a working knowledge of this subject and know how to effectively share it with those searching for God (thus my quest).

It is a surprise to me, that despite what Christians regularly claim is true about God's willingness to relate directly with men, that few Christians really do have *in actuality* a truly personal, communicative, relationship with God. Therefore,

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to be totally honest, maybe we Christians had better “put up or shut up” on the notion that God is personally involved in our lives.

Some speakers and writers have been helpful to me on this subject. We will refer to them perhaps from time to time. But enough is still missing from the equation yet, for this particular author to be satisfied. Therefore, the reader is invited to enter into my personal quest, (at their own risk!), and seek to discover perhaps greater insights on how to know and recognize God's voice. I cannot guarantee anything except that I will do my best to be honest, real, and decisive about the prospect. I believe it is my responsibility to share and teach these things. As a minister and spiritual counselor, I need to “get real” about this process and be honest and practical about it. And really, when you think about it, nothing could be more important than knowing how to listen to God.

In addition to extended reading, study, and experience, I have also recently “surfed” the web on this subject. The same frustrations arise also in this endeavor. One of the most distasteful circumstances discovered in cyberspace is the obvious commercialization of this subject. For a price you can have “released” to you, the three, or four, (or ten) secrets of communicating with God. Sometimes, for a significant tuition figure you can also take classes on the subject. Simpler approaches are offered as well. But typically, promises are made such as: “How to hear God's voice” in “so-many” easy steps. But even these somewhat elementary helps, even if they are reasonably valid in themselves, are mixed in around the occult, mystical,

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paranormal, or astrological refuse that is marketed on the internet and elsewhere.

While Gospel materials must often have a cost attached to them for their production, it does seem disingenuous to make a knowledge of God's voice and will available only to the inducted, or the prepaid or moneyed learner. Thankfully, God does not sell tickets that you must buy in order to come hear him speak. The Gospel is free, or at least it ought to be. Here, in these pages, it is our goal to share whatever tools we possibly can without a whole lot of profitable monetary exchange going on. My interest is not in selling a book, or even an idea. As much as possible I want to make whatever knowledge I may have gained, small or large, a gift. The knowledge is not really mine anyway. It's a journey and an experience. Yet what I desperately want is for any interested Christian to be able to experience one-on-one conversation with the God of heaven.

Dividing the process into steps, or over-systematizing and packaging the subject of God's voice and will, can also be a problem, I believe. "Keeping it simple" is a noble aim, but ordering it numerically in this particular way makes it sound like there is only one right way to reach God, or that it is difficult and complicated, like some boxed merchandise that requires assembly. While communicating with God is a science in which there is much to learn, it is not something that requires "graduation" before one can start. Heaven's resources are close and accessible to the novice as well as the expert, and in some ways might almost be more accessible to the new, non-prejudiced beginner.

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Ultimately, there should be only ONE real step to come to God, or to hear Him. That is to reach out to God in one's own way and show interest in Him, because God has already reached out to each person individually and to mankind in general. Fundamentally, there is only one real basic step in communicating with God. The seeker must simply have an "ear." (He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says...) [Rev. 1]. The learner must simply "be interested" and "pay attention." Basically, that's all!

There are many conditions, and many tips that may lead us to greater understanding, it is true. These will be discussed. But God is available right wherever the reader is stationed at this moment. He is close by, "nigh unto you." He can be communicated with at this moment. There are no "steps" as it were for this immediate and direct exchange to begin. It can be occurring right now. Whatever the time or emergency, God through his Son is ready for immediate conversation.

This leads us then to the scope and purpose of this small book or experiment. The aim is to approach this subject as simply and as clearly as we possibly can. This little book does not offer a clever, intellectual approach to the subject. Far from it. The language and thought will be simple. At all costs this information should be available to the simple as well as the brilliant. Therefore, we will attempt to avoid the academic, wordy, philosophical exercises of some writers and stick to practicality and simplicity as much as possible.

It would be foolish to propose that we can direct each person's own experience with God in these pages, for God

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works with every unique person in his own unique way. But what we can attempt, is to lead every sincere Christian to the person of Jesus and His Word, and introduce him to God's ways in such a fashion that the Lord himself will hopefully become the reader's own personal instructor--- and not even this book, or any other earthly personage.

This is an exciting and wonderful privilege and prospect. The heart of this writer is right now being warmed as he writes the above words, not because he has some special connection with God, but because he is again strongly impressed that God truly wants more Christians to have such a special connection with him. He wants YOU, the reader, to have this connection with Him. Is there even just a small interest or warmth in your own heart about this very thought? See! God has already spoken directly to you! This moment, already through this humble writer, and in a thousand much more important ways previous to this, he has spoken directly to you.

The aim of this small book will be to explore how each person MIGHT experience God's voice for himself or herself. It will not be written so that one must labor through the whole book to begin doing this in more earnest. Again, it shouldn't really require a book or a laborious methodology to teach someone how to hear God's voice. So, the following chapter and each chapter in turn, will simply be testimony on how one might enrich his walk with God. But any one chapter alone should equip the reader enough to experiment for themselves. The rest is bonus material.

2

Conversation with God

From my earliest years I have been taught that “prayer is talking to God as to a friend.” I was also taught that knowing God is in some ways similar to having a relationship with another person or human companion. “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” we sing.

Now while any of us know that there are enormous differences between our relationship with God and say our relationship with our spouse or family, or our human friends,

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we have to recognize that any relationship, whatever the parties involved, has to have certain components or qualities.

One of these components, and perhaps the chief among them, is that certain feelings and attitudes of one being have to in some way be communicated, understood, or somehow transferred to the other being. These feelings or attitudes usually elicit some kind of response or acknowledgement from the other person, or maybe even a pet, or whatever. If there is no response it is hard to establish that a valid relationship, or at least a rewarding one, is taking place.

For instance, when a baby is born to loving parents, the strength of the relationship largely becomes the responsibility of the parents, at least at first. The baby, being a baby, has learned very little about his or her social part in this world. But the parent realizes this, and speaks to the baby words that the child may not even understand yet, but speaks them as if the baby can understand them.

What the baby probably first observes is not what the parents are really saying verbally, but what they are saying through the language of love and touch. There is really nothing more exciting for a parent to see, perhaps, than the circumstance when the little one indicates or responds in some gentle way that he or she understands this fact of their expressed love. The baby's first smile, the baby's first squeeze on the finger, the light and sparkle in the developing infant's eyes, even the cries for food and help, are extremely precious, because they are proof that a loving, dependant, and successful relationship is being established. If and when these signs do not appear, parent and pediatrician become very concerned.

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While some kind of relationship may exist between most any being, developed relationships, both good and bad rely largely on communication. This communication may be verbal or otherwise, but it is still the key to the nature of the relationship. One may argue incessantly with their boss, or one may be silent and give the cold shoulder to some co-worker, yet a certain “relationship” still exists. In these cases it is not a positive one, but it is a relationship. Its nature has been determined by the attitudes and feelings being transferred back and forth between the parties.

It is difficult to conceive of any close or intimate relationship existing without mutual communication of some kind. I've tried to imagine what would have happened if my wife had never from the start spoken to me or responded to me in any way. Would I have a relationship with her, at least a meaningful and lasting one?

What if when I asked her out for the first time she had simply stared blankly at me and said absolutely nothing? (I wouldn't have blamed her if she had!). With no indication on what to do next I doubt the relationship would have changed from that point forward. If I dared at that point to make the assumption that she might go out with me, and even if I stated that I planned to pick her up at a given time and place, I couldn't be sure before that time whether she would meet me, or not. If I came anyway and she wasn't there, it would probably signal again that she wasn't interested in getting acquainted, or at least that she never really heard me or understood what I wanted for her and me in terms of a relationship. In short, our relationship would

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have never gone very far without some sort of response from her, and back and forth after that.

I am thankful that this isn't how my relationship with my wife developed. Instead, she communicated in some way (verbally, in this case) that she would be happy to go out to a certain restaurant and share a dinner with me. That was an unusually good start! We had conversations on the way to the restaurant, and at the restaurant. During the meal Elizabeth indicated she wanted to taste my dessert (gooseberry pie). I “granted her request”---- “up to half of my” pie. She polished off the rest of my pie, and has been stealing the best things off my plate ever since!

My point is that communication must usually go **two ways** for a significant relationship to develop and positively exist. Yet it has seemed that my communication with God is mostly a one-way type of communication, at least in terms of direct conversation (monologue). I would pray for hours, pretending God was there, mostly assuming that God would not say much back. And indeed most of what I heard was silence. I would listen and listen, but seldom did I feel that God was keeping up his side of the conversation.

Now there is nothing wrong with meditating and just being silently alone with God. There are most definitely times for that, and it can be very meaningful and instructive and soothing. But it seems to this author that to put such a limit on God's part of the communicative process is somehow not right. It seems that God wants to say more than this, and that he wants more personal interaction with His creatures than this. It also seems that the human spirit needs more response

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than this also, to at least spiritually sense that a direct, personal, relationship with God truly exists.

So now we must ask, “Does God really want to communicate directly with us?” “Are we instructed to submit our personal decisions and affairs to him for his approval?” Are we enjoined or invited to carry on a personal, conversational dialogue with the God of heaven?

Says Proverbs 2:1-8, TLB: "Every young man who listens to Me and obeys My instructions will be given wisdom and good sense. Yes, if you want better insight and discernment, and are searching for them as you would for lost money or hidden treasure, then wisdom will be given you and knowledge of God himself; you will soon learn the importance of reverence for the Lord and of trusting Him. For the Lord grants wisdom! His every word is a treasure of knowledge and understanding. He grants good sense to the godly—his saints. He is their shield, protecting them and guarding their pathway."

Another famous verse (James 1:5-8, TLB) says: "If you want to know what God wants you to do, ask Him, and He will gladly tell you, for He is always ready to give a bountiful supply of wisdom to all who ask Him; He will not resent it. But when you ask Him, be sure that you really expect Him to tell you, for a doubtful mind will be as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind; and every decision you then make will be uncertain, as you turn first this way and then that. If you don't ask with faith,

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don't expect the Lord to give you any solid answer."

A verse in the Psalms says: *"I will instruct you (says the Lord) and guide you along the best pathway for your life; I will advise you and watch your progress. Don't be like a senseless horse or mule that has to have a bit in its mouth to keep it in line!"* Psalm 32:8-9, TLB. Ps. 32:8

Or,

I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go: I will guide thee with mine eye. KJV

One of my favorite of all Bible verses, Proverbs 3:5-8, (TLB) recommends trusting God for guidance and understanding: "Then trust the Lord completely; don't ever trust yourself. In everything you do, put God first, and He will direct you and crown your efforts with success. Don't be conceited, sure of your own wisdom. Instead, trust and reverence the Lord, and turn your back on evil; When you do that, then you will be given renewed health and vitality."

The promise in Psalms 25:9, NIV, is that "He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them His way."

Further verses repeat the same basic promise:

"And I will bring the blind by a way that they knew not; I will lead them in paths they have not known: I will make darkness light before them, and crooked things straight. These things will I do unto them, and

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not forsake them.” Isaiah 42:16 KJV

“And the Lord shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought, and make fat thy bones: and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not.” Isaiah 58:11

And again several more texts can be cited:

Isa. 30:21 And thine ears shall hear a word behind thee, saying, This is the way, walk ye in it, when ye turn to the right hand, and when ye turn to the left.

Ps. 33:11 The counsel of the LORD standeth for ever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations.

Ps. 23:3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Ps. 73:24 Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory.

Again, the Psalmist says in *Ps. 27:1 1*: *Teach me thy way, O LORD, **and lead** me in a plain path, because of mine enemies.*

Prov. 19:21 There are many devices in a man's heart; nevertheless the counsel of the LORD, that shall stand.

Ps. 16:7 I will bless the LORD, who hath given me counsel: my reins also instruct me in the night seasons,

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Ps. 25:5 Lead me in thy truth, and teach me: for thou art the God of my salvation; on thee do I wait all the day.

And these are but a few of the Bible references on this important subject.

It is obvious in reading the Bible accounts that the righteous characters of the Bible consulted the Lord on a regular basis. Adam and Eve, before sin entered, walked with God in the garden, we know, and openly conversed with Him. Enoch, we are told somehow communed with God, maybe he even went “walking” with Him. Noah received detailed instructions from the Lord, at least about the project of building the ark.

Abraham had several direct encounters with God and followed God's direction in his life. If he had never somehow heard God's voice, he would have never left Ur and sojourned in the land of Canaan. Moses spent long periods, 40 days and nights (7X?), communing with God on the mount. David consulted God on a regular basis and received guidance from God, some of which even included specific military instructions. So, God communicated directly with the prophets, and many others.

Certainly, the Lord Jesus himself somehow received discernible communications from his Father. While it is not entirely clear how this process took place for Christ on earth, we know that some system was in place. Jesus seemed to know whether or not he had divine permission to perform a certain act or miracle, and even knew whether the timing was

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right for it. While Jesus probably did not hear an audible or internal voice as much as some people probably think he did, he somehow had a direct connection with his Father and lived out the Father's will on the basis of this heavenly connection. An inspired writer gives us this insight:

"Christ in His life on earth made no plans for himself. He accepted God's plans for Him, and day by day the Father unfolded His plans. So should we depend on God, that our lives may be the simple outworking of His will. As we commit our ways to Him, He will direct our steps." Ellen G. White, *MH* 479.¹(Further references below)

¹ MAKING PLANS:

Where many have erred, was in not being careful in following God's ideas, but their own. Christ Himself declared, "The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do" (John 5:19). So utterly was He emptied of Himself that He made no schemes and plans. He lived accepting God's plans for Him, and the Father day by day unfolded His plans. If Jesus was so wholly dependent, and declared, "Whatsoever I see the Father do, that I do," how much more should human agents depend upon God for constant instruction, so that their lives might be the simple working out of God's plans! . . . *In Heavenly Places*, p. 147

Jesus repelled the charge of blasphemy. My authority, He said, for doing the work of which you accuse Me, is that I am the Son of God, one with Him in nature, in will, and in purpose. In all His works of creation and providence, I co-operate with God. "The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He seeth the Father do." The priests and rabbis were taking the Son of God to task for the very work He had been sent into the world to do. By their sins they had separated themselves from God, and in their pride were moving independently of Him. They felt sufficient in themselves for all things, and realized no need of a higher wisdom to direct their acts. But the Son of God was surrendered to the Father's will, and dependent upon His power. So utterly was Christ emptied of self that He made no plans for Himself. He accepted God's plans for Him, and day by day the Father unfolded His plans. So should we depend upon God, that our lives may be the simple outworking of His will. DA 208

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One way we know that God invites us to consult him in our decisions is that he repeatedly in the Bible scolds or rebukes those who failed to seek God's direction when they should have. In the Bible, the Lord often asks such questions as: "Why do you consult the gods of Ekron?" "Don't you know that I am a God that is willing to give you instruction?"

Psalm 1:1 says: "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly."

God doesn't want us to seek special instruction, at least on spiritual matters, in just any of the popular ways of the world. He wants us to consult Him directly and avoid the worldly alternatives. Here are some texts of this nature:

Ps. 106:13 They soon forgat his works; they waited not for his counsel:

Isa. 30:1 Woe to the rebellious children, with the LORD, that take counsel, but not of me; and that cover with a covering, but not of my spirit, that they may add sin to sin:

Isa. 29:15 Woe unto them that seek deep to hide their counsel from the LORD, and their works are in the dark, and they say, Who seeth us? and who knoweth us?

One king of Israel refused to consult the Lord on matters in which he should have. Even so, God sent Elijah with a message anyway! God's point in all of this was to show to Ahaziah that the failure to receive the counsel was not because of God's

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unwillingness to communicate, but because of the disinterest of the king. As a result of his evil heart, Ahaziah was even refusing to communicate back with the Jehovah God:

“And Ahaziah fell down through a lattice in his upper chamber that was in Samaria, and was sick: and he sent messengers, and said unto them, Go, inquire of Baalzebub the god of Ekron whether I shall recover of this disease. But the angel of the LORD said to Elijah the Tishbite, Arise, go up to meet the messengers of the king of Samaria, and say unto them, Is it not because there is not a God in Israel, that ye go to inquire of Baalzebub the god of Ekron? Now therefore thus saith the LORD, Thou shalt not come down from that bed on which thou art gone up, but shalt surely die. And Elijah departed. And when the messengers turned back unto him, he said unto them, Why are ye now turned back? And they said unto him, There came a man up to meet us, and said unto us, Go, turn again unto the king that sent you, and say unto him, Thus saith the LORD, Is it not because there is not a God in Israel, that thou sendest to inquire of Baalzebub the god of Ekron? therefore thou shalt not come down from that bed on which thou art gone up, but shalt surely die. 2 Kings 1:2-6

Again and again God warns his followers away from false divination and worldly counsel and asks that we seek him instead:

Isa. 8:19 And when they shall say unto you, Seek unto them that have familiar spirits, and unto wizards that peep, and that mutter should not a people seek unto their God? for the living to the dead?

Isaiah 8:20. “To the law and to the testimony, if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no

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light in them.” KJV

God asks that we not use astrology, spiritism, false prophets, false gods, the many typical worldly forms of guidance, and even our own selfish wisdom. Why? Not only because these sources of guidance are dangerous and misleading, but because he knows it is better and wiser to consult Him, particularly through the mediation of his law and testimony, that is, the Bible and the testimony of the true prophets.

So how then, specifically should one consult God and hear his voice? I think this is one of the most under-addressed and least understood matters in all of Christendom. Thus this book, and thus our quest. And it all begins with seeking the Lord himself, directly, for his answers. The key is in knowing how to hear God's voice and how to separate it from all the other voices we hear in the world around us.

There is a particular scene in the dramatic presentation of “Joan of Arc” written or directed by George Bernard Shaw. In the story Joan is interviewed by French officers and the king who are both curious and mystified by her spiritual experiences. Whether or not the historical Joan of Arc actually ever heard the genuine voice of God we cannot know for sure. But what she said in this instance is thought provoking.

“Where do you get your instructions?” her inquisitors, one of whom is the king, asks.

“I hear voices,” Joan says. “I hear voices telling me what to do---they come from God.”

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“Oh, your voices, your voices,” the King says.

“I am the king. Why do they not come to me? I am the king and not you!”

Joan replies:

“THEY DO COME TO YOU **SIR**, BUT YOU DO NOT HEAR THEM.”

A story is told of an entomologist, an expert on insects, who was present at an outdoor wedding ceremony. Amidst the din and noise of the reception he sat quiet and interested in something, yet strangely detached from the rest of the crowd. Finally a curious observer, noticing his strange behavior spoke to him and asked him what he was doing.

The expert replied that he was listening to insects. “What insects,” questioned the observer. “I can't hear anything but the visiting and the music.”

Yet the entomologist, with his keen ear and particular training, could easily discern the noises of many tiny creatures and even estimated that there were at least 200 crickets in the immediate environs. It was all a matter of familiarity and knowing what to listen for.

In the classic book, *Alone With God*, the story is related how a certain man, who worked along the shorelines of Lake Michigan, could easily yet mysteriously predict the arrival of certain ships to the wharf long before they even appeared on

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the horizon. Finally, one day this man took one of those who were curious as to how he knew when the ships were about to arrive, into a small icehouse near the shore. Somehow there in quietness of those walls, away from the din and commotion outside, one could easily discern the churning of the propellers or the vibrations made by the oncoming ships.

In a certain way this holds true in the realm of "hearing God's voice." The sounds of God's communications are coming, but we are not attuned to listening to them, or we have not learned to listen in the right ways. Nevertheless, God wishes to communicate with the willing of heart. He invites: "He that hath an ear, let him hear."

We are told that God "will speak His mysteries to us personally":

As Christ lived the law in humanity, so we may do if we will take hold of the Strong for strength. But we are not to place the responsibility of our duty upon others and wait for them to tell us what to do. We can not depend for counsel upon humanity. The Lord will teach us our duty just as willingly as he will teach somebody else. If we come to him in faith, he will speak his mysteries to us personally. Our hearts will often burn within us as One draws nigh to commune with us as he did with Enoch. Those who decide to do nothing in any line that will displease God, will know, after presenting their case before him, just what course to pursue. And they will receive not only wisdom, but strength. Power for obedience, for service, will be imparted to them, as Christ has promised. Whatever was given to Christ,--the "all things" to supply the need of fallen men,--was given to him as the head and representative of humanity. And "whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight." 1 John 3:22.

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{RH, July 14, 1910 par. 7} See also COL 129

As David told his son Solomon about God, “If you seek him, he will be found of thee.” I Chronicles 28:9 This seeking attitude and listening spirit is the elementary and primary key to unlock the secrets of God's will and heart for each person.

First of all, then, we must listen!

3

The Three Ways

Triads often occur in Jesus' teachings and in inspired literature. While it is true that the number "three" is a very small and common number, it should not be assumed that *all* of these triads are simply accidental or spontaneous. I believe one of the reasons these are given is to indicate the fullness of the Trinity and to represent the fullness of blessing given by the Trinity. "Holy, Holy, Holy," is another tri-fold designation used in addressing God. (Isaiah 6, Rev.

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4:8)

In almost every circumstance I have ever heard of, where someone actually heard an angel's voice, or received a powerful inner impression to act upon some impulse, the signal almost always comes at least *three times*. This repeating of the “voice” gives the God-seeker certainty that God is speaking. This three-fold circumstance seems to have happened to hundreds if not thousands of people. (Elijah in the cave, the young Samuel, etc.)

God's voice often seems to be equated with a trio of witnesses. Sometimes there are more ways that God will speak, but usually at least three “voices” seem to usually be required to distinguish the communication as a genuine product of God's will and voice. God wishes to give abundant evidence and to make our pathway safe, so he establishes his counsel “out of the mouth of two or three witnesses.” He doubles or triples the communication, to make the communication sure and the interpretation certain.

GOD’S WILL

This is why it is interesting to me that as to our *personal* understanding of God’s will we are told by Inspiration that it is revealed to us in at least the **three** following ways:

“There are three ways in which the Lord reveals His will to us, to guide us, and to fit us to guide others. How may we know His voice from that of a stranger? How shall we distinguish it from the voice of a false

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*shepherd? God reveals His will to us in His word, the **Holy Scriptures**. His voice is also revealed in **His providential workings**; and it will be recognized if we do not separate our souls from His by walking in our own ways, doing according to our own wills, and following the promptings of an unsanctified heart, until the senses have become so confused that eternal things are not discerned, and the voice of Satan is so disguised that it is accepted as the voice of God. . . .*

*Another way in which God's voice is heard is through the **appeals of His Holy Spirit**, making impressions upon the heart, which will be wrought out in the character. If you are in doubt upon any subject you must first consult the Scriptures. If you have truly begun the life of faith you have given yourself to the Lord to be wholly His, and He has taken you to mold and fashion according to His purpose, that you may be a vessel unto honor. You should have an earnest desire to be pliable in His hands and to follow whithersoever He may lead you.”²*

Of course, there are more than three ways in which God reveals his will. Other ways are through Christian mentors, friends---or other people or companions, through the example of Christ and His life, through sacred Christian music, through preaching of the Word, and through “prophetic guidance.” In the Old Testament God's will was sometimes communicated through the “Urim and

² E.G. White, *Testimonies to the Church*, Vol. 5, p. 512.

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Thummim,” or through “lots,” through predicted or fulfilled prophecy, and through a variety of other ways. Often visions or dreams were given. Sometimes nature was even used. One source lists at least 21 different ways in which God is known to speak. We are even told in further places that God has a thousand ways to speak. But if one will pause to consider, these “other” ways are usually just different variations of these same original three.

These three “ways” seem to equate also with the Trinity. Providence (1) seems to often be associated with God the Father, the One who controls all things, even the affairs of nations, according to the counsel of His own will. But the authority of Christ and the influence of the Spirit are also involved, of course, in the out-workings of providence. Jesus is called the “Word of God” (2), therefore he is equated with the Scriptures, though the Holy Spirit and God are very much involved in the process of “giving” the Word of Life to the world as well. Impressions on the heart (3) can be notably attributed to the working of the Holy Spirit, though, of course, this same Spirit is the Spirit of Christ and of God the Father, just the same.

The late F.B. Meyer, a famous Christian pastor in England sometime in the last century similarly explained this three way guidance system in a graphic way:

He often related that this paradigm of hearing God's voice is like certain ships that for many years were known to enter through a dangerous passage into a certain harbor on the English coast. The only way to enter the harbor and not be foundered upon the dangerous rocks blocking the entrance

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was to follow some lights placed onshore. These lights were so situated so that they could be visually lined up from a ship captain's perspective. When he lined up these “buoys” or landmarks, and followed them in keeping his course in line with them, he could safely enter into the harbor without accident.

Likewise, it so occurs in the Christian realm. All three of God's “signals” need to line up. Not just two sometimes, but usually all three. Generally, if these three are all prayerfully considered, the pilgrim can be quite sure God's voice and God's will is being safely communicated to him.

At the present moment I am again testing this ingenious template for making a life-changing decision. It is a genuine situation in which I am seeking God's voice and will. I am using this circumstance here as a practical example in using the “three ways” model.

What is particularly challenging in this instance is that one particular option in the decision involves significant resistance from church, family, and even the church administrative leadership (or my employer). Unfortunately for me, I am feeling led in a different direction than the particular one the “powers that be” are recommending. It is clear what most everyone else thinks I should do, but I seem to be the one that is not clear whether or not God is recommending it.

The circumstance is really difficult because I don't want to cross the will and desire of my family, church, or work associates. Sometimes God speaks through these other

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channels as well. Above all, I certainly don't want to cross God's will. And, of course, to complicate it, there is the matter of my own personal wishes in any decision that must be dealt with.

So, for instructive purposes, this is how it lays out for me so far. I am currently serving as an interim pastor at a particular church. In certain ways God is blessing my time in this place, and now the church search committee has asked me to stay on to be their permanent pastor. It is a reasonably nice, modest-sized church, with certain advantages. My family needs a stable situation, in that we have moved around a lot in the last few years and it has taken its toll family-wise, and financially.

But I haven't come to the place where I feel clarity or freedom to accept the call, at least permanently. Honestly, when I am writing this I don't know how the matter will turn out. I have communicated my present reticence in taking the call to my conference leader who I greatly appreciate and respect. I am pleading for extra time to make this decision.

My suspicion is that he and his fellow administrators (one includes my own brother!) are mystified and maybe a little taken back that I am not embracing this opportunity immediately. My extended family feels that it is a priority that I accept most any single assignment regardless of what it is, because a man's duty is to his family and its support is a higher priority than a satisfactory configuration of my ministry profession. To fail to take this opportunity might possibly lead to the loss of my family's support, something I am quite reticent to really consider.

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But for certain conscientious reasons all of which I won't take time to divulge here, I don't think it would be right for me to take the call, not to mention that I personally don't feel "freedom" or "desire," about continuing long-term in the current situation. Certain ones think I'm "nuts" for not taking the situation immediately, and have even questioned my mental condition, even going so far as recommending psychiatric assistance! "Hmmm. Well, maybe I....?!!"

But to apply the 3-way paradigm above, here is what I have considered so far. I am asking, do ALL three buoys in the harbor line up? For me they really don't, at least, so far.

1.Providential Workings

It is true that there are some strong providential considerations. The local church wants me to stay, that is a plus, and I am already here as an interim anyway, so why not just conveniently continue on? It is also important to have a job these days, and I am a trained, ordained Seventh-day Adventist minister. The area is o.k., and maybe with some changes it could work. But, currently, my wife's job, which we need, is an hour and a half away in a neighboring city. With a two-year old child, and her having to work on worship days [she is a tech at a large hospital], this situation is certainly NOT providential at the moment. But in some ways it might be a partial "YES," since the church and its leaders are positive about it----and yet there are some difficult constraints too.

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2. The Word of God

Now, I know, of course, that God's Word is not normally going to say “in actual words” to take a particular call to a particular city. I have received no visions, either! But I have been convicted for years that in many cases the typical, long-term pastoral assignments in a particular parish are not recommended by the Bible model, and particularly by what many of us call the “Spirit of Prophecy” guidelines. Yet this arrangement is exactly what is being expected by the current congregation that I would serve. They want one man to be their local, titled leader for the next 5-10 years, at least.

But the counsel is clearly given in repeated instances that this model of permanent assignments is **not** to be followed, at least in most cases. Our principle efforts as pastors are not to be primarily engaged in preaching to those who have already heard the message. Having been convicted on this issue for years, it is becoming difficult (for me) to encourage and abet this clearly condemned practice, by agreeing to serve one church only for the next several years. I have prayed and wondered if I should ignore such feelings and convictions, or if I for some reason I am blind and am seeing the counsel in the wrong light.

But while praying over this the Lord has repeatedly led me to several Bible texts that seem to confirm this understanding. I was led back to Acts, chapter six, where the New Testament church was compromised by self-serving administration. In addition, I was particularly led this time to Paul's words in Romans 15:20,21: “Yea, so have I strived to preach the gospel, *not where Christ was named*, lest I should build

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upon another man's foundation, But, as it is written, to whom he was not spoken of, they shall see and they that have not heard shall understand." In *Jeremiah* one morning, I read the words, "many pastors...have spoiled the vineyard." Almost every day a verse of this nature sticks out at me. I have repeatedly asked the question of God concerning whether or not I was seeing this whole issue correctly or whether I should indeed "see a shrink." But everywhere I am met with Bible verses and "Spirit of Prophecy" counsel that exonerates the general position I seem to be taking. It also seems wrong to believe that God would require me to subjugate my conscience then in order to properly support my family.

On this issue I was told by one mentor that providing for my family is more biblically required than obeying God's mandates in the writings concerning our jobs and careers. But I was subsequently led to the verses in the Gospels where Jesus was asked what the greatest commandments were. The first law is to obey God. The second law is toward our families and our fellow man. In that order. This encourages me to think that while it is manifestly important to provide for our families, God is not ever going to ask us to provide for them in a way that knowingly violates his revealed will. In other words, though I have a God given responsibility toward my family, it would not be right (for me, at least) to sell whiskey to support my family if I felt that was my only option. God does not ask us to do this. He will provide us with ways, though they may be very difficult at times, to produce income for our families in a clear, moral fashion.

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So overall, it seems that God's written "word" FOR ME (I must emphasize) does not support a decision of acceptance in this case. This is strongly exonerated by what some of us call the *Spirit of Prophecy*. (If interested in this subject, please read my small book, "*The World is My Parish*.")

3. Impressions of the Spirit upon the heart

In the case we are discussing, I have simply not felt impressed that taking the call permanently is the "right thing to do." Though I feel a little "guilted" by church leaders and family that I should take the call because to them "it's the right thing to do," or they say they would be "disappointed in me if I didn't take it," it seems clear that a better witness from the Spirit is needed for me to accept this particular invitation. To the credit of my wonderful church superiors, they are not *forcing* the decision on me. But it is clear that their *opinion* is that I should definitely accept it, and that if I don't I am going against that opinion. And their opinion, I know, should be considered, of course, in the whole of the decision.

Impressions from the Spirit are not always clear, undeniable, impressions or feelings. I find that usually this waymark is revealed in a couple of principle ways. First and foremost comes the voice of conscience. If conscience is active, **God will almost always use it first in making a decision.** In fact, it seems that God more often gives special and distinct impressions outside the normal conscience only when one is in danger of making the wrong choice. The cases that could be cited on this are numerous. But usually the "voice of conscience" is enough to influence the right decision.

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"Conscience is the voice of God, heard amid the conflict of human passions; when it is resisted, the Spirit of God is grieved." 5T 120

Another way the Spirit impresses is whether or not something may simply “seem right” or not. Some options may actually be very moral options, so there is no “wrong feeling” associated with taking them. But sometimes the Spirit will indicate His will by removing His blessing from a certain option.

Likewise, in this case I simply do not feel “freedom” to accept this assignment, except for a short term. There is nothing “wrong” with the call, but I somehow can't “feel” it. Now if I am not wanting to do it, like Jonah in the Bible, and I run away from a clear assignment given by God, then it will never totally “feel right” to avoid it. But I can't seem to sense that in this case.

I may feel “disfavor” from my church or superiors, or extended family, because I am leaning away from the permanent assignment. Yet I feel this disapproval largely because I don't want to displease *them*. But I don't feel guilty toward God. In fact, to take the position might incur some guilt, or better yet, negative *conviction*, for me, *from* God. Over all, then, I just don't feel taking this call is the right thing to do. Maybe on paper it is, but not before God and His Spirit.

The three buoys, overall then, simply don't line up. The way into the harbor may not be safely negotiated at this juncture.

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Temporary Conclusion

Therefore, in the end, I believe that God is very definitely speaking to me on what I should or should not do. I am open to any changes or further developments, but again the three voices don't completely line up. Some of them are in place, but some of them are not. According to our paradigm, they must all line up to a degree. The configuration may not be perfect in every detail, life decisions rarely are. But the trend should be consistent. So, I am waiting for God to give me further direction before I accept this permanent call. In fact, I am quite desperate at the moment, in a sense, to see where he might be leading, since I am not finding total resolution about what does follow this present assignment.

By the time this book is ever printed, hopefully circumstances will have worked out so that I can see and report that I have made the right decision. But at this time, it is very frightening and difficult, to say the least.

I hope this helps the reader see a little, at least though, how this wonderful formula works. It doesn't make every decision “easy,” but it makes the process a surer one, thankfully.³

“Why doesn't God just speak audibly to us about these

³ (Later update: This decision paved the way for an unexpected career opportunity that came about soon that far exceeded any expectations and represented an acme experience for my family, life, and ministry).

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decisions, and we can just go on from there,” some might ask? This is a natural question, and it is one I wish I could totally answer. But we don't always know.

But I do know I just heard recently of a fellow pastor of a successful church who heard an audible voice speaking to him recently instructing him to leave his present congregation and go and begin a church in the heart of a secular city. At first, I envied his “voice call,” until I thought about what he was being asked to do. Now I am actually relieved that I wasn't the one God spoke to about that particular appointment because I feel that humanly speaking, I could never carry such an assignment out. At least I sure wouldn't want to at this point. Hopefully, if God wanted me too and so directed, though, I would willingly follow His leading.

In fact, this particular pastor probably would never take on this responsibility, nor would his sponsoring organization support him, if he hadn't received such a definite signal. Therefore, God does what is appropriate and necessary in each case. If his subjects successfully follow his leading in the “normal” ways, God does not need to use more dramatic forms of communication, **yet the results of his leading are in every way just as genuine and “God-sent.”** I think God wants us to get to the point that we are so close to his will in how we live and think that when we conscientiously act it out, we are in verity living out his will, *without* the direct interposition or correction of his “audible” or directive voice.

God has his reasons for taking us through the process. I think God wants to involve us in our own decisions, and not

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always give us an order or mandate. This mutual involvement preserves the power of choice that he has given all of us. If God always makes the entire decision, then our own power of choice is largely negated. God does not want automatons, or robotic slaves, but rather thinking, rational beings, who learn from experience under his tutelage, just how to live, think, and act, like Him.

No given one of the three major pillars of decision making should ever stand alone. Impressions, and especially feelings by themselves, are unreliable and need to be tested against the Word of God. Some African tribesmen are known to experience significant guilt if they fail to successfully kill an enemy tribesman in war. We know that such a more' in our culture would not be right or spiritually valid. So conscience needs to be guided and educated by the Word. Yet some people will read something in the Bible and apply it strangely or wrongly, or even take it as a false "providence." This circumstance comes because they are not led by the genuine impressions and special guidance of the Spirit in interpreting the Word of God for their lives. All things must agree.

Finally, providential workings are not indication enough in themselves that something is God's voice or will. Sure, circumstance should make sense and in every way agree with the revealed will of God and the principles of the Bible. But, for instance, getting offered a normal job that requires that one work on the Sabbath is probably not a providential working, in my opinion. So just because something seems providential doesn't make it providential. Its not just as simple as open and closed doors. The Word and the Spirit

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must also testify.

When Jesus was enduring his temptations in the wilderness he was offered several options that he could have considered very providential in that particular situation. But Jesus insisted that these things contradicted what God said in His Word (It is written), and by what the Spirit had impressed upon him during those forty days of prayer and preparation. Satan is still active in showing seemingly providential teasers to Christians when they are sometimes nothing more than a deadly trap. The Spirit did not lead Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted. It led him into the wilderness to prepare for the temptations sure to come. During those forty days Jesus became “Spirit-filled” so he could resist the false offers of providence that would come His way.

But when doors open that do not violate Scriptural principles and the threshold can be crossed with a clear conscience then we can usually be quite certain that we are living in God's will. His voice can be distinctly heard in the alignment of these three cardinal way marks.

4

The Audible Voice

Some people long to hear God's voice more directly in their lives. Others are just the opposite and actually try to avoid hearing the things of God. What would it be like if we could actually hear God speaking audibly to us?

Maybe you are like the little girl I once read about. She wasn't sure she wanted God to speak to her at all. She was afraid to go to bed in the dark by herself. After three or four trips to her parents' bedroom, her father sought to reassure her. "Look, honey," he said, "You are not really alone in your bedroom. God is watching over you. God is everywhere and He is in your bedroom, too." The little girl was not very reassured by this. She started back to her room but stopped at

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the door and said in a loud whisper, "God, if you are in there, please don't say anything. It would scare me to death!"

God's voice seldom comes in an "auditory" fashion, however. Yet it would be incorrect to say that God never speaks in this way, for thousands of times he has. Sometimes God, usually through the agency of His angels, speaks in a real, audible voice.

"And thine ears shall hear a word behind thee, saying, This is the way, walk ye in it, when ye turn to the right hand and when ye turn to the left." Isaiah 30:21

19-year-old Leonard Lee was plodding with wearied steps through an Arctic snowstorm. Over the last several months he had been slowly working his way toward Alaska. By the first of February he had traveled nearly a thousand miles and was trying to reach a trading post on the Laird River. But at the moment he was plunging on alone on snowshoes against a howling blizzard. He was trying to desperately follow the outlines of a creek that he believed would take him to the river.

When he had left a settlement on the Peace River he had had plenty of provisions, but the blizzard had pinned him down with its fury and he had exhausted his food supply and was forced to keep going lest he freeze to death.

He didn't really expect to make it and was wondering if anyone would miss him when suddenly he heard a voice saying---"Turn left." He looked around startled, but no one was in sight. He started north again, but again the voice

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spoke--"Turn left."

He could see no reason for turning left and away from the creek bed. The way to the left was into a range of hills, and even worse, even into the biting wind. He started north once more. But a strange feeling came over his conscience. He couldn't stand it, so taking a compass bearing he turned left.

He climbed for miles half-blinded by the driving snow. The going was hard and rough. It was getting dark with an arctic twilight when he finally crossed the divide and descended to another creek bed. He decided to turn right and follow down this creek bed, when he heard the voice again insisting that he turn left.

A few rods up the creek he saw a cabin half buried in snow. Here was shelter and possibly food. Using his snowshoe for a shovel, he dug his way into the cabin. It was pitch dark, but out of the darkness came a groan. He struck a match.

An old man was in a sleeping bag lying on a low bunk. His beard and eyebrows were covered with ice from his breath and his eyes looked sunken and feverish. Quickly Leonard scrounged around and built a fire. He looked for food but found none.

As the room brightened the man was able to talk some. His name was Henry. He had had an accident and had broken his leg. He had crawled into the abandoned cabin hoping someone would find him. After a week he had given up hope. Then he had turned to God in prayer and asked for him to send help.

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Leonard made what provisions he could for the old trapper knowing that he would have to go for help. He asked the old man where he should go. He was told the post was about twenty miles west.

That was when again a strange feeling of awe came over him. He had been going totally in the wrong direction, trudging into an empty wilderness, and certain death.

The old man gave specific directions. Then reverently, the two men prayed before Leonard left for help. And though incredibly exhausted Lee somehow was given the strength to make it to the post where he was taken in and help was sent to the old man who also barely survived. (Source unknown)

Many times we wish that God would speak so that we could literally hear. But this circumstance is actually extremely rare. I, the writer, have never heard God's voice or even an angel's voice that I know of. It has troubled me that I haven't, because I know of others that have heard an "internal" or even "external" voice. Therefore, I have felt that God was not willing to communicate with me. But this determination may not be true in any sense of the word. If we find ourselves in the exact same situation as Mr. Lee found himself, we can be sure that God would speak directly to us just as he did to Leonard.

My own father-in-law had a life-defining experience in which he heard a supernatural voice. At the time, he was quite happily working on a school farm in Southern California. One day he received a letter inviting him to serve

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as a missionary farm manager in Peru, South America. Immediately assuming that he could never master a new language (Spanish; a prospect that seemed difficult, if not impossible, for him) and because he was really quite satisfied to stay where he was, he laid the letter aside and summarily dismissed the whole idea.

But as he went to work early one following morning, as the sun rose, he heard a definite voice saying to him: "Bill, I want you to go to Peru." Doubts about his ability and readiness for such a mission filled his mind and he balked at the idea. But again the voice came: "Bill, I will bless you if you go to Peru." Yet in his mind he remonstrated with the call. "I can't go to Peru!" he said to himself. But the voice persisted and said, "I can't bless you in Peru, if you remain in Southern California."

With this he soon accepted the call, and left with his family for ten years of mission service in Peru (where my wife was born). There, with patient planning and hard work (and God's direction, of course) he soon turned the school farm at the mission college into a profitable business, a feat that had not been accomplished in all the previous administrations at the school.

The results of his farm management were phenomenal. The national government showed interest in his success and consulted his expertise. Many students at the school received valuable training under his supervision and went out to work in their districts as evangelists, farmers, and workers of all kinds. Scores of these rose to prominent positions in church government and are still to this date

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communicating their appreciation for his service and instruction there in Peru. In many ways this experience defined his life and ministry for the years to come. In the end he managed other successful agricultural ventures in the United States and was subsequently elected to the Dairymen's Hall of Fame for his innovative work with breeding and caring for the dietary needs of dairy cattle.

What is of interest to me is that in this singular circumstance, when my father-in-law “heard” God's voice in an audible way, was when he was in danger of not obeying God's preferred plan for him. Likewise, in the many stories related to this author it seems that such rare indications from God or his angels come typically in two particular and like circumstances. The first is in a current emergency where distinct warning is necessary (Leonard Lee), and secondly in cases where the Christian is in a frame of mind bent on making a dangerous mistake for his life or future.

In other words, God uses these dramatic forms of communication only when they are absolutely needed. Joseph, the earthly father of our Lord received a dramatic vision in the night telling him to flee to Egypt so as to preserve the life of the Son of God. Such a communication was necessary to ensure the importance of moving quickly and decisively. But generally, in most cases, God speaks in a non-auditory method, through his Word or through other circumstances. For the most part “we walk by faith, and not by sight,” or “hearing.”

I remember reading once about the great Peter Marshall, the U.S. Senate chaplain. In his early life, Marshall lived in

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Scotland, his native birthplace. One late night he was cutting across unfamiliar territory on his way home. The night was pitch black. As he walked forward he heard a voice telling him to stop. Unsure as to whether he had really heard such a voice he proceeded forward only to hear the same warning. According to my memory of the story, when he heard the voice the third time he finally did halt in his tracks.

He soon discovered, as he felt ahead of him that he was on the very brink of a precipice. In fact, if he had continued forward, even inches, he would have fallen headlong into an enormous rock quarry and most certainly would have been killed. God obviously used an audible voice to save the life of this great man, who was soon to become famous and influential as a devout, godly minister.

It is often true that God's true "audible" voice (or an angel's, of course) is customarily repeated at least two to three times. This is because it is so unusual and not generally to be expected, so God needs to confirm to the subject hearing it that he, the Lord, is indeed speaking to them. But in non-emergencies, or in the case that the subject is already "in His will" it seems like God chooses to "be auditorily silent" or to speak in the other typical ways.

The *Quiet Hour Echoes* relates a story told by Murl Vance that illustrates how God simply speaks in whatever way that is necessary to get our attention. An old classmate of his, whom he calls Jensen:

"trudged along a hot, dusty road in Africa behind an oxcart. After his graduation, Jensen had gone to

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Africa as a medical missionary, to do all he could to educate the poorer classes and to relieve suffering. It was hard work, ...trudging from village to village in the heat and dust; but the appreciation shown by many of those for whom he labored made him push on with courage and zeal.

Soon he came to a little river and, as the custom was, he decided to take a bath in this great natural bathtub-the only kind available in that part of the country. He walked up the river to a quiet pool and began to remove his clothing.

"Don't bathe here; there is danger!" The voice was clear and distinct; but, whether it was striking his ears as well as his mind, he says he could not tell. Quickly he jumped to his feet and looked around. He knew that nothing dangerous could be hidden in the low brush behind him in that part of Africa, and he was positive that there could be no crocodiles in such a small stream. The pool was quiet, and there was not the slightest evidence of danger visible. Deciding that he was imagining things, he continued with preparations for his bath.

Again came the voice: "Don't bathe here; there is danger!" Again he looked around, and convinced himself that there could be no danger. But now something happened to Jensen that made him know that he was not imagining things, that he was really being warned by a supernatural power against an

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unseen danger in that pool. **As he sat down to unlace his shoes, all at once he lost control of his hands. They refused to obey the messages being sent by his brain. They became palsied, and trembled so violently that he could not grasp the shoelaces.**

This time as he jumped to his feet he no longer had any doubts in his mind. He decided to obey the voice, and go farther up the river for his bath. He soon found another quiet pool, and bathed without incident.

As he started back down the river, he decided to try to find out what the danger was in the first pool; so, instead of walking directly down along the bank, he slipped out through the brush, and tiptoed his way up to a place where he could peer through the brush and down into the pool. Sticking up out of the water was the snout of an enormous crocodile.

Cold chills ran up and down Jensen's back as he looked at the reptile which is many times more dangerous than a lion---a reptile which snatches its victims from underneath, and pulls them defenseless beneath the surface before they have the slightest chance to defend themselves.

So motionless was the snout of the crocodile in the water that Jensen began to wonder if it could be a log which happened to be shaped like the head of a crocodile. Wanting to be sure, he quickly jumped into the open. Just as quickly the crocodile jerked his head

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beneath the surface, sending the ripples dancing across the pool. Again the trap was set, without the slightest sign of danger on the surface, save the lingering ripples. Never did man or animal step into a more dangerous trap than the one now in front of Jensen, the one he had almost entered within the previous half hour.

I do not know what you would have done under such circumstances; but I know what Jensen did. He kneeled and thanked the Lord for preserving his life.

"I don't care what others may think about God," said Jensen, in relating the story. "But I believe as firmly as I stand here that God is still interested in those who give their allegiance to him. He has promised: The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them." Psalm 34:7."

(The Quiet Hour ECHOES, April 1985, Page 5)

So, in the above case God spoke not only through an audible or internal voice, but the third "voice" really came in the form of sudden paralysis. God does whatever is necessary to reach us. The above case was a life-threatening emergency, and so even more than an audible voice was required to convince the subject of his imminent danger.

But God is totally capable of speaking without the use of an audible voice, and when the circumstance is non-urgent or if our path is already safe, God will usually use His Word, or His comforting presence, or some other way to communicate

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to us.

A couple of months previous to the writing of this paragraph, I was in severe back and leg pain from an exploded disk. Pastoring my church, standing in the pulpit, visiting in the hospital, helping take care of my two-year old son, could only be done in the midst of unbelievable pain and agony. Many who have had similar problems can relate. Just standing up produced enough pressure on the spine to make me want to cry out and groan most every moment.

One Sabbath morning during this time I was waking up and doing my Sabbath morning ritual. My requests that morning were the usual, that God would bless my message (I pray that a lot, because my messages badly need it!), and all the regular things. But my main request was that I would be able to stand through the service, and just make it to the end. I told the Lord in my pain, "I don't really think I can stand up long enough to deliver the sermon and to greet the people. And in an effort to be specific I really need at least three things today. I need to know that You are blessing me and my sermon today as always, I need actual strength to endure the demands of the day, and I need literal, physical help to simply stand up and endure the pain through the sermon."

I read a little in the Word and derived little benefit as to my requests. Discouraged, I said to myself, "Well, I will just lay back and think about some promises, then, since my Bible reading today doesn't seem to offer anything much, and God seems silent and doesn't want to say anything in particular." One of the first promises that I rehearsed was good old Isaiah 41:10, "*Fear thou not for I am with thee, be not dismayed,*

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for I am thy God, I will strengthen thee, yea, I will help thee, yea I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness.”

This promise is so familiar I almost said it to myself glibly, hasting to pass on to another one. I thought, “Yeah, yeah, Lord you promise all these nice little spiritual things, and its really nice of you to say so, it sounds good as always----- but. . . .” Then I stopped for a moment and actually thought about what the promise really said. It said something pertinent about each of my three sincere requests that morning.

God directly said he would be with me that day. He said he would **help** me that day. He said he would give me **strength**, something I specifically asked for. And He said he would **uphold** me. Then, I thought, “what does **uphold** mean?” Literally, of course, it means to “hold up.” God was saying he would actually “hold me up,” something I truly needed that day and really wasn't sure my back would be able to endure otherwise!

And God did it! Sure, there was some pain, and it wasn't easy, but I made it through, and to the best of my knowledge the congregation was blessed, and expressed it in a tangible way that day. I was blessed, too.

Another time, years ago, I remember, a similar blessing occurring to me in the pulpit. As soon as the message was over my uncomfortable condition returned. Some have said, “Well, if it was God that really did it why didn't he just totally heal you?” I don't know the answer to all questions in

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seeking God's voice and will. If we knew all the answers we wouldn't need to seek God. And maybe that is just the point.

I know this, God does “speak” in such circumstances. If my pain had not returned I may have been tempted to think that my temporary improvement was happenstance. I also may not have sought further treatment that I perhaps needed for long-term health. There could be a number of reasons.

One thing it also reminds me of is, that God is not just lavish with his gestures, but is economical. His favor is not to be expected and hoarded, but to be experienced as needed for every trial. It is not something that he “owes” us. It’s up to Him. It is even possible that while God does not “cause” the pain or discomfort, he still often allows it so that we will continue to seek him and communicate with him more than we normally do!

5

The Bible as God's Voice

Most people accept the fact that the Bible is the principal way in which God reveals his will to us. Of course, it is extremely important to pray for guidance from the Spirit when reading and interpreting the Word, because otherwise it is nothing more than printed words on onion-skin paper. It is also important to ask that Satan's forces and influence be negated so that we can "rightly divide the word of truth."

But most of what we read in the Bible is very general in nature. It's enlightening to read how God created the world.

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It's informative to follow the children of Israel in their journey through the wilderness. Reading about the life of Christ in the Gospels is inspiring. It's thrilling to see how God cared for the prophets and characters such as David, and Jeremiah, and Daniel. The Bible contains moral laws and exhortations that can guide the Christian in his walk. All of this is important in forming a "law for life."

But initially the Bible, as great as it is, doesn't seem to the ordinary individual Christian to be a document of the personal variety. This is why it has in the past seemed like to me that while we pray to God in a very personal manner, talking directly to him in prayer about the concerns of our day, he sends back his answer in a bulk-mailed instruction book addressed corporately to everyone---making God himself not very personally communicative to the individual Christian.

Again, written communications of such a general nature can become very impersonal and confusing. Such is the story of computer manuals or any instruction manual, if you please. Most can relate to the frustration of encountering a difficult problem on the computer or in the operation of some piece of technology that for some reason or another one cannot make work like it should. One can be frustrated for hours, even days. The operator repeatedly turns to the manual for "help," only to be gravely disappointed and perhaps in the end not a little irate. "If I could only say something to a real person!" we think. And often, that is what it finally takes.

Unfortunately, most manuals are written in such a way that only the inventor can understand them, or they are written in

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such a way as to always leave out any reference to the particular problems most users are actually encountering! I swear, the writers of instruction manuals are living on a totally different planet than the manufacturers are! Certainly they are on a different planet from the actual users of the product.

Likewise, the Bible can seem to be the same way, at least for some of us.

But this author is finding (slowly, but surely) that this is a very unfortunate view of the Bible and in some ways an inaccurate one. This general view comes because Christian leaders have failed in training their fellow Christians on how the whole process of hearing God's voice in the Bible takes place. Many have become lazy and left God's Word on the shelf. Or perhaps others have lost faith in it themselves or have become frustrated in understanding this important subject of communicating with God. Therefore the art of seeing God speaking to them personally has become a vague and distant endeavor.

Now it is true that the Bible will always have a general instructional purpose. It is a corporate letter to mankind in general, and contains history, law, and general instruction about many things. It is needed in this capacity to propagate moral values in the world, and to teach all men what God is like. Likewise, in the secular world we utilize history books, science textbooks, certain "how to" books, and the like, to propagate general but useful information to the masses.

But I think one of the greatest and best-kept secrets in all of

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Christendom is that the Bible can also be applied very personally, and in ways most Christians have never dreamed of. One saying that has been used which I think is practically true is that “the Bible is not just for learning, but for living.” I am beginning to believe that God wants to communicate more personally with people than most people are aware of. The Word of God can be a richly rewarding conversational tool in knowing God in a more personal way. The Bible can become quite specific in informing the Christian in his modern thoughts and decisions.

In one church where I pastored there was a young man who approached the church asking that they invite a certain contemporary Christian singing group (from a distant state) to do a concert in front of our small-town, old-fashioned congregation. This particular church had very conservative views on what comprised acceptable music to be heard in the sanctuary of the church. Furthermore, this particular young man had already become a controversial figure in the congregation on the music issue already, and so even the request immediately led to some divisive sentiments within the church fellowship.

As pastor I was in a quandary, because I shared some of the congregation's conservative values on music, yet I strongly encouraged youthful involvement in our church plans. For myself, I personally had “zero” interest in having the group come. And beyond this was the issue of the cost to bring the group: \$4,000.00. This seemed like a ridiculous outlay for our miniscule community and our limited church resources. Even though the young man offered to raise much of the money himself, his promotions “stole” interest from other

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church projects badly needing attention. His attitude was interpreted as “pushy” and “demanding” by some of the board members, and this attitude seemed not only be evident by him alone, but seemed to be encouraged by his parents, certain friends, and some influential church leaders themselves. So, to some the concert was a noble idea, to others it was definitely not!

Certain proponents of the opposition to this proposed concert counseled me to “be Moses,” and stand up and simply use my position to stop the whole endeavor. But I was reluctant to take this stance, because I didn't wish to discourage this ardent yet determined youth to be involved with the church, and to live out his dream of having this popular group come and make an impact in our community. I referred the matter to certain committees for a decision, and yet I was unclear on what action to ultimately take. The congregation was splitting into parties for and against the entire endeavor. Tempers began to rise when it was discussed. Personally, I wanted it all to “go away,” and was beginning to feel some anger and frustration about the whole thing myself and what it was doing to my parish.

Over the intervening months I prayed incessantly about the matter and asked God for guidance on how to steer my church through this relatively small yet potentially volatile crisis. It seemed like no option could be taken without certain damage and loss. If the singing group came, even the once, certain members threatened to leave and attend elsewhere---but if the group were not allowed to come there would be bitter repercussions from the young man and those who supported him. Part of the plan included the group

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doing some songs during the morning church service itself, not just at the afternoon concert, and this also increased the volatility of the matter significantly. Letters arrived regularly in my office. I saw no way out of the maze.

In an effort to be open-minded and fair the church board along with myself as pastor agreed that the group would be granted permission to come under certain conditions, the particulars all of which there is no need to recount here. But still I dreaded the event in advance, because of the waves it was causing already, and I expected would still roll, when it actually took place. Certain close associates and I prayed privately that we could somehow get past “the concert” without unnecessary damage to the church or even to the experience of the ones interested in promoting the concert.

One day, feeling incredible pressure to fold to the wishes of the opponents of the concert and pull the plug on the whole thing, I went to my Bible to find some counsel on what to do. I was being encouraged to stop the concert from happening, and at the time this seemed the best thing to do, because it seemed like an incredible waste of money, it was upsetting the church, plus, I didn't like the bold attitude of those pushing for the “liberal” and “controversial” music. I thought, “Shouldn't I just ‘cleanse the temple’ and stand up for what I thought was right for the church as a whole?” For sure, I needed strength and guidance on how and what to do.

I was held back from acting impulsively because I didn't want to offend the “liberal” side of the congregation, even though it did seem like there were some “permissive” and “unholy” attitudes being entertained and blessed by the

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young man's parents and others in the congregation. "Should they be tolerated," I wondered?

But let me return to my prayer request. A short time before the actual concert I was reading and praying about the course I should take as pastor. At the height of my perplexity I came in my reading to I Samuel, Chapters 1-3. This is the story of the careless and weak Eli, and his sons, Hophni and Phinehas, complete with their reckless attitudes about sacred matters. As a result of this whole ancient fiasco, the sacred ark was taken by the Philistines, and so on.

For some reason I didn't have my current reading Bible with me at the given time, but could only find one of my older, and marked, Bible versions to read in. Underlined were several parts of the story that I didn't remember marking before, but which seemed to give incredible instruction to me in my particular circumstance.

First, I was amazed as a re-read the story, that neither God nor even Samuel (though he was yet a boy) stood up and forcefully stopped this whole smudge and disgrace to God's cause from happening. Sure they made some efforts to discourage the wayward course of Eli and his sons. But while it may be important at certain times to *legislate* certain values, in this case, God permitted the matter to take its full course, a scenario, contrary, no doubt, to his own liking. Certainly God had sent messages to Eli through Samuel, and the family was warned of impending judgment for their irreverent behavior and their warped view of what was appropriate for sacred service and worship. Yet God did not use his power to ultimately "stop" it from happening. (And

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neither did Moses always, if I was to “be him.”) I was captivated and overwhelmed with this strange and incredible thought as I read this passage.

Secondly, I was struck by certain similarities in the case, though I was clear on the differences as well. In the story are found the same irreverent or liberal attitudes as were being expressed by certain church members in my congregation. Also featured were attitudes of weakness and tolerance, especially those expressed through the weak and vacillating Eli, who God was obviously not happy with at that time. Eli was so like certain parents that exist today, who, not wishing their children to be crossed in any way, allow certain practices to enter the church that perhaps should not be allowed to enter. Because they are “the youth” for some reason the rules strangely change or liberalize. (Why should this change anything, really, I have always wondered?) And yet God, for whatever reasons, allowed the matter of Eli and his bold sons to run its course.

What really stunned me as I read the passage was when I said to God, “But Lord, how can it be your will to stand by and allow \$4,000 of church money to be wasted?”---- “You cannot bless or tolerate that?!”---- “Shouldn't I stop this whole thing and save the church from making a big mistake?” Right then my eye landed on the number “4,000.” (just the number: “four thousand” was what was underlined, not 4,000 men, or whatever). For some reason I had picked out and underlined this particular number years before in that particular Bible, the Bible that seemed to be the only one I could find that particular day, which I was reading. The “four thousand” were, of course, the number of lives that

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were tragically lost when Israel went to war along with Hophni and Phinehas, and when even the sacred ark was taken by the heathen, all part of the same story I was rehearsing.

God even then had allowed this embarrassment to his cause to transpire, even though it must have caused him great displeasure and despair to do so. God allowed His sacred ark, the symbol of his presence, holding the actual Ten Commandments, to fall into the hands of the reckless heathen! Wow! Sometimes it's not what to do, but what not to do. I was too preoccupied with what I should do.

I immediately decided that in this case I would not openly resist the concert taking place, but would pray that God would see us through the matter without undue negative impact on the fragile attitudes on both sides of the church. I felt immediate relief that the matter was ultimately in God's hands and that it would not be wise now for **me** to interfere or "make a scene" about it. If God allowed such a thing to take place as the story of Hophni and Phinehas, damaging as it was to his sacred church, its money, and service, certainly I would do best to let our much smaller, yet similar matter in some ways, take its course, even though some conservatives in the church thought I was very wrong in doing so.

The thing that concerned me most was the worship service where the group was scheduled to perform. I wasn't concerned so much with the concert itself, because only those who "liked" the group would probably be there anyway. What concerned me were the regular attendees at worship that week, who were opposed to the music style or

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“performance aura,” of such groups, some of who threatened to march out, making a scene as they did, never to return. I didn't like the attitudes expressed on either side of the equation, but as pastor, this was the problem I was left with. I wanted to keep my congregation together, for I loved all of them. It was a proverbial mess. Music has often been called “the *war department* of the church,” and so it is.

Here is what happened. Several of us prayed about the matter privately. We were not so concerned about the concert or the group. We were more concerned about the effect the whole matter was having on the church. We put it in God's hands.

When the day of the concert came I remember saying to God, “I'm really interested on what you are going to do. Please, Lord, do what is best, despite my wishes. I have acted to the best of my knowledge and direction from you.” When the church service started things were quite tense for some. But as the service progressed, to our surprise no group appeared, at least in time to be part of the service. The service went typically and smoothly. We later learned that an unexpected conflict in the group's air travel arose and they were routed through another city and were delayed. They barely arrived in time for the afternoon concert.

I never made it to the concert myself, which was actually a “good thing” for me because I felt awkward about what to do. My wife was working at the hospital that day and I had my young daughter in my care. Unusually, she became very sick, and so I had to stay home with her. Later, I heard certain reports that the concert itself went o.k., but that the

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whole affair really kind of had a disappointing flavor to it. At least, the ones who wanted to be there, were there, and could enjoy it, and the ones who didn't approve of the thing weren't there. Like the story of Eli, the whole thing kind of ended appropriately--- or ingloriously---however one wished to look at it.

What I liked most was about how it all turned out. My church was for the most fully intact afterward, and went on as if it had never happened. Everybody seemed happy, and really, because no extreme moves were really made before the concert, that is, things never had developed into a totally open, ugly, confrontation. In the end, in a sense, everybody got their way. The lessons came at a cost, for sure, but everyone on both sides, I think, learned something valuable from it.

Since then I have thanked the Lord many times that I didn't act in the way I intended to at certain stages, perhaps brashly, or like some thought I should, and that I had proceeded forward with the cautions given me in the passage I prayerfully considered, and through other signals the Lord gave me and my church through the whole matter.

Sometime after, I spoke with another minister who had heard from a distance what our church had gone through. His question to me was, "How in the world did you manage to take your church through that crisis like you did and come out unscathed? You must be a genius. My church just went through the same type of thing and it split the church hopelessly right down the middle!"

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While I deserve no credit whatsoever, and I am certainly not a genius (though I wish I were), I am glad that God helped me and the church through that circumstance. I feel the Lord directly showed me through the Bible story (and other biblical principles) I read, exactly how to handle the case at hand. Though the story didn't line up in all the details, God gave me the wisdom to apply the parts that were pertinent to my situation, and thus instruct me through a difficult maze. He spoke directly through his Word. And in the end, *everyone* was essentially spared. We are all still friends to this day.

I don't want to make it sound that I always get such definite answers to my prayers or that God's voice always comes clear to me. Yet I am beginning to believe that in a sense it always should. The problem is that I don't stay tuned for the answer or that I miss it. But it is there if I care enough to find it.

Jesus said that we need to “ask, seek, and knock.” The first letters of these words spell “ask.” God often expects some interest and determination on our part. He isn't being stubborn or delighting in making it hard for us. He rather wants to draw us into a closer focus on him and he wants to train us to be wise yet free moral agents who are learning to naturally make the right decisions, not just follow his dictatorial orders. He wants our educated choice involved in the process.

But God has on several occasions seemed to indicate his Scriptural “voice” in matters of my life.

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On more than one occasion, when anticipating whether to expect a move soon or not I have been led to the passage, “Prepare thee stuff for removing.” Usually, I have totally forgotten that that passage is in Ezekiel. While God doesn't often reveal the future, sometimes we need to know a little of what might be coming so as not to invest unwisely or make careless plans.

In one instance, I pleaded with God that I felt impressed that I should leave the circumstances I was in a certain city and get my family into a more rural location. But I didn't have a place to go to, so I didn't know how to live out this conviction. “There are still strings tied to where we live so what should we do?” I thought. It didn't seem to make sense that God would counsel us to leave the place we were at and yet not provide a way. All that seemed to come evident at the time was that we should probably settle temporarily in an apartment on the southern part of the city still nearby (we were in the northeastern part). But I was puzzled. As I prayed earnestly I came across certain verses in Isaiah 52, the chapter right before the famous Isaiah 53 chapter:

The first part of the passage said, and now I liberally paraphrase: “Get out of the city by all means.” But the next verse said, “but you shall not go out in haste, nor go by flight.” In other words, it seemed to say that God was saying, “Yes, in the end I want you away from here, but for the time being I have work for you in this place.” This same message was verified by other similar verses and circumstances (“I have many people in this city,” etc.).

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And it is exactly how the matter turned out. The new place we lived for a short time was better fitted for our lives at the time for several reasons I will not detail. But one, for example, was that the new location we ended up at was many, many miles closer to a distant church where I became interim pastor for an extended time thereafter, and made it infinitely more convenient a location overall.

God can even use the same verses to speak in different ways to different individuals.

A dear friend and a dedicated Christian doctor I know told me once of an experience he had when he was stationed in the North Atlantic during World War II. After serving many months at that location the time had come for him to return home, and he was anxious to get off the distant island and return to his life and family. He was delighted when his name appeared on a publicized list of those who would be the first allowed to leave on the next airplane.

He could hardly wait to leave, but as the time came for him catch his flight he was not allowed to board the plane. His place had been taken. Disappointed and crushed in spirit because he would have to remain at his station longer than planned, he went back to his quarters. With nothing to do he spent the time reading his Bible and waiting.

Almost immediately he was directed to the same text I have referred to in Isaiah 52, “You shall not go out in haste, nor go by flight.” As he read these words he seemed to understand that God was explaining his situation to him and knew all about his circumstances.

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As it turned out he never did leave that place on an airplane. He left later, first on a ship, and in time arrived home safely. It was only later that he learned some of what had happened. There had been another “Arthur Miller” on that base, (If I remember right, even his middle initial was the same), who had been allowed on the first plane. But that plane never reached its destination. It crashed and everyone on board was killed.

I don’t believe you would be able to convince Dr. Miller that God doesn’t speak directly and specifically to individuals through His Word, and that God was not speaking to Him on this trying occasion in his life.

On certain occasions, being a pastor, I have wondered if indeed I am “really” called. Every pastor, who comes to believe he is definitely called by God goes through some of those moments at times. For me, while I have never been absolutely sure that I have been called to always be a *pastoral* minister, I know with great certainty that I’m called to be a “minister,” in general. But in some moments of despair, because of the current circumstances, I have questioned God on whether he was really leading in my life or that I had a particular type of ministry to perform.

I have especially been convicted hundreds if not thousands of times that God wants me to involved in spreading the messages of the three angels (Rev. 14:6-12), but particularly and specifically in and around the “prophetic” aspects of it. By this I mean, not as a “prophet” per se, “no, no,” but just being a unique voice giving the specific messages of

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prophecy an emphasis in our last day time.

One night, while camping down on the Salmon River in Idaho, just as I had finished writing what I thought was a “powerful” chapter in one of my books on these subjects, using my laptop, I prayed to God and said, “Lord, I am so impressed with these subjects. There is such a fire in my bones, I cannot contain it. Do I really have any kind of place out there in doing more for you in sharing and proclaiming these subjects? It feels like it’s just me and maybe the river here that cares anything about it.” I opened my Bible and began reading in Ezekiel 33, which has become one of my favorite Bible chapters.

In this biblical book of Ezekiel God often addresses Ezekiel as a “son of man,” or a “human being.” Now Ezekiel was a “real” prophet. But I took the words “son of man” to mean, “just me, an ordinary man.” God says in this passage: “Son of man, I have set you as a watchman unto the house of Israel,” and so forth. It is really a powerful passage about how Ezekiel and every faithful servant of the Lord has a God-given responsibility to sound the trumpet and warn the world of prophetic truth. They are to hear the word of God from God's own mouth and declare it about them in the world. It is not a light and gentle call, its a powerful one, a *trumpet* one---and for sure, a grave and responsible one.

It was like God again said to me, “Steve, I have a place for you, along with many other “sons of men” to “be a special watchman to the house of Israel---the church.” I really believe God calls me through these verses to be such a watchman, and in a way, he calls anyone who knows the

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grand prophetic truths of our time to be such. But I really believe God spoke *personally* to me through those verses, not telling me that I'm some grand prophet, but telling me that this "son of man" has a "special calling" and it involves proclaiming his prophetic word. I am possessed by the import of these verses almost to the point of misery sometimes!

But what I am really saying is that God speaks directly, person to person in His Word. I don't think this is reckless or arrogant at all, to believe so. It is every Christian's privilege to search the Scriptures for instructions that God will impress upon the careful yet active and interested listener.

How do you know if God is really saying something to you?

This is perhaps the most important question to ask when reading the Scripture. And it isn't really one that I or anyone else could totally answer because the communication between any one person and God is unique to them. But I use a few rules that perhaps can help.

The first rule is that seldom if ever would I make a decision that God is speaking to me about something on the basis of one verse. God may so speak in an emergency, perhaps, but not usually in only one isolated way. God's voice tends to come more as a "trend," and not as an instant answer. It is usually on the basis of several confirmatory signs that one will find safety in hearing God's voice this way.

The second rule is that like the "three ways" rule we have already established, the verse of Scripture needs to have the

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testimony of the Spirit as well as the workings of Providence or circumstance backing it up. As a friend has often related to me, "The Lord must 'quicken' the verse to you."

Somehow the verse needs to stand out to you from the other surrounding verses, and do so, without you're trying to make it happen. (This leaves some questions, I must admit, and I'm still working on this one in my own experience).

A facetious example is often used to show that we can't just read any passage of Scripture and use it as a reliable guide. This regards the story of a man who was seeking guidance in a random way, and opened the Bible to the following verses:

"And Judas went out and hanged himself." (Matthew 27:5)

"Go, and do thou likewise." (Luke 10:37)

"That Thou Doest, Do quickly" (John 13:27).

It is true that if someone wished to, he could gain permission to do most anything, right or wrong, by finding some appropriate words in the Bible! But these words need to be governed by common sense and by what the Bible "teaches" in other places. It needs to agree with what would likely be the will of God in the matter. Our conscience and the impression of the Spirit need to be considered. All of these should line up. But when all three are in harmony, and with repeated Scriptural admonitions being added to the equation, the more certain one can be that God is speaking in a particular way.

But when other confirmatory signals are in place, the Bible can be very specific. Even well-respected Christian leaders have been influenced by texts in the Bible that seem to speak

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to a particular personal or family circumstance. Morris Venden writes that at one time his family received a call from Northern California to Southern California. They were not sure what to do, but one morning at worship his wife was led to the text addressed to Philip the evangelist in Acts 8:26: “go toward the south, to the place which is called the desert....After three years in Southern California,” he reports, “we were delighted to find another text, after being invited back to northern California, which read, “Ye have compassed this mountain long enough: turn you northward.” Deuteronomy 2:3 (Morris Venden, *How to Know God’s Will in Your Life*, p. 40).

A third rule that is usually valid is that if you aren't sure that God is speaking directly through a passage, he probably isn't, at least in that passage exclusively. It is like the question of how to know whether you are in love or not. The old adage is if you are truly in love, you somehow will know it. If you are not sure, you may not be.

If in doubt, it is not wrong to ask for confirmation from God. In fact, it is probably wrong *not* to ask for confirmation. God wants us to make solid decisions, not based on a whim or accident, or pure chance.

Hezekiah the king had been sick for some time. Facing death he asked God for his life to be saved. Through the prophet Isaiah, Hezekiah was told he would recover in three days. One time in reading this passage I began to puzzle over the fact that when God told Hezekiah he would be healed, Hezekiah asked God what the sign would be that he would recover. “How about recovering, wouldn't that do?” I

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thought! "Wouldn't that be sign enough?!"

After studying the passage and seeking some help on how to understand this circumstance I learned that Hezekiah was asking for confirmation that this was really God speaking. After all he had just heard just before this that he would **not** recover. Like Gideon, and some others, he needed to be sure he could truly believe what he was being told. God did not scold Hezekiah for asking for such confirmation, in fact, as a result he made the sundial go back ten degrees as a sign, probably the greatest confirmatory sign to ever be given to a mortal human being! It is acceptable then for us to ask for some confirmation from God if we are not sure of what he is saying.

One time I was confronted with a personal medical decision that required some prayerful consideration for me. I know some people look at the issue of medical decisions differently than I do, my good wife included. A medical practitioner herself, she basically feels that if we have a problem that can be fixed by the medical profession, you just go get it done. I'm not so confident. I like to ask God for his will in these matters, and I think that since our temples are the temples of God, it is appropriate to do so.

To abbreviate a long story, I have a serious problem in the cervical area of my neck. Probably it has developed out of several accidents. I have restricted movement in the neck, and my dominant right arm is affected to the point that my specialist once told me I could lose the use of it if it isn't surgically corrected soon.

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So to make the story as short as possible, I prayed about having this surgical procedure done. Naturally, I don't relish surgery, especially to the front of my neck, but for other reasons, from the start, I haven't felt right "spiritually" about doing it. Yet I really don't want to lose the use of my arm either, and the problem makes me awkward. Thus the decision, for me, was a difficult one.

One of the things I was told was that there was a percentage chance, though low, that if I had this surgery I could lose my voice. Making a living as a preacher, I was nervous about that possibility, too.

But my doctors strongly advised that I move ahead with the surgery. As I prayed specifically about the matter, a book, chapter, and verse came into my mind. This has happened to me but a few times or so in my life. The verse was Philippians 3:2. At the time I couldn't have even guessed what the verse said. I looked it up and the second half of the verse said "Beware of the concision." (RSV).

Now I know the verse is talking about "circumcision" and the Judaizing controversy the apostle Paul was addressing at the time. But the terms were interesting to me. I looked up the English word, "concision" and saw that it means to "cut out," exactly the procedure recommended for my condition (removal of a bone spur, etc.).

But this was not enough. I needed confirmation. Through the warnings of some others who had had the same procedure done, with some inherent problems, and through the impressions I had received, I determined that it was

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probably not the right thing to do, and so I delayed the surgery. The three markers didn't line up for me to go ahead. However, the three markers lined up for *waiting*.

That was several years ago and though I have some problem still, I didn't get dreadfully worse as I was advised I soon would. I was told that I could lose the use of my arm even within two months of the time of my decision to not have the surgery. But this expected result did not come about.

I still don't know if the matter is resolved, and I expect it is not because some things are beginning to get worse at the present time. Maybe someday I will know absolutely for sure why God counseled me to delay. It might be the timing was not right, or that some natural remedy will later come to my attention, or that my retained doctor was not the best for my situation and I would have had protracted problems. I don't know. I just have to trust in the Lord for that.

Recently I did have a surgery on my lower back. As I prayed about what I should do about this severe pain and debilitating condition experienced over an extended period of time, I concluded that I should go ahead and have the surgery done. God did not "tell" me directly in his Word that I "should" have the surgery done, but through a series of providential situations I was accepted by an excellent surgeon who many try to get in to see and are unable to even get an appointment with. He is one of the premier surgeons in the entire Northwestern United States and has a sterling reputation. Nothing in my Bible reading, study, and inner spirit stood up and said "not to do it," so I took this as God's voice and will. I am confident, (as I write this paragraph I

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am in recovery), that the surgery will bring the desired results in my general health and well-being. (Later update: It did!).

Sometimes one simply doesn't know for sure if God is speaking through a Scripture or not. But I think God is honored if we watch to see if he is speaking to us personally through certain Scripture passages, even if they don't contain "miraculous" applications to a specific instance.

If we innocently assume that God is saying something to us that cannot be dangerous in any way, or will not damage our spiritual lives even if it doesn't come to pass, it is safe to hold them to our heart as communications from the Mighty One until we get further information about them. We need to be sensitive to the Lord's impressions and signals.

On several occasions I have read the following verses and wondered if God was saying something to me in the circumstances at the time:

"Come, and let us return unto the Lord: for He hath torn, and he will heal us; he hath smitten, and he will bind us up. After two days will he revive us: in the third day he will raise us up, and we shall live in his sight." Hosea 6:1,2

It is become a matter of interest to me that nearly every time I come across this passage in my daily reading it seems to be a Wednesday. One time I was on vacation in Canada, and at the same time trying to recover from a particularly bad bout of back failure. I had to return to the States in time to deliver a sermon to my congregation by the weekend. I came across

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these verses as I was writing my personal testimony to give in the form of a sermon. I was apprehensive about preaching this way because “it was different” from the usual, and I didn’t know how it would come across to talk about my own experience in a sermon. I was also apprehensive again, about whether I would be physically well enough to give the sermon.

The passage seemed to promise that I would improve and be functional by the time I needed to be. “In two days, he will revive us, and in three he will raise us up,” it said. I wondered about the passage, and kind of tucked it away in my mind. This was on a Wednesday, about mid-day.

Even though I was aware that the verse could really mean next to nothing, I watched with private interest during the passage of the next three days. By Friday, two days later, I seemed fit enough to deliver my sermon. On Sabbath my delivery went extraordinarily well. It truly “lifted me up” to share what God had done in my life in the past. I was on a humble, yet excited “high.”

The church members were particularly appreciative of my testimony, or telling of my life experience, though to me it seems very ordinary. But they were very positive and full of zeal as a result of the message. “Why don’t more preachers tell us their life experience like that?” they kept saying. A well-respected minister in the congregation that had heard the message said, “In all my years of ministry I have never shared my experience like that. I wish now that I had. I didn’t realize how powerful it can be to do it that way.”

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I was both humbled and lifted up at the same time. But I couldn't help but notice that the verse I had read was perfectly fulfilled. It was the Lord who had lifted me up, and held me up, and to Him went all the credit. Yet I was greatly strengthened and given courage in my circumstances.

What is interesting to me is that I have since come across this verse many times, basically forgetting that it was there (Hosea 6) in the meantime. And every time I come across it something positive happens to me in declaring God's glory within the next three days. It's really Christ who is lifted up, but when this is done, the Lord lifts me up with him too---yet in the right way, of course.

I don't want the reader to think that I believe in magic, or that every time there is a verse in the Bible like this that we can apply it so opportunistically. But I do think that personalizing the Scriptures is exactly what God wants us to do. He wants to teach us lessons through these stories and these passages, and the best way to do that is to 'live' them.

God speaks even through nature and other ways to us as well. Most will charge that God is giving the same message to everybody so the lessons of nature are not personal. But the sunshine can represent God's love to the world, yet it can also represent God's love to you, the individual. The book *Steps to Christ* says that "God is Love" is written on every blade of grass, and in every happy song of the birds. The difference between the message being general, or personal, is totally dependent on how the recipient chooses to accept them. I'm trying in my life to personalize the words of Scripture and claim them for myself. God gives us

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permission to do so, and if we are careful to listen for his voice in them, he will reward our interest, at least at certain times.

God speaks through His Word!

6

The Voice of Providence

God has spoken to me through his divine providence many times. One time that particularly comes to mind was at one of the lowest periods of my life.

I had just a few days previous to this experience broken up with a beautiful girl I had dated for several months and who, I thought at the time, had come into my life through a series

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of providences not of my own doing. As it turned out, she was not the one for me at all, and it all ended badly. I was both confused and devastated. I wasn't sure of what God was saying. I wasn't even sure God cared at all.

I was required to attend some pastoral meetings in the next few days and so I left my home early and headed north to a city near where the meetings were to be held. I planned to do some shopping early on in the day and then travel on to arrive at my meetings. Tired and depressed I completed my shopping in about fifteen minutes! The gloomy day was in league with my miserable circumstances. Exhausted by my mental and emotional condition, I climbed back in my little car, reclined the seat, and put my head back on the headrest. I could not weep, but I felt extremely hurt, rejected, and lonely. Like one Christian comedian once observed, "I felt so low, a whale's belly could have been the North Star!"

My car was parked in the extensive parking lot of a city mall. It was Sunday. As I lay my head back, overwhelmed with my personal tragedy, I apparently went to sleep, something I almost never do during the daytime. When I awoke later, it was cold, the rain was splashing like teardrops on my windshield, and it was dark outside. I sat up, looked about me and shivered. If it were possible, I felt even lower yet. The entire parking lot was totally empty, and my car seemed like a tiny little island in an ocean of grief. It was a very lonely feeling, and I told God about it, though it seemed like he had departed from me as well.

I decided to start my car and hasten to my appointment. But alas, the car wouldn't start. In my personal distress I had

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failed to turn my headlights out and my battery was now totally dead. I couldn't even operate the wipers to clear my view. I was jolted to a greater reality of my predicament when I realized I was now stranded alone in this large and dangerous city, and I didn't know where to go for help. I knew no one in the area at all, and being Sunday evening most everything was closed. And in those days there were no cell phones, of course.

With hardly a coat I decided I had better begin searching for some assistance. With a listless prayer, I chose a direction, and decided to try to enter the mall entrance because perhaps I could at least find shelter from the pouring rain for the length of the mall itself. I entered the mall, and walked down the corridor. All the shops had their iron gates closed and not a soul was to be found anywhere. At the far end of the mall I emerged back into the rain and onto the mall siding road to continue looking for a service station or something.

The moment I stepped onto the street beside the last store in the mall I was almost run over by a fast-moving car that came to a screeching halt in front of me. Soon out of one of the windows came a voice that said, "Hi, Pastor Steve"---- then, "What in the world are you doing here?" I'm sure I looked a little bedraggled. I had the same question of the unknown occupants of the car, because I knew they were driving across an empty parking lot--- at a now empty mall. The "voice" turned out to be Jeff's, a dedicated Christian young man who I had worked with earlier that summer for a couple of weeks in a youth project at my church. He was with his parents in that car, and when he recognized me, he

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told them to stop so he could speak to me.

Of course, I told them that my battery had died and that I was searching for some assistance. Jeff and his father offered immediate help and within minutes they had my car running happily again. I thanked them profusely and continued on my way.

I had learned in the meantime that Jeff and his parents had no particular business at the mall, but that they were on their way to a certain appointment (in town for a wedding) and suddenly decided to try to take a shortcut, and cut across through the mall parking lot to get to another main street. They normally wouldn't have gone that way, but with the rain and all, they suddenly felt impressed to try to get to their destination by cutting across the lot and passing via the empty mall. I had emerged from the opposite mall entrance at exactly the moment they were driving by. A second or two sooner, or a second or two later would not have worked for me.

Jeff was probably about the only person in the entire city who would have readily recognized me on sight at that time, anyway. They certainly wouldn't have recognized me walking along the street in the darkness and rain. I had never met Jeff's parents before. I had not even known Jeff before the week or two he was at my church that summer, and to tell you the truth, I have never seen him again since, for decades. I sincerely hope God continues in his life, for God most certainly used him and his fine parents to help me on that discouraging day. I don't entertain even a particle of doubt that this was a definite providence. I simply refuse to

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believe that all of this was merely a random happenstance that took place.

Depressed as I was, I was greatly comforted by the fact that God did indeed know of my life and circumstances, and that he cared for my pain and difficulty. I have often thought of this experience as I have gone through my life. God does not remove the trial, but he helps us through it. And sometimes He speaks through these providential circumstances.

Much of the workings of providence have to do with “timing.” One time while working in Alaska I gained a deep desire to live outside of the city closer to the wild Alaskan wilderness that I loved so much. At the time I was living four blocks from literal downtown Anchorage, across the street from the central fire station. I was thankful for my living quarters, but all in all it wasn't my idea of country living!

The need came for me to move because the mission for which I was working was going to change my living quarters (a house owned by the mission and that I was renting from them) into a book store. I searched frantically for an apartment with a country setting appropriate for a single person to live in, one that would also accommodate my limited budget.

It soon became evident to me that really no such arrangement existed. I was unrealistically dreaming of a quiet country cabin by a lake or something. People who have those ideal settings usually put expensive family homes on them. Certainly apartments aren't built in such settings.

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My prayers for such a private place were not answered in time and so I was resigned to move into a nearby apartment with noisy, smoking, and partying neighbors. I still was not satisfied, yet as always, I was thankful for a place to live.

A couple of months later I went down to the store on a rare day off and picked up a newspaper. I seldom buy newspapers, I think they are awkward to read, and mostly a waste of money---but something interested me in that particular newspaper. I took it home and soon found myself in the home rental section of the classified ads. Immediately my eye landed on: "One bedroom apartment, Fire Lake, \$325.00 per mo. Call....." I picked up the phone and a Mr. Hendrickson answered, and said I could come and look at the living arrangements if I wished. Without hesitation I asked for directions to the apartment.

I drove out of town to a beautiful rural location. The apartment was small, but was all that I needed. It was new, and connected to a private family dwelling, yet having a private entrance, a deck beside the lake, and a dock where I could tie a rowboat or canoe. It was perfect! I took it immediately. As I wrote the check out the landlord said, "You are welcome to the place, but if you are not sure you want it there are three other parties waiting to rent it. They all called moments after you did. We have been out of town for two weeks and had just walked in the door when you called."

I realized that I had found this unusual little apartment by calling at exactly the right minute--- or even second. I thanked the Lord many times in later months for that little

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retreat outside the city to which I could flee every day. With my tiny, fuel-efficient Honda, there was little expense involved with the commute. The ducks would swim under my bedroom window in the morning and greet me. I acquired a canoe which I sometimes paddled about the lake when the weather was acceptable. I found why they called it “Fire Lake,” because the sunsets over the lake out my window were stunning, some of the most beautiful I have ever seen. I enjoyed watching the float planes, playing ice hockey with the neighbor kids in the winter, or riding my bike on a bike path just a few feet from my door. Walks around the lake were wholesome and refreshing. I took hundreds of 35mm photographs. Deer, moose, and other wildlife would come right into my yard.

Some people thought I was “nuts” for living 18 miles out of town, near Eagle River, but I was ecstatic. I could get to work in 18 minutes, when most of those who lived in town themselves took much longer to get there. Everything I needed locally was just down the road about half a mile from my apartment.

Soon it came about that I was to interim pastor a church 320 miles from Anchorage where I worked during the week as an assistant mission treasurer. This location cut a significant distance out of that long journey that I had to make every weekend for almost two years. The location, and the situation was exactly what I needed, or at least the best that could be expected in that setting. I'm sure that God found me the only place really like that, perhaps, in the entire area.

I have learned also that God doesn't always seem to grant a

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providence, at least immediately. We expect that only good things will happen to us when we want them to happen. But providence can be in the “no's” as well as the “yes's.” And sometimes the answer is “wait.”

One time my brother with his young family took a call to Sun Valley, Idaho, the home of the famous ski resort. At first, they stayed in one of the small, available, church rooms. They could not afford any of the available and expensive recreational lodgings, of course, aimed at the rich and the famous. As the first few months passed they looked desperately for a home to live in. Sometimes my brother and I joke about being SDA pastors and how poor we really are. Sometimes we tell folk that we work for the “Voice of Poverty” (after the well-known radio ministry, *Voice of Prophecy*). It's not that bad, but there certainly are budget limits! To say the least, the family was in a dilemma and I was praying, at their request, for a reasonable place for them to live.

But nothing seemed to open up. A door for a place or some financing possibility for a prospective place would seem to open and then close as quickly as it had opened. In the end all the doors literally “slammed shut.” It seemed like the heavens were brass above us. We kept telling God, especially after about the eighth month, that he ought to really begin to do something for this family. After all they had taken his call. Was he going to leave them out in the cold? What was going on, anyway?

About this time something totally unexpected came up. The conference leadership unilaterally changed their mind about

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where my brother should serve as pastor. They needed him in another district, which turned out to be an ideal experience for his ministry and family, and where they immediately found living accommodations that were exactly to their needs and liking. Looking back, it might have been disastrous for them to have bound themselves into an expensive contractual property responsibility in the former place. The shutting of the doors turned out to be an enormous benefit in the end.

There is a fanciful story that illustrates how sometimes a “no” can really be in God's plan a “yes.” Though it is very doubtful that the following story is true, the concept it enlarges on is not really fictional.

It is called, “This is Good,” and goes like this:

“I heard a story told recently about a king in Africa who had a close friend that he grew up with. The friend had a habit of looking at every situation that ever occurred in his life (negative or positive) and remarking, “this is good!”

One day the king and his friend were out on a hunting expedition. The friend would load and prepare the guns for the king. The friend had apparently done something wrong in preparing one of the guns, for after taking the gun, the king fired it and his thumb was blown off. Examining the situation the friend remarked as usual, “this is good,” to which the king replied, “This is NOT good!” and proceeded to send his friend to jail.

About a year later the king was hunting in an area that he

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should have known to stay clear of. Cannibals captured him and took him to their village. They tied his hands, stacked some wood, set up a stake and bound him to the stake.

As they came near to set the fire to the wood, they noticed that the king was missing a thumb. Being superstitious, they never ate anyone that was less than whole.

As he returned home, the king was reminded of the event that had taken his thumb and felt remorse for his treatment of his friend. He went immediately to the jail to speak to his friend. "You were right," he said, "it was good that my thumb was blown off." And he proceeded to tell the friend all that had just happened. "And I am so very sorry for sending you to jail so long. It was bad for me to do this."

"No," his friend replied, "This is good!"

"What do you mean, 'This is good!' How could it be good that I sent my friend to jail for a year?"

"Well," said the friend, "If I had NOT been in jail, I would have been with you--- and I still have my thumb!"

----Chuck Hess---source unknown

In the Christian realm circumstances like these are referred to as "dark providences." Though they are not good things in themselves, they can be used by God to produce good results.

Jesus' death on the cross was humanly speaking something that was definitely NOT good! The Son of God was brutally

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killed by the very people he came to save. Yet this same circumstance itself has and will become the key to eternal life for the faithful in the entire universe.

Sometimes death or sickness shakes our Christian faith. We don't see how it can be good. But according to Romans 8:28 God works in everything to accomplish some good. Sometimes a death in a family turns some family members toward God, realizing the eternal issues that are at stake. This is how “dark providences” work. But they are providences just the same. Just because something comes as a positive answer does not always mean it is perfectly providential. Riches, prosperity, and applause can sometimes lead to fatal godlessness. What ultimately makes something providential is if the circumstance is allowed to be used by God in turning the subject toward God, and his purpose and plan.

Many remember how the Dutch girl, Corrie Ten Boom, and her sister found themselves in a Nazi prison camp. Soon they became infested with fleas. Yet Corrie's sister was intent on thanking God for the fleas, for the Scriptures enjoined them to “give thanks in everything.” Such an attitude was difficult for some of the other prisoners, including Corrie to understand. Finally, however, they realized that because of the fleas, they were spared being ravaged and abused by some of the Nazi guards. It turned out that Corrie's sister was right after all, at least in part, by giving thanks, even for the fleas.

My own Father, I am told, sometime before I was born applied for a job working for Harris Pine Mills, a job where

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he would be working in the woods. My parents wanted this job desperately, and felt they really needed it. So they were quite devastated when my dad didn't get the job.

Before another week passed they heard some news that changed their outlook on the circumstance, somewhat. The man that got the job was tragically killed doing the very thing my Dad would have been doing if he had gotten the job.

Another similar thing happened to my grandfather. He was a carpenter and painter in Pullman, Washington, who was not in the frame of mind to be taking Bible studies or to be learning any pertinent truths from "those crazy Adventists." But one day he fell off a scaffold and was laid up for months thereafter.

It was during this time that he and his wife, my grandmother, were visited by a colporteur and later a Bible worker. Because he had nothing else to do, he began studying the subjects they presented in earnest, and totally changed his life and future and became an enthusiastic Seventh-day Adventist. Though a naturally shy man, he became a church elder, and even served as the church preacher on scores of occasions in later life. The fact that my grandparents and my own mother became Adventists at the same time, is as good a reason as any that I (with my entire extended family) am a Seventh-day Adventist today.

My grandfather is known to have often said that his fall off that scaffold was as providential as anything for him. He knew that if he hadn't have become laid up with time to

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study and receive the message as he did, he would have never discovered the eternal gospel. He was thankful for the out-workings of even the “dark” providences of life.

God’s providential voice can be seen in the negative circumstances as well as the positive ones. The real key is that whatever comes our way we perhaps need to see if we are indeed hearing God’s voice and doing his bidding as we experience them.

7

Impressions of the Spirit

One day as a young pastor I was out visiting in the afternoon hours. I came to a lull either from a cancelled appointment or for some other reason, I can't remember for sure. I was tempted to just take a break or go home but something impressed me to continue visiting. But I wasn't sure where to go or who to visit. As I contemplated what to do next, the thought entered my mind that I could go visit a particular elderly lady whose name was Mattie who stayed in a nearby nursing home.

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I was surprised with this thought, because it had only been days since I had visited her. She had been doing fine then. The church where I was an associate pastor had about 600 members, plus there were evangelistic interests or Bible studies I had going, so there were plenty of others I could have chosen to visit. Many of them were not usually visited (if at all) even as often as this particular lady had been visited.

But feeling almost foolish I decided to go visit her again. After all I needed to keep busy, and certainly she wouldn't object to another visit, I thought.

I soon arrived at the home and went in to see Mattie. She welcomed me to her room, and we had a short and comfortable conversation. She seemed more thankful than usual for my presence. She said she had in the last hour or so started to feel a little sick, and so she said she would like me to pray for her. This I was ready to do, though she seemed quite alright overall. I asked the Lord to be very close to her, we talked a little of God's goodness and grace and how it is always best to have our lives in order with Jesus, and then I left a card as usual and departed to carry on with the rest of the afternoon.

Only a couple of hours later I received a call from one of the caregivers at the care facility. She pointedly thanked me for stopping by to see Mattie. Then she said, "How did you know that Mattie really needed a visit this afternoon? She just unexpectedly passed away a few minutes ago."

I was rather stunned, for it never had occurred to any of us

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that Mattie could come to the end of her life so soon. But what really struck me the most is that I almost didn't make the visit at all. It would have been easy to ignore the thought that I should go see her. And to my shame, I have probably ignored similar impressions many other times. From this experience and others I have learned that sometimes it may not be wise to ignore even "light" impressions like this. I pray that I will sufficiently listen to what God wants me to do, all through the day, so that I don't miss the best opportunities for service.

Another time comes to mind that transpired in a similar fashion. In another large church where I was an associate pastor we had a very devout middle-aged lady who was fiercely battling with cancer. After some time she was admitted to the hospital. Many prayers were offered for her recovery. But her suffering continued and even worsened. But like so many of these cases there seemed to be a sense that though the cancer was raging, there was still some time left.

One Friday evening it was planned that there be an anointing service by her bedside, and that some of us would go as a group and sing a few hymns to her from outside her room. She wanted, naturally, a direct healing or at least a resolution to her protracted suffering.

However, I remember that when I was called to go with the group to the anointing, that I felt very reluctant to go. After all, I was in the throes of sermon preparation for the morrow and I needed more time to prepare. Plus, I hate interruptions when I am into some project, even though I do care about

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other people and their needs (not as much as I should perhaps, but at least to a degree!).

But I soon surrendered to the idea that I should go. My conscience was smiting me. Of course, I was one of her pastors, though just the youth pastor, but the woman's daughter was in my youth group. But I thought, isn't sermon writing more important "tonight?" But as I thought it over I said to myself, "Think about what is really the right thing to do, Steve. What would Jesus do?" I somehow knew then, that Jesus would make the visit and then pray in the night that God would give him the right words for the following day. So that is what I did.

As we gathered near the bed of this faithful woman, the elders and senior pastor anointed her. We, of course prayed for complete healing, but inasmuch as many, many such pure and sincere prayers had not changed her condition so far, everyone including this godly woman, wanted some resolution to her painful suffering. It turned out to be a very precious time about this sickbed with family, church friends, and elders. This was enough in itself. But as the anointing concluded she requested that our group sing the song: "Because He Lives," to her.

In those very moments, as the song was sung, this dear lady calmly and peacefully passed away. All who were there were greatly impressed with the solemn truth that this was a sacred and molten moment that we would never want to miss, if given opportunity to be there. So, we were there when it counted. God allowed us to see his mercy, even in death, and to be participants in encouraging and

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strengthening a precious family at the time that was most important to them. And beyond this, because I was a witness to this circumstance, my sermon radically changed and was altered to be more appropriate (and powerful, I hope) to what the congregation and family was dealing with at the time.

Genuine impressions such as these are largely the work of our consciences. But they often turn out to be providences as well. They are as verily the voice of God, as was His booming voice on Mt. Sinai. It is best to look at these impressions as the voice of God, or at least to inquire of God about them, when they come.

It is interesting to me, that often the voice of conscience is active also, even when God may speak directly through an audible or internal voice as well. In the case of Mr. Lee, the man lost in a blizzard in a previous chapter, he felt incredible guilt or conviction when he tried to ignore the voice to “turn left.” God almost always gives several witnesses when he speaks, and almost always one of these is the voice of conscience, or the sense of “right.”

Sometime during the years I was in academy and college my brother and I came home for Thanksgiving, or some other home leave. One of the things we really liked to do was go rock climbing together. We had scaled hundreds of rocks and mountains in previous years and were always up to a new challenge. We had been anticipating for months “getting away” and going climbing.

About thirty or forty miles from home was a canyon that was walled by impressive granite cliffs. One particular attraction

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for us that stood out from the hillside was tall rock monolith or tower. Because we had been there before, we had noticed the presence of hundreds of bats flying around in the evening hours as we would leave. We therefore called this pinnacle, “Bat Tower.” After several previous attempts we had finally managed to reach the top, but we have never managed to climb by the face route, which was more technically vertical and direct. Like all climbers we wanted to say we had successfully tackled this route.

We decided on this day we would climb this route which followed an extended crack system that basically separated the two main ears at the top of the high tower. After considerable effort we finally reached the real base of this impressive finger of rock.

First I must mention that typically my younger brother, an avid climber, is usually undaunted in most any circumstance. I’m not so eager, but literally nothing will usually stop him from attempting what might seem impossible.

On this day he started to climb, hammering direct-aid protection into the cracks leading up the face. The air and the rock was cold that day, but that usually didn’t deter my brother at other times. He had only climbed a few feet before he indicated that he didn’t feel right about this climb and he wanted to back down. I was a little taken aback about his attitude. But he said he didn’t feel right about climbing the route.

So, I believe I tried to lead the route. I soon didn’t feel right about it either so I climbed down and tried to convince my

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brother to make another try. After all, we had climbed already a long way to get up there, why go back so soon?

But it was no use. My brother didn't want to climb anymore and his hands and lips were turning blue and he wasn't able to grip the tools or the rock. The thought of the warmth of the living room at home, and one of Mom's dinners, sounded much more interesting than anything else at the moment so we decided to return home having climbed only about three or four feet up the new route. "Bat Tower" would have to wait for another day.

A few days later our family was traveling through this same valley on our way to another destination. Naturally my brother and I requested that Dad slow the car down so we could study the scene of our unfulfilled challenge as we drove by. No amount of searching could reveal the tower, for it didn't seem to be where it had always been, for probably hundreds of years.

It next came to our notice that enormous rocks and boulders were strewn in a destructive path almost entirely down the hillside and almost to the highway itself. Only a small whitish stub of degenerate rock could be detected where the original tower had stood. Bat Tower was "no more." It had come crashing down, splintering into a thousand pieces, destroying everything in its path.

It was quickly obvious to us that we had experienced a "close call." The tower had likely collapsed within hours of when we were on or underneath it. We had even been energetically hammering pitons (metal wedges to clip into---

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used in those days) between the two giant ears of the jutting pinnacle. There isn't even the slightest chance that if it had fallen over at any time we were on the hillside or on the rock itself that we could have avoided being crushed and our very lives quickly extinguished by the collapsing pinnacle. It is more than likely, and we believe it is defensible, that the strong impressions to leave are what spared our lives in that instance.

Please don't come to the conclusion from all of this that we should go by feeling, or act simply upon impression as we go through life. Perhaps we could say, that if an impression or a feeling is ALL we have at a given moment, then it MIGHT be the best to follow these conscientious signals. But impressions and feelings really are not intended to stand alone in most cases. They are additional witnesses in most scenarios to the safer pillars of the Word and duty:

Impressions and feelings are no sure evidence that a person is led by the Lord. Satan will, if he is unsuspected, give feelings and impressions. These are not safe guides. All should thoroughly acquaint themselves with the evidences of our faith, and the great study should be how they can adorn their profession and bear fruit to the glory of God. . . .

(Maranatha (1976), page 233, paragraph 2
Chapter Title: Impressions, Feelings, and Drugs)

I have to admit that there have been times when I have followed what seemed to be a genuine impression, but it turned out after all to be a dead end. I thought God was saying something when he was not. When this becomes your experience, and especially when your mistake is known to others, it can be a very humbling and humiliating position

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to be in. But I still recommend that it is better to mistake your duty or mistake an impression you thought was honestly received and later find it to be invalid, than to ignore what seems like a genuine impression and later find out you “blew it” with God or with the circumstance.

In the majority of cases where I have been mistaken in hearing God’s voice through certain impressions, I have come to realize that it was because I was not testing them against the other voices; providential workings, and the Word of God or the Spirit of Prophecy and the like. If I had always held to the three-way test, I would not have been so ultimately mistaken. It often turns out that the “impression” was something “I” wanted perhaps, and not necessarily what “God” was apparently promoting in my life.

8

Does God Always Speak Back to Us?

Does God always speak through his Word, or otherwise, or are there just some days when you get nothing more than “the begats?” Are there some things that are too small or inconsequential to ask God about, or are there some things that God will simply refuse to answer?

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While I don't believe that we can *demand* that God speak to us every moment of every day, I think it is the right attitude to “expect” that he will or that he wants to. Yet God is God, and we can't demand that he speak to us whenever we want him to. He is not a “guidance” vending machine.

There certainly are things that we probably don't need to ask God about. I don't ask God on a daily basis whether or not I should brush my teeth, or take a shower. I already know this would be his will for me (and everybody else's too!). Again, God doesn't need to micromanage what he wants us to naturally do. I, for one, need to be a “big boy and take care of myself.”

But I think there is an inherent danger in the concept that there might be parts of our lives that are not under God's control. If we selfishly hold to the control of certain areas of our life, however small, Satan can use these opportunities to hook us on evil habits or to lead us to forbidden areas of selfish ambition. Therefore, in a sense, our entire being should be under the control of the Almighty. There may be times when God might tell us not to take a bath (as the man who almost bathed with the crocodile). We need to be ready to hear God's voice in regards to most anything we do, especially if a change or an exception to the normal might for some reason be required.

We are told that there is nothing too small for God to be interested in, or to escape His notice if it concerns our peace. Therefore, it seems to make sense that while I don't need to get permission from God to brush my teeth----his will is already determined for me, I can still continue doing it as an

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act that is pleasing to God. “Whatever, we do,” the Bible says, we should “do it to the glory of God.”

But personally, I don't think it is biblical to teach as some do, that God withholds his voice and presence for only certain special people, or for special “worthy” moments, when he arbitrarily chooses to reveal himself. The Bible says we can “pray without ceasing.” I think this is how Enoch walked with God, living his entire life in God's presence. He was constantly aware of God's presence with him, at least, and made his entire life a living conversation with his Lord and Master. He walked with God, and God walked with him as well.

If I feel that God is ignoring me and not listening to me at times it can be very detrimental to my conceived relationship with him. I think it is a preferable practice to continue seeking for God's voice each day, until we are satisfied that he has spoken---rather than walk away from his presence because it seems to us he has not responded or that he just isn't in the mood to respond. We are assured in many places that God always hears our prayers. So why not believe that he will always answer, or be responsive in some way, at least on the basis of our faith?

In Joy Dawson's book, *Forever Ruined For the Ordinary*, she tells of a lady who lost one of her favorite pens, that was a keepsake. Through some Bible verse and some providential circumstance the lady soon found the pen again. While it may seem almost a sacrilege to expect that God would take the time to help one find a lost ink pen, it still argues that God is interested in communing with us and

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honoring our faith. If we seed and grow the idea that God is not interested in whatever concerns us, then our entire relationship with God including even the more important things will likely cool or die as a result. We will tend to think that our insignificant life circumstance even at its highest levels is not worthy of notice.

But the story of Jesus' walk on earth is one that demonstrates that Jesus was generally interested in the people who were often the most minor or inconsequential, at least they were to everyone else. Jesus repeatedly sought out the people who assumed that the Master would never notice THEM! Yet this is what Jesus did. He took the children on his lap. People in his day viewed children as the least in the kingdom of heaven, and especially the least in society. But Jesus said they were the "greatest." The blind Bartemas, the woman with an issue of blood, the lepers and outcasts----these were the focus of Jesus' ministry, and not just the important priests and politicians.

Therefore, I think it is manifestly important for me, and for you, the reader, to boldly claim the attention of the Most High, even about the small things. Our temptation is to think that since we don't amount to much in other people's eyes, or that our lives are not as important as maybe a pastor or prophet, that God really wouldn't waste his time with our petty concerns. But the promise is that God is concerned about us, and not only interested in us, but he is "honored" with our requests. Not a vile or totally selfish or lazy request, of course, "God is not mocked," but with our sincere desires to have our lives wrapped up with His.

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We need to be determined to believe that God wants to respond to us. This, I believe is what is meant by “asking in faith.”

Personally, I don't like to lay down my Bible, or suspend a prayer session unless I feel that God has spoken in some way to me. It may not be miraculous or even new. It just means that I can look back at something I have read or experienced and say, “God has spoken, and I believe this is what God wants me to think about today or this moment.” Sometimes I read an entire book of the Bible (not every word), or I may get caught on a particular passage that I review and meditate on over and over. It is very important to look at the Scriptures as the direct voice of God. When it is viewed this way, every day can be a day with God.

One morning I read the first ten chapters of the book of Jeremiah. I was particularly hungry that day for some indications from God on some matters I was praying about. It seemed like I was talking to a brick wall. Nothing in the entire ten chapters said anything to me. I wanted to know that God was interested in “me” and not Jeremiah. I laid my Bible down and went about the activities of the day.

But strangely, to my surprise, as I went through the day, certain things I had read came back to my mind. Particularly comforting was the call to Jeremiah in the first chapter. God said that he knew Jeremiah before he was in the womb, and that he had called him. I began thinking, *because God is no respecter of persons*, God had called *me* to, and *knew me before I was born!* He had a plan for Jeremiah's life and he had a plan for mine as well. I was just as much called as was

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Jeremiah. Not to exactly the same thing (thank goodness!). But my call was a call, in a sense, in league with Jeremiah's. This very thought enriched my entire day and influenced the things I was doing at that time.

Some teach that sometimes God is saying something to us personally and other times he simply remains silent. But I tend to think that God is always ready for conversation. The variable is whether or not we are listening for his voice and spiritually sensing his presence. If we teach that God is always willing *to listen* to our side of the conversation, why in the world would God not be interested in responding on his side of the conversation so we can listen to him? The thought that God listens patiently but customarily makes us beg for a response that may or may not come is in itself inconsistent with the God we hear about and is in a way ludicrous.

It is true that God sometimes lets time pass before he “fulfills” our specific request. This happens more often than not. But usually it seems to me that God also leaves us messages in the meantime that he has heard our request, that we must “wait,” or that perhaps we are “asking amiss,” or whatever. I don't think God delights in leaving us in the dark, at least as concerns his responsive interest in us.

Recent to this writing my wife came up missing her “bite guard,” something that is important for her sleep and dental health. Unfortunately, this bite guard we knew was not something she could just go down to the drugstore and replace. It was specially made for her by dental experts at a cost of around \$500.00. After searching high and low for it

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and not finding it, I decided to pray about it. Since it was valuable and unique, I fully expected that God would reveal to me or my wife or my daughter where this bite guard was.

Soon after praying I felt impressed to look at Luke 1:13. The verse said: “Fear not, Zechariah: **for thy prayer is heard;** and thy wife Elizabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John.”

Now this verse would have very little relevance to most anyone else, I know, but I immediately smiled, as my mind was drawn to that particular text. In the previous few weeks I had reviewed this very story of Zechariah and Elizabeth in front of my congregation. It is a story that my family relates to in a certain way. Yet I had forgotten that the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth comes so early in the first chapter of Luke.

To go back, for many years I was single. At one time I didn't really believe I would even find someone who would marry me, much less have children of my own. Later in years than most people do, I met and married my sweet wife. Some years later even after that we were supremely blessed with our first child, our daughter, Stephanie. Even when Stephanie was born we were already “older parents” and certain folk would ask (and some still do) if she was our granddaughter!

Soon after Stephanie was born my wife encountered some serious medical problems, including thyroid cancer. As a result of that and some other things, we weren't supposed to be able to have any more children, and indeed we didn't over

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the next twelve years. Happy with our one daughter, we completely and totally put the idea of having more children out of our minds.

But when we were even further “well stricken in years,” my wife and I were dumbfounded with amazement one day to find out that she was expecting. In time our blessed little son came. We couldn't decide on a first name for him until the last minute, when we finally determined: “His name shall be Jonathan.”

It was only after the fact, when my conference leaders and my circle of friends kept teasing and referring to me as “Abraham,” that I felt impressed to correct them and say, “No, I'm Zacharias!” Why?

Because Zecharias was also a man who “miraculously” had a child in his old age. Secondly, the name of Zecharias' wife was Elizabeth, my wife's name. Thirdly Zecharias was a priest, or pastor as I am. Fourthly, Zecharias was found doing short term stints at the temple serving his course. For several years I have been involved in doing “interim” pastoring or short-term stints in churches that need that sort of thing. Fifthly, without this story in mind, we announced late and to even our own surprise that we would name our son “John.” And finally, though I wasn't literally struck dumb before my son's birth, I have been very “dumbfounded” and “speechless,” ever since, along with my wife, on what God has surprised us with.

That this is a “surprise” in our life is really in itself a vast understatement, to say the least, yet we are so “blessed” by

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this special little son. We cannot express the joy that was felt at his birth and that we have felt since. “He is not a prophet, nor the son of a prophet,” but he is an enormous blessing to our entire family! All in all, this wonderful Bible story has become our family’s private little anecdote, to laugh about a little, and to share with God also, maybe a little.

But to return to our subject from the ramblings of a now and not so wordless and proud father (!), what about the “bite guard?” Well, I think God has told us generally what happened to it, for we cannot find it for anything. Jonathan (now 2 years old) has a penchant for getting hold of valuable items and doing things with them. Our best efforts don’t always keep up with his busy little hands and feet. At first, I thought maybe God was telling us that we would find the item in with Jonathan’s toys or something. But it seems like God would tell us where it was if it could be found. But the verse simply seems to say that the Lord “has heard our prayer,” and hints that “Jonathan” is likely responsible for the bite guard’s final disappearance.

To date no amount of searching has turned up the bite guard. Recently, however, I caught Jonathan putting a cell phone in our large trash bin (we have also been missing another cell phone). I of course “counseled” him on not repeating this action. I even asked him if he put “mommy’s bite guard” in there and he said “Yes, Daddy.” Now with a two-year-old you never really know for sure, but the scenario makes sense. The bite guard has gone to “bite-guard heaven,” (I guess if it was in the garbage it went to the other place!) and we had best aim now on trying to replace it rather than

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spending all our waking hours praying and searching for it.

I'm sure God will somehow work out getting another one. Even though it would be nice to find the original guard still, it may not be “findable.” I feel God heard our prayer and gave us an answer through a private and familiar story. While we may not be told how to find everything that has been carelessly lost, God does wish to answer and to give us guidance about what to do in these frustrating circumstances. Despite the loss, we wouldn't even think of forfeiting the blessing of having this little “saboteur” in our house. Our daughter, who accomplished similar things as well when she was younger, is every bit as much a blessing to us as well.

(A postscript to this is that after all, my wife was able to go down to the drugstore, and for \$19.00 get one, we learned, that can be self-initiated or boiled and formed at home. My wife now much prefers this one to the other one anyway, and can also have as many as she likes. “Whew!”)

I used to think that certain passages of Scripture were better suited to hear God's voice out of than others. While this may be true in light of why a particular passage was written in the first place, I have come to the opinion that it may not matter at all which part of the Bible one is reading in. Whatever part it is, God can find a way, if he wishes, to speak to us.

This is why the Bible can become more interesting to the seeking listener than to the common, ordinary reader. Earlier in life I used to like the narrative sections of the Bible best, the stories of the Bible. I found the other historical, poetic, or prophetic parts not so interesting. Naturally, the human

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interest stories were more entertaining, as reading material.

But when I began to see the Bible as a vast instruction book for my personal life this changed dramatically. Now I like Isaiah, Ezekiel, and the Psalms in a new and different way. In fact, I find them sometimes more informative to my personal journey than a protracted story in the narrative sections.

Some Christians have indicated that when they begin to pray before reading their Bible they ask God to lead them to the section of Scripture that is most helpful to them that day. While sometimes God may so direct, I have not found this plan to be all that effective or fulfilling. It seems more occurrent in my experience, that God already in his providence has prepared himself to speak through whatever passage is available or planned for that particular day. So usually it probably makes little difference whether one chooses a reading from their regular reading plan, or not. Instruction will come to them in time if they are “tuned” to His Spirit.

One time not long ago to this writing I had gone through a difficult time that involved sickness and pain. Right after a rather traumatic health challenge for me I got sick with a severe cold. To say the least I was really discouraged. It seemed like one thing added onto another.

One morning I was reading about Hezekiah’s episode with the Assyrian army under Sennacherib who had besieged him. All that I could seem to find that applied to my situation that day was that Hezekiah had also been sick, though much

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more serious a situation than mine. God finally told Hezekiah through Isaiah, the prophet: “After three days you will recover.” 2 Kings 20:5

I wondered, “could that apply to me also? Could God be encouraging me also, or am I being foolish and opportunistic to think so?” But I left it at that.

When I noticed that I was completely well three days later I was not surprised, but it made me think again about what I had read. I immediately tried to go back and read the passage again just for interest. Through what Bible knowledge I do have, I surmised that I had read it in the book of Isaiah, for the same story is found there. I read the story in Isaiah but could not find any reference to three days. So then I thought I had read it in Chronicles. But the story in Chronicles didn’t say anything specific about the three days either. After re-reading the story again I could not find the reference. That’s when I said to myself, “Well, that’s it....I’ve lost my mind....I was sure I read something about three days!”

Something I should have known but I had forgotten is that this same story is repeated at least three times in the Old Testament. I had been reading in Kings on that particular day. And when I read the Kings account, there it was. It is interesting to me that when the “three days” was an issue in my life I was reading the Kings version of the story. It impressed me how appropriate it can be to listen for God’s voice every day, other wise we might miss these signals.

This being said it is important to observe that Christians

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probably should have a regular Bible reading plan. If God speaks through His Word, then it is logical to spend quality time exploring its pages.

But don't let it be thought that a seeker is to be scolded for not reading his Bible enough, or “guilted” for under-achievements in Bible reading. The reading of God's Word is not a requirement, but a privilege. Don't think that God will only speak to people if they spend four hours a day in the Word, and dig like gophers. This position makes Bible reading a “work” and a “contest” rather than something fun and rewarding. It should be counted a precious privilege to converse with the Most High. When looked at in this non-threatening way, it makes most sense, and I think, is certainly the scenario that is most blessed.

I am aware of a story told by an acquaintance of mine, a very godly woman (and I know is genuinely true) that demonstrates how God values the time we spend with Him. We tend to think that God is quite occupied and shouldn't be expected to have an interest in speaking to us or hearing from us. But according to this story God is very interested in communicating with us on a daily basis.

Helen, for that is her name, was attending academy or high school when this happened. She was a good student, and so far in the quarter or semester in consideration had achieved straight “A's.” She felt conscientiously determined to keep up this trend.

But on the eve of a very important test in one of her classes she was invited to visit an elderly couple who had been

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faithful friends and mentors to her in the past. She desperately needed to study instead, but felt that she owed these devoted friends the attention that they had requested. So with some private reluctance, she did what she thought was the right thing, and spent the evening visiting this elderly couple.

Returning home quite late, at least for her, she decided to honor her health standards and get the necessary sleep she needed. She arose early the next morning and was fiercely tempted to use her regular devotional time to study for the test. She desperately wanted to keep her “A” grade in the class.

But her conscientious desire, as well as her spiritual desire was to spend her time with the Lord as always. But she thought, “Why not skip it just this one time?” But soon she thought better of it and spent the next hour or so in her customary devotional time.

It was soon time to leave for school. She left feeling totally unprepared for the test, all the while praying that somehow she would survive it. Yet she still felt that she had done what was most important, in visiting her dedicated friends and in spending her time with the Lord the following morning.

On the way to school she quickly crammed five or six random study questions and answers from her class notes into her head. Yet there was a large amount of material that she didn’t have time to cover or look over.

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The next thing she knew she was sitting for the test, full of apprehension. To her surprise the teacher wrote down on the board (I believe he had somehow lost the original test) the very same questions, without exception, in the same order, that she had studied in those waning few moments in which she had been able to study. In the end, she wrote a perfect test.

She learned an enormous lesson in the area of honoring her communication time with God and with doing what her conscience had indicated was right, in honoring and respecting her loyal and aged friends as well.

A longtime friend from college days once related to me an experience of how God wants us to honor this conversational time with us and can speak using rather unconventional means as well. While a student missionary in Japan as a young woman, this person developed a faithful devotional life with the Lord. However, she became troubled because on some occasions she would unintentionally oversleep in the morning, short-changing herself on her time with God.

Not wanting to miss these opportunities, she asked the Lord to wake her in the morning so she could spend the necessary time with him. She did not have an alarm clock with her or any way that she could think of or devise to ensure that she would wake up in time. However, for the next several mornings she was awakened by the sound of a mosquito buzzing about her ear. She would soon awake to address the mosquito problem, and was soon ready to spend her time with the Lord. What was most amazing was the timing of the mosquito each morning.

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Personally, I'm not sure what to make of this circumstance, since it's hard to see God using such an irritating approach to the whole thing. I tend to see mosquitoes as the Devil's tools.

But Kathy at least, for that was her name, didn't see it that way. She was delighted about the circumstance and was convinced that God had sent the mosquito each morning to gently awake her so she could spend time with him.

We have to grant this much, it worked! Perhaps like Corrie Ten Boom's sister, with the fleas, the Lord's voice can be discerned in even the buzz of a mosquito!

It seems to be the case that God is willing to speak to anyone, at any level of involvement with him. God speaks in a variety of ways as well. He speaks through much more than the Scriptures, too, of course.

The wife of a pastoral friend of mine relates how one particularly difficult day she was out on her "walk" with God and was talking with God. She hungered for some particular indication that God really loved her. At first it was like God answered nothing. But walking along, as she looked up she could see a unique formation in the clouds on the horizon. Through the shape of the clouds, or through the light passing through them, was the incredibly distinct and definable shape of a "cross." Such "a picture is worth a thousand words." God not only "speaks," but He is "incredibly eloquent!"

Usually, however, the Scriptures will be the avenue, because

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in them God has *already spoken*. It does seem to be a truism that the more one searches the Scriptures, the more one's reward will be, in terms of hearing God's voice. The more time invested in God's word, the more often God's voice will be heard. Yield is generally related to effort.

Being a recreational “prospector” myself, I have often compared this style of Bible exploration to the experience of searching for gold or precious minerals. Usually, the deeper or more thoroughly one searches or pans, the more likely it is that he will find valuable material. Some fields that don't seem to be promising might be left momentarily to scan some new ground. But often the real gems are just below the surface, even in “drab” passages, and sufficient attention and meditation will uncover priceless treasure. Some of the most precious verses or promises are found where least expected. The famous prayer of Jabez is in the middle of genealogical lists in *Chronicles*, of all places. Sometimes I “prospect” in my Bible, and other times I choose a particular passage and “mine” it. Either way it can be profitable if the motive and spirit is right and one prayerfully seeks to hear what God might be saying to you that particular day.

While God can speak through non-Scriptural sources, and often does, it still remains true that the best mining is to be found in the Word of God. It contains the richest “ore.” It seems like some part of every day the earnest seeker should somewhere and somehow encounter the great “mine of truth,” the Bible itself. Everything else is “low grade ore” in comparison.

A lady that I knew in one of my churches early on in my

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ministry once related to me a story of how God can speak through his Word, which I have never forgotten. At the time of the incident she was a missionary in a remote part of Africa with her husband, who was a physician, and with her family.

On this occasion her husband had previously gone to work in a village some 80 miles distant. She followed later in a Land Rover or Jeep to join her husband. The challenge for her and her children was that they must travel a difficult and remote “road” that was narrow and undeveloped.

On the way they were overtaken by a storm, which caused the rivers that had no bridges to overflow their banks, and for the clay to become as slippery as ice. Waylaid by the rainstorm she soon found herself stalled in the darkness and the Land Rover overturned. She felt incredibly lonely and fearful, stranded in total wilderness along with her frightened children. She wondered whether she would ever safely make it through the swollen rivers and to her destination.

All they could do to find shelter was to crawl under the overturned vehicle with a Bible and a flashlight. Immediately the Bible was opened to the following text in Isaiah: “When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee.” (Isaiah 43:2)

Not much later they were rescued and the fearful storm passed. The family was reunited safely. But even years later this brave missionary woman could not ever recount the

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story without tears of joy, thankfulness, and comfort flowing down her cheeks.

God speaks through His Word, and through many other incomprehensible ways as well! In certain ways, at least, he is constantly speaking, hour after hour, day after day.

9

Asking Direct Questions

Something very important to realize is that God's voice is probably more discernible when it comes in direct response to our SPECIFIC requests. When we ask God for things, “in general” we can probably expect that God will answer “generally.” But it is more rewarding and perhaps more diagnostic when we come to the Scriptures, or to the Lord, with one or two specific requests on our minds.

James 1:5 and the following verses are very instructive in this regard. James says that we are to ask God for wisdom,

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without wavering or being double-minded. Originally, I have always thought that this simply meant that we should come to God with nothing but strong faith. Now it is supremely true that we should ask in sure confidence and “faith.” But I think these verses mean more than this.

I think they mean that we need to be very sure, clear, and focused on what we are asking for. It does not mean we should be narrow in our thinking. God may answer way beyond or outside of our simple request. But it does mean that our prayers ought to be purposeful and direct. The reason for this is that the answers that God sends will stand out more against such a background when our expectation is so clearly painted in our minds.

If we ask that God “help” us with our school work in the next quarter of school, perhaps we can trust that he will. But how do we really then know how he is particularly “helping” us, except maybe the grades at the end? But if we ask, for instance, while we are studying for a particularly important test, that portends to be a difficult one, to help us remember what we are diligently studying for at the moment, we might be in a better position to notice God's particular help. It might be that as one is taking the test, certain facts come readily to mind that weren't registering well during the struggles of study. The student can then think, “Thank you, Lord, for helping with this test. I claim your promises for this moment.” With such a specific request matched with such a specific answer one can hear God's voice in perhaps a greater way than a prayer at the beginning of the quarter asking and hoping God will help them somehow. Such a prayer is also very appropriate, but maybe soon forgotten.

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Such a prayer is best followed up by specific conversation with God about that very thing.

There is another thought to consider while we are discussing James 1:5. It is important to realize, as well, that God doesn't always necessarily promise that he will “**tell us** exactly what to do.” While God promises guidance and help in all our decisions, in all but a very few verses does God claim he will complete the decision **for** us. Instead, it says he will give us “wisdom.”

“Wisdom” is not the answer in itself. But it is the tool that can detect and formulate the answer. This is why Solomon in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes is so preoccupied with it, saying that its “price is above rubies.” “Above all,” he says, “get wisdom.” And, of course, he is referring to *godly, guidance* wisdom. God promises to supplement our decisions with his own might and wisdom. We cannot always expect a “thus saith the Lord.” But we can expect “a plain path before our feet.” God's Word may not always say, “this is the way, walk ye in it,” but there may be instead an informative “light” on our pathway to reveal to us what route is probably best for us to take.

Psalms 119:105 says, “*Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.*” I am told that in ancient times that certain lamps, or clay bowls made as lamps, had on their rims, four holes formed to which one could tie a rope or string. These four points of attachment and their respective ropes could be knotted together in the hand of the person walking along a path. This way the lamp was situated down near to a person's foot and specifically lighted the path and

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its potential dangers to the traveler at night.

Likewise, the Scriptures are said to be a ground/specific light to our path. It may not say directly *which* way always, but it will reveal the best paths that are available, or it will shine in such a way that the pilgrim will know what direction to take or what hazards lie ahead and how they can be avoided. Such elucidation is greatly needed while traveling through the darkness of this world. Anyone who has hiked in the darkness with a dim or failed flashlight can appreciate the need for path-specific light shining ahead of them. This God promises for those who are interested in being guided by him.

The Bible can be a source of courage as we are footing the storms of life. We may not always get a complete answer, but often, if we are listening, I believe we can gather courage and instruction that will carry us through and make the road “easier” and the “burden lighter.” Sometimes the “bad news” that arrives in our lives is ultimately much easier to accept if we feel that God is “hanging in there” with us.

More than one time I have strongly desired a change in my work situation, feeling largely unfulfilled and unsuccessful where I was working at the time. In these situations I have wondered if God is telling me I should seek a change, or if it is just my own selfish wishes taking over.

One time in particular, I am thinking of, I had my hopes and sights directed toward something beyond my present assignment. Some openings were taking place and I had a secret desire that a call would come my way asking me to

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take one of them.

One morning, with this strongly on my mind I read,
Psalm 75:6,

*“For promotion cometh neither from the east, nor
from the west, nor from the south.” KJV*

Indeed, nothing ever came of my hopes, no promotions were in order. And about 99.9% of the time this is way it seems to come about in my life anyway!

But to return to point, I was very thankful for this verse being brought to my attention at that time. While it wasn't “good news,” it had a positive effect in my life and attitude. When the “promotions” didn't come, I was already mentally prepared for it. I was able to largely focus on present duties and not “dream away” and neglect what needed attention right where I was. I was on a fast slope toward being greatly disappointed and discouraged, and this helped me “get my act together” in the present circumstance. (God has visited me more than once on this verse. “Hope springs eternal in the human breast,” and I often have to be sent back to earth and reality!)

I have a large burden about how ministry is carried out in our modern church era. I think it should be done in the “right” way, and it looks to me like many mistakes are being made, high and low, in how certain things are done. Some associates think I am obsessed about this, and it may be. But I would say, I just want God's blessing to rain on His church.

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Anyway, right or wrong on these issues, I have been caught in certain conscientious dilemmas in these areas sometimes. More than once the issue has raised itself to the point that I had to schedule a little talk “with the brethren,” so to speak, either with my superiors, or my church elders, or whoever about it.

One time it was arranged that one of my administrators invited me to come and discuss some of the things that were troubling me, into his office. I was also in dialogue with leaders in my particular parish about these same things. I was praying earnestly about the whole situation and especially the interview.

The night before this one important interview, though a little apprehensive, I said to the Lord, “This is good. I just know that ‘they’ will agree with what I am proposing, because it is Your plan, Lord. It even has the testimony of a modern prophet of Israel to back it up. They are being really friendly and open with me, they have invited me to talk with them about it, and surely they will see that what I am proposing is right and it will all work out.” I really felt positive about the whole thing.

I went to my “call” chapter, Ezekiel 33, to get “refurbished” for the interview and for the matter I was dealing with at my congregation, because the first part of this chapter is a springboard for what I’m trying to accomplish in my personal life and ministry in any place. I asked the Lord for specific guidance on the interview, and on my own words, and what I should speak.

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I read the familiar words in the first part of chapter 33 and I could already feel my zeal rising. But intent on spending a little more time I read the rest of the chapter, and on beyond that. But what really jumped out at me, almost like I had never read it before, were the following words. Some of them are put in bold---but without telling the whole story, which we can't do right now, I cannot emphasize enough how incredibly appropriate almost every word resonated with me in the situation I was in:

*Also....thou son of man, **the children of thy people still are talking against thee** by the walls and in the doors of the houses, and speak one to another, every one to his brother, saying, "Come, I pray you, and hear what is the word that cometh forth from the Lord.*

*And they come unto thee, as people cometh, and **they sit before you as my people**, and they hear your words, but **they will not do them**: for with their mouth **they show much love**, but their heart goeth after their coveteousness (i.e. what they want for themselves).*

*And, lo, thou art unto them as a very lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument: for **they hear thy words, but they do them not**,*

And when it cometh to pass, (lo, it will come,) then shall they know that a prophet hath been among them." Ezekiel 33:30-33.

Now don't take me wrong, I am certainly no prophet. Nor am I greatly persecuted like Ezekiel. But grant me this, I do believe I can "feel" like Ezekiel felt. And the general

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circumstance may not be unlike the one Ezekiel was in, after all, especially when it comes to this certain issue that I know about.

When I read this passage, it was like I was fore-warned not to expect too much of the interview or of the understanding of my fellow-leaders and my congregation. Yet, at this point, I really still thought they would buy it.

However, here is how the interview, and the general circumstances that followed it, turned out. The interview was *very cordial*, a lot of pleasantries and compliments were exchanged, though I mostly had a single audience. But as far as solving or accomplishing anything relative to the purpose of the interview it was a total disaster. It never got much past the pleasantries. I almost panicked at the time and prayed, “Lord, this is my moment. Don’t let me blow it. But this doesn’t seem to be working. I’m not sure they are hearing a word that I’m saying.” After the final hand shakes I was more confused than ever on what to do about the prospect. The matter at hand was on a worse footing than before, it seemed.

I’m not trying to criticize my superiors, or simply justify my opinion here, or anything of that nature. I am just reporting what seemed to happen from my perspective, for that is really the only one I have.

To return to point of this experience I simply wish to illustrate how helpful the Bible can be when specifically applied to our lives. I believe that the Lord led me to these verses just as surely as I believe that I have a nose on my

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face. These verses (and the following chapter) were incredibly informative and comforting to me. As it turned out, I could come away from this affair, something that normally could have hopelessly thrown or devastated me, or even offended me, quite secure in the Lord's favor and unsurprised by the outcome. Sure, it transpired against my hopes and expectations, but went exactly as the verse said it would. "Much love" was exchanged, but the "word and concept" was treated like a popular "hit" song, that everybody likes, but doesn't live--- and that rises in the charts and within days is replaced by another one.

When we have a difficulty, or a decision to make, shouldn't we go to God and His Word, and at least seek for an answer from Him? I believe that in most cases, God will not only give us "wisdom," but that he will give some additional light as well to shed on our pathway. We need to ask him for exactly what we need, and then expect, without wavering, some kind of an answer from Him. Just how "ground specific" God's help can be, I learned "again" from this next experience.

When my daughter, Stephanie, was about four years old I bought her a little kite to take flying. I confess I probably bought it more for myself than I did for her, for I have from my earliest days loved flying kites. But in no time, she and her daddy became attached to this little kite with *hearts* on it, which we would sometimes fly together in Grandma's back yard.

The kite could be quickly disassembled because the tiny dowels that supported the frame fitted into tiny plastic

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sleeves on the kite itself. These little sleeves were hardly bigger than $\frac{3}{16}$ th of an inch in diameter and maybe $\frac{3}{8}$ s of an inch long. But without them the kite could not be readily re-assembled.

One day in trying to fly the kite, or when reeling it in, the kite collapsed because one of these tiny plastic parts came up missing. My daughter was greatly distressed because the kite flying was going to have to be suspended, and her kite was not “alright,” or at least “functional.”

I was sad that we had lost the part, too, but it was just a “dollar” kite, and most every kite has a demise some time anyway. I knew searching for this miniscule piece of plastic was hopeless, because the kite had been flown over literally acres of grass. It would be easier to “find a needle in a haystack.”

But my daughter didn’t view it this way. Her first response to the current problem was, “Daddy, we can pray about it and Jesus will help us find it.” She had me by the throat, because we, her parents and teachers, had repeatedly taught her that this was the appropriate thing to do. On one hand, I was delighted that she would suggest this solution, but on the other hand I was in a quandary.

In a momentary panic I quickly searched for some way to tell her that, “Yes, we could pray, but.....sometimes God chooses not to answer our prayers----or it wasn’t really that important, so----or we could try to find her another kite----or the kite was just broken, and that was that.” But all these possible responses seemed as flimsy as the kite at the time.

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Though I really didn't want to pray about it, I suddenly decided I had no real choice, because what would it say to her if we didn't pray about it?

Most any Christian parent has found themselves in this dilemma, of wanting their child to have faith in God, but afraid that the child's fragile faith might be disappointed. But, anyway, out on that "almost an acre" lawn, we had a simple little prayer.

We immediately sallied forth onto the sea of grass. It could not have been more than thirty seconds, and several yards from where we had been standing, that both my daughter and I at the same time spied the tiny little black piece of plastic down in the thick grass.

My daughter was delighted! Her matter of fact comment---directed straight at me was: "*See* Daddy, Jesus helped us find it!"

I dare say, that is what this "rebuked" and "relieved" father *now* believes, for I could make quite an enormous case---that it could never have been found otherwise!

10

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In this chapter we are going to talk about asking for signs, or putting out fleeces, or using chance methods to determine God's will. Are these methods, or at least parts of these methods, acceptable ways to hear God's voice?

While one may find what sounds like some of these practices reported in the Bible, it is important to recognize a couple of facts relative to them.

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The first is that while such things as Gideon's fleece turning wet or dry according to his wish did indeed happen, most of these cases occurred in very unique circumstances which should be carefully examined before running out and trying the same things ourselves. If one is careful to observe, Gideon's fleece experiment was not carried out to determine God's will, for that was already determined. It was carried out to confirm to Gideon if he was indeed hearing God's voice. Considering the stupendous near impossibility of what God was asking him to do it is completely understandable that Gideon needed some confirmation.

In many cases where “signs” are used or specified in the Bible, it becomes clear that God was usually the one who provided or suggested the sign, and the signs were almost always given as a follow up to a direct revelation that God had already given. So, unless we have received some kind of supernatural vision, or some marvelous providence that has God's handprints all over it, it seems that asking for a miraculous sign is not the preferred way that God wishes to speak to us.

A second observation is that nowhere in the Bible are we really given specific directions to use such methods. The Bible is strangely silent when it comes to these kinds of things. Therefore, it behooves us to avoid making at least the majority of our decisions based on such practices.

It does seem, though, that God is willing to work with us where we are at in our spiritual understanding. For many, the method of letting the Bible fall open to a certain text has worked at times. Rather incredible stories have emerged

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about Christians using this method.

All I can say is that almost ninety-nine times out of hundred it hasn't really worked for me! And I have developed an explanation as to why this is the case.

My opinion is that such a method is seldom blessed by God, for most of us, at least, because this isn't the usual way God wants a supposedly "mature" Christian to determine what he is saying to us. The times that it has worked for some folk is because God was either speaking in a direct emergency or because he understands that the motives of the ones receiving the signs are pure, and while they do not know any better, God rewards their sincerity.

Once, when I was a young man, I was praying that God would lead me to the right woman to marry. One day with this subject on my mind I went to the Word for some instruction. That day I opened up to Hosea, and read the words, "Go, take a wife of harlotry!" At first, of course, I was confused and stunned by what I had read! Then as I thought about it, it came to me that God had allowed this strange answer to come to me, not to tell me to seek such a girl, but to show me that such a method for finding a wife was not the best method. Indeed, if this is what God really wanted me to do, I certainly had some questions. I didn't ask God to confirm such a possibility because I didn't need to. Both God and I had other things in mind. For Hosea, yes, that was part of the plan, but it wasn't for me.

Generally, we are not to use the Bible like an "Ouija Board." If all we ever did in seeking to hear God's voice was to let

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the Bible fall open to a certain place, that is exactly what we would be tempted to continue doing time after time. What a lazy, careless way to try to learn about God! God wants us more involved in the process than this. He has a few additional things to say to us beyond a simple “yes,” or “no!” Overall, it seems that usually God doesn't want us to use any method where chance and happenstance are in the picture.

What is perhaps really happening when certain ones systematically practice the “bible falling open” method is that they set themselves up to rely on *providence* alone (maybe even false providence) in the equation. This leaves out the impression and counsel of the Holy Spirit working on the mind, as well as the broader intelligent counsel of the Scripture itself. While it seems to be a “Bible answer,” it really may not take into account our safer and more comprehensive three-way paradigm we keep returning to in this book.

Once I learned about a guidance practice that purportedly was used by gypsy travelers. If they came to a fork in the road and they weren't sure which way to travel they used what was called a “gypsy stick.” This stick would be thrown up in the air. However, it landed, and whatever direction it pointed was the direction they took. At best this is a terribly unreliable method. Would you really want that kind of method used, for instance, in choosing who you are to marry? Help! But what is really the difference between this method and the bible falling open method, except in the latter the “stick” falls on a Bible verse?

In the town and church where I grew up there was a family

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that lived near us. One time the lady of the house told us how she had decided to marry her husband. She had first received a proposal, but was unsure whether she should marry this particular man or not. She asked the Lord that if he wanted her to marry this particular man that he should tell her by making her alarm clock go off the next morning. That night she didn't set the alarm. Yet the next morning it went off anyway---and so she ended up marrying the gentleman.

Now it seems like God worked with this person where she was, and apparently rewarded her request. I have always wondered what would have happened if the alarm had not gone off. Would she have married him anyway?! (Knowing this lady, in my mind a difficult person, I have even wondered if some real “alarms” *should* have gone off somewhere *in the gentleman's head* before he married her!!) All in all it still seems like a dangerous way to make such an important decision. Could not the Devil make the alarm go off? Hopefully more “reasoned” consideration will go into most marital plans!

Such methods, however, are nowhere recommended in the Bible. God usually wants a thought process to be involved in our major decision making, not just some inane casting of the lot.

Ellen White once was informed that a certain adherent of the Faith was flipping a coin to determine some of his spiritual and business decisions. Of course, this person indicated that he always prayed before he flipped the coin. The testimony written to this fellow and others in like situations is very interesting. She unequivocally condemned the practice and

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indicated that the prayer along with it would not make a whit of difference because God was generally not working in such methods anyway.⁴

It makes complete sense that such practices are condemned and should not be used by the earnest Christian, for the reasons given.

Again, God wants us to be guided more in line with the three

⁴ *Selected Messages*, Book 2 (1958), page 325, (326) paragraph 2
Chapter Title: Guidance by Chance Methods----

“You endeavor to reach correct decisions regarding religious duties, and to make decisions regarding business enterprises, by the tossing up of a coin, and letting the position in which it falls decide what course you shall pursue. I am instructed to say that we are not to give encouragement to any such methods. They are too common, too much like sleight-of-hand movements. They are not of the Lord, and those who depend upon them for direction will meet with failure and disappointment. Being nothing more than a matter of chance, the influence of adopting such tests regarding duty is calculated to lead the mind to depend on chance and guesswork, when all our work and plans for work should be established on the sure foundation of the Word of God.”

“The people of God can come to a correct understanding of their duty only through sincere prayer and earnest seeking for the sanctification of the Holy Spirit. When they seek aright for instruction concerning their course of action, these strange and unreliable methods will not be accepted by them. They will then be saved from haphazard work, and from the confusion that is ever the result of depending on human devisings. . . .”

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ways addressed previously. This artificial attempt at providence should not even be used as perhaps even one leg to support our three-legged platform of guidance.

Kermit Ecklebarger, an associate professor of New Testament at Denver Conservative Baptist Seminary once submitted an interesting article in the *Moody Monthly* that I saved for its value. It is so appropriate to our discussion and so well written that parts of it are quoted directly to preserve the integrity of the presentation. The article contains a warning about “fleeing,” that is, using chance methods and “heathen” practices, to determine God’s voice or will:

"God's Orders Send Pitcher Packing" announced the headline at the top of a *Chicago Tribune* sports section. After his team lost 25 to 3, a minor league baseball pitcher was summoned to the manager's hotel room and cut from the squad. But the player wasn't dismissed because he had played poorly; he had allowed only one earned run in the two innings he pitched. The manager said the pitcher was being released because of direct orders from God. He had made his decision in consultation with the team owner, who explained to a reporter that she had opened her Bible randomly to Ezekiel 12:3. The words "prepare thee stuff for removing" (KJV) jumped out of the page at her.

The owner said it was as if God had become a partner in the team's front office. She made all the important decisions about the team this way. She would pray and open her Bible, and the answer would be on the page before her. Several days before his firing, the pitcher had demanded more money. The owner's concern about the pitcher's attitude had motivated her to seek God's will....

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Few recognize the pagan connotations of using the Bible in a mechanical way that ignores the versed clear meaning and stresses instead a contrived coincidence of terminology. Missionaries report that one Moslem way to..... (a short discussion follows about “cutting the Koran,” a method used by Moslems that is similar to opening the Bible and putting your finger on a verse).

.....In the case of the baseball team owner, the words through which she supposedly received her guidance, "prepare thee stuff for packing," were addressed to the prophet Ezekiel himself. If anybody should have packed her bags, it should have been the owner.

A personal command in Scripture given by God to a specific individual is just that—a command to that one person. God doesn't expect everyone who reads this passage to pack his suitcase.

The unusual thing about this passage is that Ezekiel was to pack his bags, but he wasn't supposed to go anywhere. He was to pretend to be taking a trip to show the rebellious Jews that those living in Jerusalem would be taken captive to Babylon. Nothing in the passage justifies cutting a pitcher from a baseball team.

The Bible should play an important part in decision making, but not as some spiritual device that's mechanically manipulated to find God's will. Through study to discover the eternal truths revealed there, the Bible gives principles that guide Christians in making decisions.

Eckleberger then discusses the common practice of “fleece-laying” among Christians. He relates a story of how the late Francis Schaeffer used this method when he was young.

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With the story of Gideon in mind he writes:

Encouraged by this example, many have prayed that God would arrange a particular outcome of events as tangible evidence of His will about a decision. During his teenage years, even Francis Schaeffer resorted to fleece laying in a moment of crisis when he felt a deep need to know God's will.

It was 5:30 A.M. of the day that 19-year-old Fran was to leave for college to prepare for the ministry. At his father's request Fran got up early to see him before he went to work. When Fran came down the stairs, his dad said, "I don't want a son who is a minister, and I don't want you to go."

Since Fran had first started talking about being a preacher, his relations with his parents had been strained. For six years his education had been geared toward mechanical engineering. His dad wanted a son who would be "a good honest worker," not a "parasite."

Fran broke the awkward silence and asked permission to go to the cellar to pray. There he tearfully begged God to make it clear what to do. In desperation he took out a coin and said, "Heads, I'll go in spite of Dad!" He flipped the coin, and it came up heads. Still crying, he pleaded, "God, be patient with me. If it comes up tails this time, I'll go:" The tossed coin was tails. A third time he begged more earnestly "Once more, God. I don't want to make a mistake with Dad upstairs. Please, now let it be heads again:"

After the coin came up heads, a reassured Fran mounted the cellar stairs and confidently told his dad he had to go.

The young Francis Schaeffer had faced a crucial decision that went against his parents' wishes and dreams. Reminiscent of

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Gideon's fleece, a thrice flipped coin brought certainty at a time of family opposition. Viewed from the perspective of Schaeffer's productive life and ministry those flips of a coin seem even more significant than they did that morning.

Who could then question the validity of fleece laying to determine God's will? Francis Schaeffer could. In recounting this story in *The Tapestry*, his wife, Edith, says that he advised against confirming decisions that way, even though at the time he believed it was the right thing to do. . . .

Eckleberger gives one more example of common fleece-laying that did not work out:

Others who've practiced fleece laying have had negative results. A number of years ago, an evangelical leader who faced a major career decision prayed that God would arrange a particular set of events as an indication of His will about the choice. In each test, the results "confirmed" he was to accept the new position.

He resigned from his ministry and moved across the continent, only to realize within a few months that this new role was clearly not God's will for him. Fortunately, no replacement had been found where he had previously served. He was invited to return and had a long, successful ministry.⁵

However, one may ask, "What about Gideon, and the case of Achan where lots were used, and the selection of Matthias, the apostle to replace Judas, by casting lots? But in each of these cases one must analyze carefully what God was doing and why.

⁵ *Moody Monthly*, Nov. 1984.

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In the case of Gideon, we have already determined that it was to confirm God's will, and not to determine God's will alone that the sign was conceived.

In the case of Achan, God's purposely had the lot used for several reasons people don't immediately think about. Doing this judgment by lot gave Achan and his family a chance to repent before they were discovered (He broadcast his own lack of sincerity by not confessing. Otherwise, people could have accused God, or Joshua, of mistreating an innocent man). It also gave all of Israel a chance to examine their own hearts as the process took place. It also protected Joshua and the leadership from being blamed for picking out a scapegoat for political or other reasons. Finally, it showed that God knew all along who had done it, and thereby knows what everyone else has done. It left no question as to the fairness and truth of the situation.

Achan did not repent, and when confronted with the evidence he was forced to admit his folly, so in the end the lot exonerated and confirmed the action that was taken. Nobody questioned the outcome. There had been no mistake made in the sentence.

As to the lot cast for Matthias, it might be observed that it appears that the idea of using the lot was contrived by the apostles and elders themselves, and was not suggested by God himself. Some commentators observe that the apostles and elders may have gone ahead of God in seeking to replace Judas so quickly. And it doesn't seem that the apostles even asked God about carrying out this action. They assumed it should be done.

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Later developments revealed that God had another apostle waiting in the wings, one “born late” as Paul himself once remarked, an apostle to the Gentiles who may have been intended to be the twelfth apostle.

God over-ruled for good anyway and worked with the early church as best He could. But it does seem strange that God would leave the matter of the final apostle up to chance. However, it should be mentioned that the final two names were not determined by this method up to that point. The lot was only finally used to decide between two equally qualified candidates.

And this is probably when the use of chance can actually be divinely ordained. It seems to be used in cases where a final choice is to be made between seemingly equally righteous options, to ensure against political under-handedness.

Often in modern church settings promotions and decisions are often based on the political opinions and ambitions of those in power. It is not what you know, but who you know that seems to count. Therefore, the lot could be used in such times to demonstrate that no favoritism is being entertained, and that the selection is being surrendered to God’s voice and will.

Sometimes in an effort to not show favoritism my parents would have us “draw straws.” The one who picked the shortest straw won. If there was one candy bar left, they wanted to leave the result to chance, so as not to favor anyone. But in these cases it was not materially important

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who won (except in the cases where it was I who had to do the dishes!). But when determining God's will it seems presumptuous to use such determinative methods, at least to the exclusion of other valid witnesses.

Below are some principles to perhaps consider when directly asking for a sign:

Principles About the Direct Asking of a Sign:

1. In the Bible usually a direct revelation from God preceded the need for a confirmatory sign. Therefore, in most cases, GOD INITIATED any dramatic revelation.

2. In many cases in the Bible, God was usually the one who specified the sign, and not the person in the story. He instructed Joshua to use lots in the case of Achan. In other cases he told the subject what the sign would be.

3. Usually the dramatic signs that God honored in the past were those that were asked in a direct emergency or in times when there was no time to think or pray about the matter----

Eliezer, Abraham's servant needed help on selecting a wife, for someone else. And in the end more went into the decision for Rebekah to become Isaac's wife than merely her offering to give Abraham's servant a drink. But it contributed to the providential angle of the whole arrangement. Jonathan, King Saul's son asked for a sign as he headed into battle, or took on a dangerous assignment. Nehemiah could only pray as he was presenting the cup to

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the Persian king. The providences that came seemed to be confirmation of an anointed decision that was determined beforehand or as the result of a sudden need or emergency.

4. Signs typically were not left simply to pure chance. They were formulated to show that **only God** could be the one giving it.

5. Sign dependence, practiced for the wrong reasons, may actually be sign of the last days, and of the evil ways and attitudes of man. In the last days Satan will be performing all kinds of miraculous signs, to “fasten” his followers in his delusions. Satan asked Jesus to perform a sign (stone/bread) and Jesus refused to work on the level of such signs. He once said “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign.”

6. God's refusal to show a sign does not mean that God is unable to do what is asked---(think of a parent and child). A parent will not always give a child what they ask for because the parent knows better than the child what things are safe and right for the child. But this does not mean that the parent is not able to provide what the child wants. Likewise, if God does not answer a sign that we specify, it does not mean that he is not interested in our situation or is unable to act. It simply means that he does not think it best to reward us for whatever reason he might demure, on the thing we have asked.

Asking for Genuine Signs

With all this being said it is not wrong at all to ask God for a

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“reasonable” sign if we are truly on the fence about an important matter. But we must be careful that in creating the sign that we are not, as some call it, “tilting the fleece.” If one day we drive by the car dealer and see a white car that we like, it would be very opportunistic to pray that very night, “God, if I see a white car in the car lot tomorrow, I’m going to take it as your will that I am to buy that car!” This would be “tilting the fleece.” Sadly, Christians very often do just that.

But there are times when I believe God can reward an honest and reasonable sign.

One time when my wife and I had bought some acreage and I was preparing to build a premium log home on the property, it seemed necessary to acquire a tractor to mow grass, clear snow, move logs and beams, and move dirt and gravel. But with our limited resources I wasn’t sure we should spend money on a tractor.

My father-in-law is a farmer and he knows all about tractors, and knew the tractor dealers in town so we decided to shop a little at the tractor showroom. Of course, they had exactly what we needed. But the price for the tractor was quite “firm” and I wasn’t sure we could handle the investment and still reach our other goals.

So, after we left the dealer to think about and consider the matter, I prayed that we make the right decision about the tractor. One of the things I prayed was, “Lord, it does seem a little much, but we probably really do need this tractor. If the dealer offers to come a little closer to what we can afford

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I'll take that as one sign that we should get this tractor."

The next day we got an unexpected call from the dealer, who was a friend of my father-in-law. Without any negotiating on any of our parts, the dealer offered to take a significant amount off the retail price of the tractor. As a result of this and other considerations as well, we bought the tractor.

As it turned out I used that tractor in a thousand ways during the next few years. I could have never completed the projects that I did without that tractor. It no doubt saved us thousands of dollars in the end, not to mention my own back. When our circumstances changed we sold the tractor (though it was hard to let go) and largely recovered our entire investment. So it was a win, win situation, as far as the tractor was concerned.

Therefore I believe there is a legitimate use of signs or providences that God has rewarded thousands if not millions of times in people's lives. We just need to make sure we are working within God's safe parameters, and that we are not making decisions based on our own wills, or on the basis of mere chance. Then we can make wise decisions and be successful in our endeavors, and can rightly hear a voice behind us saying, "Here is the way, walk ye in it."

11

Troubleshooting

Remember those frustrating computer manuals I was telling you about? The ones that never answer the questions that you are asking, or that never apply the situation you are in, or that are written in “Geek” (not “Greek!”), or “Computer Swahili?” Well, for this book to be complete we have to include the “troubleshooting” section that probably won’t be helpful at all, either. But for what its worth, let’s take a stab at it.

In the science of “hearing God’s voice” there are often things

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that “don’t compute.” Like a computer, the only message you seem to get sometimes is: “You have performed an illegal operation,” or even something like this:

“If you continue you will irreparably damage your computer files. If you don’t continue, you will lose all your data. Do you wish to continue: Yes ___? No ___?”

I wish I could always easily figure out what was going on in my spiritual life or what God might be thinking. But to be honest, there are sometimes when certain mysteries will simply remain. Not all our questions can be answered in this life, either because we are not ready for the answer, or because the answer is too complicated for us to understand anyway.

At the end of the book of Job, Job repents before God. Job repents even though the book reports earlier that in all of this experience Job did not sin. What Job repents of is of interest then.

In the context, it seems that what Job repents of is “pretending to know or understand why things happen the way they do.” Job says, “I spoke of things I didn’t understand. I repent in sackcloth and ashes.”

God doesn’t ever explain either, why things are the way they are in Job either. God does make the enormous case, however, that HE KNOWS WHAT HE IS DOING, and that he is wise enough to create weather, control mighty creatures, and build the cosmos. God essentially tells Job that after all he, and especially his friends, don’t really know

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what they are talking about.

God suggests that these really big questions cannot be adequately explained to mortal man. They are beyond us. They aren't so great that God can't handle them. He is well able to deal with them. But we must simply give trust on the basis of what we can understand about God that He is doing what is best. We must trust that all the rest that we can't understand is safely under the supervision and control of this loving, yet wise and powerful God.

I don't know why little children sometimes get run over. I don't know why one time God miraculously healed my back, and almost at the same let my brother unexpectedly bleed to death on an operating table, a brother who was more righteous than I, and who had a wife with two very young children. I don't know why a faithful brother-in-law, a powerful minister, greatly needed in our time, died from a brain tumor. Why did my mother, a true saint and worker for the Lord, die so soon? Or my cousin, Janine, or?

These things make no sense in the small context of my own little world. But in the greater context of this complicated "wheel within a wheel" intergalactic machine of God's purpose, I have to trust that God will churn out some sort of answer in the end.

There can be good reasons why some of our requests and prayers are not answered to our liking. Following are some of these reasons, perhaps:

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1. OUR PRAYER MAY NOT BE AFTER GOD'S OWN WILL.

We need to be sure that indeed we are not praying for something that God has forbidden or refuses to bless.

2. OUR PRAYER OR REQUEST IS MAYBE UNREASONABLE

I have at numerous times had people in my office who were troubled about things that even to me seemed to be unreasonable or at least unlikely for God to answer.

One time a very faithful doctor's wife confided to me that she and her husband had prayed that God would sell their house. She was upset that God would not answer this prayer. This was not unreasonable, perhaps, but what seemed to be unreasonable was that she and her husband were demanding what seemed to me to be an exorbitant price for the house, which she indicated to me was non-negotiable. I wasn't surprised that the home continued to be on the market for some time and I never knew whether it ever sold. I felt that perhaps they should have been willing to take less money for it, or perhaps God may have even been telling them not to sell the house. Does God always agree with our decisions or desires, or does he want us to agree with his?

Another family I know of were puzzled because their house had not sold. They even had designs that they wanted to go as a result of their house selling, to be missionaries. They

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wondered why God wouldn't want them to go as missionaries. I don't really know whether or not God did want them to go as missionaries, maybe he did. But he didn't pave the way in this case, or in this way, for them to go.

I did hear that not too many months later, the entire marriage and family broke apart from internal strife. Knowing what I knew as a pastor already at the time made me wonder if they were "missionary" material. But God only can be the judge of these things.

I have to think that out of all the things where God's involvement is concerned it seems like the selling of a house, or the selling of any kind of property has to be one of the most problematic areas of all. Sometimes a house will sell miraculously for the earnest follower of God's will, and sometimes they won't sell for maybe even years.

I have developed a theory on this whole thing that may or may not be sound. But it seems that sometimes we may be unreasonable to expect that God will immediately "sell our house," when we think we need it sold.

While God is "able" to do anything, I believe he abides by certain rules that respects the property and free will of others. For instance, some seem to think that its always God's will that we sell our property for a profit. But if one thinks about this, how far can this scenario always go?

In economic theory, in a closed system, a profit can only be gained through someone else's loss. A profit means that

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value is obtained beyond what the unit of exchange is really worth. Yet most expect that they should never sell a house, for instance, for the same value they bought it for.

Now while it may be good business to sell at a profit, it still is usually the case that someone else had to lose or give up something (money) for that profit to be acquired. It cannot be that everyone can all sell their house for a profit, unless the buyer is willing to make a greater sacrifice in the deal than the seller does.

To simplify, what does God do, for instance, when there are let's say, only two Christian families in the world? Each family, let's say, has a house they own, and each family needs to sell their house and move to the other's location.

Suppose that the first family names a price that is greater than the value of their home, or a price that the other family cannot afford from the property they own. Both families are praying their house will sell, and that God will help them to be able to obtain another home.

Will God favor one family's prayers over the other? How can he answer both their prayers, at least through normal circumstances? Even if one party lowered the price of their home to less than its value, the other family still may not have their prayers answered because they still might not be able to afford it.

It seems like the only way this situation can really resolve itself is for one family to take "a loss" and make a straight exchange, or for one family to extend themselves in the

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credit area (the modern scenario), while the other family ultimately exploits them in that way. In this case one family will claim that the Lord was in the deal, and the other family will be left to wonder if the Lord was in it at all, because they hoped God would find them a house in which they would get more, for less.

Now this is all fictitious and incomplete at best. But the point is no one in the market is typically willing to take a loss. Instead inflation builds, and each time a house sells it sells for more money than it did the last time, far beyond its original worth, or really its dollar value. God isn't going to normally steal from one family to reward another.

Therefore, even though God can do anything he wishes, he is a good God, and plays by the rules. It can sometimes take a while for him to find someone who is willing to take a loss, or break even, as it were.

In addition to this are the issues of taste, location, and so forth. Some people's house I know I'm certainly not interested in buying because sometimes what people do to their property is "nuts." God is not going to force someone into buying your house if it is not a desirable house, or even if it is. But maybe eventually he can lead you to someone who likes it.

It seems like our current world is one where there are say three families in the world but there are four houses available to them (One family perhaps owns another for speculation or whatever). In this scenario, not unlike our current economy, the fourth house will not likely sell, no matter how many

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prayers are offered, because no one needs the house. The sellers need to wait for a wedding to take place.

Now I may be wrong about much of this, and these illustrations don't take everything into account. All I am saying is that we can't make unreasonable demands of God and expect him to impose or override someone else's freewill in order to "sell our house" for us, or favor us at the expense of other Christians or worldlings. I have sort of adopted the wisdom that we should be very careful and get God's o.k. on what we buy, especially if God might move us somewhere else later or change our circumstances. In some cases I have almost been resigned enough about the matter to say, "I don't think God sells houses!"

But I think he does, sometimes, if we wait on his leading long enough. Sometimes he even delivers us from circumstances where we went against his revealed will and were financially or otherwise trapped.

3. OUR PRAYER IS SELFISH

Another reason God may not answer our requests in a positive fashion is that our prayer may really be selfish.

"Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts." James 4:3

I personally believe millions will be lost because of the desire for personal gratification, or because personal treasure takes too large a place in these person's lives. Israel

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repeatedly fell into apostasy, almost never in times of trial, but almost every time in times of prosperity. God is not going to enable us toward evil and eternal loss.

4. OUR PRAYER IS SHORT-SIGHTED, and NOT FOR OUR BEST GOOD

Sometimes our prayer is not answered because in our ignorance we simply don't know what is best.

The apostle Paul had a "thorn in the flesh," and he asked the Lord to remove it. It seems like a sure thing that God would want the thorn removed. But God didn't remove it, not even for Paul, and apostle. 2 Cor. 12:7-10.

Both Paul and Moses asked three times that God would remove the obstacles they wanted removed. But they weren't removed. Paul retained this thorn in the flesh, whatever it was (I believe it was partial blindness). God even told Moses not to speak to him any more on the matter of entering Canaan. But please notice that God did answer each of them, though they didn't much like the answer.

We maybe too often assume that healing or deliverance is always God's will. But God says that sometimes the trials are allowed to prove our character. God does whatever is best for our own ultimate good.

"To every sincere prayer an answer will come. It may not come just as you desire, or at the time you look for it; but it will come

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in the way and at the time that will best meet your need. The prayers you offer in loneliness, in weariness, in trial, God answers, not according to your expectations, but always for your good." *GW* 258

A rabbinic legend tells of a certain holy man, Rabbi Akiba who while traveling sought lodging in a particular village one night. But he was callously refused lodging. His only prized possessions were a donkey, a lamp, and a rooster. Forced to board outside and away from the village, he camped for the night. Mishap after mishap befell him. First, during the night his donkey either died or wandered off. The rooster also was killed. The wind even extinguished his light. He felt betrayed and abandoned by God and man.

According to the legend, that night the village was attacked by a marauding band of thieves who killed or carried away everything in the village, people and livestock.

Rabbi Akiba finally realized how fortunate he was after all. He had his life. If his donkey had been there and had brayed, if the rooster had been alive and crowed like it always did, or even if his light had stayed alight and revealed his camp, he would have been apprehended and killed and would have lost everything he owned anyway. Thus:

"In the future life the mysteries that here have annoyed and disappointed us will be made plain. We shall see that our seemingly unanswered prayers and disappointed hopes have been among **our greatest blessings**." *MH* 474

Writes the prophet:

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"When our prayers seem not be answered, we are to cling to the promise; for the time of answering will surely come, and we shall receive the blessing we need most. But to claim that prayer will always be answered in the very and for the particular thing we desire, is presumption. God is too wise to err, and too good to withhold any good thing from them that walk uprightly." SC 96

5. THE PRAYER ISN'T AT THE BEST TIME

Always, God's timing is better than ours. Sometimes our prayer is even a good prayer. But because we don't see the end from the beginning we want an immediate answer, or a certain answer. But sometimes God has something even better in mind than we do. Therefore, we must keep praying, allowing God to work out what is best. This is how I found my apartment on "Fire Lake."

6. IT'S A PRAYER THAT REQUIRES PERSISTENCE

Many prayers are abandoned before they hit pay dirt, like the miner who stopped digging six inches from the vein. We ought always to pray and not to faint. It is not wrong to persist in a prayer if we feel it is right and if we are seeing no answer. Elijah sent his servant to look for the cloud of rain seven times. We must go again seven times also.

Some people often ask, "Why doesn't God answer, just like he did in the Bible?"

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But experience reveals at least two observations relative to this question.

The first is that really God does answer and reply in many cases in equally dramatic fashion to the stories of the Bible. Not everyone was healed in the Bible. Not everyone walked with God at noonday. But sometimes they did.

Yet today sometimes the miracles that God ordains even surpass some of the biblical precedents in size and scope. People are healed, angel voices are heard, armies are delivered, the gospel is preached in many tongues, dramatic rescues occur, and lives are saved. Probably more miracles are occurring today than have occurred in all the previous history of our planet because of vast numbers of God's people that belt the globe.

But another reason why we cannot compare today with Bible times is perhaps the Bible itself. Many of the people in Bible times were illiterate. Even if they were literate, they did not have copies of God's Word available to them in the form of pages and books. They didn't have taped sermons, telecasts, and podcasts available to them on spiritual matters. There was no radio or TV to proclaim the gospel.

Therefore, for God to reveal himself to these people he spoke from Sinai, or he gave visions in the night, or he sent prophets to instruct them. But today we have God's Word

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conveniently bound together so that we can scan over it while eating at the breakfast table, or we have headsets to listen to religious presentations, and we have a plethora of other gospel materials to shed spiritual light on our lives and decisions. Our day is not exactly like the Bible, *because we have the Bible* and the Spirit of Prophecy. We are incredibly and doubly blessed because of this.

The question really isn't "Does God speak?" The question is "Do we hear him, and do we recognize his voice." I hope this simple treatise can help us see that God does indeed speak to us. Will we listen? Will we seek God when we sit down and when we rise up? Will we search for his will as we would for silver and gold?"

"Behold," Jesus says, "I stand at the door and knock. And if anyone HEAR MY VOICE, and open the door, I will come into him, and sup with him, and he with me." Rev. 3:20

God says: "You will search for me, and you will find me, when you search for me with all your heart." May this experience be the experience of every sincere child of God as he, or she, treads the heavenward pathway.

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