Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God

If you were to narrow down the essential priorities of a Kingdom leader, at the top, invariably, would be the importance of hearing God's voice. Absent hearing from God, a leader is simply asking people to line up behind his or her own personal agenda.

As a leader, in developing and sharpening your capacity to hear from God, you need look no further. Dallas Willard–whose contribution to Christendom's understanding of how to walk with God intimately–provides guidance and insight in his book Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship With God that will at once instruct, encourage, and bless.

Title: ***Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God***

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Book Description:

Being close to God means communicating with Him—telling Him what is on our hearts in prayer and hearing and understanding what he is saying to us. It is this second half of our conversation with God that is so important but that also can be so difficult. How do we hear his voice? How can we be sure that what we think we hear is not our own subconscious? What role does the Bible play? What if what God says to us is not clear? The key, says best-selling author Dallas Willard, is to focus not so much on individual actions and decisions as on building our personal relationship with our creator. In this updated classic, originally published as In Search of Guidance, the author provides a rich, spiritual insight into how we can hear God's voice clearly and develop an intimate partnership with Him in the work of His kingdom.

Ultimately, we are to move beyond the question of hearing God and into a life greater than our own—that of the kingdom of God. Our concern for discerning God's voice must be overwhelmed by and lost in our worship and adoration of him and in our delight with his creation and his provision for our whole life. Our aim in such a life is to identify all that we are and all that we do with God's purposes in creating us and our world. Thus we learn how to do all things to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31; Colossians 3:17). Learning the two-way communication between us and God will develop as a natural part of such a life.
LOCATION: 81

It is very important to remember and to always keep before your mind this fact: You are an unceasing spiritual being, created for an intimate and transforming friendship with the creative Community that is the Trinity. Learning to hear God is much more about becoming comfortable in a continuing conversation, and learning to

constantly lean on the goodness and love of God, than it is about turning God into an ATM for advice, or treating the Bible as a crystal ball. My hope is that this book will help you develop an ongoing relationship with God that will involve conversation, communion and consummation.
LOCATION: 86

Hearing God is but one dimension of a richly interactive relationship, and obtaining guidance is but one facet of hearing God.
LOCATION: 122

Generally we are in God's will whenever we are leading the kind of life he wants for us. And that leaves a lot of room for initiative on our part, which is essential: our individual initiatives are central to his will for us.
LOCATION: 132

In the pages that follow I deal with hearing God as it relates to living a whole life in the will of God: the question of who God wants us to be as well as what he wants us to do (where appropriate). What he wants us to do is very important, and we must be careful to learn how to know it and do it. But knowing what God wants us to do is never enough by itself to allow us to understand and enter the radiant life before the shining face of God that is offered to us in the grace of the gospel. Such a life is pleasing to him, one in which he can say to us, "This is my beloved child, in whom I am well pleased."
LOCATION: 165

In the most primary of senses the word of God is simply God's speaking.
LOCATION: 221

People are meant to live in an ongoing conversation with God, speaking and being spoken to.
LOCATION: 252

The biblical record always presents the relationship between God and the believer as more like a friendship or family tie than merely one person's arranging to take care of the needs of another.
LOCATION: 360

Spiritual formation into Christlikeness—true change of character—comes from living in relationship to God. LOCATION: 391

First, we need to understand that God's communications come to us in many forms. What we know about guidance and the divine-human encounter from the Bible and the lives of those who have gone before us shows us that. We should expect nothing else, for this variety is appropriate to the complexity of human personality and cultural history.
LOCATION: 438

Our failure to hear God has its deepest roots in a failure to understand, accept and grow into a conversational relationship with God, the sort of relationship suited to friends who are mature personalities in a shared enterprise, no matter how different they may be in other respects.
LOCATION: 490

God could have created a world of robots, instead of free people who love him and understand his participation in the kingdom and their work. But then there would be no conversations. There would simply be direction and conformity. That picture robs people of initiative and freedom that goes into true friendship with God—cooperative creativity. Is there subordination to God? Yes, but not forceful direction that leaves no possibility of initiative on the person's part.
LOCATION: 536

We must make it our primary goal not just to hear the voice of God, but to be mature people in a loving relationship with him.
LOCATION: 548

We must never forget that God's speaking to us is intended to develop into an intelligent, freely cooperative relationship between mature people who love each other with the richness of genuine agape love. We must therefore make it our primary goal not just to hear the voice of God, but to be mature people in a loving relationship with him. Only in this way will we hear him rightly. This is our first general guideline.
LOCATION: 553

We must think of ourselves as capable of having the same kinds of experiences as did Elijah or Paul.
LOCATION: 677

When God speaks to us, it does not prove that we are righteous or even right.
LOCATION: 799

The complete and ultimate blessing and highest good, the summum bonum of humankind, comes to those with lives absorbed in the Way of Christ—life in the presence of God.
LOCATION: 889

The primary manner of communication from God to humankind is the Word of God, or God's speaking.
LOCATION: 1070

In this life with God, his presence banishes our aloneness and makes real the meaning and full purpose of human existence. This union with God consists chiefly in a conversational relationship with God while we are consistently and deeply engaged as his friend and colaborer in the affairs of the kingdom of the heavens.
LOCATION: 1167

God's world is an arena in which we have an indispensable role to play. The issue is not simply what God wants, but also what we want and will. When we accept whatever comes we are not receiving guidance. The fact that something happens does not indicate that it is God's will.
LOCATION: 1286

When considering whether God would be with ordinary human beings in a conversational relationship, we must remember not to think of him in the likeness of any human dignitaries we know.
LOCATION: 1413

If we cannot clear our minds of such associations with greatness, we won't be able to imagine that the great God would talk to us. We will think of him as a dignitary who is too busy, too conscious of his status or too high up to communicate with us.
LOCATION: 1421

God being who he is, and now revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, we should be surprised if he does not speak to us.
LOCATION: 1429

Joyce Huggett passes on similar advice, which she received from her friend Jean Darnall: "If you believe God has told you to do something, ask him to confirm it to you three times: through his word, through circumstances, and through other people who may know nothing of the situation." This precept of three witnesses is not a law, but it is a good rule of thumb in an area where rules of thumb are badly needed.
LOCATION: 1811

What is this still, small voice? The phrase is taken from the story of Elijah…The translation might just as well read “a gentle whisper of a voice” or “a gentle whispering.” Each expression places the emphasis on the unobtrusiveness of the medium through which the message came. They are all seemingly unremarkable, inconspicuous, unassuming and perhaps not immediately noticed.
LOCATION: 1867

Far be it from me to deny that such spectacular experiences occur or that they are, sometimes, at least, given by God. But a major point of this book is that the still, small voice—or the interior or inner voice, as it is also called—is the preferred and most valuable form of individual communication for God’s purposes. God usually addresses individually those who walk with him in a mature, personal relationship using this inner voice, showing forth the reality of the kingdom of God as they go. We must therefore compare and contrast it to the other, more dramatic ways in which God encounters human beings.
LOCATION: 1916

When the voice came to little Samuel (1 Samuel 3), he didn’t know what it was or even that there was such a thing. So when you hear God’s voice, you do not automatically know it is God’s voice. Indeed, I believe it is possible for someone who regularly interacts with the voice of God not even to recognize it as something special. The Scripture teaches that the less dramatic the message, the fuller the content and the more advanced the person who is receiving the message. If you study the lives of Moses and Abraham, you will see that this is true.
LOCATION: 1923

God will not run over us. We must be open to the possibility of God’s addressing us in whatever way he chooses, or else we may walk right past a burning bush instead of saying, as Moses did, “I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up” (Exodus 3:3).
LOCATION: 1948

That brings us to the two most important ways in which God speaks to us: (1) in conjunction with the language of human beings, and (2) through the inner voice of our own thoughts. These two ways are the most suited to God’s presence in our lives as a close personal friend, a presence shared by the whole Christian community. They are also most appropriate in working out the development of our individual personalities into his likeness.
LOCATION: 2037

God’s speaking in union with the human voice and human language is the primary objective way in which God addresses us.
LOCATION: 2061

The human spirit or the “still, small voice.” The final means through which God addresses us is our own spirits—our own thoughts and feelings toward ourselves as well as toward events and people around us. This, I believe, is the primary subjective way that God addresses us. Of all the ways in which a message comes from within the experience of the person addressed (such as dreams and visions or other mental states), the form of one’s own thoughts and attendant feelings is the most common path for hearing God for those who are living in harmony with God. Of all the possible subjective routes, this mode is best suited to the redemptive purposes of God because, once again, it most engages the faculties of free, intelligent beings involved in the work of God as his colaborers and friends.
LOCATION: 2135

Knowledge and experience of hearing God teach us many things that can keep us from harm and keep us from harming others in our spiritual adventure of life in God’s kingdom. One of the most important things we can learn is the superiority of the voice—however the “voice” may come, even as the still, small voice within the

silence of our own minds—over the other types of encounters. This superiority lies in two things: the clarity of its content and the advanced spiritual condition of those who can hear and receive it.
LOCATION: 2379

I believe that the predominance of the spectacular encounter generally goes along with the less mature levels of the spiritual life. On the other hand, the absence of such spectacular events must not be taken as indicating great spiritual development; it is also consistent with utter deadness.
LOCATION: 2434

When the spectacular is sought, it is because of childishness in the personality.
LOCATION: 2444

The phrase “still, small voice” might seem to suggest something weak and marginal, but that is far from the truth. Hearing this divine but small voice is what lies at the heart of a relationship with God. One who hears God’s voice is operating from the foundation and framework of all reality, not from the fringe.
LOCATION: 2562

I cannot deal effectively here with all the issues involved in such cases, but there is one thing I can and must make clear: In a life of participation in God’s kingdom rule, we are not to make things happen, but only to be honestly willing and eager to be made able.
LOCATION: 2991

If you take just the passages studied so far and carefully examine what they say about the word of God, you will see that that word is much greater than the Bible, though inclusive of it. The Bible is the Word of God in its unique written form. But the Bible is not Jesus Christ, who is the living Word. The Bible was not born of a virgin, crucified, resurrected and elevated to the right hand of the Father.
LOCATION: 3110

Although all these means are good and helpful, however, the person who wishes to grow in grace is by far best advised to make a close and constant companion of the book—the Bible. I do not mean that it should be worshiped. Its uniquely sacred character is something that does not need to be exaggerated or even insisted on, because it is self-authenticating to any earnest and open-minded user. For just as openness to and hunger for God leads naturally to the Bible, if it is available, so the eager use of the Bible leads naturally and tangibly to the mind of God and the person of Christ.
LOCATION: 3548

This use of the Bible is not superstitious or magical, because a natural connection exists between a proper use of the Bible and its ideal result—union with Christ. The Bible expresses the mind of God, since God himself speaks to us through its pages. Thus we, in understanding the Bible, come to share his thoughts and attitudes and even come to share his life through his Word. Scripture is a communication that establishes communion and opens the way to union, all in a way that is perfectly understandable once we begin to have experience of it. LOCATION: 3556

We will be spiritually safe in our use of the Bible if we follow a simple rule: Read with a submissive attitude. Read with a readiness to surrender all you are—all your plans, opinions, possessions, positions. Study as intelligently as possible, with all available means, but never study merely to find the truth and especially not just to prove something. Subordinate your desire to find the truth to your desire to do it, to act it out!
LOCATION: 3561

You may have been told that it is good to read the Bible through every year and that you can ensure this will happen by reading so many verses per day from the Old and New Testaments. If you do this you may enjoy the

reputation of one who reads the Bible through each year, and you may congratulate yourself on it. But will you become more like Christ and more filled with the life of God? It is a proven fact that many who read the Bible in this way, as if they were taking medicine or exercising on a schedule, do not advance spiritually. It is better in one year to have ten good verses transferred into the substance of our lives than to have every word of the Bible flash before our eyes. Remember that "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:6). We read to open ourselves to the Spirit.
LOCATION: 3596

Now practice again with those great passages from Romans 8, beginning with verse 28, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose," and ending with the declaration of triumph that no matter what befalls us "we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (v. 37). Again, the general train of development is as follows: 1. information 2. longing for it to be so 3. affirmation that it must be so 4. invocation to God to make it so 5. appropriation by God's grace that it is so
LOCATION: 3628

When a word or thought comes to us—through others, the inner voice, some special experience, the Bible or circumstances—how do we know whether it is a word from God to us? What is it about it that indicates it has a divine source? We can, of course, know that the word is from God if it corresponds with the plain statement or meaning of the Bible, construed in such a way that it is consistent with soundly interpreted biblical teaching. We can all know at all times, for example, that God directs us not to worship an idol or be covetous.
LOCATION: 3680

Beyond this, however, the only answer to the question, How do we know whether this is from God? Is by experience.
LOCATION: 3685

We may mistakenly think that if God spoke to us we would automatically know who is speaking, without having to learn, but that is simply a mistake—and one of the most harmful mistakes for those trying to hear God's voice. It leaves us totally at the mercy of any stray ideas we have picked up about what God's speaking is like.
LOCATION: 3730

To confidently distinguish and recognize his voice as his voice—that ability comes only with experience.
LOCATION: 3736

God's impressions within and his word without are always corroborated by his providence around, and we should quietly wait until those three focus into one point. . . . If you do not know what you ought to do, stand still until you do. And when the time comes for action, circumstances, like glowworms, will sparkle along your path; and you will become so sure that you are right, when God's three witnesses concur, that you could not be surer though an angel beckoned you on.
LOCATION: 3747

But this much we can say: The content of a word that is truly from God will always conform to and be consistent with the truths about God's nature and kingdom that are made clear in the Bible. Any content or claim that does not conform to biblical content is not a word from God. Period! As Charles Stanley comments, "God's Voice will never tell us to engage in any activity or relationship that is inconsistent with the Holy Scriptures."
LOCATION: 3931

In order to qualify as the voice of God, a thought, perception or other experience must conform to the principles—the fundamental truths—of Scripture. It is the principles, not the incidentals, of Scripture that count here. Study of the Scriptures makes clear that certain things are fundamental, absolute, without exception. If

the Bible says something once, notice it but don't count it as a fundamental principle. If it says it twice, think about it twice. If it is repeated many times, then dwell on it and seek to understand it. What you want to believe from the Bible is its message on the whole and use it as a standard for interpreting the peripheral passages. The principles show up with stunning clarity as we become familiar with the overall content of Scripture.
LOCATION: 3943

In summary, then, what we discern when we learn to recognize God's voice in our heart is a certain weight or force, a certain spirit and a certain content in the thoughts that come in God's communications to us. These three things in combination mark the voice of God. To those well experienced in the Way of Christ, these give great confidence and great accuracy in living day-to-day as the friends of Christ and as colaborers with God in his kingdom.
LOCATION: 3996

More of God's speaking to me has come in conjunction with study and teaching of the Bible than with anything else.
LOCATION: 4040

- Read—lectio
  - Read the passage slowly, considering the invitation that reading Scripture is "encountering God himself or hearing his voice." LOCATION: 4208
- Reflect—meditatio
  - Read the passage again slowly. As you do so and for a few minutes afterward, reflect on the word or phrase that stood out to you. Why do you think these words resonated with you? Who you found yourself to be in the passage. How does it feel to be this person or object? What are you thinking about the situation? What are you thinking about God, or maybe how God interacts with people? what it would mean to be a person who is not left to wonder about the meaning of their impulses to do this or that or their feelings about this or that. LOCATION: 4231
- Respond (Pray)—oratio
  - Read the passage one last time, preparing yourself for what you want to say to God about what you think the Spirit might have said to you or what came to you. Pray however you are led to pray. You might thank God for something or ask God for something, perhaps for help in believing that our life can have the same quality of life as those in Scripture. LOCATION: 4241
- Rest (Contemplation)—contemplatio
  - Do as you are led. You may wish to wait on God—to simply be with God. You may wish to pay attention to God, pondering especially, What sort of God is interested in communicating with humans so clearly? What about him makes you want to worship him, or at least be with him? Sit in the companionship of God—the one who seeks you. LOCATION: 4246

Faith is not opposed to knowledge; faith is opposed to sight. And grace is not opposed to effort; it is opposed to earning. Commitment is not sustained by confusion but by insight. The person who is uninformed or confused will inevitably be unstable and vulnerable in action, thought and feeling.

LOCATION: 4314

His speaking most commonly occurs in conjunction with study of and reflection on the Bible, the written Word of God, wherever the Bible is available. Less commonly, though still often, it comes in conjunction with a human being who is speaking to us. But it may come in any of the other ways God chooses.
LOCATION: 4347

Those who want to live under God's guidance and who by proper teaching or God's other special provision become convinced that he will speak and perhaps is speaking to them can learn through experience the particular quality, spirit and content of God's voice. They will then distinguish and understand the voice of God; their discernment will not be infallible, but they will discern his voice as clearly and with as much accuracy as they discern the voice of any other person with whom they are on intimate terms.
LOCATION: 4352

People who understand and warmly desire to hear God's voice will want to hear it when life is uneventful just as much as when they are facing trouble or big decisions.
LOCATION: 4385

James Dobson has given some of the best practical advice I have heard on how someone who really wants the will of God and who has a basically correct understanding of it should proceed. Describing how he does it himself, he says, "I get down on my knees and say, 'Lord, I need to know what you want me to do, and I am listening. Please speak to me through my friends, books, magazines I pick up and read, and through circumstances.' " The simplicity of this should not mislead us. When we are in a proper, well-functioning relationship with God, this is exactly what we are to do. And then we are, as Dobson says, to listen. This means that we should pay a special kind of attention both to what is going on within us and to our surrounding circumstances.
LOCATION: 4417

Generally, it is much more important to cultivate the quiet, inward space of a constant listening than to always be approaching God for specific direction.
LOCATION: 4463

There are reasons other than his displeasure why a specific word may not be forthcoming to us in a particular case. One of the major other reasons is that, in general, it is God's will that we ourselves should have a great part in determining our path through life. This does not mean that he is not with us. Far from it. God both develops and, for our good, tests our character by leaving us to decide. He calls us to responsible citizenship in his kingdom by saying—in effect or in reality—as often as possible, "My will for you in this case is that you to decide on your own." God is preparing us for a life of initiative, so I know that God will be with me even when he does not tell me what to do. His presence is known in ways different from his specifying what he wants done. LOCATION: 4525

If we are living in sincere devotion to the fulfillment of God's purposes in us, we can be sure that the God who came to us in Jesus Christ will not mumble and tease and trick us regarding any specific matter he wants done. I cannot emphasize this point too much, since the tendency to think otherwise is obviously so strong and ever present.
LOCATION: 4579

In his book Decision Making and the Will of God, Garry Friesen has done a masterful job of critiquing the view that God always has one particular thing for you to do in a given case, that correct decision-making depends on your finding out what that thing is and that if you miss it, you will only be in God's permissive will at best—and a second-class citizen in the kingdom of God.

LOCATION: 4596

Human initiative is not canceled by God redeeming us; it is heightened by immersion in the flow of God's life. People with a mature vision of God and extensive experience in his ways have no need to be obsessively anxious about doing the right thing. For the most part they will simply know what is right. But their confidence is, finally, not in a word from the Lord but in the Lord who is with us.
LOCATION: 4616

We must purposefully, humbly and intelligently cultivate the ability to listen and see what is happening in our own souls and to recognize therein the movements of God.
LOCATION: 4743

When God does speak to us, we pay attention and receive it with thanks. It is a good habit to write such things down until we become so adept at the conversational relationship that we no longer need to. If he gives us an insight into truth, we meditate on it until we have thoroughly assimilated it. If the word he has given concerns action, we carry it out in a suitable manner. God does not speak to us to amuse or entertain us but to make some real difference in our lives.
LOCATION: 4752

The visible world daily bludgeons us with its things and events. They pinch and pull and hammer away at our bodies. Few people arise in the morning as hungry for God as they are for cornflakes or toast and eggs. But instead of shouting and shoving, the spiritual world whispers at us ever so gently. And it appears both at the edges and in the middle of events and things in the so-called real world of the visible.
LOCATION: 4809

Christian spirituality as practiced through the ages takes the form of this companionship with Jesus. Spiritual people are not those who engage in certain spiritual practices; they are those who draw their life from a conversational relationship with God. They do not live their lives merely in terms of the human order in the visible world; they have "a life beyond."
LOCATION: 4911