

“Are Your Players on the Same Page?”

Joel 2:28-32

Series: The Voice: Tuning Your Heart to Hear God

Week 4. Align the Languages to Hear God’s Voice

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A pastor visits a new member and makes a request. “The director of our children’s choir is pregnant. Since you led a choir in your last church would you be willing to take on the kids choir for now? Don’t worry. It’s only four children.” So the new member agrees. After all, it’s only four children. What harm can they do? Well it turns out these children are holy – holy terrors. They hide from the new director. They climb the walls. They run in four different directions. They do everything but stay still and sing. Finally, the new director snaps. She tells them to sit down facing in four different directions and stay that way. When their parents pick them up they will have to explain why they are being punished. One girl starts sobbing. Why? She’s the pastor’s daughter. The next week at choir practice only three kids show up. In just one week the new director managed to decrease her choir by 25%.

Not a very promising start for our own Darlene Stevens. She could not get those kids to sit and sing off the same page. Thank God she did not give up. That temporary choir turned into a calling from God. For the last 34 years she grew those three little voices into the Cherub Choir, the Praise Choir, the Hallelujah Chorus, four bell choirs, the Junior High Band, the X Changed band, the Women of Woodside, the Boys of Woodside, and two Celebration services plus the thousands of children who passed through her Preschool music classes. From her leadership and mentoring we witnessed the birth of the Higher Ground service and the Parkland service with their bands. For nearly three and half decades Darlene directed countless voices to sing off the same page and praise Jesus. When she is able to get all of us to blend in glorious harmony it’s enough to make the angels jealous. I can tell when we reach that sweet spot because there are tears in Darlene’s eyes. I can also tell when we don’t hit that spot because there are tears in Darlene’s eyes. Let’s face it: there are a lot of tears.

Like multiple parts of a choir, like the manifold instruments in an orchestra, God communicates with us through different voices. On this Sunday when we celebrate Darlene’s faithful and fruitful music ministry, it’s perfectly appropriate to conclude our series on Hearing God’s Voice by looking at the various ways the Lord speaks to us. There are at least seven. Why so many? Why doesn’t God simply speak audibly to our ears? Well He can and, according to some, He does. Yet the Lord loves variety and diversity. He created 914 species of birds in North America, 400,000 types of flowering plants in the world, 7.6 billion people on earth and billions upon billions of stars in the universe. So when God speaks, it’s not surprising for Him to use various ways to get His message to us. After all, God created a wide spectrum of sound from infrasonic to sonic, ultrasonic, and hypersonic. We cannot hear all of it but we feel it. We are moved by it. The Lord is not limited to just one spot on the spectrum.

Like a Master Conductor, however, these various voices must work together. They sing together in harmony. They play off the same page: The Bible. The Holy Scriptures are the first of God's seven languages. The Bible is the primary authority. It's the sheet music from which all the voices sing and play. It says in 2 Timothy

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

Scripture is the primary way God speaks to us. As Dave Outcalt demonstrated so well last week: the Bible is the Manual for your flightpath through life. Don't just scan or casually consult the Manual. Devour and digest it so when a crisis comes you will know what God wants you to do. I am delighted to know over a hundred Woodsiders accepted the Summer Psalm Challenge. Every morning when I read my two psalms it's great to know there are others in our area digesting and devouring the Bread of Life, hearing God's voice, applying His Word to their flightpath. Why not join us?

So what are the other voices in God's Choir? In the Old Testament the Lord promises He will speak in many ways through the Spirit.

And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days. I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth (Joel 2:28-30)

In this passage we see the Spirit speaking through people, prophesy, dreams, visions, and creation. In his book *Whisper* Mark Batterson lists six ways God speaks in addition to Scripture. He calls them languages and even, "love languages." The best way to learn a language is not to read a book or sit in a class. Full immersion and practice are best. The same is true of these languages. It takes time and openness to hear God speak through these. They are Desires, Doors, Dreams, People, Promptings and Pain. Now I know what you are thinking. You're starting to squirm because you fear this will be a six-point sermon. Well I will cover these quickly and, to make it up to you, I promise next week's sermon will be pointless.

As we look at these six voices there is one crucial principle to keep in mind: they must always sing off the page of Scripture. The way to test if a voice is from God is to see if it points to Jesus Christ who is revealed in the Scriptures. The Apostle John said this from the beginning:

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world. (I John 4:1-3)

Seven years ago Lisa and I snagged tickets to the Last Supper – Da Vinci’s Last Supper in Milan, Italy. It was like going backstage at a rock concert. After several airlocks, you are permitted just fifteen minutes with the painting. Leonardo used this fresco on the wall of a dining hall to make the room look deeper as though Jesus is dining with you. He employed one-point perspective to create this 3D affect. And when you stand before this masterpiece you discover all the perspective lines converge on one spot: Jesus. If any of these six voices draw you away from Jesus, if they turn the focus on you or someone else, if any lead you to sin or selfishness, that is not God speaking. It may even be the spirit of the evil one.

It’s especially crucial to keep this in mind with the first one: **Desires**. God gives you desires, feelings and emotions. He created them. In the Psalms it says,

Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart. (Psalm 37:4)
I’ve often said you should *listen* to your feelings but not be *led* by them. Why? Feelings signal something is wrong. If you feel anger, sadness, longing, depression or fear that’s a message something is troubling you. It’s good to listen to a feeling and find out why it’s there. Yet we get into deeper trouble when we are led by those feelings. If anger leads to aggression, resentment leads to revenge, longing leads to lust, depression leads to despair, fear leads to flight we will compound our problems. Desires can be deceiving. They are tainted and even twisted by sin. They have the inside track. If we allow them, feelings can control our thoughts and will.

When you give these desires to the Lord, you go in a different direction. If you feel angry, work to make things right. If you feel resentment, let go with forgiveness. If you feel depressed, seek God’s comfort. If you are gripped with fear, answer it with faith. When you give your desires over to God, you will start to hear Him speak through them.

I meet Christians who believe Jesus will only call them to do a task they dislike. They even feel guilty if they enjoy serving God. If your delight is in the Lord, the Lord will give you the desires of your heart. If your desire is to make music He may be calling you to be in the choir or band. If your desire is to teach, He may be calling you to lead a Growth Group, Discovery Kingdom or VBS. If your desire is to build, He may be directing you to Habitat or a Mission Trip. If your desire is to share your faith, pray for Him to lead you to a seeker. If you feel weary and exhausted, He’s probably telling you to take a rest. After all that was one of His Ten Commandments. Yet if your desire directs you to murder, adultery, stealing or lying – you can be sure those are not from God. We’ll be looking at the Ten Commandments in our next series “Breaking Bad: God’s Commands for a Better Life.” Learn how to break bad habits and use your desires the way God planned.

The next two are **Doors** and **Dreams**. They both appear in a passage from Acts.

Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to

Macedonia and help us.” After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. (Acts 16:6-10)

Paul and his team tried to turn left and go to Asia but the Holy Spirit closed the door. So he turned right to enter Bithynia but the Spirit shut that door. Finally they reached the coast at Troas and ran out of land. Paul was probably frustrated. He was forbidden to share the Gospel with all those souls. Yet in Troas he received his orders through a dream. God opened the door to a whole new horizon and Paul set sail for the continent of Europe.

Like you, I’ve found myself pounding against a locked door and wondering why God did not open it. At the time it seemed so right. Yet God had a different door waiting for me. There is no guarantee what’s on the other side of the open door is easy. When Paul and Silas reached Europe they wound up in jail. Yet God opened that door in a dramatic way as well. Instead of wrapping your knuckles raw on the door you want, trust God and walk through His door.

The dream of the man from Macedonia reminds us that many Bible characters received dreams from God: Abraham, Jacob, Joseph in the Old Testament, Joseph in the New Testament, Daniel, Ezekiel, Pilate’s wife, Peter, Paul, John. We know a lot more about dreams today than they did back then. Yet that doesn’t mean God can’t still speak through them. When you have a dream or vision you think is from God, the safest test is to check it against Scripture.

Next come **People and Promptings**. The most frequent way God speaks outside of Scripture is through people. In fact, God used people to write the Bible. Many of these are called prophets. The word prophet literally means to “Speak for” God. The Lord spoke to His people through the prophets often because the people were headed on a dangerous course to disaster. There are modern day prophets like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Billy Graham who call us to follow God’s ways. There are people in your life, fellow believers, whom you trust who will “speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15) to you. Listen to them. Take seriously what they say. If you are unsure if God is speaking through someone, always consider the source and check it against Scripture. If the person has a personal agenda you may want to pray about it and get the opinion of another trustworthy believer.

A prompting is an impression or a push you receive to do something. I’ve often been prompted to call, email or visit someone only to discover they are going through a crisis and need to talk. God may be prompting you to sit with a coworker at lunch and listen, strike up a friendship with someone at the gym or school, share your faith with another parent while you watch your kids play sports. I was told this week about a member of our Audio Visual Team who was not scheduled to serve and frankly was planning to, in his words, “Blow off church.” The next thing he knew he was in car driving to Woodside. When he arrived he discovered there was a serious problem in the sound booth – one he was able to correct.

The important thing about a prompting is to do it. You have no idea how many opportunities you’ve missed by dismissing a prompting. Simeon was told by the Holy Spirit he would not die until he saw the Messiah. After many decades he was quite old and ready for death. Then one day...

Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation (Luke 2:27-30).

Now imagine if the prompting came and Simeon said, “Aw, I’m just going to hang out here in the Jerusalem Starbucks.” He would have missed the Lord. A prompting made lead you to an appointment with Jesus.

Finally, and most difficult of all, **Pain**. In Psalm 69 David cries,

But as for me, afflicted and in pain—may your salvation, God, protect me. I will praise God’s name in song and glorify him with thanksgiving. (Psalm 69:29-30)

This is the voice no one wants to hear. We don’t like to admit it but most the important lessons in our lives came through failure, defeat and pain. It’s pain that drives a person to seek medical help and change their lifestyle. Pain causes the couple to seek marriage counseling. Pain makes the addict say, “I’m sick of this, I need help.” God rarely sends the pain. He does use the pain to speak to us, to guide us, to get us to depend on Him. Pain can cause us to curl up in self-pity or lash out in anger. It can imprison us in grumbling or it can be the pathway to a new perspective, a different approach, a better life.

Arthur was in pain. He felt his glory days were behind him when he hung up his college football jersey. He returned home and married Adele. They had two boys and Arthur took a job with the Department of Transportation. It was the normal American life. Then came the accident. While on the job a semi-truck hit him. Miraculously Arthur didn’t break a single bone. His brain was another matter. When he awoke from an 8 week coma he was different. Adele soon learned the slightest event sent Arthur into an uncontrollable rage. Though he never laid a hand on her, he broke and smashed all the things she held dear. Eventually the cumulative weight of his verbal, emotional and psychological abuse crushed her. Adele left.

She didn’t take their sons.

The younger boy, a third grader at the time, became the focus of his father’s uncontrolled anger. Spankings turned to full-on beatings as Arthur seemed to purge his rage by laying hands on his young son. This was quickly followed by shameful apologies from his Dad. In thinking back on those days, the boy said his father was an irredeemable monster. Abandoned by his mother, abused by his father, his only hope was to grow up and get out.

Then, as a high school freshman, his father received the diagnosis: pancreatic cancer. Through the pain of this disease, Arthur started listening for the voice of God. He began reading the Bible, listening to sermons on the radio, attending worship. Through the walls of their Greenville, Texas home, his two sons heard an incredible sound – their once monstrous father praying for them. Over the next five years the grace of God transformed Arthur from the inside out. The doctors couldn’t explain it. But, the monster was gone replaced by a man his son

describes as “the godliest man he never knew.” It took time but God also healed their fractured relationship.

Arthur passed away in 1991. Standing by his graveside, Arthur’s son heard his grandmother whisper, “I can only imagine what he’s seeing right now.” Those words spoke to him like the voice of God. They filled his thoughts until Bart Millard, Arthur’s son, finally wrote them down on a page and turned them into a song. Millions have sung off that same page. Millions grasp the hope of eternity by singing “I Can Only Imagine.” Yet it all started with an irredeemable monster who turned to listen to the Voice of God.

May turn as well to listen to His Voice.