

HEARING GOD'S VOICE

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AC 23:11 The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome."

Have you ever heard the Voice of God? I am not speaking to those who have a mental condition and hear voices, one of which, to them, is God. As a normal Christian who attends church fairly regularly, have you heard the Voice of God? Probably not—at least not verbally like people in the Bible. As you remember, after God spoke the world into existence, He spoke to Adam. He spoke to Noah. Then, later, He spoke to Abraham, and Abraham left his family, his homeland, and all his security and journeyed to a land that he had never seen. God spoke to young Samuel in the temple, calling him by name. God spoke to the great prophets of Israel causing them to preface their message by "Thus saith the Lord!"

In the New Testament, God spoke through angels that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, according to the prophecies He had told the prophets beforehand. (He always told His prophets what He would do before it happened.) God spoke when Jesus was baptized. God spoke when Jesus was on the mountain, transfigured before the disciples. God told them that they were to Hear Him, or, Listen to Him. Now why would God say this? Because while Jesus was with them, He was the Voice of God, the Word of God. ^{JN 1:1} In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning.

^{JN 1:3} Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of men. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it."

The people knew they were hearing the Voice of Authority, for He spoke as no other man had ever spoken. The demons knew that they were hearing the Voice of Authority, for they fled when Jesus spoke. Even nature knew that His was the Voice of Authority, for He spoke and the winds stopped and the waves lay silent on the sea.

Jesus died and ascended back to God's right hand and sent the Holy Spirit back to be His Word to man. To listen to the Holy Spirit is to listen to the Voice of God.

In our text today, however, Paul hears the Voice of God. God speaks to Paul the prisoner, and says to him, "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome." This was not the first time God spoke to Paul; not would it be the last time. Paul was so spiritually aware that he heard when God spoke. That is the first thing we need to know—**WE MUST ATTUNE OUR SOULS TO HEAR THE VOICE OF GOD.** From the time Saul first encountered Jesus on the Damascus Road, Paul's one question was, "Lord, what would you have me do." Paul's one desire was to do the will of God. We can learn to hear God's voice in three ways: by honest and earnest prayer; by reading the Bible prayerfully; and by our compassionate relationship in our human encounters.

Paul was a man of prayer: ^{RO 10:1} Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the

Israelites is that they may be saved.

Rom 10:12 Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.

1 Cor. 7:5 Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer.

Phi. 4: 6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

COL 4:2 Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. 3 And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. 4 Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. 5

Col 4: 12 Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.

1TI 2:8 I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing.

Paul was a man of prayer and urged all followers of Jesus to be people of prayer.

In prayer, God speaks to us, and He speaks to us as the Voice of Authority by His own Holy Spirit.

Further, God Speaks to Us Through the Bible. However, we must read the Bible prayerfully, asking the Holy Spirit to help us to understand it. When we read the Bible as a duty we risk the Bible becoming a boring task not unlike work. No, when we come to the Bible let us come to it joyfully and prayerfully, knowing that God has therein a Word for us. God desires to have His Voice heard over the print and the ink and the paper and the page. When God gives us His Word through the Word it becomes for us “sharper than a two-edged” sword. To give you a personal example, Martha and I were talking about where God wanted us to live in our retirement, and I was complaining about the problems I had in the community. I said, “Let’s see what we can find out in the Bible.” Anyway, I had been teaching about man’s fall from Eden, and I read in the Bible a passage from one of the lesser known prophets about man’s fall from Eden. Then, it became clear to me that God was saying to us, “Wherever you live there will be problems because there is no perfect place. Since the ‘fall of man’ there is no place to live without problems.” To me, in that instance, that was the Word of God. I understood that whether I live down here or up there I am going to have problems. Why? Because man is the problem. Because sin is the problem.

Again thinking about the same situation I was greatly helped when one of my sisters prayed during prayer meeting, “We thank you O God that all things work together for good to them that love the Lord and to them that are called according to His purpose.” I may not know why bad things happen, but I do know that as a Christian it will work for good for me.

God speaks to us when we read and hear His word and do it prayerfully and joyfully.

Again, God speaks to us in our compassionate relationship with fellow human beings. You remember the Christmas story of the Christ promising to visit the shoe cobbler on Christmas day. But the time passed and he was so discouraged that Christ had not visited his little shop. Then Christ reminded him that He had come three times as three destitute people. It was just that the cobbler did not recognize Him.

Then there is another story about the man who God had promised to save from the flood. When three boats came to save him, he refused them, only to be told in heaven after drowning, “I sent three boats to save you, but you refused to get into either boat.”

Whether people hear Him or not, God is speaking through our compassion toward the poor and the needy that we serve. He is saying to them, “I love you more than you can possibly understand. I see your desperate situation. Human sin has brought the human race to this place. Now, human beings are doing something about your plight, loving you because of My Love in them that works through them.” God shows His Love through our human deeds.

Look for example at Haiti. The nations have risen up to help them! Above all, the Christians of every denomination and every land have risen up to help them! Even those ten missionaries in prison, at least nine of them, in their naivete in following a blind leader, were trying to help from the motive of Love. Their actions certainly hurt, however. Still God speaks through our Love. And God speaks more articulately to humanity about His Love for them by our actions than He does by our words, however eloquent and electrifying those words may be.

Having told you about how we hear God, let us now look at what God said to Paul. First, God said to Paul in his plight, “Take Courage!” The King James translation says, “Be of good cheer, Paul...” In Greek that word is *tharseo*, and means *to be of good comfort, and to have courage*. God was not saying to Paul to be cheerful—*euthymos*; but *to be courageous, to be of good comfort*. This word of God was to Paul the prisoner. He had just returned from a third triumphant missionary journey. He goes to the temple, and pays the vows of four worshippers, as he was advised by the apostles, purifying himself with them. The Asian Jews had seen him earlier with the Greek, Trophimus, and accused him of being desecrating the Temple by bringing the Greek there, and of being a false prophet who taught others to break the law of Moses. The prophecy of Agabus had come true. Can you imagine being a prisoner, hearing the mob scream for your murder, having absolutely no control of the situation, with nothing whatever you could do? But Paul could do something—he could pray! And God intervened! “Take courage, Paul!” “Take comfort!”

Is that enough? Here we are with all our burdens. Sometimes it seems we can go no farther. We lose hope. We lose heart. If God is not going to help us, let us die. At least that is preferable to our suffering. Why should we suffer any longer? What good are we to ourselves, our family, and our world? These questions are not at all uncommon to us in our suffering.

That “take courage” was not enough. But it was followed with, “Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.” God spoke and said in effect, “**Paul, your life still has Purpose.**” In fact, the purpose of Paul’s life had been growing to the point that he was obsessed with preaching the Gospel in Rome. It is interesting to me that Jerusalem means ‘city of peace.’ Whereas, Rome, or Roma means ‘power.’ And Paul would actually find more peace in Rome, that bastion of power, though he would be beheaded there, than he had found in Jerusalem, the city of peace.

Paul’s life had purpose. As a Christian, you are on the Purpose Road. You may not know fully what that purpose is, but your life does have purpose. When your life ceases to have purpose, God will take you home. Remember that, as long as you are in the world,

you have purpose. Your chief purposes is to 'enjoy God and to glorify Him now and forever.'

And Paul's purpose is also your purposes: To be a testimony of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As long as we have a tongue we can tell others what God has done for us. As long as we have a voice we can tell others that Jesus loved them so much that He died for their sins that they might have eternal life through Him. And whenever we suffer, we can say, "I am suffering with Him, and I know that my suffering is not worthy of being compared with the glory that I shall one day see!" We may not be a witness like Paul, but we can be a witness to people that might not have listened to Paul but will listen to us. By the way, the word witness comes from the word martyr; and doubtless God was forewarning Paul that he would be a martyr for Him.

Finally, The Voice of God comes to us From One Who is Present With Us. Listen again to our text: AC 23:11 The following night **the Lord stood near Paul** and said, "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome." Did you get that? The Lord Stood Near Paul! Our courage and our comfort comes from the very Presence of Jesus Christ Himself, who promised us, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the ends of the earth."