

Chapter Four ***HEARING GOD'S VOICE***

Easy for some!

It was a strange sight that caught the eye of Moses as he shepherded his father-in-law's sheep. A bush was burning fiercely but was not being consumed! The leaves remained green, though the flames licked about them.(Ex 3:2) He had never seen anything like this wonder in all his time in Egypt as Pharaoh's son, nor in the many years since those days, in which he had lived as a shepherd in the land of Midian. He stepped a little closer to investigate.

Suddenly a voice rang out. "Moses!"

Can you imagine his surprise, especially when it appeared that the voice was coming from the interior of the burning bush! The voice continued, "Take your shoes off your feet for you are standing on holy ground!" I'm sure he was quick to obey for he was much afraid.

Thus began the long time of communion between God and Moses. Thereafter they spoke together often, as the Lord directed His servant in leading the Children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt, gave instructions for the building of the tabernacle and dictated several laws for His covenant people. Indeed, we read that they spoke 'face to face as a man speaks with his friend' (Ex 33:11). No wonder Moses' face shone!

Don't you envy Moses being able to talk with God in that way? I certainly do.

One can speculate on what it was that Moses saw, and what he heard when God spoke to him. What did God's voice sound like? Was it a deep, resonating baritone as a trained Shakespearean actor? Did it have a lilt or an accent? (Welsh maybe, like mine, seeing that He evidently enjoys visiting my country periodically, in great outpourings of revival?!!!!) What language did He speak - that of Egypt where Moses was educated or that of the Midianites where Moses had lived for the past forty years?

All we can say for certain is that it was a language that Moses understood.

Was it the voice of a man or did it sound like 'rushing waters' as Ezekiel described the voice of the Almighty? Elijah the prophet heard Him speak with a still, small voice, while Isaiah recorded that He spoke 'in my ear'.

Surely, it must be easy to walk in God's will when he speaks to you in an audible voice, just as He did to Moses and others of Old Testament days. It would be easy to walk the walk of Faith in those circumstances!

Would it?

Maybe God would then demand much more of us if we could hear His voice clearly. We would have no excuse to disobey and our obedience would not be faith. Slaves obey their masters but it is often out of fear. That is not the kind of obedience that the Lord requires.

He is looking for a people who are tuned to hear His voice in the spirit and whose very nature has become obedience.

Not an obedience due to fear but an obedience due to character. It has never been in His nature to compel or manipulate His people into doing His will or to walk according to His purposes. He has always given them the freedom to respond in love and willing obedience. The faith that pleases God is not evidenced in the obedience of fear but in the obedience of love and willingness.

Young Tommy was restless at the supper table as he wanted to go back outside to his waiting friends. "You cannot leave the table until you have finished all your meal," his mother said. Tommy gulped at his food. "And sit down on your chair while you eat," added his father. Tommy was slow to respond, so his father

repeated the instructions in a voice, a little slower and a little louder. Still Tommy slouched by his chair, his eyes straining to watch his friends out of the window, as he crammed another fork full of spaghetti into his mouth.

His father's voice grew more stern and he spoke deliberately. "I have told you to sit down when you eat, so DO SO NOW!" Tommy sat down, a sullen look on his tomato-stained face. His mouth was full so he could not speak but inside his head, a voice shouted out, "I may be sitting down on the outside, but I'm standing up on the inside!" Hardly an attitude of obedience that would please the father!

The still, small voice.

The prophet Elijah had seen God do a mighty miracle before all the prophets of Baal. He was bold in slaying all these false leaders and the 'hand of the Lord was upon him'. (1 Kings 18:46) However, when he heard that Jezebel, the wicked queen, was seeking to take his life, he fled into the desert to hide and mourn. "I've had enough, Lord" he cried. "Take away my life!" Hardly what one would expect from a 'man of faith'! First, an angel is sent to inquire why he is in this state, and then the Lord Himself speaks to Elijah - not in the great wind that tore apart the mountain, nor in the earthquake or the fire, but in a still small voice. Surely, the first three would have caused him much fear and he would have responded quickly if God had spoken. But the still, small voice is unthreatening. He is ordered to return to Damascus and to anoint his successor, Elisha. Thus, Elijah regains his zeal for the Lord, for he has heard His voice. His obedience is that of faith.

I am reminded of 'doubting Thomas' the apostle who would not believe that the Lord had risen from the dead, until he could see Him and put his fingers in the nailmarks of the wounded hands. When Jesus appeared before him, Thomas finally believed and Jesus said to him, "Thomas, because you have seen me, you have believed: blessed are they who have not seen and yet have believed."

He might well have also said, "Blessed are they who have not heard (with the ear) and yet have obeyed!" The walk and life of faith that pleases God is seen in the man or woman who, 'have not heard (with the ear) and yet have obeyed.

Should we expect to hear the Lord's voice? Of course we should. It was Jesus Himself who said that 'the sheep hear My voice'.

When the Lord wants to communicate to us, to teach us His will, to direct us in His paths, He chooses not to do so with a loud voice, but by the still, small voice, heard only by the soul in tune with Him. He wants to speak to His sheep and most of them, I am sure, want to hear His voice.

Communication is always the responsibility of the communicator if the communicatee is willing to hear. That is why a good teacher will always seek to know if his students have understood what he has tried to teach. I was a schoolteacher for eighteen years during which time I taught Physics to senior high school students. To me it was more important that my students *understood* what had been taught them, rather than that they could repeat to me all the laws, equations, etc., with little understanding of the fundamental principles involved. They might forget the equations but, once understood, they would never forget the principles. That is why I found it so difficult to accept the wide-spread use of pocket calculators in the classroom. Pupils simply plugged-in numbers to given formulae, getting the correct 'numerical' result without ever understanding what the 'result' represented nor how it was obtained.

So, is God speaking to us, His sheep? If so, why are we not hearing what He is saying?

Learning to recognise His voice

I believe He speaks to me every day but His voice is so often drowned out in the cacophony of other voices that rush through my head. I need to learn the secret of which the Desert Fathers spoke and wrote, a mystery understood by those men and women of Church history, whose lives have impressed us as being in deep communion with God; those called, often derisively, the *mystics*.

The Desert Fathers (and mothers) were the men and women of the 4th Century, a time when Christianity had become accepted by the Roman emperors and Christendom as a political, worldly system had been born. To be obedient to their understanding of the Lord's command to 'take up one's cross', they had withdrawn from the world and all its 'voices' and had sought solitude in the Egyptian desert. To them, solitude was not being alone, but being able to draw so close to God, that they would become unaware of all

other persons around them. They learned to be still, to develop an inner silence, to meditate upon Him and to hear His voice. (*An excellent book on their teachings is "Desert Spirituality" by Henry Neuwen.*)

I'm sure we do not need to withdraw into a monastic life-style but we do need to spend quality time if we would learn to recognise His voice. We do not need a great intellect that understands all theology, nor do we need a Bible College diploma or Seminary degree. He speaks, not to the intellect and mind but to the spirit, where His Spirit communicates to ours.

To hear His voice, we need:

- . a hunger, a passion for His will
- . a heart set on being obedient to whatever He wants
- . time spent in His Word
- . a quiet place for meditation
- . inner silence and solitude

"The Lord told me ..."

Nothing so disconcerting to a pastor than to have someone come to you, supposedly for counsel, who begins the conversation by saying , "The Lord told me" ... end of conversation! I usually try to ask them how the Lord spoke to them, only to discover that, in my opinion, it was no more than a thought they had, possibly originating in the emotion of some meeting or in conversation with a friend - but seldom originating in the Lord. If only we would be quicker to ask such a question whenever people say, "The Lord told me", maybe we would stop people being so flippant in use of the expression.

For four years, my wife and I had the great privilege of working on a Mercy Ship traveling between Europe and West Africa. On board were doctors, surgeons, nurses who volunteered their skills in performing life-changing operations, for hundreds of unfortunate Africans who could not afford the high costs of surgery their maladies required. Though it was a very fulfilling time, there were many days of great stress and weariness, but to those in the developed nations who received the reports of the work being done by the medical staff and the rest of the ship's crew, it must have seemed to be a very glamorous ministry. I remember so many who came to work on the ship who said that they were there because the Lord had told them to come. It always surprised me how many of them discovered, just a short time later, that it was not where they really wanted to be. Obviously the Lord had made some mistake - or they had mistaken his voice for another.

I have had others tell me that the Lord had told them to do something which was contrary to Scripture! I personally know two women who left their husbands because "the Lord told me to", even though there was no evidence of unfaithfulness or mistreatment. One husband was a believer but he had entered into a (perfectly legal) business arrangement with an unbeliever. The wife claimed that the Lord had told her to leave her husband because he was "unequally yoked" with an unbeliever! What a misuse of Scripture - and certainly not the Lord's will for any marriage!

Many believers use this expression, "The Lord told me ..." sincerely, believing they have been led by God. This may have been through a dream, the encouragement of a friend, circumstances, a verse of Scripture becoming prominent, 'coincidences' or just a growing personal inner desire. All of these are genuine ways, preferably collectively, that the Lord can lead us to walk in His will, particularly if our #1 desire is to so walk. However, it would be advisable to say "I believe the Lord would have me do this" rather than the 'spiritual' expression that "The Lord told me..." which might do lots for the ego but is often so damaging to Christian testimony.

That rare occasion - a personal testimony.

In my life, I have had a number of experiences where I knew His presence in a more-than-usual way. Let me emphasise that they are rare, not the norm. On two occasions I have heard Him speak to me in an audible voice. I do not try to explain these, they certainly are not because I am more spiritual at those times than other times. In fact both times were when I was with a heavy heart. I will tell you of one of them.

It was 1983 and I had been pastor of the small Christian and Missionary Alliance church in Sidney on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, for less than one year. They were a warm, loving congregation and we had developed a deep attachment to many of them. However, prospects for the church to grow in numbers were not good, as there was a 'freeze' on local land development and suitable buildings were scarce. In fact, we were meeting at the local headquarters of the Free Masons! I was not receiving a great salary but it was evident that soon, the church's limited expenses would exceed their even-more limited income. This small congregation were an off-shoot of the larger church in nearby Victoria, the capital city of the province, but there was now little relationship between the two, least of all any commitment by the mother church to underwrite the cost-overheads of the daughter.

It was a drizzling Sunday evening late in November. Anne had taken our three daughters to a meeting at the mother church while I decided to walk and talk with the Lord concerning the growing heaviness upon my heart. Should I return to teaching - at least part time - to augment my income and so not be a burden on the church? Should I resign and seek another position, telling the church that they could not, at this time, afford a full-time minister? Should I put out a 'fleece' to try to find God's will? My mind was full of questions but I was not receiving any answers!

My footsteps took me to the top of a local beauty spot from where one could look out over all the surrounding countryside. Bear Hill had become a favourite retreat location for us, and it was at its summit that I rested - and found my 'burning bush'. I heard an audible voice! Its words were clear and were repeated so I understood them clearly. Though my spirit gave witness that this was a Divine moment, I looked around to see if there was anyone else on the hilltop with me. There was no one else present. The Lord was speaking and His words were clear.

"You will pastor Victoria Alliance Church!"

There was no explanation how this would come about. At that time, Victoria Alliance Church had three pastors and the senior man had been there just about one year. He had his Masters degree in Theology while I had never been to seminary and had only recently been ordained. Maybe God was not speaking of the present time and His words had relevance only for the future? How would that answer my questions for the present? Perhaps He meant that I was to approach the senior pastor and suggest that the mother church took over the daughter church again, and that I be taken on as their fourth pastor? Such were the thoughts racing through my mind as I returned home.

I told Anne of my experience and we decided to be silent about this, believing that if the Lord had truly spoken, He was perfectly able to bring about His purposes without our interference. Imagine our surprise just a couple of weeks later, to hear that the senior pastor had announced his resignation from the Victoria church! We were tempted to telephone everyone at that church to tell them that we knew who was to be their next pastor, but we decided that discretion was a better choice and so remained silent. As an extra precaution, we stayed away from that church over the coming months, so we could not be tempted to manipulate their situation to bring about 'God's will' for them.

It was several months later that the District Superintendent called to invite me to pastor the Victoria Alliance Church. I immediately responded in the affirmative, causing him to remark, "That was quick!"

"Brother," I said, "I knew four months ago!"

During my seven years at Victoria C&MA church, there were many times that I was tempted to leave, but I stayed for I knew that the Lord had called me there and believed that He would call me out when it was time to go. We have no doubt that, when an invitation came in 1990 to serve on board the Mercy Ship, it was His time to move on.

Why did God speak in an audible voice? It certainly wasn't because I was more spiritual than others nor because He had just woken up to my need! Maybe, just maybe, it was because my heaviness was so real that it had brought me to the place of solitude that I needed, the place of inner emptiness and silence where I could hear Him speak. Maybe, it was just His sovereign act of speaking into my pain out of His great love.

Relating this story reminds me of the words I once heard spoken by Floyd McClung, then a notable teacher with Youth With A Mission. He was speaking on the subject of *prophecy* but his words could well apply to my circumstance in hearing the voice of God.

He said that *whenever you receive a word of prophecy, put it in the bottom drawer and lock the drawer! It was not given to you for direction, it was given to you to build up your faith. There will come a time when you will need to remember, possibly in a difficult situation, that God gave that word. You may then have confidence that He has brought you to this place - and most surely is able to bring you through.*

I believe these to be very wise words, much needed in these days of multiple personal prophecies made from public pulpits. There are so many believers very confused by words of knowledge and prophecy that have been made over them, with little evidence of their fulfillment and little accountability by their proponents. A charismatic gift really needed today is that of *discernment*.

My trust in the Lord is not built on these very rare experiences when I heard His audible voice; it is built upon the confidence that He is leading me every day as I hold on to his hand. I do not have to hear His voice audibly but it is essential that my spirit is in tune with His so that He can lead me.

Corporate prayer.

One of the greatest blessings I have received is in the area of corporate prayer. When I was a young believer, I found most prayer meetings rather boring as there was much repetitive praying and little evident answering. Things changed when the Lord began to do a wonderful work among the youth of our church. These young men and women began to pray for one another in a remarkable way as it became evident they were hearing the inner prompting of the Lord in the things they should pray for. I began to realise the power in corporate prayer when those praying are collectively hearing the Shepherd's voice.

I was leading a Missions Bridge School, in which our goal was to disciple eager believers and to give them a missions 'experience' in a developing or third-world nation. One evening our topic was *corporate prayer* so I taught the twelve students a practice I had learned in my first church. We quietened our hearts in a silent prayer and then I read a meditative psalm. The students were then instructed to meditate in silence for the next twenty minutes, using the psalm as a basis for their meditation. On completion of the twenty minutes - a very long time for most of us unaccustomed to such practice, I asked each person in turn, to tell us of their thoughts. They were to describe any pictures, relate any stories, quote any scriptures they had received, without trying to make any interpretation of their thoughts. As each told of their thoughts, I began to look for a pattern. My wife, Anne was the last to speak. She is not given to charismatic experiences but that evening she spoke of seeing a vision of a white ship sailing on black waters off the coast of Victoria. I had also seen a black cloud lifting over the city revealing a white ship on its waters!

I summed up their thoughts with words like this: "It seems that we have four themes running through our meditations. Several of you have spoken of our governments, both federal and provincial, our native peoples and this ship. I wonder how we are to pray."

That evening two dear friends had unexpectedly come to visit Anne and myself and were even now sitting at the side of the classroom. Robin and Anne Jones lived up-island but were spending the evening in Victoria, taking in this Mission Bridge class, though not as students. Anne spoke up. "Gareth, please forgive me for interfering, but I think Robin has something very interesting to share."

I invited Robin to speak so he told us their reason for being in Victoria that evening. "At midnight, I shall be at Victoria airport with two local (provincial) politicians, greeting two federal politicians who are coming to discuss the purchase of a ship. This is to be used to develop a ministry to native peoples who are subject to the courts. Rather than committing first-time offenders to prison, we wish to begin a Christian ministry of taking them to sea for a period of three weeks, training them in seamanship skills and teaching them Christian principles. This will be jointly funded by the provincial and federal governments."

We had heard from God! He had revealed His heart to us and we knew how to pray. That Mission Bridge class prayed that ministry into being for He had given us faith appropriate to the need.

