

LISTENING TO GOD

EXPERIENCE A DEEPER RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD BY LEARNING TO HEAR HIS VOICE

Lesson 4 – How God Gets Our Attention

When we walk in the Spirit, alert to God, we hear what He is saying to us as a natural part of our spiritual walk. This is the Christian life, living keenly responsive to the voice of God in whatever fashion He may choose to speak to us. We can have our attention focused on a person, a chore, or an idea, but at the same time we are so tuned to God's voice that if He speaks to us, we immediately turn our attention to Him.

Unfortunately, there are also times when we choose to do things our own way. As a result, we head in a direction that will bring us to disaster or disappointment. God is speaking, but we aren't listening. We aren't tuned in to Him.

In these times God often uses unusual means to get our attention. Prominent among them are these four means:

A restless spirit

An unsolicited word from another person

Unusual circumstances—both bad and good

Unanswered prayers

When we look back at our lives, we nearly always can find times in which God got our attention through one of these methods. His prodding may have been profound or gentle. Regardless of the intensity of His wake-up call, we awoke! And once awake, we were more than willing to hear.

As we begin this lesson, we need to be aware that God uses these methods to get our attention, but they don't necessarily have a meaning in and of themselves. In other words, we should not conclude that because we have a restless spirit, we are on the right track or the wrong track. I have met people who have concluded that if they have a certain amount of nervous energy about something, it must be right. I have also met people who automatically have decided that, if they feel agitated in spirit, they are sinning. A restless spirit is an attention-getter. The message that follows is what is important! Certainly, our conscience may prick us about a matter causing us to feel upset in our spirits, but the upset feeling is not the message. The conscience is based upon our understanding of right and wrong, and that understanding is rightly based upon the truth found in the Bible.

Sometimes the Lord will prompt a person to say something to us that is exactly what we need to hear. The other person may not realize that he is being used by God in this way, or he may be speaking to a group and have no idea that he is speaking directly to us. The message, however, hits us right between the eyes. It gets our attention.

Unusual circumstances must be treated like a restless spirit. Great blessings are not an automatic message that God is pleased with you. The message that follows from such an outpouring in your life may not be that God is pleased; it may be that God wants you to do something very specific with the blessings. A tragedy is not God's curse on your life. Rather, you should perceive it as your opportunity to come before God to hear what He has to say to you in the midst of your need.

In the matter of prayer, sometimes we are so eager to hear the answer we want that we fail to hear God's answer. We perceive in these cases that our prayer has gone unanswered. Our perception is not accurate, and it can lead us to question further, "Why am I not hearing from You, God?" Such questioning, done in an honest and soul-searching manner, can lead us to the position where we do hear God's voice.

Restlessness of Spirit

The sixth chapter of Esther has an excellent example of God using a restless spirit to get a person's attention. King Ahasuerus had been duped by his prime minister, Haman. Haman hated all Jews, especially Queen Esther's relative, Mordecai. He tricked the king into signing an edict for the annihilation of the Jews. After he signed the proclamation, the king could not sleep. He had a restless spirit to the point that he "commanded [someone] to bring the book of the records of the chronicles; and they were read before the king" (Est. 6:1). The king discovered during that sleepless night that Mordecai had saved his life earlier by reporting an assassination plot. Instead of the Jews being killed, Mordecai was honored and Haman faced the gallows.

In my life God frequently uses a persistent restlessness to direct me. When I look back over my life I can see clearly that every time God moved me from one place to another He caused me to feel restless for several months beforehand. That restlessness drove me to seek God so that, when the time came, I was ready to hear Him.

A restless spirit is not a case of nerves. It's much deeper than that. This type of restlessness originates in the deepest aspect of a person's being as part anticipation, part uneasiness. It persists over time. When you have that feeling, the best thing for you to do is to stop and ask the Lord what He is trying to say. Spend even more time in the Word and in prayer. Don't attempt to outrun this feeling or to throw yourself into some activity just to keep busy and to keep your mind occupied. Do just the opposite. Set aside a block of time—perhaps a weekend or even a week or two—to quiet yourself before the Lord so that you can hear from Him clearly.

A Word from Others

I don't know anybody who enjoys hearing a word of admonition. We may say that we appreciate words of correction or warning, but we usually feel uncomfortable when they come. We don't like to hear about sin or its consequences, especially if the person is talking about our sin.

King David was in such a position when the prophet Nathan confronted him about his sin with Bathsheba and his subsequent sin against Uriah. After committing these sins, David apparently continued his reign without any visible evidence of a guilty conscience. David desperately needed to hear what Nathan said to him, but it wasn't a pleasant experience for him.

Read 2 Samuel 12:1-12

Not all messages from others are negative. Sometimes we lightly dismiss compliments and words of appreciation or approval. The words of blessing may also be God's way of getting our attention off our pity party to see our true worth in His eyes. The person who cannot receive heartfelt thanks or affirming words often needs such positive edification. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the person who cannot take criticism or reproof is destined for failure. That message is repeated often in the book of Proverbs.

In either case you must be extremely careful that others do not lead you astray with their words. People can use flattery, veiled threats, or even Scriptures to get you to fulfill their desires or do their bidding, all in the name of God. When someone comes to you with a message from God, take a close look at both the message and the messenger. Carefully weigh what the person says. And then go to God's Word and ask the Lord to speak to you directly. Count the praise or admonition of others only as an attention-getter that causes you to seek God.

Sometimes the message that comes to you is one of information. You may be puzzled, frustrated, or worried by what you hear. At these times turn to God. See what He desires to say to you about the situation, about whether you are to act, and if so, in what way and when. That's what Nehemiah did when Hanani, one of his

brethren, came from Judah with a report about the distress of the people in Jerusalem and about the broken-down state of Jerusalem's walls and gates (Neh. 1:1-4).

Nehemiah 1:1-4 "The words of Nehemiah son of Hakaliah: In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem. They said to me, Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire. When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven."

The word you receive from someone may represent a need in God's kingdom, the plight of fellow believers, or a specific plea for help in extending the gospel. If your heart is touched by the matter or if you can't seem to shake the message you have heard, take the matter before the Lord to hear what He has to say to you about ways in which you should become involved.

Read 2 Chronicles 10.

What were the short-term and long-term consequences of Rehoboam's failure to heed the elders of Israel?

Circumstances

Circumstances can set us up to open our hearts to God and turn our attention fully toward Him. I have seen numerous examples in my ministry of illness, accidents, bankruptcies, divorces, and other times of trouble bringing people to their knees and to a total reliance on Christ, sometimes for the first time in their lives, sometimes for a renewal of surrender and commitment. These situations are not necessarily caused by God. They may not be the result of our own error or sin. But they are circumstances in which we question life and seek answers, and very often that search for meaning turns us toward our heavenly Father and gives Him a greater opportunity to speak to us.

When trouble strikes, your first response should never be, "Why, God?" or "Why me, God?" There is no good answer to such questions in most cases. Your first response should be, "What do You have to say to me in the midst of this, God?"

Unusual circumstances can also be in the form of blessings. This is certainly the type of attention-getting method I enjoy most! The blessings may be spiritual or financial, or they may involve your home or vocation. God just seems to pile on the blessings. If you are not careful, you may assume that you have a right to use these blessings in any way you desire. Instead, you need to ask the Lord why He is blessing you so abundantly. He may very well have a special plan for you to use these blessings for the furtherance of His kingdom, and if you fail to be sensitive to God's plan, you can miss an even greater blessing ahead.

Read 1 Kings 19

What unusual circumstances did the Lord use to get Elijah's attention? What purpose did He have in doing so?

Unanswered Prayer

When all of our prayers seem to be answered, we may become complacent and just cruise through life without paying close attention to what God desires to say to us. Then we encounter a particularly urgent need, and the heavens seem to be made of brass. The silence is uncomfortable to us. We feel a growing desperation to hear

from God. At that time God has our full attention, to be sure! There are legitimate reasons in the Scriptures why some requests are not granted:

A person may be asking for the wrong reasons (James 4:3).

A person may be in disobedience or rebellion (1 John 3:22).

A person may be asking for something that is outside the will of God (1 John 5:14).

A person may be in a state of unforgiveness with another person (Matt. 6:14–15).

At times God refuses to answer our prayers because He knows that if He answers them, we will stray farther off base. For example, an answered prayer may cause us to respond with personal pride and error in thinking that our prayers alone led to a miracle, a healing, a blessing, or a person's salvation.

We need to keep in mind, of course, that what we call an unanswered prayer may be a no, a not now, or a not until answer. Each is a valid answer, although it may not be the answer we desire. The Lord denied Paul's request to remove his thorn of the flesh, and He gave instead a grace sufficient to help Paul face and overcome his problem (2 Cor. 12:7–9). Not all prayer is answered with a yes. Sometimes no is the best answer for our situation.

Read 2 Corinthians 12:2–10

What role does suffering play in our lives?

No Such Thing as an Accident

There is no such thing as an accident with God. He has a plan and purpose for our lives, and even when bad things happen to us, we can trust that God is continuing to work for our benefit. Our role is not to flail our arms against a tragedy but to lift our arms to God so that He might reach down and lift us up, hold us close, and speak His words to us.

God may use one method to get your attention in one circumstance and a different method at another time. Or He may consistently use one method to get your attention to the point that whenever you feel restless or face unusual circumstances, you automatically say, "I wonder what God wants to say to me?" Don't try to second-guess God, however. Recognize that He is a creative God and that He uses many methods to reach us and guide us.

Recognize, too, that God doesn't use the same methods for all people in like circumstances. He knows exactly how to reach each person. We err in prayer when we attempt to dictate to God how He should get the attention of another person. God cares enough to employ various methods to cause us to stop and listen to what He is saying. He does not let us walk into an open manhole, spiritually speaking, without giving us clearly discernible danger signs. He never quits trying to reach us so that He can guide us into His wonderful plans and purposes for our lives.

Romans 8:28 "And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them."

Who are "the called according to His purpose"?

Exactly what things does Paul say will work together for good in a Christian's life?

God uses all things—good and bad—to draw us closer to Him.