

Led by God

The comedian Lilly Tomlin famously said, *“Why is it that when we talk to God we’re said to be praying, but when God talks to us we’re schizophrenic?”* Of course, we know it’s a joke and we laugh at it, but for many of us, it’s an *uncomfortable* laugh, because we see passages in Scripture like we’re going to read today and we wonder why God doesn’t speak today the same way he did back then.

For some of you, it’s just a bit of a curiosity. It might be that you want to take the next step in your faith and move from a strictly intellectual or practical faith to a life where you have an ongoing conversation with God day to day. But for some of you, this is a much more pressing question. You might not have come today thinking, “I hope he teaches us about how to hear God speak,” but you need something. Anything! You feel yourself floundering and to hear something from God would be huge for you! Well, I hope that today you’ll find what you’re looking for or at least you’ll be on the path to it.

Over the last few weeks, we’ve been talking about evangelism and that’s what I intended to talk about today as well, but as I started studying the passage for today, it took me where I didn’t expect to go.

The passage is in Acts, chapter 8. (p. 751) As you’re turning there, let me give you some background. The book of Acts tells us about the expansion of Christianity in the first

40 years after Jesus. In Acts 1, Jesus tells his followers they will be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth. The book of Acts is structured around those expanding circles. Jerusalem was the city where they began. Judea was the region where Jerusalem was situated. Samaria was just north of Judea, where the cousins of the Jews, the Samaritans lived. And the ends of the earth is the rest of the world.

The first seven chapters of Acts are set in Jerusalem. The believers formed a pretty happening church in Jerusalem. It describes the early church like this, **“Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”** They were a big happy family and they were even a growing family, but they weren’t doing exactly what Jesus told them to do.

But in chapter 8, something happened that motivated them to start to go out—persecution broke out. And it says that, **“everyone except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.”** (vs. 1) Among those who were scattered was a man named Philip. Now, you might remember that one of Jesus’ 12 apostles was named Philip. But the Philip in this story isn’t one of Jesus’ 12 because it says all the Apostles stayed in Jerusalem. This Philip was a member of the church in

Jerusalem—probably the one who was named one of the seven deacons that was chosen in Acts 6.

In any case, Philip went to Samaria, which was a place the Jews didn't like to go since there was a lot of animosity between the Jews and Samaritans. That's why when Jesus was teaching people what it means to love your neighbor, he told the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus was challenging them because the Jews considered "Good Samaritan" to be an oxymoron. But that's where Philip went and was having success healing people and telling them about Jesus. And that's when God called Philip to the ends of the earth. We'll pick up the story in Acts 8:26.

²⁶Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." ²⁷So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means "queen of the Ethiopians"). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, ²⁸and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. ²⁹The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it."

³⁰Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked.

³¹"How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So, he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

³²This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading: “He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. ³³In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.”

³⁴The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” ³⁵Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

³⁶As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?” ³⁸And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. ³⁹When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.”

When I approached this passage, my intent was to use it to describe a method of sharing the gospel. But the truth is—and maybe this was God speaking to me, but I got hung up on something that I suspect many of you probably get hung up on, too.

You see, as we read this passage, we get the sense that Philip and God are *partners* in ministry. God *speaks* to Philip. Philip seems to hear God clearly, does what God says and everything turns out great. But it doesn’t work like that for most people.

Most of us go through life, doing their thing and making decisions without giving much thought to God's leading. But throughout the book of Acts, including this story, God actively guides people. Most of us, if we're honest, this *bothers* us because it's not our *experience*. And because this kind of thing doesn't happen to us, we're skeptical as to whether it's even possible. Or maybe that kind of life is only for special holy people.

But Philip was just a regular guy. Not only that, but we have too many stories of God speaking to people to discount. I'm sure, many right here in this room. Next week I'll share a few of mine. You see, I believe the question isn't *if* God speaks, but "*How* does God speak? And how do we *hear* him when he does?" Those are the questions I want to explore this week and next because we can't do just to them in one week.

Now, before we get into the first two ways God speaks, let me start by saying that we can only really know by *experiencing* it. I can tell you all the theory and what the Bible says or what *other* people have experienced. But this is something you can't *really* know until you cultivate a life of being led by the Spirit.

You can learn by *studying*, but you only know by *doing*. I can talk about hearing God, but if you really want to know, you have to practice. And I'll show you some ways you can practice at the end here.

Next week, we'll talk more about the "supernatural" ways—God speaking directly to us through impressions or an almost audible voice or through circumstances—all the

ones you really want to know about. This week, we'll start with the *safer* ways—hearing God through Scripture and other people.

Let's start with *Scripture*. We believe God speaks to us through Scripture. This is the way every good Protestant should begin, right? Protestants love Scripture. We even love scriptures about Scripture. Like 2 Timothy 3:16-17, **“¹⁶All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”** God-breathed means breathed out by the Holy Spirit. God reveals himself to us in Scripture.

I like to read. I don't read much fiction. I read non-fiction. Theology books, books about the Church, social commentary. I really like C.S. Lewis. I've learned a lot from all these and I'm grateful for them. But they don't carry near the weight of the Bible for us because we don't believe they are God-breathed in the way Scripture is. They're helpful, especially when they help us understand Scripture, but we believe the Holy Spirit speaks through Scripture in ways that other books don't. It's our authority.

Even if God didn't speak any other way, the Christian conviction is that Scripture would be enough for you to know who God is and who we're supposed to be and how we're supposed to live. Scripture is the anchor for the other ways God speaks to us.

The reason we need that anchor because the three most dangerous words in the English language are, “God told me!” There are many examples, even in modern history

who believe God has said some wacky and even manipulative and harmful things. Cult leaders who claimed to hear from God have led masses of people to their deaths because of those three words. We need the anchor of Scripture.

Notice that this passage actually shows God speaking through Scripture. When Philip met the Ethiopian, he was riding in his chariot reading Scripture—the scroll of Isaiah. Even though the Ethiopian wasn't Jewish, it says that he had just gone up to Jerusalem to worship. From that we can discern that he was what's known as a "God-fearer," someone who came to believe in the God of the Israel—but didn't want to fully commit to Judaism. In fact, he probably *couldn't* fully convert because eunuchs weren't allowed to make sacrifices in the Temple.

Philip found the Ethiopian reading a prophecy that he didn't *know* was about Jesus. But because Philip was attentive to God, he was able to explain the passage to him and it changed his life. He knew there was a spark of faith there, but he didn't fully know God until he understood Scripture.

Scripture is the most common and often the most reliable way God speaks to us. It's the starting place for Christians. The question is, "How do we listen to God in Scripture?"

Well, *first* we have to approach it with *reverence* as God's Word to us and be ready to submit ourselves to what it says. When we hold it in reverence, we acknowledge its authority over us.

When you read, start with a prayer asking God to speak to you.

Then *take your time*. Linger a while. Read it over a few times. You might not be convicted or inspired every time you crack open the Bible, but God does speak to us through Scripture. So, don't just plow through your Bible-in-a-year plan. Read slowly and listen for God to bring out what he wants you to see. //

But also remember that God also speaks *through other people*—especially, but not limited to, people in the Church. That could be a pastor in a sermon for instance. Once in a while, someone says to me, “I feel like you're speaking right to me.” And I tell them, “*That's because your wife called me and told me about you!*” No, I haven't read your mail. That's the Holy Spirit taking words that I prepare during the week and heightens your awareness of them. It's not me, it's the Holy Spirit.

But God doesn't just speak through pastors. God even speaks through unlikely sources—even people we don't *want* to learn from. And oftentimes God speaks to us through people who don't even know that's what's happening.

In the story in Acts 8, it wasn't just Scripture that spoke to the Ethiopian. A person, Philip, came along and explained it to him. So, there's an intersection where God speaks through the *combination* of *Scripture* and *a person*.

That's why opportunities like small groups are so important if we do them well. Sometimes there are things we need to hear, but we'll never hear them if we don't hear the words come out of someone else's mouth. Those words can be encouraging, life-giving, convicting, inspiring or challenging. They can come from someone explaining Scripture or just sharing honestly with us about their life.

During the last focus season, one of the best exercises we did was when we had to ask other people what they thought our strongest and weakest character traits are. I always thought I was pretty sensitive and gentle. But when I asked my friend about my weak traits, he said I can be too blunt—basically that I gentleness isn't my strong suit.

Sometimes, others see something in us that we don't see in ourselves. I knew one of the guys that was in my youth group years ago was called to be in ministry and I would tell him quite often. For a long time, he didn't see it. But eventually, he did hear and obey that call and he's a *great* pastor.

Sometimes God will take just a word of encouragement or a little nudge from someone and magnify it to give us guidance. Sometimes we're too dull to see it ourselves, so God has to use someone else.

So, how do we hear from God through other people? Well, I don't know if there's any magic trick to it, but like any other way of hearing from God, *we have to be open* to the possibility. If someone says something that really stands out and sticks with you. Take the time and pay attention because God might be trying to say something. Sometimes that takes humility because there are people you don't want to learn from. Who are they to tell you? Sometimes God will speak through unlikely sources and if you're not open to them, you might be closing yourself off from something God wants to tell you.

New Testament scholar, Scot McKnight reminds us that at Pentecost in Acts 2, the Holy Spirit created the Church. He says, *"Too many Christians believe in their hearts that they don't need the church—that they can follow Jesus on their own...One cannot be filled with the Spirit and reject the church."* That's a provocative statement. But I agree.

And what that means is that, on the flipside, you never know what the Holy Spirit might say through you. So, if there's a thought *about* someone or *for* someone that you just keeps coming to mind, share it with them because if you hold it in, you might deprive someone of a word from God.

Let me end with this: The key to hearing God and knowing God's voice, however he speaks is to *respond*. If God is convicting you or asking you to change something, do what he says. James 1:22-25 says, **"²²Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. ²³Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it**

says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror ²⁴and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. ²⁵But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.”

I believe there are two main reasons we don’t experience God speaking. The first is that we don’t *expect* it, so we don’t *listen*. And the second is that when he does speak, we *don’t do what he says*. When someone tells me they never hear God speak, I ask, “*How committed are you to listening? And when you do listen, how committed are you to obeying?*” That’s what makes all the difference.

When Sam Snyder preached a couple weeks ago, he reminded us of a concept we introduced a few years ago called the Learning Circle or Kairos Circle [Kairos circle]. The purpose of the Kairos Circle is to help us cultivate the awareness that God does speak regularly and to give us tools to grow.

The X at the top of the circle is a moment where you sense God speaks. It might be a circumstance that gets your attention. You might be convicted of something—sin or a bad interaction when you’re reading Scripture or talking to your spouse. You might feel a gentle nudge to do something—like give someone money or talk to a person on the bus.

If you’re cultivating a life where you’re trying to listen to God, there’s an opportunity to learn and an opportunity to grow. When you notice it and just think,

“Hmmm. I wonder if God might be speaking,” and leave it at that, you’ll be stuck where you are. But if you take the time to listen, make a plan and obey, you’ll grow from it by learning to discern the voice of God and your character will grow.

So, here’s what I want you to do this week. Do it as an experiment. Set your phone or your watch to beep regularly. I’m talking every hour. When it beeps, simply remember that God is there. Whatever you’re doing at the time, do it as though God were right there with you.

The purpose of this experiment is to interrupt our habit of ignoring God most of the day. You’re trying to develop a habit of including God in on all your thoughts, whether they’re pure or sinful, all your decisions, all your lustful looks, all your victories, all your judgmental pronouncements, all your stresses, all your celebrations, talking it over with Him.

Hebrews 1:1-2

“¹In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, ²but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe.”