

Learning to Hear God's Voice

3

The Voice of the Shepherd

We saw in the last lesson that the New Covenant is based upon a revolutionary concept, as described in **Jeremiah 31:34**:

“No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, “Know the Lord,” because they will *all* know me, from the least of them to the greatest,’ declares the Lord.”

A God Who Guides

A People of the Way

The Voice of the Shepherd

Principles of Guidance

Toward Maturity

Jeremiah is describing a knowledge of God that is not limited to the privileged few, but that is enjoyed by all. Every single person in this New Covenant, he says, will have a personal and intimate knowledge of God.

It is only in the light of this prophetic insight from Jeremiah that the words of Jesus in **John 10** come into sharp focus. In **John 10:14**, Jesus announced:

“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father...”

Take a moment to mediate on these words. Do you realize what Jesus is saying? He is describing a quality of relationship between him and you that is likened to the intimate bond between a shepherd and his sheep. He not only says, “I know my sheep,” but he also says, “and my sheep know me.”

Let’s examine this reciprocal relationship of knowledge more closely, for in this mutual knowing lies the most profound understanding of God’s guidance.

The Lord knows you

Jesus’ first declaration is: “I *know* my sheep.” According to Adam Clarke this expression has the meaning...

“I know their hearts, their wishes, their purposes, their circumstances; and I approve of them; for in this sense the word to know is often taken in the Scriptures.”¹

Albert Barnes amplifies on this:

“The word ‘know’ here is used in the sense of affectionate regard or love. It implies such a knowledge of their wants, their dangers, and their characters, as to result in a deep interest in their welfare.”²

As we can see, the fact that the Lord Jesus “knows” you has far-reaching implications in our study of guidance. For he doesn’t just know *about* you (the circumstances of your life). He *knows* you personally (your desires, your fears and your needs). It is the “Lord who knows you” who is your guide.

You know the Lord

But this is not a one-way knowledge. You are also a partner in this mutual knowing. In your walk with God, the Lord’s desire is that you may know him intimately. In **1 John 5:20**, John writes:

“We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, *so that we may know him who is true.*”

This is God’s general will for your life. God’s plan is for you eventually to know him as fully as he knows you (see **1 Corinthians 13:12**).

And so we see that the nature of divine guidance lies within a relationship – a relationship between the *God who knows you* and *you who know God*.

Do Not Be Like the Mule

Read Psalm 32:8

In this verse, the Lord gives a wonderful promise:

“I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you.”

Now you can’t get a better “guidance promise” than that! It’s the sort of verse that you can jot down in your journal, or stick to the door of your refrigerator. Yet most people stop at **verse 8**, not realizing that **verse 9** goes on set conditions upon **verse 8**. So let’s read on...

Read Psalm 32:9

“Do not be like the horse or the mule,” says the Lord. These two animals are domesticated, yet need a bit and bridle in order to guide them. They have no understanding of their master’s will, save through the mechanistic control of the master’s reins. And the Lord warns you, “Do not be like them!”

So what is God after? What condition does he actually set in **Psalm 32:9** in order to activate the promise of **Psalm 32:8**? You will find the condition in the latter part of the **Psalm 32:9**, when God instructs us not to be like the mule who, without a bit and bridle, “will not *come* to you.” So what is the condition of **Psalm 32:9**? Very simple. Come to the Lord! Be ready to obey and yield to this guidance.

Be prepared to correct those areas in your life that come under the spotlight of his Word, to realign your life voluntarily to the guidance he brings.

Verse 8 cannot be read independently of **verse 9**. The first verse gives the promise, and the second verse sets the conditions, making guidance a *conditional* promise. This conditional promise involves two parts:

- ☞ **God's part** - He promises to instruct, teach, counsel and watch over you.
- ☞ **Your part** - You must come to God, yield to him, and obey his guidance.

God does not want to control your life by bit and bridle. He wants you to respond to his voice. And so God uses another animal to describe your relationship with him. Rather than being like a *mule*, he encourages you to be like a *sheep*.

The Shepherd and the Sheep

Read John 10:2-5

In this passage we find the distinctive relationship between you and Christ being described as that between sheep and shepherd. Jesus makes four very clear points in this passage:

- ☞ The sheep listen to the shepherd's voice.
- ☞ The shepherd guides his sheep individually (by name), not just as a flock.
- ☞ The shepherd leads by going out ahead of them and sheep respond by following him.
- ☞ The sheep follow the shepherd because they know his voice.

Albert Barnes tells us:

“It was customary, and is still, we are told by travelers, for shepherds to give particular names to their sheep, by which they soon learned to regard the voice of the shepherd.”³

Far from being a distant, bland relationship, the shepherd-sheep bond is intimate and individual. The shepherd knows each sheep's unique characteristics – its name, its appearance, its quirks and its needs. And this is exactly the type of relationship that Jesus says exists between him and you.

Read again John 10:14

We've already seen how the Lord here is describing a relationship where “I know my sheep,” and “my sheep know me.” But Jesus doesn't leave it there. He goes on to liken this mutual knowledge to exactly the same kind of mutual knowledge experienced between the Father and the Son. He declares that he knows you “just as the Father knows me,” and that you can know him “just as I know the Father.”

If that is not enough to knock you off your seat, what is? Do you fully comprehend the quality of relationship that you have entered into with the Lord Jesus? As you begin to grasp the depth of communication that has been opened up to you, this will impact your day to day walk with God. It cannot help but do so!

It is not just the *fact* that the Lord knows you and you know the Lord that is so startling. It is the *quality* and *depth* of this mutual knowledge. Jesus says that he knows you “just as the Father knows me” and that you are to know him “just as I know the Father.”

Just as the Father knows me

How well does the Father know the Son? The answer? Completely. Intimately. In **Luke 10:22**, Jesus says:

“...No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and *no one knows who the Father is except the Son* and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”

And Jesus knows his sheep with the same quality and depth of knowledge.

Just as I know the Father

Read John 17:25

How well does the Son know the Father? The answer? Completely. Intimately. **John 1:18** declares:

“No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.”

And we have been called into a relationship with Jesus in which we know him just as he knows his Father. Completely and intimately.

Read John 10:38

Once again, Jesus describes his relationship with his Father in the most intimate of terms. He states that his purpose in performing miracles was so that “you may know and understand that *the Father is in me, and I in the Father.*” In **John 15:4**, Jesus extends the same intimate relationship that he enjoys with his Father to you! As the *King James Version* phrases it:

“Abide in me, and I in you.”

That word “abide” describes an *organic* unity with Christ – you are inseparable from him and he is inseparable from you. And when Jesus calls for you to “abide” in him, he is not asking you to *attain* to this union. He is telling you to *remain* in this union. This also describes the relationship between the sheep and its shepherd. The sheep can do nothing to *attain* to a relationship with the shepherd. They are simply to *remain* in that relationship.

Your Master’s Voice

In the days when gramophone records were being sold, at the turn of the last century, RCA had a logo which represented its high fidelity in sound recording. A little dog is sitting on a table, next to a gramophone player, his head cocked somewhat puzzled. For from the recorder, it recognizes the sound of his master’s voice.

Jesus wants you to hear and recognize his voice in the same way. His express desire is to speak into your life with great clarity and fidelity. Sadly, however, what was said of Israel could also be said of Christians who have an Old Covenant mentality and still live in an Old Covenant lifestyle. In **Isaiah 1:3**, the Lord laments:

“The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner’s manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.”

Do you know your Master’s voice? How is it possible to even recognize that voice amid all the noise in the world around you?

When it comes to the issue of guidance, the most commonly asked question is:

“How can I tell it is really God speaking to me? Has he been speaking all along, but I haven’t heard him? How can I know his voice?”

In answer to this comes the promise of Jesus in **John 10:27**:

“My sheep listen to my voice...and they follow me.”



Recognizing the Voice of the Shepherd

How do you learn to recognize anybody’s voice? Think about it for a moment. Think of someone that you know very well – your father or mother, your spouse, your child, your best friend. If you were placed in a crowded room and blindfolded, how quickly would you hear their voice amid the crowd?

Let’s suppose someone is leading you through the mingling voices. There are strangers all around you, unfamiliar voices that strike no chord in your heart. But then suddenly a voice rises amid the crowd, a voice that is clear amid the commotion – not because it is *loud* but because it is *familiar*. You know that voice. You know its tone, its timbre, its inflection. Why are you able to recognize that voice? Because you have heard it so many times in so many different contexts. That voice is known because it is *familiar*.

It is no different in your relationship with Jesus. How do you learn to recognize his voice? By becoming familiar with his voice. And how do you become familiar with the voice of Jesus? Only by listening. The simple fact is this: The more you hear his voice, the more you will recognize his voice. By exposing yourself constantly to his voice, you will be able to pick it out, even in the most “noisy” of situations.

In **Matthew 11:15**, we read a statement that Jesus often made to his hearers:

“He who has ears, let him hear.”

Even when he walked upon the earth, Jesus knew that just because he spoke to people did not mean that they automatically heard what he said. His natural voice rang clear, but many hearts did not yet recognize the Master's voice.

Today, his encouragement to you is exactly the same. "If you have an ear," he says, "then hear." He wants you to experience **Isaiah 50:4-5**:

"...He wakens me morning by morning, *wakens my ear to listen* like one being taught. The Sovereign Lord *has opened my ears*, and I have not been rebellious; I have not drawn back."

You'll notice that Isaiah learned to hear the voice of God because God "wakens my ear to listen like one being taught" and because he had "opened my ears."

Your ears are first opened at the point of salvation, when you respond to God's voice in the Gospel and receive the Holy Spirit into your life. From that point in time, you are now fully equipped to hear God's voice. But at the same time, your ear must be trained to recognize the voice of God.

It is said that a baby can recognize its mother's voice while still in the womb. This is the result of continual repetition over the nine months of pregnancy. The child is literally bathed in the sound of its mother's voice, so that when it is born, the mother's voice is the first familiar sound it hears.

God wants you to be bathed in the sound of his voice, and there is only one way this can happen – by submersing yourself in the Word of God. Recognition comes from familiarity, and familiarity comes from repetition. There are no short cuts. You only learn to *do* by *doing*. And in the same way, you learn to *hear* by *hearing*.

It is in reading and studying God's Word that God's voice becomes a familiar sound in your ears. For this reason, the Bible plays a central role in guidance in two ways.

- **God's Word *trains* your ear** – As you read the Bible, you learn to recognize the tone of God's voice and become familiar with God's heart and will.
- **God's Word *speaks* to your ear** – Reading the Bible, however, is much more than just a training exercise. It is actually an exercise in hearing God's voice! As you prayerfully read his Word, you will find that God will speak to your heart on issues that matter to him. As you obey the voice of God's Spirit, speaking to you in the context of his Word, you will soon discover how familiar and common the guiding voice of God truly is.

In the next lesson we will look at the various ways in which God can guide you, but by far the most common is through his written Word. At the very beginning of the Biblical Studies Course, we emphasized in **Module 101** – "A Passion for God's Word" – that reading the Bible is an function of relationship with God. Now, in **Module 110** – "Learning to Hear God's Voice" – we have come full circle. Guidance, it turns out, is *also* a function of relationship with God, and is equally founded in the reading of God's Word.

Brother Lawrence, in his classic book, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, describes what he calls a life of “continual conversation with God.” He writes:

“There is not in the world a kind of life more sweet and delightful than that of a continual conversation with God. Those only can comprehend it who practice and experience it; yet I do not advise you to do it from that motive. It is not pleasure which we ought to seek in this exercise; but let us do it from a principle of love, and because God would have us.”

The Bible plays a major role in this “continual conversation with God.” It is both the primary means through which God speaks to you and also the launching pad for an ongoing communication between your spirit and the Spirit of God within you. The Bible is God’s way of “tuning” your ear to his voice.

The Principle of Selective Hearing

Have you ever spoken with someone who has been watching TV, or reading a good book, or simply absorbed in his own thoughts, and not received any reaction from him? Why? Because his has “tuned out” your voice and “tuned into” the voice of the TV, the book or the inner dialogue of own thoughts. This phenomenon is called “selective hearing” – the ability to sift out unwanted noise, to block that which we do not want to hear.

Any parent will bear witness to the selective hearing of children. Try this experiment while a child is watching television. First, try this sentence: “Does anybody want to help me wash the dishes?” Wait and see if there is a response. Then try this sentence: “Does anybody want ice cream?” (Or substitute the child’s favorite treat). Which do you think will get a reaction? Which sentence will the child hear?

Are we any different with God? We too tend to tune out that which we don’t want to hear, but are suddenly alert when there’s something that tickles our ears. Part of the practice of learning to recognize God’s voice is choosing not to be selective in the *subject* of the voice, but to be selective in the *person* of the voice.

For selective hearing also works in another way. Do you remember the illustration we used of the crowded room full of strange voices? Let’s take this a step further. Imagine you are in the same room, engaging in idle conversation with somebody. But behind you, you hear the voice of your best friend (or spouse or parent or child) speaking with someone else. Even though you may be in apparent conversation with another person, you are more than able to tune that person’s voice out and tune into the familiar voice behind you, to the exclusion of all other noise in the room. This is selective hearing *by choice*.

This world is indeed a noisy place. Many “voices” vie for your attention. But as you learn to recognize God’s voice you will also learn to tune in selectively to that voice, to the exclusion of other voices around you. You can do this by learning to “quiet your soul” (**Psalm 131:2**) as you pray and meditate upon God’s Word, and as you engage in a continuing conversation with the Spirit of God.

The Qualities of His Voice

As you read [John 10](#), you find that Jesus continually emphasizes the fact that “my sheep hear my voice.” Albert Barnes has this to say concerning the practice of the shepherds of Jesus’ day:

“[The sheep] are so tame and so trained that they follow their keeper with the utmost docility. He leads them forth from the fold, or from their houses in the villages, just where he pleases. Since there are many flocks in such a place as this, each one takes a different path, and it is his business to find pasture for them. It is necessary, therefore, that they should be taught to follow, and not to stray away into the unfenced fields of grain which lie so temptingly on either side. Anyone that thus wanders is sure to get into trouble. The shepherd calls sharply from time to time to remind them of his presence. They know his voice and follow on; but if a stranger call, they stop short, lift up their heads in alarm, and, if it is repeated, they turn and flee, because they do not know the voice of a stranger.”⁹

The *Victor Bible Background Commentary* makes this observation:

“The flocks of several shepherds were often kept in the same fold at night. In the morning each shepherd would call his flock, using a distinctive word or phrase. Even if another person called to the sheep using the same word or phrase, the sheep did not respond. The sheep recognized the specific tone and timbre of their own shepherd’s voice, and responded only to him. God’s flock recognizes the voice of Jesus and responds to Him. As the Gospel call comes, His sheep lift up their heads and turn their eyes toward the Savior. And, recognizing Him, they obediently follow Him where He leads.”¹⁰

Every human voice has three unique qualities which make it distinctive and distinguishable:

- **Its manner** – *How the voice communicates the personality of the speaker.* Each voice has its own inflection and accent, creating a distinctive quality to a person’s voice.
- **Its tone** – *How the voice communicates the spirit of the speaker.* A voice echoes the person’s soul. It resonates with the speaker’s emotions and spirit.
- **Its content** – *How the voice communicates the mind of the speaker.* By listening to a person’s speech, you can tell what is in his heart ([Luke 6:45](#)).

God is no different. His voice also has its own manner, tone and content. As you spend more and more time with the Lord, you quickly pick up “the specific tone and timbre” of God’s voice. You will find that the voice of Jesus is:

A still, small voice

Elijah experienced this “gentle whisper” in [1 Kings 19:12](#). In [Matthew 12:19-20](#), we find this prophecy concerning the Lord Jesus:

“He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.”

The voice of Jesus is not loud or hysterical. He doesn't whine or argue or cajole. He does not attempt to quarrel or plead with you, or even try to reason with you. He just speaks softly but firmly to your heart.

The voice of many waters

The voice of God is variously described as “a loud voice like a trumpet” (**Revelation 1:10**), “like the sound of rushing waters” (**Revelation 1:15**), “like the sound of a multitude” (**Daniel 10:6**), and “like the tumult of an army” (**Ezekiel 1:24**). This aspect of the timbre of Christ's voice emphasizes its majesty and authority.

How can you reconcile Christ's voice as “a gentle whisper” with his voice as “like the sound of rushing waters”? Aren't these two descriptions contradictory?

No, they are not contradictory; in fact, they are complimentary. Anyone who has heard the voice of God in their spirit knows that his voice is both soft and authoritative. It has the quality of “the voice of many waters” because it brings with it the weight of the whole of God's Word, yet it is not overbearing in its delivery. It is both forceful and soft. It comes with a strength of conviction, and resonates strongly with the Spirit of Christ within you. It is a “still, small voice” that can still be heard amid the earthquake, the whirlwind and the firestorm.

Dallas Willard describes the quality of Christ's voice in this way:

“There is a certain steady and calm force with which communications from God impact our soul, our innermost being, inclining us towards assent and even toward active compliance...We sense inwardly the immediate power of God's voice. And once we have experienced it, we no longer wonder at the biblical phenomena of nature and spirits responding to this divine word.”¹¹

An example of someone who learned to recognize the voice of God's Spirit is Samuel. As a boy sleeping near the Ark of the Covenant, he was awakened by the audible voice of God, but did not recognize whose it was, for he was not yet familiar with it (**1 Samuel 3:1-10**). But as he grew, Samuel learned the distinctive qualities of God's voice (**1 Samuel 3:19-21**).

Read 1 Samuel 16:1-12

Here we find the story of Samuel being sent to anoint David as king of Israel. We note that the Lord spoke clearly and directly to Samuel. How God spoke in **1 Samuel 16:1-3** – whether audibly or as an inner voice – we do not know, but in **1 Samuel 16:7-12** there is no question that God spoke inaudibly to Samuel's heart, for it is obvious that Jesse did not hear the voice of God speaking. But whether God's voice was audible or inaudible, Samuel had by this time come to recognize that voice. This is exactly the same process for you too.

As Adela Rogers St. John once expressed it:

“The first time you receive guidance you will know the difference. You can mistake rhinestones for diamonds, but you can never mistake a diamond for a rhinestone.”¹²

The Guidance of the Shepherd

Read Psalm 23

This familiar psalm describes beautifully the shepherd-sheep relationship that the Lord Jesus has with you. In this psalm, we find a number of broad principles that shed clear light on his method of guidance in your life.

Three images rise clearly out of this psalm:

- **Green pastures** – The Lord will guide you to lush pastures and feeding places. These are places of growth.
- **Still waters** – The Lord will also guide you beside cool streams. These are places of rest and refreshing, of healing and restoration.
- **Dark valleys** – The Lord will at times even guide you through dark valleys. These are places where you need to rely on and trust in the shepherd.

These three images represent distinct periods in the life of every Christian

- Times of growth
- Times of rest
- Times of reliance

Remember that guidance is based upon two things – Jesus knowing you and you knowing Jesus. Therefore it is important the times and seasons of his guidance. For example, it is often assumed that God would never guide a Christian into “bad things.” But this is not completely true. Let’s take a closer look at **Psalm 23**.

Read Psalm 23:3

Here everything seems good. The Lord is guiding me along “paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.” David is probably thinking of the sheep tracks that were carved into the hillsides of his day – paths along which he would lead his sheep from pasture to pasture. These “paths of righteousness” are well-worn trails, trodden by saints of old. They are the paths of “good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (**Ephesians 2:10**).

Read Psalm 23:4

Ah, but suddenly the scene changes. Instead of green pastures and still waters, I suddenly find myself in “the valley of the shadow of death.” Most automatically assume that if I find myself in such a valley that I must have wandered off the “paths of righteousness.” While it is possible for a sheep to wander off by itself and find itself isolated and in danger (note **Luke 15:4-6**), this is not actually what **Psalm 23:4** is talking about.

What few realize is that **verse 4** is connected to **verse 3**. As we follow the shepherd along the paths of righteousness that lead from green pasture to green pasture, these paths will sometimes lead through a dark valley. The sheep become skittish and fearful. On either side there are shifting shadows. A lion's roar can be heard on right-hand slope, and a wolf's howl pierces the darkness on the left.

But we must remember that square in the center of this dark valley there is a path of righteousness upon which the shepherd is leading. As David tells us clearly:

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”

Why is the Lord with you in the midst of the valley of the shadow of death? Because he has led you there. He has not, however, led you there to stay there. He does not tell you to *lie down* in the dark valleys. No, he is leading you *through* the dark valley because he is taking you to a green pasture on the other side.

This is the nature of the shepherd's guidance. As you get to know the voice of the shepherd, you will discover that there is always the comfort of his presence there, regardless of where he may be leading you. This truth is captured beautifully by a delightful song:

*Shepherd of my soul, I give you full control
Wherever you may lead I will follow
I have made the choice to listen for your voice
Wherever you may lead I will go*

*Be it in a quiet pasture or by a gentle stream
The Shepherd of my soul is by my side
Though I face a mighty mountain or a valley dark and deep
The Shepherd of my soul will be my guide*

¹ Adam Clarke, *Adam Clarke's Commentary on the New Testament*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0.

² Albert Barnes, *Barnes' Notes on the New Testament*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0.

³ Albert Barnes, *Barnes' Notes on the New Testament*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0.

⁴ *The Nelson Study Bible*, Exodus 33:17, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0.

⁵ *Strong's Greek Dictionary*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0.

⁶ *The Nelson Study Bible*, John 15:4, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0.

⁷ *New Commentary on the Whole Bible*, John 15:4, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0.

⁸ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1958), p.46.

⁹ Albert Barnes, *Barnes' Notes on the New Testament*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0.

¹⁰ *The Victor Bible Background Commentary*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0.

¹¹ Dallas Willard, *Hearing God* (London: Harper Collins, 1999), p.169.

¹² Adela Rogers St. John, *Guideposts*, December 1968, p.8.

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