



Hearing God

THE SUMMARY

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dallas Willard

*Dallas Willard authored *The Divine Conspiracy* and *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, and was professor of philosophy at the University of Southern California.*

Preface

Hearing God? A daring idea, some would say presumptuous and even dangerous. But what if we are made for it? What if the human system simply will not function properly without it? Is it not, in fact, more presumptuous and dangerous to undertake human existence *without* hearing God?

Among our loneliest moments, no doubt, is the time of decision. Whatever comes from our choice will be our responsibility, our fault. After collecting a few disasters, however, and learning that actions are forever, that opportunities seldom return and that consequences are relentless, we hungrily cry, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven!" Our prayer expresses the burning need for God to be a constant guiding presence in our individual lives.

God has created us for intimate friendship with himself both now and forever. Hearing God is but one dimension of a richly interactive relationship, and obtaining guidance is but one facet of hearing God. It may seem strange, but being in the will of God is very far removed from just doing what God wants us to do. It's so far removed, in fact, that we can be solidly in the will of God, and be aware that we are, without knowing God's preference with regard to various details of our lives.

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Generally speaking we are in God's will whenever we are leading the kind of life he wants for us. That leaves a lot of room for initiative on our part, which is essential; our individual initiatives are central to his will for us. Of course, we cannot fail to do what he directs us to do and still be in his will. Quite apart from any specific directions he may give us, there are many ways of living and being that are clearly not in his will.

But one who inquires seriously after God's guidance must never forget that even if one was to do all the particular things God wants and explicitly commands us to do, one might still not be the person God would have one be. An obsession merely with *doing* all God commands might be the very thing that rules out *being* the kind of person that he calls us to be.

Chapter 1: A Paradox About Hearing God

In the last analysis nothing is more central to the practical life of the Christian than confidence in God's individual dealings with each person. The biblical record always presents the relationship between God and the believer as more like a friendship or a family tie than merely one person's arranging to take care of the needs of another.

I believe we, as disciples of Jesus Christ, cannot abandon faith in our ability to hear from God. To abandon this is to abandon the reality of a personal relationship with God, and that we must not do.

First, what we know about guidance and the divine-human encounter from the Bible and the lives of those who have gone before us shows that God's communications come to us in many forms. God in redemption is willing to reach out to humanity in whatever ways are suitable to its fallen and weakened condition. If we give primacy to forms of communication that God does not on the whole prefer in relationship to his children, that will hinder our understanding of and cooperation with his voice, perhaps even frustrating his will for us.

Second, we may have the wrong motives for seeking to hear from God. I fear that many people seek to hear God solely as a device for securing their own safety, comfort and righteousness. My extreme preoccupation with knowing God's will for me may only indicate, contrary to what is often thought, that I am overly concerned with myself, not a Christ-like interest in the well-being of others or in the glory of God.

Third, our understanding of God's communication with us is blocked when we misconceive the very nature of our heavenly Father and of his intent for us as his redeemed children and friends. God certainly is not to be our buddy. But then neither are we intended by him to be robots wired into his instrument panel. Such ideas must not serve as the basis for our view of hearing God.

The idea for hearing from God is finally determined by who God is, what kind of beings we are, and what a personal relationship between ourselves and God should be like. Our failure to hear God has its deepest roots in a failure to understand, accept and grow into a conversational relationship with God. It is within such a relationship that our Lord surely intends us to have and to recognize his voice speaking in our hearts as occasion demands: "The sheep follow him because they know his voice." (Jn 10:4)

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Chapter 2: Guidelines for Hearing from God

Hearing God cannot be a reliable and intelligible fact of life except when we see his speaking as one aspect of his presence with us, of his life in us. Only our communion with God provides the appropriate context for communications between us and him. Within those communications, guidance will be given in a manner suitable for our particular lives and circumstances. It will fit into our life together with God in his earthly and heavenly family.

If we are to hear God's voice ourselves and on an individual basis, we must above all else observe how his word came to those people described in the Scriptures. How did they experience God's communication? What was it like for them to hear God? We must prayerfully but boldly use our God-given imaginations as we read the stories of people who encountered God. We must pray for the faith and for the experiences that would enable us to believe that such things could happen to us. Only then will we be able to recognize, accept, and dwell in them when they come.

Within the scriptural record, those spoken to by God, such as Moses or Gideon, often tried to plead unworthiness or inadequacy. While such responses are in a sense fitting, they are also beside the point. They are irrelevant, as God makes perfectly clear in the stories concerned. We might think, on one hand, that we are not that important and, on the other hand, that such a communication might seem to make us important. But these thoughts are simply irrelevant to his purposes in dealing with us.

In the first place, we are that important. We were important enough for God to give his Son's life for us and to choose to inhabit us as a living temple. Obviously then we are important enough for him to guide us and speak to us whenever that is appropriate. In the second place, his speaking to us does not in itself make us important. If we allow God's conversational walk with us to make us think we are people of great importance, his guidance will pretty certainly be withdrawn for we cannot be trusted with it.

In seeking and receiving God's word to us, therefore, we must at the same time seek and receive the grace of humility. God will gladly give it to us if, trusting and waiting for him to act, we refrain from pretending we are what we know we are not, from presuming a favorable position for ourselves in any respect and from pushing or trying to override the will of others in our context. (This is a fail-safe recipe for humility. Try it for one month. Money-back guarantee if it doesn't work!)

Chapter 3: Never Alone

There are three commonly accepted but surely mistaken and certainly very harmful interpretations to our efforts to live a life in which God is heard and his guidance received.

The message-a-minute view. According to this view, either God is telling you what to do at every turn of the road or at least he is willing and available to tell you if you would only ask him. I do not believe either the Bible or our shared experience will substantiate this picture. There is no evidence in the life of Peter or Paul, for example, that they were constantly receiving communication from God.

The it's-all-in-the-Bible view. I believe this second view is seriously misguided and very harmful. It intends to honor the Bible, but it does so with zeal that is not there according to knowledge.

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The Bible gives direct instructions about many situations in our lives. We do not need to make long inquiries into God's will in order to know whether we should worship an idol, take something that is not ours, engage in illicit sex or mistreat our parents. But many other questions force us to realize that many of the specific circumstances of our lives are simply not dealt with in the Bible. Our reverence for and faith in the Bible must not be allowed to blind us to the need for personal divine instruction within the principles of the Bible yet beyond the details of what it explicitly says.

The whatever-comes view. This third mistaken view of how God speaks is commonly adopted and has much to recommend it in terms of the peace of mind and freedom from struggle that it provides. But in fact it amounts to giving up any possibility of a conscious interchange between God and his children.

If you wish to know what God would have you do, it is no help at all to be told that whatever comes is his will. For you are, precisely, in the position of having to decide in some measure what is to come. Does it mean that whatever you do will be God's will? I certainly hope not.

God's world is an arena in which we have an indispensable role to play. The issue is not simply what God wants but also what we want and will. When we accept whatever comes, we are not receiving guidance. The fact that something happens does not indicate that it is God's will. With respect to many events in our future, God's will is that we should determine what will happen.

In opposition to these three mistaken views of discerning God's voice, we have the *conversational view*. This is where there is appropriate, clear, specific communication through conscious experience from God to the individual believer within the context of a life immersed in God's kingdom.

Chapter 4: Our Communicating Cosmos

Many people's honest response will be (1) that God would not communicate with run-of-the-mill human beings by surrounding them with his presence and speaking to them, or (2) that he does not communicate with them in that way or even (3) that he cannot do so. Perhaps yet others, motivated by the need to control the divine presence and word for what they sincerely regard as proper ends, will even think (4) that God should not communicate with individuals as I have indicated he does. I offer these replies.

Truth #1: God Would. When considering whether God would be with ordinary human beings in a conversational relationship, we must remember not to think of him in the likeness of any human dignitaries we know. How hard it is for us to come to an adequate conception of the lowliness of God, meaning his greatness is precisely what makes him able, available and ready to hear and speak personally with his creatures! With God being who he is and now revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, we should be surprised if he does not speak to us.

Truth #2: God Does. What about those who believe that God just simply does not speak to them? First, the fact that we do not hear does not mean that God is not speaking to us. We know that messages from radio and television programs are passing through our bodies and brains at all hours of the day, messages that an appropriately tuned receiver could pluck from the very air we breathe. What an apt picture this is, it seems to me, of human beings in relation to God. We are

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showered with messages that simply go right through or past us. We are not attuned to God's voice. Second, it may be that many make no good use of a word from God because of how they are living. God's guidance is not a gimmick that we can keep on tap for our gain. Hearing God as a reliable, day-to-day reality for people with good sense is for those who are devoted to the glory of God and the advancement of his kingdom.

Truth #3: God Certainly Can. Many fear that the physical universe, being what it is, makes communication with God impossible. It puts him too far away. If you really do believe that the idea of hearing from God is unscientific in the world in which you live, you are going to have great difficulty in making enough sense of it to deal with it in practice or even to be open and intelligent concerning it.

Truth #4: And God Should! To manipulate, drive or manage people is not the same thing as to lead them. The sheepdog forcibly maneuvers the sheep, whereas the biblical shepherd simply calls as he calmly walks ahead of the sheep. How, though, could we ever have thought that anything other than this was required of a minister of the kingdom of God? We can minister Christ only as we teach what he taught in the manner in which he taught it. If the leaders have this spirit of Christ, the individuals of the fellowship will have a correct and formative model of how they should respond to and bear their communications with God.

Chapter 5: The Still Small Voice & Its Rivals

One aspect of hearing God is receiving his guidance. Guidance is a process where some person, thing or sequence of events is brought to follow a definite course.

In the most inclusive sense the train is guided by the rails upon which it runs, the driver guides the car, the writer guides the pen or keyboard, the radar guides the airplane, the stars guide the ship, the teacher guides the class, and the parent guides the child. God could certainly determine the course of our lives by manipulating our thoughts and feelings or by arranging external circumstances (what is often called the "closing" and "opening" of doors) in the "sovereign will" of God. But he can and does also guide us by addressing us. Humanity's actual experience of God, profusely documented in history, shows this.

God addresses us in various ways: in dreams, visions and voices; through the Bible and extraordinary events; and so forth. Once again this is obvious within the biblical accounts. But those who seek to live a life within God's will can be confused about the significance of the various ways God speaks with us. Each way God communicates with us has its own special uses, but all the ways are not equally significant for our life with him. In terms of overall importance the written Word and Jesus, the Living Word, are not even to be compared to a voice or a vision used by God to speak to an individual. Furthermore, from among the individual's experience of hearing God, the "still small voice" has a vastly greater role than anything else.

In the still small voice of God we are given a message that bears the stamp of his personality quite clearly and in a way we will learn to recognize. But in contrast with other cases the medium through which the message comes is diminished almost to the vanishing point, taking the form of thoughts that are our thoughts, though these thoughts are not from us. In a way, the human spirit becomes the "candle of the Lord" (Prov 20:27).

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Unfortunately this gentle word may easily be overlooked or disregarded, and it has even been discounted or despised by some who think that only the more explosive communication can be authentic. But God comes to us precisely in and through our thoughts, perceptions and experiences and he can approach our conscious life only through them, for they are the substance of our lives.

The reality of God's voice does not make seeking for it unnecessary. It is when we seek God earnestly, prepared to go out of our way to examine anything that might be his overture to us—including the most obvious things like Bible verses or our own thoughts—that he promises to be found (Jer 29:13). In the biblical record we see God addressing people in at least six ways: a phenomenon plus a voice, a supernatural messenger or an angel, dreams and visions, an audible voice, the human voice, the human spirit or the "still small voice."

Chapter 6: The Word of God & the Rule of God

God created, God rules and God redeems through his word. God's creating, God's ruling and God's redeeming is his word. This is the single basic truth about the overall relationship that he has to his creatures. In this truth we see the all-encompassing mediation of Jesus his Son. If we wish to understand God's personal relationship to us, including how he speaks to us individually today, we must understand what the word of God is in general and how both the Son of God and the Bible are the Word of God.

First, however, we must consider what words are. If you find a word written on a wall or simply overhear one spoken in a crowd, you cannot tell whose word it is. Its ownership does not reside within itself, considered merely as a mark or sound. In contrast, my word is not just a word. It is I who am speaking or writing. But even my name written ever so clearly on a check is not my word or my signature if I did not write it and thereby express myself, my thoughts, and intentions.

What is essential to a person's word is the meaning given to it by that person which includes the thought, feeling or action that person associates with it and hopes to convey to others. Through our words we literally give to others a piece of our mind. Through others' words we may know their thoughts and feelings and share in their lives.

Through words, soul impacts soul, sometimes with great spiritual force. As marks or sounds alone, words are nothing. It is their mental side and their spiritual force that hooks into the hidden levers of mind and reality and gives them their immense power. If we do not understand Spanish or Greek, we hear the sounds, but they have little or no effect because they are without meaning for us.

The power of the word lies finally in the personality that it conveys. The word of God, when no further qualification is added, is him speaking, him communicating. When God speaks, he expresses his mind, his character and his purposes. Thus he is always present with his word.

All expressions of his mind are "words" of God. This is true whether the specific means are external to the human mind as in natural phenomena (Ps 19:1-4), other human beings, the incarnate Christ (the Logos) or the Bible, or internal to the human mind as in our own thoughts, intentions and feelings. God's rule over all things, including the affairs of humankind, is carried out through his word, and understood this way.

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The Bible is one of the results of God speaking. It is the unique written Word of God. It is inerrant in its original form and infallible in all of its forms for the purpose of guiding us into a life-saving relationship with God in his kingdom. Our dependence as we read the Bible today must be on God, who now speaks to us in conjunction with it and with our best efforts to understand it. While the Bible is the written Word of God the word of God is not simply the Bible. The Bible is not Jesus Christ, who is the living Word. Neither is the Bible the word of God that is settled eternally in the heavens (Ps 119:89). But all of these are God's words, as is also his speaking that we hear when we individually hear God.

Chapter 7: Redemption Through the Word of God

We will be spiritually safe in our use of the Bible if we follow a simple rule which is to read with a submissive attitude. Read with a readiness to surrender all you are—all your plans, opinions, possessions, positions. Study as intelligently as possible, with all available means, but never study merely to find the truth and especially not just to prove something. Subordinate your desire to find the truth to your desire to do it, to act it out. It is through the action of the word of God upon us and with us that we come to have the mind of Christ and thus live fully in the kingdom of God.

Those who wish to hear the word and know the truth are often not prompted by their desire to do it. The light that such people find frequently proves to be their own snare and condemnation.

Your aim must be only to nourish your soul on God's word to you. Go first to those parts of the Bible you already know, therefore, and count on your later growth and study to lead you to other parts that will be useful.

Do not try to read a great deal at once. You may have been told that it is good to read the Bible through every year. If you do this you may enjoy the reputation of one who reads the Bible through each year, and you may congratulate yourself on it. But will you become more like Christ and more filled with the life of God? It is better in one year to have ten good verses transferred into the substance of our lives than to have every word of the Bible flash before our eyes. We read to open ourselves to the Spirit.

When there is an inner agreement between our minds and the truth expressed in the passages we read, we know that we have part of the mind of Christ in us as our own. For the great truths conveyed by Scripture were the very things that Jesus believed. They constituted the faith, hope and love in which he lived. As they become our beliefs, his mind becomes our mind. We are fitted out then to function as true co-laborers with God as brothers, sisters and friends of Jesus in the present and coming kingdom of God. We are in a position to know and understand fully how God speaks now to his children. In order for the written Word of God to have its best effect, it should be made part of an overall plan of disciplines for the spiritual life.

Chapter 8: Recognizing the Voice of God

When a word or thought comes to us either through others, the inner voice, some special experience, the Bible or circumstances, how do we know whether or not it is a word from God to us? What is it about it that indicates it has a divine source?

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We can, of course, know that the word is from God if it corresponds with the plain statement or meaning of the Bible, construed in such a way that it is consistent with soundly interpreted biblical teaching. We can all know at all times, for example, that God directs us not to worship an idol or be covetous.

Beyond this, however, the only answer to the question "How do we know whether this is from God?" is, "*By experience.*" Even a word-for-word quotation from the Bible can be put to a use that makes it only a message from the dear self or from Satan. The dangers of so-called proof texting (taking biblical passages out of context to serve some preconceived purpose) are well-known. A single statement taken directly from the Bible, statements that are often invoked for personal application, may be used in ways contrary to the purposes of God, contrary to any meaning that he may have in mind for us. That is why only the Bible as a whole can be treated as the written Word of God.

Many discussions about hearing God's voice speak of three points of reference, also called "three lights," that we can consult in determining what God wants us to do. These are circumstances, impressions of the Spirit and passages from the Bible. When these three things point in the same direction, it is suggested that we be sure the direction they point is the one God intends for us.

However, it is simply not true that we can get a reading of what circumstances say, a separate reading of what the Bible says and yet another separate reading of what the Spirit says. Consequently we cannot strengthen our reading of God's will from one of these sources just by mechanically checking it against other sources, as we might get a safer reading of the time of day by consulting three clocks running independently of each other.

Yet these three do serve to correct each other. The three lights are simply the factors that we must consider in the process of making a responsible judgment and decision about what we are to do. The voice of God is not itself any one of the three lights nor is it all of them together. As we reflect on our circumstances, our impressions of the Spirit and passages we read in the Bible, we also listen for the divine voice. But when God speaks and we recognize the voice as his voice, we do so because our familiarity with that voice enables us to recognize it. We do not recognize it because we are good at playing a guessing game about how the occasions through which his direction comes do or do not match up with each other.

Chapter 9: A Life More Than Guidance

Misunderstandings, mental confusions and mistaken beliefs about God's guidance, or more generally about God and communications between him and his creatures, make a strong walk with him impossible, even if we've chosen, in effect, not to think about it.

It is an unavoidable fact, however, that what we do or do not understand, in any area of our lives, determines what we can or cannot believe and therefore governs our practice and action with an iron hand. You cannot believe a blur or a blank, and the blanks in our understanding can only be filled in by careful instruction and hard thinking. It will not be done on our behalf.

Usually those who want a word from God when they are in trouble cannot find it. Or at least they have no assurance that they have found it. This is, I think, because they do not first and foremost simply want to hear God speaking in their lives

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in general. At heart they only want to get out of trouble or to make the decisions that will be best for them. I have spoken with many who think of divine communication only as something to help them avoid trouble.

Many people, however, honestly desire God's word both in its own right and because God knows it is best for us. As a part of their total plan for living in harmony with God, these believers adopt the general counsel of Scripture as the framework within which they are to know his daily graces. These people will most assuredly receive God's specific, conscious word through the inner voice to the extent that it truly is appropriate in helping them become more like Christ.

The key concept underlying all the themes I have raised in this book is this: Hearing God's word will never make sense except when it is set within a larger life of a certain kind.

To try to locate divine communication within human existence alienated from God is to return to idolatry, where God is there for our use. To try to solve all our life's problems by getting a word from the Lord is to hide from life and from the dignity of the role God intended us to have in creation. We exist to stand up with God and count for something in the world.

We must ultimately move beyond the question of hearing God and into a life greater than our own or the kingdom of God. Our concern for discerning God's voice must be overwhelmed by and lost in our worship and adoration of him and in our delight with his creation and his provision for our whole life. Our aim in such a life is to identify all that we are and all that we do with God's purposes in creating us and our world. Thus we learn to do all things to the glory of God. That is, we come in all things to think and act so that his goodness, greatness and beauty will be as obvious as possible, not just to ourselves, but to all those around us.

Epilogue: The Way of the Burning Heart

I am still painfully aware of the one great barrier that might hinder some people's efforts to make such a life their own. That is "the seeming unreality of the spiritual life," or "the overwhelming presence of the visible world."

The visible world daily bludgeons us with its things and events. They pinch and pull and hammer away at our bodies. Few people arise in the morning as hungry for God as they are for cornflakes or toast and eggs. But instead of shouting and shoving, the spiritual world whispers at us ever so gently.

God wants to be wanted, to be wanted enough that we are ready, predisposed, to find him present with us. If, by contrast, we are ready and set to find ways of explaining away his gentle overtures, he will rarely respond with fire from heaven. More likely he will simply leave us alone.

We cannot make spirituality "work" without having a significant degree of confidence in and commitment to the truth that the visible world is always under the hand of the unseen God. Our own spiritual substance and competence grows as we put what faith we have into practice and as we thereby learn to distinguish and count on the characteristic differences that begin to emerge as evidence of God's presence in our life.

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God is with us now, and he speaks with us, and we with him. He speaks with us in our heart, which burns from the characteristic impact of his word. His presence with us is, of course, much greater than his words to us. But it is turned into companionship only by the actual communications we have between us and him, communications that are frequently confirmed by external events as life moves along.

This companionship with Jesus is the form that Christian spirituality, as practiced through the ages, takes. Spiritual people are not those who engage in certain spiritual practices; they are those who draw their life from a conversational relationship with God. They do not live their lives merely in terms of the human order in the visible world; they have a "life beyond."