

SESSION 5

PERCEPTION IN PRAYER: LEARNING TO LISTEN

KEY VERSE:

‘HIS SHEEP FOLLOW HIM BECAUSE THEY KNOW HIS VOICE’ (JOHN 10:4)

REMEMBER:

- Computer with speakers
- List of ways God speaks

(5 MINS) WELCOME

AIM: TO MAKE EVERYONE FEEL WELCOME

- Last week: Unanswered prayer
- Open in prayer, leaving a minute for silent reflection

(15 MINS) VIDEO

AIM: TO PRESENT THE IDEA OF GOD SPEAKING TO US AS NORMAL AND DESIRABLE AND TO PROVOKE DISCUSSION

- Pete said that prayer is a conversation rather than a monologue and that we can learn to use the bible conversationally and prayerfully
- He also argued that God’s voice isn’t usually weird
- ABC keys to discerning God’s voice:
 - » **Advice** – from wise friends
 - » **Bible** – is it in line with God’s Word and character?

- » **Conscience** – how does it sit with the still, small voice of my conscience and common sense?

(20 MINS) DISCUSS

AIM: TO GET EVERYONE SHARING THEIR EXPERIENCES OF HEARING GOD

- What did you find most helpful in the video?
- What questions did it raise for you?
- Share a time when God spoke to you or guided you. How did you know it was him?
- What are the things that can stop you hearing God?

(15 MINS) DO IT

AIM: TO LISTEN TO GOD FOR ONE ANOTHER

- **Hot-seating:**
 - » Split into threes and ask each group to place one person in the middle while the other two pray for them and share any encouragement, insight or impression they receive from the Holy Spirit. This might be a Bible verse, a mental image or some other word of encouragement
- Offer the following guidelines:
 - » Don't give directional words telling people what to do in the future
 - » Only give words of encouragement and comfort: 'Follow the way of love ... the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort' (1 Corinthians 14:1-3)
- Pray about the things they have shared

(5 MINS) DEVELOP IT

AIM: TO LISTEN TO GOD IN THE COMING WEEK

- Lectio Divina (literally 'Holy Reading') is an ancient way of reading the Bible devotionally, in order to hear God's voice. You might take a single verse and think it through slowly, one word at a time, until its different layers of meaning really emerge. Then pray about what you 'see' and 'hear'
- **How to Do it:**
 - » In the coming week, try to read a Psalm every day. If you do this thoughtfully, one of the verses or phrases in the passage will probably jump out at you
 - » Take that verse and pray through each word or phrase, allowing the emphasis to fall in different ways, so that multiple layers of meaning emerge to fuel your prayers. For example, if you were praying through Psalm 23:1 'The Lord is my shepherd ...'

- » You might first reflect on the fact that Jesus is your 'Lord' and spend time in worship and confession
- » You might then think about the fact that he really 'is' my shepherd, even though you sometimes feel like he isn't
- » Next you could think about him being 'my' shepherd - not just there for other but for me ... etc
- Lectio Divina may sound difficult but it's really simple and flexible. Some people practice it at the gym on a rowing machine where each stroke is another word. Others might journal about a particular verse each day, or take a walk whilst thinking about the words
- **Praying in Tongues:** The apostle Paul says that 'Anyone who speaks in a tongue edifies themselves.' (1 Corinthians 14:4). Praying in tongues can be a wonderful way of increasing our receptivity to God's Spirit

GOING DEEPER: OPTIONAL EXTRA MATERIAL

(20 MINS) DEEPEN IT

AIM: TO PROVOKE FURTHER DISCUSSION FROM THE BIBLE

- **Read:** John 10:1-10
- **Explain:** In the Middle East shepherds lead their sheep from the front and can even call them by name. They don't drive them from behind using dogs the way we do in the West. As a result, the sheep learn to recognise their shepherd's voice. Jesus is saying that this is one of the marks of his sheep. As his followers, we will learn to recognise Jesus' voice in many ways
 - » Ask people to read out each of the 'Ways God Speaks' Bible references listed below
 - » **Feedback:**
 1. What does each one tell us about the ways in which God speaks?
 2. Have you experienced God speaking to you in any of these ways?
 - » **Discuss:** Why does God communicate with us in so many different ways? Try to draw out the following: 1. We're all made differently 2. He wants to teach us to see and hear him everywhere, not just in one particular way
- **Conclude:** We all tend to have preferred ways of hearing God. As well as the revelation that comes through Bible study and preaching, others will hear God's voice while alone in silence, some are dreamers, others hear God through music, creation and through other people. God sometimes stops speaking in a familiar way to draw us into new interactions with him. It's not that he's silent, just that we need to listen in new ways

EXTRA RESOURCES

USEFUL QUOTES AND ILLUSTRATIONS

- What topic could possibly deserve more of our attention than listening to God? When the source of all life and wisdom speaks, those who would be wise listen. The foolish either don't care or don't learn how to listen.' – Dutch Sheets, author¹
- 'The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend' (Exodus 33:11)
- 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.' (Matthew.4:4)
- 'A man prayed, and at first he thought that prayer was talking. But he became more and more quiet until in the end he realised that prayer is listening.' – Søren Kierkegaard, philosopher

YOUTH RESOURCE

- **God of the Ordinary** Cut striking photographs from magazines and spread them out in the middle of the room. Avoid religious images. Invite people to choose a picture and then to spend time prayerfully asking the Lord to speak to them through the picture. In pairs share what they 'saw' or 'heard' through the picture

STORIES

- **The Lord is My Shepherd Story** High on the moors along the Welsh highlands, two ministers met a young shepherd boy who was hearing-impaired and illiterate. They tried hard to help him understand and help him find a personal faith in Christ. They explained the gospel to him, including that Jesus wanted to be his shepherd, and that Jesus would always look after him as he, the boy, looked after his sheep. They then prayed with the shepherd boy. The boy smiled, but it was hard for them to know how much he understood. They read to him the words of Psalm 23 and taught him to repeat the words, 'The Lord is my shepherd', using the fingers and thumb of his right hand to help him remember, starting with his thumb and then a finger for each word.
Some years later, one of them was passing through that same village and asked after the shepherd boy. The previous winter there had been terrible storms and the boy had died on the hills, buried in a snowdrift. The villager who was telling the story said, 'There was one thing, however, we didn't understand. When his body was discovered he was holding the fourth finger of his right hand.'

¹ Dutch Sheets, *Intercessory Prayer* (Regal 2001)

The minister replied, 'We met the boy last year. In fact, since he was a shepherd boy, we taught him to repeat the first line of the 23rd Psalm, and we told him whenever he said it to himself, to pause at the fourth word, and remember, "this psalm was meant for me."' – Folk tale ²

- **Divine Distractions** Have you ever had that experience of trying to remember a name or a particular piece of information without success? Then, hours later, when you're thinking about something completely different, the information suddenly pops into your head! When listening to God it's often helpful to ask him the question and then don't try too hard to hear his answer. Instead go do something that is undemanding that will only partially occupy your mind – loading the dishwasher or doing exercise. In this state it is often easier to hear God's voice – you'll be surprised how often his word pops into your head

FURTHER RESOURCES

- Dallas Willard, *Hearing God*
- Loren Cunningham, *Is That Really You Lord?*
- Joyce Huggett, *Listening to God*
- Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer*

² Told by Nicky Gumbel in Bible In One Year Day 50

(SOME OF THE) WAYS GOD SPEAKS:

1. Psalm 19:1
2. 1 Kings 19:12
3. Isaiah 30:21
4. 1 Samuel 3:4
5. Luke 1:19
6. Romans 2:15
7. Psalm 119:105
8. Exodus 30:35
9. Acts 16:9
10. Acts 10:11
11. Acts 21:10
12. 1 Corinthians 14:4
13. Ephesians 4:15
14. Romans 8:16
15. 2 Samuel 5:23–25
16. Acts 16:26
17. 2 Peter 2:16

Answers

(Some of the) Ways God Speaks:

1. Through creation (Psalm 19:1)
2. The 'still, small voice' (1 Kings 19:12)
3. Intuition (Isaiah 30:21)
4. Audible voices (1 Samuel 3:4)
5. Angels (Luke 1:19)
6. Conscience (Romans 2:15)
7. Scripture (Psalm 119:105)
8. Art (Exodus 30:35)
9. Dreams (Acts 16:9)

10. Visions (Acts 10:11)
11. Prophetic words (Acts 21:10)
12. Speaking in tongues (1 Corinthians 14:4)
13. Godly counsel (Ephesians 4:15)
14. Spirit 'bearing witness to our spirit' (Romans 8:16)
15. Natural events (2 Samuel 5:23–25)
16. Circumstance (Acts 16:26)
17. And even through a talking donkey (2 Peter 2:16)