

Listening for the Voice of God: How Does God Speak To His People Today?

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Introduction

In the five years that I've been active as a missionary, I've had many people speak to me about hearing the voice of God. Many Christians believe that God will speak to people directly, and many believe they have had the experience of God speaking to them, either audibly, in a voice that has somehow been physically heard, or in a kind of internal way, with a message meant only for them. There are even courses and Bible studies that claim to teach Christians how to hear the voice of God, and how to discern God's voice, and the messages He has for us as individuals.

I'll be honest – I've never heard God's voice. He has never spoken to me audibly. I've never said, “God told me to call you,” or “God told me that you needed something,” or, “God told me I needed to speak to you about the Gospel.” I've never heard the “still, small voice” of God. This is never an experience that I was taught to seek, and this was never something that I expected to happen.

But my own personal experience isn't determinative of the truth. We can't argue experience vs. experience; as Christians we need to discover the truth from its sure source, the Word of God – the Bible. If one thing is certain, it is God's Word. So when we want to figure out whether we as Christians can actually “hear” the voice of God, and how we can hear it, the Bible is where we need to turn. As a pastor and missionary in a Reformed church, I don't teach people that they should expect to hear the voice of God speaking to them directly. But I don't base that kind of teaching on my own experience – I seek to base my teaching on God's Word.

I believe, in line with the teaching of the Reformed Church over the centuries, that God does speak to us all as Christians, but that this speaking, this voice of God, is heard in His Word, and not in personal communication with us as individuals. I believe that when people say, “God told me to do something,” that they may sincerely believe they've had personal direction from God, but that they are sincerely mistaken. And I believe that this understanding is solidly based on the teaching of Scripture, and not on my own opinion or personal experience.

So that's where I want to start – with God's Word. What does God's Word have to say about God's speaking, about hearing God's voice, about receiving personal

direction from God? Does the Bible teach that I can receive direct personal communication from God, if I go about things in the right way, or if I use the right techniques? Or does the Bible have another message?

We'll begin by looking at the Old Testament witness, since that's where nearly all the examples of people hearing God speaking to them are found. Who actually heard God's voice? What was the experience like? And what was God telling them?

1. The Evidence of the Book of Genesis

The first time God spoke with a human being can be found in Genesis 2:16 and 17, where God commanded Adam, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” We know what happened; Adam and Eve disobeyed God's direct command and ate of the fruit. After Adam and Eve's fall into sin, God speaks to human beings for the second time, along with an address to the serpent who had led them to sin. God seeks out man. He calls Adam, and said, “Where are you?” because Adam was hiding in his shame. Then God addresses Eve. “What is this that you have done?” He asks. Adam and Eve have their excuses, and God's next speech is to the serpent. “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (Genesis 3:15) – the first proclamation of the gospel.

God then speaks to the woman; He tells her that she will have pain in childbearing, that her desire would be for her husband, and that her husband would rule over her. Finally, God addresses Adam; He pronounces a curse on the ground; the soil would bring forth thorns and thistles, work would become difficult, and man would die – he would return to the ground, for out of it he was taken (Genesis 3:19).

The next time God speaks to a human being, it's in the context of the first murder. The LORD speaks to Cain after rejecting Cain's offering, and then again after Cain kills his brother Abel. He pronounces a curse on Cain, and sends Cain away to be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth (Genesis 4:6-15). Humanity is divided; the sons of God, people who sought to worship the true God, are separated from the sons and daughters of men, those who chose to go their own way instead of living for the Lord. But the two groups get mixed; the sons of God mingle with the daughters of men, and things go downhill fast, until there's only one righteous man left on earth – Noah.

And Noah becomes the next person to hear God's voice, as God speaks to him, telling Noah about His plans, and about what Noah should do. In Genesis 6, He

commands Noah to build an ark. In Genesis 8, God tells Noah to enter the ark, along with the animals he was to take with him. In Genesis 9, God pronounced a blessing on Noah and his sons, establishing His covenant with them and with every living creature.

The flood subsides; but human nature hasn't changed. We're told about the tower of Babel, how humanity once again rebelled against God's commands, and how God confused their languages in order to spread humanity throughout the earth, which is what He had commanded in the first place. And then, some time after the nations were divided, we see God speaking to an individual again – this time, to Abram (who would later be renamed Abraham).

In Genesis 12, the LORD called Abram to leave his home and go to the land He would show him; He promises Abram that he will become a great nation, and says to him, “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:1-3). When Abram arrives in the promised land, the LORD reiterates His promise concerning the land (Genesis 12:7). In

Genesis 13:14-17, the promise is repeated yet again, and in Genesis 15, the LORD appears to Abram in a vision, and speaks to him in more detail in that way.

In Genesis 17, when Abram was 99 years old, the LORD spoke to him again. Once again the LORD repeats His covenant promises, He institutes the covenantal sign of circumcision, and He promises Abram that his wife would have a son. The LORD appears to Abram again in Genesis 18, in a very unique way, and reiterates that promise of a son. Shortly thereafter, the LORD enters into an extended conversation with Abraham concerning the fate of the city of Sodom.

In the time of Abraham, two other people are mentioned as hearing specific messages from God – Hagar, the mother of Ishmael, who is visited by the Angel of the LORD (who many believe is the second Person of the Trinity), and Abimelech, to whom God appears in a dream.

The final time we read of the LORD addressing Abraham is in the well-known story of the sacrifice of Isaac, and the LORD's testing of Abraham's faith, in Genesis 22.

The next person to whom the LORD speaks is Rebekah, the wife of Isaac. In Genesis 25, the LORD tells Rebekah what will happen to her sons, Esau and Jacob – “the older shall serve the younger” (Genesis 25:23). Only twice does Scripture record the LORD speaking to Isaac, both times in Genesis 26. In terms very similar to those He employed with Isaac's father Abraham, the LORD

proclaims His covenant promises – the land, a multitude of descendants, and a blessing that would come to the world through his offspring.

Isaac's son Jacob, the heir of the covenant, the recipient of the birthright, is the next person to hear God's voice. The LORD speaks to Him in a dream in Genesis 28, and the covenant promises are repeated, as they had been with his father Isaac. In Genesis 31, the LORD speaks to Jacob, as well as to his uncle Laban, to whom He appears in a dream. In Genesis 32, Jacob wrestles with God; in Genesis 35, God speaks with Jacob, gives him a new name (Israel), and repeats His covenant promises.

The focus of the story of Genesis then turns to Joseph, one of Jacob's sons. Joseph is the last person in Genesis to receive a direct revelation from God. We're not told that the LORD spoke to Joseph audibly, but Joseph did receive prophetic dreams that revealed to him how his brothers would bow down before him (Genesis 37); this would be fulfilled in Egypt.

2. The evidence of the Five Books of Moses and Joshua

For some four centuries, the witness of Scripture is that God was silent, while the children of Jacob were in Egypt. It is not until the arrival of Moses on the scene that we read about God speaking to an individual. This happens most remarkably in Exodus 3, where God speaks to Moses from out of a burning bush, and calls Moses to his task of delivering His people from bondage in Egypt.

The LORD speaks with Moses on a number of occasions between Exodus 3 and Numbers 12; throughout Exodus, Leviticus, and the first part of Numbers, the LORD speaks exclusively to Moses. No one else, it appears, heard the voice of God speaking to them. In Numbers 12:4, we have the only example of the LORD addressing others along with Moses, in an apparently audible voice, when He calls out to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.

After the death of Moses, Joshua became the leader of the people of Israel. He would bring the people into the Promised land. In Joshua 1, 3, 4, 5, and 6, we're told how the LORD spoke to Joshua; He begins in the first chapter by encouraging Joshua to “be strong and courageous, for you shall cause this people to inherit the land that I swore to their fathers to give them” (Joshua 1:6). At critical moments in the entrance of Israel into the land of Canaan, such as the time of their miraculous crossing of the Jordan River (Joshua 3 and 4), the circumcision of the people (Joshua 5), and the destruction of Jericho (Joshua 6), the LORD continued to speak to Joshua directly, making it clear that He would be with His people, and also making certain that they knew what He expected of them. The LORD would continue to speak with Joshua throughout the book that bears his name.

4. The Evidence of the rest of the Old Testament

In the book of Judges, the LORD addresses people on several occasions; He speaks to Gideon in Judges 6 and 7; He speaks to the people in Judges 10, although this may have been through the words of a prophet. In Judges 13, the Angel of the LORD appeared to Samson's parents, to announce his birth, and the fact that Samson would be set apart for a very special service to the LORD.

In 1 Samuel, the LORD speaks exclusively with the prophet Samuel, until the 23rd chapter, where the LORD speaks to David. Throughout the story of David, the LORD speaks exclusively to him; following David's death, his son Solomon became king. In 1 Kings 11, the LORD spoke to Solomon.

Following this communication with Solomon, the LORD speaks to the prophets – to Ahijah in 1 Kings 14:5, and then, throughout the rest of 1 Kings, to Elijah.

In the book of Job, the LORD speaks to Job (in Job 40), and then, following that extended discourse, to Eliphaz the Temanite (in Job 42).

Obviously, the LORD spoke many times to the prophets, and in a number of ways – to Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel (in visions), Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. For our purposes it isn't necessary to go through every example; suffice it to say that there are many examples in each of the prophetic books of the LORD speaking to individuals – either in dreams or visions, or in an apparently audible way.

5. The New Testament Evidence

We can be far more brief in our examination of the New Testament evidence for God speaking to individuals in an audible way. On several occasions in the gospels, the Lord speaks to people in dreams – to Joseph (Matthew 1:20,21); to the wise men from the East (Matthew 2:12); to Joseph again (Matthew 2:13; Matthew 2:19,20 – both appearances of an angel of the Lord in dreams).

When Jesus was transfigured, three of His disciples, Peter, James, and John, heard the voice of God, when God told them, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him” (Matthew 17:5). The uniqueness of this experience becomes evident in the way they react to being addressed by God: “When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified” (Matthew 17:6).

In the book of Acts, an angel of the Lord speaks to Philip (Acts 8:26); in Acts 9, the Lord Jesus Himself appears to Saul (who would become Paul), in an incredible vision. Also in Acts 9, the Lord spoke to Ananias in a vision, concerning Saul, in which He makes a declaration about the nature of Saul's

mission to the Gentiles.

Finally in Acts, the Lord speaks to Paul in a vision (in Acts 18:9,10), and encourages him to go on preaching, declaring that He would be with Paul, and that no one would harm him.

6. What are we to make of this evidence? Prescription vs. Description

First of all, we do have a number of examples of Scripture of God speaking to people – of people hearing God's voice, audibly, or in visions, or dreams. If my numbers are correct (and I may have missed a few), we have about fifty examples of God speaking to people directly in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. So clearly, God can speak to people in a way they can hear, in a “physical” way (by which I mean, not just “in their heart,” but so that they actually hear what He's saying to them). God obviously has the ability to speak to whomever He wishes, and He has clearly given human beings the ability to hear His voice. So it certainly is not impossible for a human being to hear God's voice.

But in order to make the most of the Scriptural evidence, and in order to figure out how we can apply these accounts to our own lives, we need to understand an important principle of Biblical interpretation. In Scripture, we have passages that are descriptive, and passages that are prescriptive. Descriptive passages tell us what happened, to whom, when, where, and often why. For example, Judges 15:15 is a descriptive passage about Samson: “And he found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, and put out his hand and took it, and with it he struck 1,000 men.”

Prescriptive passages, however, tell us as readers of Scripture what we need to do. One short, simple example is in 1 John 5:21: “Little children, keep yourselves from idols.”

This distinction is extremely important. Descriptive passages do not tell us what we should be doing as God's people. When we read that Samson struck down 1,000 men with the fresh jawbone of a donkey, we shouldn't go looking for a donkey's jawbone so we can get to striking men down ourselves; that's not the point of this passage. There is a message to this story that is applicable to us today, but the application is not direct; we are not called to emulate Samson in killing people with animal bones.

But prescriptive passages are meant for us, and can be applied easily, and directly. When John writes, “Little children, keep yourselves from idols,” this is a prescription for us. We must keep ourselves from idols – it's a simple,

straightforward message.

And the distinction is easy to see; narrative passages, passages that tell a story (like much of the Old Testament, the gospels, and Acts) are filled with descriptive passages. We read stories that are very much applicable to us today as New Testament Christians (because all of Scripture points us to Jesus Christ, as He Himself said to the disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24), but it is vital for us to understand that description does not equal prescription.

7. The Uniqueness of God's Special Revelation

I believe that many Christians make a serious mistake when they confuse description with prescription, or when they assume that since something happened to one person (or to fifty people, or even thousands of people), it should also happen to us. And I believe that this is one problem with us expecting to hear the voice of God, audibly, directing us in our day-to-day circumstances, today. The simple fact is this: just because God spoke to Adam, Eve, Cain, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, Miriam, David, Solomon, and the prophets in an audible voice, this doesn't mean that we as individual Christians should expect to receive the same sort of revelation.

Just think about this: during the time of Moses, there were some two million people associated with Israel, as they left Egypt and journeyed to the Promised Land. Scripture says nothing about God speaking to any of these individuals, it says nothing about them expecting God to address them individually, personally, audibly, as they went about their daily lives. God spoke audibly to Moses, and Moses spoke to the people. Through Moses, God brought Israel the law, His Word, which they were to use to direct their lives. This was Moses' calling, his special task as God's representative. He was the mediator of God's Word; through Moses, the people heard the voice of God – not audibly, not in intricate directions as to the decisions they should make in their daily lives, but in terms of principles that they needed to apply in making decisions, injunctions that they needed to obey, commandments that they needed to follow, promises that they needed to believe. That was God's Word for them.

If we look at the evidence of the Old Testament and the New Testament, we see God speaking to very special individuals at unique points in history. He chose specific people, prophets, judges, kings, all of whom received a very specific calling, to hear His voice, to receive His direction, to receive His promises. In the earliest days of history, this would have been the only way people could have known what God was up to, since there was no written Word, encapsulating God's message for posterity. God had to speak to Adam and Eve, so that they would know what was happening. He had to speak to Cain, to Noah, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

In the New Testament, we also see God speaking at critical junctures in the history of His redemptive work. We don't have evidence of Him speaking to many people aurally, and we have no evidence that He ever spoke to anyone merely about the mundane activities of daily life. We see Him speaking to specific individuals that He had chosen, at critical times in history, to make very specific points about issues that had significance for all of God's people.

8. The Clarity of God's Special Revelation

And it is vital for us to see how God spoke to the people that He spoke with. When He spoke to people, they knew it was Him. They knew exactly what He was saying – it was perfectly clear to them. They didn't have to spend any time trying to figure out whether it was actually God speaking to them, or whether it was perhaps a message from Satan, or whether it was their own thoughts deceiving them. God was perfectly clear, and when people heard God's voice, they knew it was God's voice, beyond a shadow of a doubt. And they often reacted by expressing shock and fear, because this was a unique, and often frightening, experience.

There are courses that purport to teach people how they can discern God's voice; but did Moses, did Elijah, did David, did Amos, have to struggle to figure out whether or not it was actually God who was speaking to them? No, not at all. When God speaks, He speaks clearly. If God were to speak audibly to someone today (and in the following paragraphs I'll explain why I don't believe this will happen), that person would surely be very clear as to the source of the message.

Often people will refer to the story of Elijah when explaining how God speaks to people. Elijah was living in a cave at Mount Horeb. Having fled from Ahab and Jezebel, he was in exile in the wilderness, and he was in despair. In 1 Kings 10:9-13, we read the following account:

“And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and He said to him, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' He said, 'I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away.' And He said, 'Go out and stand on the mount before the LORD.' And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in a cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him and said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'”

It's that "low whisper" that often seems to be so intriguing to people. The LORD spoke to Elijah in a "still, small voice," as the King James version translates this phrase, and so, people say, we should listen for that "still, small voice," ourselves, and learn how to discern it. Reference is made to Psalm 37:7, "Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for Him," and to Psalm 46:10, "Be still, and know that I am God," and we're told that we need to practice being in the presence of God, being still so that we can hear His "low whisper," His "still, small voice."

There are several problems with this application of the story of God's revelation of Himself to Elijah. First of all, Elijah was an anointed prophet of God, who had a very special role in the history of God's work. He was a mediator, bringing God's Word to His people, in the time before Scripture was completed. His work would find its fulfillment in Jesus Christ, as we'll see in the following paragraphs. So the first thing we need to consider is the place of this story in the history of God's revelation.

The second question we need to ask about this passage is whether it's descriptive, or prescriptive. Clearly, this is a descriptive passage. It tells us what happened to one person – what God did to communicate with one very special man with a unique calling. It does not prescribe what we as God's people should expect from Him, or what we should do to "hear" from Him. If we want to use this passage to support a claim that God will speak to each of us in a "still, small voice," as long as we're prepared to hear Him, then consider Amos 1:2:

"And he said: 'The LORD roars from Zion and utters His voice from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds mourn, and the top of Carmel withers.'"

Once again, this is a descriptive passage, telling us how God speaks. Perhaps the prophet Amos heard the voice of the LORD as the roar of a lion. Should we expect the same? Is there something we could do, a procedure we could follow, so that God would roar like a lion to us as well? I don't hear people expecting to hear a roaring from God today; it seems that whispering is preferred – perhaps because it speaks to some sort of intimacy, a special message meant for our ears only. I don't know; but I do know that if we apply the story of Elijah to ourselves like many people do, we should apply the story of Amos 1:2 in the same way. And this is clearly not something that is done. That fact alone should make us question our assumptions about hearing God whispering to us, as He did to the prophet Elijah.

The final thing I want to mention about the Elijah story is the fact that Elijah didn't have to struggle to figure out whether it was actually God speaking to him, even when God spoke in a whisper. There was no special gift of discernment, no "practice of the presence of God" necessary for Elijah, even when God's voice

wasn't thundering out. Elijah knew immediately that God was speaking to him; and he responded by wrapping his face in a cloak, seeking to protect himself from God's glory, which he assumed would be present outside the cave, since God had spoken to him. Again, this appears to be a very unique, unusual occurrence, as Elijah's reaction plainly shows.

9. The Fulfilment of God's Special Revelation

The next thing we need to consider is our place in history. We live after the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ, after the completion of Scripture. We now have the complete Word of God to guide us; we have His complete revelation. And most importantly, we have His revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ. We have been given what we need, and we needn't expect anything more. The author of Hebrews put it this way:

“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son, whom He appointed the heir of all things, through whom also He created the world” (Hebrews 1:1,2).

Look closely at what the writer says; God spoke to our fathers by the prophets – not to each individual personally, individually addressing each person audibly or through a subliminal voice, with a personal, unique message for every individual in many different circumstances in life. But now, the author says, God has spoken to us, in these last days, by His Son. The Son of God, Jesus Christ, is the ultimate revelation of God. His words, His life, His ministry, are the pinnacle of God's revelation. In Him, and in His Word, we have everything we need; we don't need anything more, and we don't have to seek anything more.

10. Do I Really Need God to Speak to Me Personally?

I don't have to wait for God to speak to me until I make a decision in my life. He has already spoken to me – in His Word, and in the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, His Son. This morning, when my alarm went off, I knew that I had to get out of bed. Not because God whispered to me, “Jim, it's time to get up,” but because He commanded me in His Word that I must manage my own household well (1 Timothy 3:4), and part of managing my household well means getting up on time, getting my son ready for school, driving him there, and then getting to work. I knew once I got home that I needed to get to work. I didn't need God to tell me what to do once I got into my study, because God has told me not to be a sluggard; “The way of a sluggard is like a hedge of thorns, but the path of the upright is a level highway” (Proverbs 15:19). He didn't tell me exactly what I had to do; I had to decide whether I should begin working on this week's sermon, or whether I should write this article. I decided that there was greater urgency in

writing this article, and I felt confident that this is what God wanted me to do.

Why? Again, not because He spoke to me, and told me to write this article. But I am a child of God; I know that. I know that I belong to Jesus Christ, and I trust in Him. And I know that He has given me His Holy Spirit to guide me in wisdom, because He has told me that in His Word. “For the LORD gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding; He stores up sound wisdom for the upright; He is a shield to those who walk in integrity, guarding the paths of justice and watching over the ways of His saints” (Proverbs 2:6-8). I know that I'll make mistakes; I know that I will fail; I know that I will not always be obedient. I know that some of the choices I make will be wrong choices, and that I will have to face the consequences for those wrong choices. I know this because God has revealed that as well, in His Word. While I am a child of God, I am still also a sinful man; my old nature sometimes wins out in the battle I have with it.

But I know that God expects me to use the wisdom He has given me; He has given His Church His Holy Spirit to guide us, and He expects us to use the wisdom He has given us, for His glory. We are not children, who need to be told to put our shoes on in the morning, that we need to have breakfast, that we need to do whatever chore has been assigned to us. We are called to be mature, to make mature decisions, and to do that without constant direction from our Father. He has given us what we need; we know what we need to do. We may not know the exact details, but we have been given our prescription. And if we are faithful, if we are obedient, we can be sure that the result of all of our decision-making will work out for our eternal benefit (Romans 8:28).

10. Conclusion

I wrote this article because I believe this is a very serious problem in the Christian Church today. The idea that God will speak to individuals and will give them unique, personal revelations doesn't accord with the clear teaching of the Bible, or with the experience and teaching of Christians throughout history. I believe it can also be very dangerous, and harmful to a Christian's personal growth and walk of faith. I have seen it in people I have been close to; for example, someone once told me that God told her to witness to someone who was in line in front of her in a store. She didn't do it. The next day, that person died. Now she believes that she has that man's blood on her hands, because she didn't listen to what God had told her to do. She lives with guilt, because she believes God gave her a direct, unique command, in a unique situation. Did God speak to her? I don't think so. She may have had a feeling, but I'm sure it wasn't God's voice she was hearing. Now she suffers, because she thinks she disobeyed a direct command from God.

Others have lived in indecision, unable to make choices, unable to move forward in life, because they're waiting for God to reveal what He wants them to do. Others have made bad decisions, because they haven't used the wisdom God gave them, but instead made decisions based upon something they thought was a personal message from God meant especially for them. Instead of using their God-given wisdom, they're relying on something that has more to do with paganism and divining than it has to do with the teaching of God in the Bible.

In short, this teaching can have disastrous consequences in the lives of Christians. But even if this belief may not lead to disaster, it does certainly lead to a mistaken notion of the Christian life. It can lead to a denigration of God's perfect revelation in Scripture, as if Scripture isn't enough for us – as if we somehow need something more. But God's Word is enough! We have everything we need. Perhaps we could use this as a rule of thumb: first master God's Word in Scripture. Know it inside and out. Memorize it. Study it. Meditate on it. Then, once you're done with that, wait for God to reveal something more to you. Of course, you'll never be done with the first step, so thankfully you won't have to get to the second.

This kind of teaching also leads to a kind of perpetual Christian adolescence, rather than a growth in spiritual maturity. God wants me to make decisions. He wants me to be mature. He doesn't want me constantly looking for personally directed guidance in the mundane (or even more important) areas of life. We are to grow in maturity, and the way to grow in maturity is to get to know God's Word, to let it live within us, to let it shape us, because it's in the Word where God works – the Word, the Bible, is “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

Finally, this kind of teaching leads to a serious misunderstanding of the point of the Christian faith, and even about the nature of God Himself. It leads to a kind of self-centredness – a focus on what God has to say to me personally, rather than on what He has to say to all of us as God's united people, the people of the covenant. And it leads to a pattern of thinking that makes God exist for my benefit, rather than the other way around. I have a relationship with God so that He will be glorified, not so that I will receive personal fulfilment, or a heightened emotional state, or the special feeling that comes when you think God is saying something to you that He's never said to anyone else before.

Does God speak today? Yes, absolutely, He does. He speaks in creation (Psalm 19): the heavens declare His glory, and His voice goes out to all the earth. “The Mighty One, God the LORD, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting” (Psalm 50:1). He reveals Himself clearly, to everyone, in

His creation and continuing government of the universe.

And He speaks, even more clearly, in His Word. That Word is available to everyone; its meaning is the same for everyone who reads it. We can apply it in our lives, each of us in our own individual circumstances, but the message is no different for me than it is for a Christian living in Africa or Asia or the Christian who lives down the block, or than it was for any Christian at any time in history. And that's all that we need – God knows what we need, and He has given it to us. His Word speaks to us; a verse may strike us in a particular way at a special time in our lives; a passage may become more meaningful for us because of our personal circumstances. But the Word is clear; it's understandable; and it means the same thing for me as it does for you and for everyone else. I don't have to wonder if God is speaking to me – I know He is.

We need to be thankful for what God has given us, because it's more than enough. There's no need to put ourselves in a dangerous situation by seeking something more than what God has promised. He's given us His Word; He's given us His Son; He gives us His Holy Spirit so we can be wise in applying the Word to our lives. That's how He speaks, with certainty, with clarity, to each and every one of His people. Who could ask for anything greater?