

Alive to God II: How We Hear God

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Mother of God Prayer Meeting

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So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Rom 6:11)

And you he made alive, when you were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked. (Eph 2:1)

We talk a lot about dying to sin, but less about what it means to be alive to God. "The glory of God is man fully alive" (St. Irenaeus). Fully alive means having all our faculties able to do what they were created to do. We have spiritual faculties as well as physical-amazing capacities to see and hear God, respond to him, love him. They have been disabled since the fall-we became spiritually blind, deaf, paralyzed, leprous, etc. At conversion and baptism, they are restored, but still need to be brought to full functioning. Imagine a person born deaf who at age 30 has an operation and gets his hearing suddenly restored. Will he be able to understand people talking to him? No! He'll hear only a confused jumble of sounds. He has to learn a whole new set of brain functions. This kind of healing and restoration is part of the whole work of our sanctification.

Just think: what would it be like to be really alive to God for a day? This is what God wants for us!

Many Christians don't believe he does. But what does his word say?

"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." (John 10:27)

Though the Lord give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself any more, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way, walk in it," when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left. (Is 30:20f)

Good and upright is the Lord; therefore he instructs sinners in the way. He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way. (Ps 25:8f)

Many of us are living in a reservoir of hearing from the Lord - "He spoke to me last month" or "four years ago." He wants us in a river. God does speak to us (not will, should or might). His speaking is not a rare event but a downpour. It's for everyone, not just certain kinds of people. He wants to increase the ways he speaks to us.

God's voice does not come like a trumpet blast, but a whisper. It may at first sound just like our own thoughts. We have to strain (and train) our spiritual ears to hear.

He speaks in whatever ways he can reach us:

- Through scripture that jumps out at us as we read. God "dials up the volume."

- Through scripture that "pops up" in our mind.
- Through anointed preaching.
- Through songs and hymns. Recently "Unfold your marvelous plan" kept going through my head over and over again.
- In prayer when a word or face comes to mind.
- Through others. Even when they don't intend it, a person may say something that hits the mark. Recently someone casually mentioned in a meeting, "Remember that old teaching? - All we need to do is find out what's God's plan is and follow it, then let him know that the obstacles are his problem." That simple statement hit home for me.
- Through conviction of sin. When it's from the Lord it never brings condemnation or discouragement, but comes with the sweetness of knowing his forgiveness.
- Through conviction of righteousness, blessing and affirmation. God wants so much for us to experience his passionate love for us, and to know how pleased he is with us. If it's from the Lord it doesn't cause boastfulness but a sense of deep gratitude and humility.
- Through parables of everyday life. A few weeks ago I was working on a 3D puzzle of St. Peter's Basilica. After a while I found that some pieces were missing. This was really frustrating and I wanted to quit, because it's just not satisfying when it's incomplete. But as I kept persevering I found that some of the missing pieces actually were there - they just didn't look the way I expected. The Lord used this to teach me about his plan for my life.
- Sometimes through intuitions, dreams, mental images, unexpected messengers (e.g. children or the poor).

"The sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers." (John 10:4f)

Four questions to ask:

1. Is this aligned with the word of God? The more we know the Lord through prayer and meditating on scripture, the more we will be able to recognize his voice. We become familiar with his character, and know what kinds of things he would or wouldn't say. For instance, God's voice is always life-giving, even when it is convicting us of sin. "For I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope" (Jer 29:11).
2. Is this in accord with the teaching of the Church? The Holy Spirit does not contradict himself.
3. Do the Holy Spirit and my spirit bear witness to this? Example: when I cracked the Bible and got three scriptures in a row about condemnation and rejection. My spirit did not bear witness to it.

4. Is this confirmed by those I trust? (a spiritual director, wise friends). Part of humility is to realize we don't see everything clearly, that the Lord wants us to rely on one another for help in discernment. But no one can substitute for my hearing from the Lord myself. In cases where you still don't know if it's the Lord, keep praying and asking. He will make it clear (Mt 7:7f).

Our wounding

Our faith and our belief systems don't always line up. Faith is the truth of the gospel. Our belief systems are deeply held convictions from past experience, which can be emotionally more powerful. Examples:

- "I only deserve second best. I only deserve pain." We're willing to settle for second best, because that's our experience.
- "God is not that interested in me." "Only holy people hear from the Lord."
- "I can never trust what I am feeling/thinking/sensing." This is an example of an inner vow.

Fears

If we have unresolved fears about hearing certain things from the Lord, that may block our ability to hear anything. I might be afraid that God will ask me to do things I don't want to do, or bring up a sin area I want to leave covered up. Or I might simply be afraid that he won't talk - what if he doesn't come when I call? So I fill up the silence with my own words.

We might be afraid that we'll hear incorrectly and make some terrible mistake. We have to grow in the knowledge that God loves to talk to his children. Undoubtedly we will make mistakes, but God will see to it that none are devastating. We will learn from them.

I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. (Ps 32:8)

Talking over God

Sometimes we're so busy pouring out our complaints that God can't get a word in edgewise. It takes desire and perseverance to discipline our wayward minds.

Be still, and know that I am God. (Ps 46:10)

Impatience I sometimes ask the Lord to show me whether I should do such-and-such, wait about five seconds, hear nothing, then go and do it. What disrespect! Think of Jesus asking the Father which 12 men he should choose as his apostles. He didn't go to pray, get a quick answer, then come down the mountain to rest or do more ministry: "all night he continued in prayer to God" (Lk 6:12).

The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. It is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD. (Lam 3:25f)

Garbage in, garbage out

Our imagination is a canvas on which God, Satan and the flesh can project images. Filling our minds with worldly or impure images will impede our ability to interact with God. We should guard our spiritual and physical senses.

Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. (Phil 4:8)

You hear from him more than you think. If you say, "I hear nothing," have a look at "nothing." Recently I was asking the Lord to show me the root of a problem in my life, and I didn't hear anything... well, except maybe, "I'll show you at the right time." That's something!

- Prayer to heal the wounded heart. If you recognize ways that your heart was not validated so that you find it hard to listen to God, ask someone to pray over you for healing.
- Repentance and forgiveness. A judgmental or unforgiving heart can block us from hearing the Lord.
- Pay attention to what he's already said. Recently I was feeling discouraged that I wasn't hearing from God, and then the thought came to me (from Him), "Ponder all the most recent things that the Lord has said to you." I realized I hadn't paid enough attention to things God had been saying to me through others, and he wanted me to get that first. If you don't know any recent things he has said to you, start with the last reading you heard at Mass—that was Jesus talking to you!
- Keep a journal. I've often found that if I write down what I think the Lord has been saying, as soon as I'm done he begins to say more.
- Practice and persevere. Satan wants us to get discouraged and give up. God wants us to get in shape.
- Seek help from brothers or sisters you trust.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. In prayer, ask the Lord to reveal what the main obstacles are to your hearing from him as much as he wants you to. If possible, share these with your fellowship group or a trusted friend and pray together for the Lord to remove them.
2. From the list above, what is one way of hearing the Lord that you think he wants to develop more in you? Practice listening to God in that way.
3. What has the Lord been saying to you lately? See if you can expand the ways you hear his voice. Do you notice different pieces of what he is saying that he wants you to put together into a coherent whole?
4. Choose one of the scriptures above, or any other, and roll it over in your mind frequently. What is the Lord teaching you through it?
5. In prayer, ask the Lord these questions and write down the answers you hear:
 - Jesus, what excites you about me?
 - Jesus, what concerns you about me?
 - Jesus, what do you like about me?
 - Jesus, what worries you about me?

- Jesus, if you could play a game with me, what would it be?