



Hearing God

By Dallas Willard

IVP, 1999, 228 pp, ISBN 0830835695

"God spoke to me."

"The Spirit spoke to my heart."

"God revealed this to me."

Being close to God means communicating with him—telling him what is on our hearts in prayer *and* hearing and understanding what he is saying to us. It is this second half of our conversation with God that is so important but that can also be so difficult. How do we hear his voice? How can we be sure that what we think we hear is not our own subconscious? What role does the Bible play? What if what God says to us is not clear?

The key, says best-selling author Dallas Willard, is to focus not so much on individual actions and decisions as on building our personal relationship with our Creator. In this updated and expanded edition of Willard's beloved book, originally published as *In Search of Guidance*, you'll gain rich spiritual insight into how we can hear God's voice clearly and develop an intimate partnership with him in the work of his kingdom.

"Generally speaking, we are in God's will whenever we are leading the kind of life that he wants for us. And that leaves a lot of room for initiative on our part, which is essential: our individual initiatives are central to his will for us." (11)

"I deal with hearing God as it bears upon a *whole life* in the will of God – upon the question of *who* God wants us to *be* as well as (where appropriate) of what he wants us to do." (12)

"My hope is to leave you with a clear sense of how to live confidently in a personal walk that is complemented by an ongoing conversational relationship with God." (13)

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We have faith in God’s personal, guiding communication with us, but we are painfully uncertain about how to hear God’s voice ... The aim of this book is to provide “a clear understanding and a practical orientation toward God’s way of guiding and communicating with us.” (25-26)

Willard addresses three problem areas:

- (1) that God communicates with us in many ways,
- (2) that we may have wrong motives for seeking to hear from him
- (3) our misconceptions about his intentions for us.

“Our failure to hear God has its deepest roots in a failure to understand, accept and grow into a conversational relationship with God, the sort of relationship suited to friends who are mature personalities in a shared enterprise....” (29)

“God’s speaking to us is intended to develop into an intelligent, freely cooperative relationship between people who love each other ... We must therefore make it our primary goal not just to hear the voice of God, but to be mature people in a loving relationship with him.” (31)

“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.” (36)

His speaking to us does not make us important. It only gives us more opportunity to do good, to care for others, as well as to guide others ... When God speaks to us, it does not prove that we are righteous or even right. It does not even prove that we have correctly understood what he said. The infallibility of the messenger and the message does not guarantee the infallibility of our reception. Humility is always in order.” (38-39)

God is present with us in three forms: when we are not aware of him but trusting him by faith, when there is a strong impression of his presence, and “when he acts in conjunction with our actions to change our surroundings in ways beyond our own powers ... Why, if God is personal, would he not also *talk* with us? God is also with us in a conversational relationship: he speaks with us individually as it is appropriate – which is only to be expected between persons who know one another, care about each other and are engaged in common enterprises.” (51)

“The primary manner of communication from God to humankind is the Word of God. The Bible itself is God’s speaking preserved in written form. God spoke directly to Moses, to Ezekiel, to Paul, and to many others. Through them he spoke indirectly to the people of Israel and to the church, and now – in the Bible – he speaks to world history.” (53)

“The fact that something happens does not indicate that it is God’s will. Many things that happen are not the will of God, although obviously he does not act to stop them ... With respect to many events in our future, God’s will is that we should determine what will happen. What a child does when not told what to do is the final indicator of who that child is. And so it is for us and our heavenly Father.” (61)

“The role of the Scriptures is to provide us with a general understanding of God, and to inspire and cultivate a corresponding faith. The power of stories alone to generate life-changing faith is overestimated today ... Very often in my experience the word given *to* me is actually spoken *by* me. In a way I have come to recognize through repeated occurrence, it simply comes out, with no preliminaries.” (66)

“Are we ‘in tune?’” God may be speaking to us and we don’t hear him. (68) “Are we ready vessels?” Some may not be able to make any good use of a word from God because of how they are living. Are they ready to obey and change if God should so direct? (69)

When God speaks it is to accomplish his good purpose in our lives. “When our lives are devoted to the will of God, he has reason to speak to us ... When God speaks to us it often comes as a disturbing element in our lives (quoting G. Campbell Morgan) (71)

Advice: “If you believe God has told you to do something, ask him to confirm it to you three times: through his Word, through circumstances, and through other people who may know nothing of the situation.” (quoting Joyce Huggett) (85)

“In the still small voice of God we are given a message that bears the stamp of his personality quite clearly ...” (87)

“Generally speaking, God will not compete for our attention.” (90)

“The reality of God’s voice does not make seeking for it unnecessary. When I seek for something, I look for it everywhere. It is when we seek God earnestly, prepared to go out of our way to examine anything that might be his overture toward us – including the most obvious things like Bible verses or recurring thoughts – that he promises to be found (Jer 29:28). But we will be able to seek him only if we honestly believe that he might explicitly address us in ways suitable to his purposes in our lives.” (91)

“No means of communication between God and us is more commonly used in the Bible or the history of the church than the voice of definite, individual human beings. In such cases, God and the person he uses speak conjointly ... That is, of all the ways in which a message comes from outside the mind or personality of the person addressed, it most commonly comes through a human being ...” (96)

God also addresses us through impressions in our own spirits, the “still small voice”. This is the primary subjective way God addresses us. (99)

“God uses our self-knowledge or self-awareness, heightened and given a special quality by his presence and direction, to search us out and reveal to us the truth about ourselves and our world. And we are able to use his knowledge of himself – made available to us in Christ and the Scriptures – to understand in some measure his thoughts and intentions toward us and to help us see his workings in our world.”(100) “In this way we are addressed by him through our own thoughts.” (101)

“Therefore, we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds.” (Roman 12:2).
God’s gracious incursions into our souls can make our thoughts his thoughts ... Although reoccurring thoughts are not always an indication that God is speaking, they are really not to be lightly disregarded. The thoughts and feelings in the mind and spirit of one who is surrendered to God should be treated as if God were walking through one’s personality with a candle, directing one’s attention to things one after the other.” (102)

“But a biblical Christian is not just someone who holds certain beliefs about the Bible. He/she is also someone who leads the kind of life demonstrated in the Bible: a life of personal, intelligent interaction with God.” (104)

“Often God does not give us what we ask for, but I believe that he will always answer, always respond to us in some way ... God is not impassive toward us like an unresponsive pagan idol; he calls us to grow into a life of personal interchange with him that does justice to the idea of our being his children.” (105)

“As Bible history proceeds, we notice that in the process of divine communication, the greater the maturity of the listener, the greater the clarity of the message” (110)

“God in his mercy often speaks to us in obscure ways in order to allow us the room and time we need to respond ... It is therefore natural and right that God’s word comes to us in forms that we must struggle to understand. This is even true of the Bible which is very explicit in many respects, but still requires persistent and energetic work to understand it.” (112)

“In guidance, when God shows us a sign, it doesn’t mean we’ve received the final answer. A sign means we are on the way.” (114)

“There is, finally, a silence that speaks – which, paradoxically, ‘says’ all....” (115)

“We are told that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. How did he do it? By speaking, by a sequence of directly creative words ... According to the record he said, ‘Let there be light.’ God’s speaking – the word of God – is simply the expression of his mind. By the expression of his mind, then, he created light ... The word of God is *invisible*; it is the spiritual reality that produces all that *is* visible.” (122-3)

“God reigns in his kingdom through his speaking.” (142)

“Only by *showing* how to live can we teach how to live. It is by our example – more precisely, by the kind of life that is in us and makes us examples of God’s indwelling ... Collectively the ‘called-out’ people of God, the church, is empowered to stand up for wandering humanity to see ... Individually, the disciple and friend of Jesus who has learned to work shoulder to shoulder with his or her Lord, stands in this world as a point of contact between heaven and earth ... Thus, the disciple stands as an envoy or a receiver by which the kingdom of God is conveyed into every quarter of human affairs.” (146-147)

“As the word of God in creation brought forth light and matter and life, so the gospel of Christ comes upon us while we are biologically alive but dead to God. The gospel both empowers and calls forth a response by its own power, enabling us to see and enter the kingdom of God as participants. It opens the door of the mind and enters the heart. From there it is able to progressively transform the whole personality.” (150)

“Christ through his word removes the old routines in the heart and mind ... and in their place he puts his thoughts, his attitudes, his beliefs ... he brings clarity, truth, love, confidence, and hopefulness ... now, listening for God’s voice is natural.” (154-155)

“Once the new life begins to enter our soul, however, we have the responsibility and opportunity of ever more fully focusing our whole being on it and wholly orienting ourselves toward it. This is our part, and God will not do it for us.” (158)

“We may mistakenly think that if God spoke to us, we would automatically know who is speaking without having to learn, but that is simply a mistake ... it seems that, at first, we must be *told* that God is speaking to us and possibly even be helped to detect his voice. Only later do we come, without assistance, confidently to distinguish and recognize his voice as his voice. That ability comes only with experience.” (169)

“A life lived by listening to God speaking is not one that excludes our own judgment. Listening to God does not make our own decision-making process unnecessary. We are still the ones who make the decisions.” (173)

“In my own experience, I first became aware that it was God’s word that was coming to me by the effects it had on myself and others around me. My main work for God is that of a teacher. I have occasionally received insights that, while perhaps of little significance in themselves, were experience by me as literally staggering.” (176)

“The content of a word that is truly from God will always conform to and be consistent with the truths about God’s nature and kingdom that are made clear in the Bible ... In order to qualify as the voice of God, a thought, perception or other experience must conform to the principles – the fundamental truths – of Scripture.” (178)

“More of God’s speaking to me has come in conjunction with study and teaching of the Bible than with anything else.” (183)

“We all know what foolishness sometimes follows on the heels of the words ‘God told me.’ ... We need to know what the voice of God is like, how it comes, and what kinds of things it might say, if we are to protect ourselves and those around us in the fellowship of the faithful from people who are malicious or being carried away with voices contrary to God.” (186-187)

“Faith is not opposed to knowledge; it is opposed to sight. And grace is not opposed to effort; it is opposed to earning. Commitment is not sustained by confusion but by insight. The person who is uninformed or confused will inevitably be unstable and vulnerable in action, thought and feeling.” (194)

“The infallibility of the speaker – as is the case when God is the speaker – does not, and need not, guarantee infallibility of the hearer. But fortunately, as we all know, speakers who are not even close to being perfect still communicate reliably and regularly. I know my children’s voices well and would recognize them under a very wide range of circumstances. Generally, I understand what they say. But I would know it was one of them speaking, even if I could not understand what was said.” (196)

“Generally, it is much more important to cultivate the quiet, inward space of a constant listening than to always be approaching God for specific direction ... I am led to the following conclusion: Direction will always be made available to the mature disciple, if without it, serious harm would befall people concerned in the matter or the cause of Christ.” (200-201)

A specific word may not come to us from God because “in general, it is God’s will that we ourselves should have a great part in determining our path through life. This does not mean that he is not with us. Far from it. God both develops and, for our good, tests our character by leaving us to decide ... We are dealing here with the essence of human personality as God has ordained it. A child cannot develop into a responsible, competent human being if he or she is always told what to do. Personality and character are, in essence inner directedness.” (204)

“The great height of our development as disciples of Christ is not that we should always be hearing God’s voice, but that we should have been trained under the hand of God – which includes hearing God as he speaks and guides – in such a way that we are able to stand at our appointed times and places in faith, hope and love even without a word from God: ‘and having done everything, to stand firm’ (Eph 6:13).” (209)

“The greatest of divides between human beings and human cultures is between those who regard the visible world as being of primary importance ... and those who do not. Today we live in a (western) culture that overwhelmingly gives primary, if not exclusive, importance to the visible ... But neither God, nor the human mind and heart, are visible. It is so with all truly personal reality ... God and the self accordingly meet in the *invisible* world because they *are* invisible *by nature*.” (219)

“Spiritual people are not those who engage in certain spiritual practices; they are those who *draw their life from a conversational relationship with God*.” (222)