



# Hearing the Voice of God

## Part 4: Impressions, Leadings, And Hearing Voices

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As a relatively new believer, during my first year at Bible College, I had a strong desire to see my friends and relatives come to know the Lord. I prayed for their salvation and took every opportunity to share my newfound faith. After a few months, I began to get discouraged in my evangelism efforts by my lack of success.

In the middle of that discouragement, I was given an audio tape by a friend. The tape described how to pray for unsaved friends and relatives in such a way as to almost guarantee their salvation. This being almost 15 years ago, I don't remember the title of the message or even the speaker's name, but according to the teaching, the fact that more people are not being saved is due to Christians not knowing how to effectively pray for unbelievers. This tape offered the answer and I was hungry for that answer!

The teaching promoted such practices as binding Satan, rebuking Satan, praying "the blood of Christ" over relatives and friends, praying the "hedge of thorns" around people, and renouncing generational curses. None of these are the least bit biblical! In fact, these practices have more in common with a mystical, superstitious, occult worldview than a scriptural, biblical worldview.

Young in my faith and ignorant of the Scriptures, this tape revolutionized my prayer life! Now I understood that I could pray people into the kingdom if only I could get the wording down. I began to diligently pray certain phrases, and call down certain spiritual incantations that I had been told would release my fallen relatives from the grip of the evil one in order that they could then be reached with the gospel. I had been duped.

I, along with numerous other students, accepted such practices and teachings uncritically. The one question which should have been asked, which should have been paramount in everyone's mind, was never entertained: "**Does the Bible teach these practices?**" Unfortunately, this is a question that is being asked with less and less

frequency in our increasingly biblically illiterate churches. It seems that professing Christians are becoming less and less concerned with searching the Scriptures to test all things by the Word of God (**Acts 17:11; 1 Thess. 5:21**).

The same applies to the practice of "hearing the voice of God." This notion that each Christian receives special and direct instructions from God has become so much a part of the culture of the church, that to question it almost qualifies one as a heretic.<sup>1</sup> Yet I find few who are willing to ask, "Are these practices really biblical?"

### A Quick Review

I have spent the last couple of chapters explaining some foundational principles that should serve to inform our understanding on this subject.

**First, Scripture alone should inform our belief and practice.** Scripture alone is the revelation of God and His will to men. To deny that God speaks through the Bible alone is to deny the historic orthodox Christian teaching regarding the Bible and to embrace the foundational belief of Roman Catholicism, the cults, and every non-Christian religion in the world regarding God's Word.

**Second, my evaluation of this practice has nothing to do with what God can or cannot do.** I am not putting God in a box and saying He cannot do a particular thing. *God can do whatever He wants to do, but I can't teach or practice whatever I want to teach or practice.* I can only teach Scripture. The question is not what **can** God do, but what does Scripture say that He **does** do?

**Third, the Bible simply does not teach that Christians receive direct and personal direction from God** in the form of nudgings, promptings, open doors, still small voices

<sup>1</sup> For a concrete example, please see my review of *Walking With God* written by John Eldredge which is part 12 in this series. Eldredge's view of those who disagree with him can only be described as disdain and contempt.

or impressions. You can read the Bible from cover to cover and you never see an example of such leading. There are no commands from Jesus or the Apostles, nor is there a passage or series of passages that give instruction on hearing God's voice and receiving direct heavenly telegrams.

It is difficult to assert and then prove a negative, but one thing I can do is take each of these practices and evaluate the texts of Scripture that are used to prop them up. The question we must return to continually must always be: "Does this passage teach this practice?"

### **The Difference Between "Words" and "Teaching"**

The examination of any passage of Scripture must always take into account the context in which we find a verse or a phrase. By examining the context of a passage we will avoid the error of thinking that because a particular word or phrase is used that any teaching or doctrine attached to that word or phrase is necessarily biblical.

We need to be careful that we do not think that a certain practice is biblical simply because we can find a verse in which the practice seems to be mentioned. For instance, on the tape I mentioned earlier, the teacher talked about "praying a hedge of thorns" around a lost person so as to prevent Satanic influence. He was quick to quote **Hosea 2:6** which reads, "**Therefore, behold, I will hedge up her way with thorns. . . .**" See the mention of a hedge of thorns? Well, it should be obvious that if we want to bring a lost person to Christ or protect our loved ones from Satanic influence that we need to employ that hedge of thorns by praying it around someone.

We would be quick to acknowledge that the word "hedge" and "thorns" do appear in this verse. However, even a cursory study of **Hosea 2:6** would reveal that Hosea is not speaking of something we pray into existence, or something which protects us from Satan. Though the verse mentions a hedge and thorns, Hosea is not speaking at all of spiritual warfare. **Hosea 2:6** does not support in any way a practice of praying a hedge of thorns.

The same could be said of "binding" (**Matt. 16:19; 18:18**), and the "blood of Christ" (**1 Peter 1:2**). Certainly, the words "blood of Christ" appear in Scripture but not as something we are to "pray over people" or "plead." Likewise, the "binding" is mentioned, but is the passage speaking of some prayer that we pray which halts demonic activity and power? Or is there something different going on in the text? Does the mention of these phrases lend support to whatever teaching we want to attach to them? Certainly not. Each text must be examined in its context to determine what that text

is teaching.

The importance of this distinction will become evident when we examine being "led by the Spirit," the "still small voice," and "open doors," all phrases which appear in Scripture but have been co-opted by the "Hearing from God" theology.<sup>2</sup>

### **But What About. . . ?**

#### **1) What about impressions, promptings, nudgings and feelings?**

According to the conventional wisdom, God speaks to us through our thoughts, feelings, or inner mental impressions which we receive. According to popular author, John Eldredge, such "conversational intimacy" is the lot of every believer, or at least should be. Eldredge boldly asserts, "*I assume that an intimate, conversational walk with God is available, and is meant to be normal. I'll push that a step further. I assume that if you **don't** find that kind of relationship with God, your spiritual life will be stunted. And that will handicap the rest of your life.*"<sup>3</sup>

People take these nudgings and impressions for the voice of God all the time. It comes out in phrases such as, "*The Lord told me I was supposed to go talk to Jack and encourage him,*" or, "*The Lord was clearly leading me to take this job,*" or, "*God spoke to my heart and told me I needed to pray for my sick grandmother.*"

There is nothing wrong with encouraging someone, taking a job or praying for a sick relative, but what makes us think that these were divine directives? Do you assume that every stray thought you have is a divine directive? Or just the stray thoughts that seem to be benevolent or result in a good outcome? Where in Scripture do we see anyone being led through an impression?

It is safe to assume with the mention of prophets and teachers in the church in Antioch that when the Spirit spoke to Paul and Barnabas setting them apart for gospel preaching ministry, the command came through the prophets that were in the church (**Acts 13:1-4**). Nothing is said about an impression or feeling. Paul didn't receive a nudge or a feeling.

Let me offer a hypothetical situation: You are sitting in

- 2 I am greatly indebted to *Decision Making and the Will of God* by Greg Koukl from [Stand to Reason](http://StandtoReason.com) for his thoughtful and thorough evaluation of these practices. I highly recommend his message series *Decision Making and the Will of God* available from Stand to Reason ([www.str.org](http://www.str.org)). I would also recommend a book by the same title, *Decision Making and the Will of God* by Gary Friesen published by Multnomah (also available through Stand to Reason Ministries).
- 3 John Eldredge, *Walking With God* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 7. Part 12 of this series contains a thorough examination of this book and Eldredge's teachings.

your reading chair reading a book about a missionary and find out that his wife was from Canada. Suddenly you think about some people you know from Canada and your friend Chris pops into your mind. You think, "I haven't talked to Chris in a long time. I wonder how things are going with him." Is God telling you to call Chris? Why should I believe that this is the voice of God? What passage of Scripture tells me that when God wants me to contact someone He will make their name pop into my mind? How can I be sure that it was God that brought that name to my mind? How do I know it wasn't Satan, or my flesh? Maybe I thought of Chris because I was reading a book that mentioned Canada! Could it really be as simple as that?!

What if you decide to not call Chris? After all, you are reading a book you are enjoying and really don't have the time to call Chris now. Are you being disobedient to the voice of God? Some would say yes. But once again, why should you for one minute believe that your stray thoughts and feelings are the voice of God? There is nothing in Scripture that says that God leads this way! How can God hold you responsible to obey an unclear directive? What God wants obeyed He has written down! He has made it clear.

It is disturbing to me how much confidence Christians place in these impressions and feelings. I would even dare to say that often it is more confidence than they place in Scripture itself!

Scripture says the "heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked" (**Jeremiah 17:9-10**). In my flesh dwells nothing good (**Romans 7:18**), and yet it is to the heart and mind, to feelings and thoughts, that Christians continually turn for divine guidance. This, in spite of the fact that the Bible warns me against trusting in myself, my own understanding, or my heart. Are we not warned that the heart is consistently unreliable, subjective, and easily deceived?

There is not a single example or teaching in all of Scripture which says that God leads us through impressions, nudgings, or subjective inner promptings. It is just the opposite. As we saw in part 2, we are continually directed back to Scripture as the means of knowing and hearing the voice of God, not our inner thoughts or voices in our heads. Just because you think it, does not mean God said it.

Seeking to be led through some inner prompting, still small voice, or subjective impression is nothing more than a "Christianized mysticism." One of the core tenants of mysticism is the belief "*that direct knowledge of God, spiritual truth, or ultimate reality can be attained through*

*subjective experience (as intuition or insight).*"<sup>4</sup> In all fairness, it would not be right to use the label "mystic" or "mysticism" to describe these practices or their practitioners. However, in practice this "I felt led" theology ends up looking a lot like mysticism or even a modern form of Gnosticism.<sup>5</sup> How is it that some of the more "enlightened" Christians get this specialized revelation, a special knowledge of God's will which is not revealed in Scripture? How does this differ from mysticism and/or gnosticism?

## 2) What about being "led by the Spirit?"

Have you ever heard another Christian speak of being "led by the Spirit," or perhaps used similar terms yourself? This type of verbiage is thrown around quite liberally in Christian circles with little thought as to what the words actually mean.

People often speak of the need to be "open to the leading of the Spirit." It is not uncommon to hear someone say that they are "seeking to be led by the Spirit" in a particular decision, or to even claim that they are currently "being led by the Spirit" to do whatever it is they are engaged in.

You might just as often hear this expressed in the past tense, "I felt led to call you," "I felt led to bring the subject up," or "I felt led to encourage Bob."

This all sounds so "spiritual." After all, who is more spiritual than the man or woman who is so submitted to the Spirit that they are the recipients of direct divine communications? Who is more spiritual than the Christian who has so honed their spiritual skills as to be able to live their lives in constant obedience to ever-present direction of the Spirit? Unfortunately, it is the case that this "spirituality" is often played as a trump card against people who might question the actions or the insights of someone being "led by the Spirit." After all, who can argue or reason with someone being "led by the Spirit?" To do so would, by default, place you in opposition to the Spirit of God Himself.

This also sounds so "humble." It is such a humble person who does not do their own will but is constantly submitted to the direction of the Spirit. It is so humble to be willing to

4 Merriam-Webster, I. (1996, c1993). *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*. Includes index. (10th ed.). Springfield, Mass., U.S.A.: Merriam-Webster.

5 Gnosticism was a heresy which began to spring up in seed-form during the lives of the Apostles but did not find full expression and following until the Second Century AD. The word "Gnostic" comes from the Greek word "*gnosis*" which means "knowledge." A Gnostic believed, among other things, that the key to saving-truth was hidden in a knowledge that was beyond that revealed in Scripture. Gnostics taught that they possessed a secret knowledge revealed apart from Scripture, a knowledge available only to enlightened followers.

receive and live moment by moment by the Spirit's promptings.

John Eldredge goes so far as to say that such “conversational intimacy” is the mark of a growing, spiritual Christian. If you don't experience such intimate divine direction, you are going to be stunted and handicapped in your spiritual life. Eldredge writes, “*I assume that an intimate, conversational walk with God is available, and is meant to be normal. I'll push that a step further. I assume that if you **don't** find that kind of relationship with God, your spiritual life will be stunted. And that will handicap the rest of your life.*”<sup>6</sup>

If one were to question the legitimacy of these “divine directives” it could only be because they are “handicapped” and “stunted” in their own walk with God. The implication is obvious: “if you don't have such a 'conversational walk' with God, you are not as spiritual or humble as I am.” Just try to reason with someone who has bought into that theology!

Doesn't Scripture speak of being “led by the Spirit?” Yes, as a matter of fact, it does. Unlike “nudgings,” “promptings,” and “impressions” the words “led by the Spirit” actually appear in Scripture. Fortunately for us, not only does this phrase appear, but quite a bit of attention is given to what being “led by the Spirit” looks like. We can then examine the texts to see what is meant by the phrase “led by the Spirit.”

Without any consideration given to the context of these verses, some read the words “led by the Spirit” and think that the Bible is teaching that we should be constantly led by God's Spirit through our subjective feelings and impressions. So, again, the appearance of a phrase or word in the Bible is not sufficient to establish as valid whatever someone might believe or teach that those words or phrases mean. The question is: “What does the Bible mean when it speaks of being 'led by the Spirit?’”

We find that being “led by the Spirit” is only mentioned a few times. We find this phrase in **Romans 8:12-14** and **Galatians 5:16-20** and three texts in the Gospels. We will look at each in due course.

**Romans 8:12-14, “So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh - for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.”**

6 John Eldredge, *Walking With God* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 7. Eldredge disparages and scoffs at those who believe that God speaks only through His Word to direct His children. The doctrine of Sola Scriptura (Scripture alone) is ridiculed and described as an error which has led to much despair, ignorance, and disobedience to God's will.

We can tell right away that Paul is contrasting the life lived in the flesh, under the dominion of the flesh and the life lived in the Spirit, under the control of the Spirit. You can see this contrast as you read through the first 11 verses of chapter 8. Paul says in verse 4 that the law is fulfilled in us “**who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.**” You can see the contrast between living in the flesh and living in the Spirit.

Paul then gives characteristics of those who live in the flesh. They “**set their minds on the things of the flesh**” (v. 5). Having their mind set on the flesh is “**death**” (v. 6). The fleshly mind is “**hostile toward God,**” “**does not subject itself to the law of God,**” and is “**not even able to do so.**” The result is that those “**in the flesh cannot please God**” (v. 8).

Those who live according to the Spirit are just the opposite. They “**set their minds on the things of the Spirit**” (v. 5). They are indwelt by the Spirit of God because they belong to Christ and “**if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him**” (v. 9).

Those who are believers do not live in death, in the flesh, hostile to God. They do not walk in darkness, in death, in sin. They live according to the Spirit by “**putting to death the deeds of the body**” (v. 13).

Those who are “in the flesh” (unregenerate) cannot please God. They do not have the Spirit of God, do not belong to God, and remain in death hostile to God. Those who have the Spirit are led by the Spirit, for they are the sons of God. Those in the flesh are not sons of God for they have never been regenerated.

In Romans 8 Paul is building a case for living a holy, righteous life that is the product of the Spirit of God that dwells in us. In verse 12 Paul reaches the main point of his argument, “**So then we are not under obligation to the flesh, but the Spirit.**” We have an obligation to “**put to death the deeds of the body.**” Those who “**put to death the deeds of the body**” (v. 13) are identified as those who “**are being led by the Spirit of God**” and thus are “**sons of God.**”

Don't miss this: ***Those who are putting to death the deeds of the body are those who are being led by the Spirit.*** Romans 8 has nothing whatsoever to do with hearing a voice in your ear, receiving direct divine guidance or decision making. Being led by the Spirit has everything to do with putting to death the deeds of the flesh and living a holy, righteous life.

The teaching of Romans 8 is rather straightforward. Those who are “led by the Spirit” are those that resist sinful impulses and walk in holiness. Holy living is the result of

being led by the Spirit. All those who live holy are being led by the Spirit.

The notion of hearing God's voice or waiting for some mystical prompting is completely foreign to Romans 8! That is not even close to what Paul is talking about. It is only the worst abuse of Scripture that can read Romans 8 and walk away with a theology that being led by the Spirit means hearing a still small voice or obeying some subjective inner prompting from the Spirit. That is not at all what Paul has in mind in that passage.

OK, well, perhaps it is not in **Romans 8**, but what about the other place where being "led by the Spirit" is mentioned? What about **Galatians 5**? Since Paul is the author of both passages, we might suspect at the outset that he is going to mean the same things by that phrase in Galatians 5 as he did in Romans 8, but let's check it out to make sure.

**Galatians 5:16-21 - But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law. Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.**

Very quickly we can see that Paul's point in Galatians 5 is the same as in Romans 8. Those who "walk in the Spirit" (v. 16) are those who are "led by the Spirit" (v. 18). Those who are "led by the Spirit are not under the law" because they are believers. Believers are not under the law, but under grace. Like the case in Romans 8, "the law is fulfilled in those who walk according to the Spirit" because they walk in love which is the fulfillment of the law. Those in the flesh are under the law and have not yet been delivered from its condemnation because they are not believers - they will "not inherit the kingdom of God" (v. 21).

In contrasting the Spirit and the flesh, Paul lists a host of sins which are the products of the flesh. Then he lists the fruit of the Spirit which is produced in those who are being "led by the Spirit" who are the sons of God (v. 22-23). "Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passion and desires" (Galatians 5:24). Notice that Paul's point here is the same as in Romans 8 when he says that if you live "by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body" because "all who are

**being led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God" (Romans 8:13-14).**

Galatians 5 and Romans 8 are teaching the same thing and it has nothing to do with hearing a voice from God or being led by some subjective inner spiritual prompting. Clearly, in these passages, being led by the Spirit has nothing whatsoever to do with hearing the voice of God, or sensing the Spirit's leading in decision making. Rather, to be "led by the Spirit" is to mortify the flesh and live a holy life by the power of the Spirit of God.

Look at the following contrast between the definitions of "led by the Spirit" as per Paul and as per the modern "felt led" Christian theology:

**Paul's meaning:** *living a holy life by power of the Spirit*

**Modern meaning:** *hearing God direct me by impressions*

Christians have taken a biblical phrase, "being led by the Spirit," and stripped it of its *biblical meaning*, assigned it a meaning that Paul never intended and Scripture does not support and built an entire theology of divine guidance on it. This is abuse of Scripture on a level that would make a Jehovah's Witness blush! You will hear Christians talk about being "led by the Spirit" all the time, yet they do not use it the way Paul did.

The last place where being "led by the Spirit" is mentioned is the gospels (**Matthew 4:1; Mark 1:12; Luke 4:1**). All three passages have to do with the same event in the life of our Lord. They describe Jesus being "led by the Spirit" out into the wilderness where He was tempted by Satan.

The text does not say how this was accomplished whether it was directly or indirectly. A good case can be made that since Jesus was the Son of God, and a prophet of God, that His experiences as the incarnate Son of God were unique to Him. We are simply not given enough information about this leading in the gospels to understand what this "leading" looked like. There certainly is no indication that we are intended to follow this pattern, or to build a theology of divine guidance off of those references.

So what about "being led by the Spirit?" I would say that is a good thing - if you mean what the Bible means, which is living a holy life of righteous conduct and putting to death the deeds of the flesh. The Bible simply does not teach that being "led by the Spirit" means we should seek, receive and obey our inner promptings, impressions, or stray thoughts.

### 3) What about the "still small voice?"

If you want to read about the "still small voice" you have to turn to **1 Kings 19** and read about the prophet Elijah. After his confrontation with the prophets of Baal on Mount

Carmel, Elijah fled from Queen Jezebel and hid in the wilderness. After arriving at Horeb, the mountain of God, Elijah has a conversation with God Himself - something we would expect from an Old Testament *prophet* but not something we are told is the lot of every Christian.

The text says that Elijah saw the earthquake, the great wind, and the fire, but the Lord was not in any of these. Then there was a quiet blowing and then a voice said, "What are you doing here, Elijah" (**1 Kings 19:1-14**)?

Christians talk about the "still small voice" and use the term as a metaphor to describe hearing God speaking in our hearts in some subjective fashion like thoughts or impressions we receive.

We should pause a moment to recognize the obvious: Elijah heard a **voice**. It was a **voice**. It was not an impression, nudging, feeling, or stray thought. God did not speak it "to his heart" but for his ears. He heard it. It was spoken. He had a conversation with God that we can put quotation marks around. It was an audible revelatory voice. It was not an inner sensing or feeling.

Elijah had no uncertainty about what God had said to him because he heard a voice. Elijah did not have to try to "sense" what God was saying, to pray about it, evaluate his feelings, or seek a confirmation! He knew because he heard the words that God audibly spoke to him.

It is not unusual for Elijah to have a conversation with God since he was a prophet. That was how Old Testament prophets functioned in their God-given office.

The case study of Elijah is another example of how some take a biblical passage, even a biblical phrase, and use it in an unbiblical way, even changing the meaning of words and phrases in the text. According to **1 Kings 19**, the "still small voice" was the unmistakable audible voice of God speaking to Elijah. According to modern "felt led" theology, the still small voice is an inaudible feeling, stray thought, or impression by which we subjectively sense God's leading. The passage in 1 Kings offers no support to those who think God whispers in their hearts. The conversation Elijah had with God was not a series of nudgings or thoughts, but an audible voice that he heard.

### **Fair and Balanced**

What I have just offered concerning these Scripture texts is a fair and accurate assessment of these verses in their contexts. The simple fact is that these verses **do not teach** the practices that they are typically pressed into service to support. We have no authority to divorce verses from their biblical context, reassign meaning to words and phrases, and press them into service to support our own beliefs. If an

honest look at the passage shows that it does not support this practice then the practice needs to be seen as **unbiblical** and then abandoned. These unbiblical practices should not be taught as sacraments of ultra spiritual Christianity by using phrases and verses ripped from their context and used as proof texts. This constitutes an abuse of Scripture that no Bible-loving Christian should countenance.

The Bible does not teach that God leads us through our thoughts, impressions, nudgings, or promptings. The Bible does not assign divine authority to our hunches or impulses. **It is simply not there!**

Once again, the one question we should most often ask is the one that most Christians seldom do, "Does Scripture teach this?" If you are not concerned about having that question answered then why do you have a Bible to begin with? Toss the thing out! After all, you certainly don't need a Bible if God is speaking to you through some mystical inner impression.

There are more things to evaluate. What about having "a peace about it?" What about "fleece?" What about "open doors" and "confirmations" and "signs?" We'll take up those subjects and the texts that are used to support them in our next chapter.

Without Wax -

