



Hearing the Voice of God

Part 10: Spurgeon On Hearing God's Voice

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If you walked up to a fellow believer 50 years ago and said, "God spoke to me and revealed. . ." they would assume that you had been reading your Bible that morning. Today if you walk up to someone and say the same thing, a whole different sentiment is conveyed. Today it would be assumed that you heard a "still small voice" whisper in your ear, you got an "impression," or you "felt led" to do something. Oh how the times are a changing!

Unfortunately, "hearing from God" in modern evangelicalism has nothing to do with reading the Bible and understanding it. Instead, it has to do with a very subjective, personal, feelings based practice of trying to hear God speak *apart from Scripture*.

It is my contention that this second, and very new and modern view is not only subjective, dangerous, and presumptuous, but also grossly unbiblical.¹

That is not to say that people in previous centuries never claimed to be led by impressions, nudgings and feelings. There were many who did. However this notion, which today is nearly a sacrament among evangelicals, was historically frowned upon, warned against, and rejected as being quite contrary to the teaching of the Scriptures - which it is.

We are revisiting this subject in order to analyze this teaching as addressed by two historical figures, Jonathan Edwards and Charles Spurgeon. We looked at Edwards last month. Now we turn our attention to Spurgeon.

A Brief Overview of Spurgeon

Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-92) was England's best-known preacher for most of the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1854, just four years after his

conversion, Spurgeon, then only 20, became pastor of London's famed New Park Street Church (formerly pastored by the famous Baptist theologian John Gill).²

Spurgeon is one of my favorite figures of church history. Known as the "Prince of Preachers," Spurgeon preached over 36,000 times during his pastoral ministry often to crowds in excess of 10,000 people, in a day without electronic voice amplification!

According to Spurgeon expert Phil Johnson, Charles Spurgeon was a cessationist, meaning that he regarded the apostolic sign gifts as unique to the era of the formation of the New Testament. Spurgeon believed that the genuine gifts of tongues, healing, and miracles all ceased before the end of the Apostolic era.

Ironically, Spurgeon is often quoted by charismatics as someone sympathetic with their view on hearing the voice of God. This is because Spurgeon did from time to time act upon strong subjective impressions as if they were special revelatory messages from the Holy Spirit.³

Although examples could be offered where Spurgeon acted on such impressions, whenever He discussed such things, he warned of the dangers of such a mystical approach to being led by God.

Some Quotes from Spurgeon

Likely you have crossed paths with folks who think that every spiritual idea that presents itself to their minds must be God speaking to them. They measure of their spirituality by the number of such impressions that they receive and follow. If they don't race after some course of action, they think they are disobeying the voice of God. So, they follow after every still small voice and feeling cart blanc, as if it were a directive from God, because they believe it is.

I have known people to lay aside all sound doctrine,

rational thinking, and Scripture itself to follow after what they believe God was telling them through “impressions.” Spurgeon warned against this in sermon 2185, “*I hope that none of us will ever fall into the snare of following the guidance of impressions made upon us by texts which happen to come prominently before our minds. You have judgments, and you must not lay them aside to be guided by accidental impressions.*”

Spurgeon was addressing the practice (which is pandemic among modern evangelicals) of seeing in Scripture some message customized for them which they think is mysteriously contained in the text. This personal message is somehow “given to them by the Holy Spirit” when it springs off the page. I had a friend tell me that he named his son a certain name because he was reading in the Old Testament and when he read that particular name, “The Holy Spirit told me that is what the child’s name should be.”

By what should we order our life? Strong impressions or Scripture? Spurgeon answered this in his eloquent and even humorous way in sermon 878. I have to confess that these next words from Spurgeon are among my favorites! If you are easily offended, please do us both a favor and stop reading right here. If you have thin skin, and you persist in reading, you have been warned.

“Some, I know, fall into a very vicious habit, which habit they excuse themselves - namely, that of ordering their footsteps according to impressions.

“Every now and then I meet with people whom I think to be rather weak in the head, who will journey from place to place and will perform follies by the gross under the belief that they are doing the will of God because some silly whim of their diseased brains is imagined to be an inspiration from above.” [Note: I told you to stop reading if you were easily offended!] *There are occasionally impressions of the Holy Spirit which guide men where no other guidance could have answered the end. I do not doubt the old story of the Quaker who was disturbed at night and could not sleep and was led to go to a person’s house miles away and knock at the door just at the time when the inhabitant was about to commit suicide - just in time to prevent the act.”*

In the same sermon Spurgeon confessed, “*I have been the subject of such impressions, myself, and have*

seen very singular results.” By “singular” Spurgeon meant, “extraordinary, remarkable, or exceptional.” There are times when we act upon what is in our heart or mind because we feel strongly inclined to it (when not in violation of Scripture) and we find that God grants remarkable results.

I don’t doubt that those who think God leads through impressions have themselves felt such strong leadings. As I have argued before, we all have feelings and thoughts come to our mind. The question is, “Am I instructed in Scripture to treat these impressions and feelings as God’s revelation to me? Should I live by such impressions?”

Spurgeon answers, “*But to live by impressions is oftentimes to live the life of a fool and even to fall into downright rebellion against the revealed Word of God. Not your impressions, but that which is in this Bible must always guide you. ‘To the Law and to the Testimony.’ If it is not according to this Word, the impression comes not from God - it may proceed from Satan, or from your own distempered brain! Our prayer must be, ‘Order my steps in Your Word.’”*

Common Sense over Impressions

I believe that God *can* and sometimes *does* providentially direct our steps by the ordering of suggestive providences. Since Scripture teaches that God is sovereign, we must conclude that His unseen hand is directing all things. Sometimes this is felt and sometimes this is seen. We can believe this, which I do, without falling victim to the folly of believing that this means God is whispering directives in our ears.

All these strong providences and suggestive circumstances must be tested by common sense at least and certainly tested by the Word of Truth. Spurgeon explains this:

“It needs a deliberate and judicious reflection to distinguish between the actual and apparent in professedly preternatural intimations, and if opposed to Scripture and common sense, we must neither believe in them nor obey them. The precious gift of reason is not to be ignored; we are not to be drifted hither and thither by every wayward impulse of a fickle mind, nor are we to be led into evil by superstitious impressions; these are misuses of a great truth, a murderous use of most useful edged tools. But notwithstanding all the folly

of hair-brained rant, we believe that the unseen hand may be at times assuredly felt by gracious souls, and the mysterious power which guided the minds of the seers of old may, even to this day, sensibly overshadow reverent spirits. We would speak discreetly, but we dare say no less."

Spurgeon's Balanced Perspective

Spurgeon did not "despise" those who received impressions and did say, "*Such strong impressions are not to be despised, and I have no doubt that highly spiritual minds do become like a photographer's sensitive plate, and do receive impressions. What another man may be a fool for talking of, such men may truly speak of, for God does sometimes reveal his will in this way.*"

I would agree with that assessment with the caveat that the "spiritual mind" is the one controlled not by impressions **but by the Word of God**. He who is governed by the Scripture is thus governed by the Spirit. The one governed by the Spirit will order his steps according to the Word of God, not impressions. His heart and mind will be so influenced by Scripture that he will find himself proving and doing the perfect will of God (**Romans 12:1-2**). Therefore, it would be the Word which impresses the mind and not some additional revelation. Such a "Word directed" Holy Spirit controlled man or woman will find themselves knowing and doing the good, acceptable, and perfect will of God. God's will in a given situation is brought to light as the person, submitted to the Scripture, walks in the Spirit.

Apparently trying to strike a balance, earlier in the same sermon Spurgeon said, "*Sometime, too, but rarely, God guides us by very vivid impressions. I have seen so much of people who have been impressed this way, and that way, and the other way, that I do not believe in impressions except in certain cases. I was once in conversation with two friends, one of whom was guided by his judgment, while the other was swayed by impressions, and I could not help noting that the man who was guided by impressions was, as such people always will be, "unstable as water." If I am impressed in one way one day, I may be impressed in another way the next day, so impressions are unreliable guides. There was a young man, who was impressed with the idea that he ought to preach for me one Lord's day; but*

as I was not impressed to let him do so, it stood over, and probably will continue to stand over for some little time. He had no gifts of speech, but he thought his impression was quite sufficient. When I receive a similar impression, the revelation will be a proper one, and you will have the pleasure of listening to his voice, but certainly not before that."

For Spurgeon, the tendency of some to be guided by impressions was something that needed constant reproof and warning. Sometimes following such feelings and impressions ended up producing, in the words of Spurgeon "singular results." In other words, it worked out OK. But far from being a rank pragmatist, Spurgeon recognized that under the "guidance of the Spirit" in "impressions" people committed "*follies by the gross.*"

One more comment concerning the above anecdote: Spurgeon said, "*I was not impressed to let him do so. . . He had no gifts of speech, but he thought his impression was sufficient.*" I ask you, "What do you do in such a situation if your only guide is what one 'feels led' or impressed to do?" Who was right? This young man apparently felt that God wanted Spurgeon to hand over his pulpit. Spurgeon refused. Was Spurgeon disobeying God's revealed will? Perhaps the young man's impression was a strong one. If God speaks through such means, and such impressions can be trusted and taken as God's voice to us, what are we to do when two of God's children [in this case, Spurgeon and the young man] receive differing impressions?

What if I told you that I feel very "impressed" and that "God was leading me to tell you to cash in all your retirement accounts, investments and land holdings and give the money to the building fund." How do you respond to such "leading" on my behalf?

You may say, "I don't feel led to do that."

But if feelings and impressions are to be our guide, then you're only basis for not following "my leading" is that you don't have the same leading. But of course, I could just suggest that you aren't spiritual enough to be hearing the voice of God and there must be something wrong with you if you can't sense His leading.

However, if Scripture becomes our **only** guide for knowing and doing God's will, then you can confidently say to me, "Jim, the Bible doesn't tell me that that is what I am to do. I am not led by my impressions and I am certainly not led by your impressions. You are

deceived at best and a fruitcake at worst!" And you would be right!

A Final Word From Spurgeon

There is an obvious deceptive danger in judging your duty by impressions. Spurgeon comments in Sermon 3263, "Others, too, judge of their duty by impressions. 'If I feel it impressed upon my mind,' says one, 'I shall do, it.' Does God command you to do it? This is the proper question. If he does, you should make haste, whether it is impressed upon your mind or not; but if there be no command to that effect, or rather, if it diverges from the line of God's statutes, and needs apology or explanation, hold your hand, for though you have ten thousand impressions, yet must you never dare to go by them. It is a dangerous thing for us to make the whims of our brain instead of the clear precepts of God, the guide of our moral actions. 'To the law and to the testimony,' - this is the lamp that shows the Christian true light; be this your chart, be this your compass; but as to impressions, and whims, and fancies, and I know not what beside which some have taken, -these are more wreckers lights that will entice you on the rocks. Hold fast to the Word of God, and nothing else; whoever he shall be that shall guide you otherwise, close your ears to him. If at any time, through infirmity or weakness, I should teach you anything which is contrary to this Book, cast it from you, hurl it away as chaff is driven from the wheat; if it be mine and not my Master's, cast it away. Though you love me, though I may have been the means of your conversion to God, think no more of what I say than of the very strangers in the street, if it be not consistent with the teachings of the Most High. Our guide is his written Word, let us keep to this."

Indeed! Let us keep to this.

Without wax -



More Spurgeon Quotes

"I speak most plainly here, no additional revelation is to be expected, because the book of God is ended, the revelation of God is finished, and he that adds to the sacred book is cursed."

"I have little confidence in those persons who speak of having received direct revelations from the Lord, as though He appeared otherwise than by and through the gospel. His Word is so full, so perfect, that for God to make any fresh revelation to you or me is quite needless. To do so would be to put a dishonor upon the perfection of that Word."

"There is a special curse pronounced upon any who shall add to this Book; and you may rest assured that the Holy Spirit will not so transgress in a matter which He has peremptorily forbidden all his children to commit."