

How can I be sure I'm hearing God's voice?

July 16, 2023 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

This morning we have another great question to think about:

How can I be sure that it's God's voice and not some other voice in my head that I'm listening to?

That's a great question and a very practical one too. Time and time again the Bible tells us to listen to God, to hear what He's saying, to do what He calls us to; when we actually put that into practice and listen for God's voice, how can we be sure that it's God that we're hearing and not our own ideas or some evil spiritual power whispering in our ears? There are actually verses in the New Testament that tell us to "...take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2Co 10:5 NIV) and to "...test the spirits to see whether they are from God" (1 John 4:1). How do we do that? How do we tell if it's God's voice or something else?

Now to be honest, I don't think that there's one specific Bible verse that conclusively answers our question; but for sure, the Bible helps us to think this through. So what I want to do today is take you to the book of Acts and walk you through a case study where I think we can see this very thing in action. The Apostle Peter hears a voice in his head and then has to figure out if it's God talking to him or something else and I think we can learn a lot from his example. So join me in Acts chapter 10, Acts chapter 10, starting around verse 1 and I'll show you what I mean.

So to set the stage, you can see there in verse 1 that we're introduced to a man named Cornelius (Caesarea by the sea); he's a commander in the Roman army and he is a Gentile. He's not Jewish and yet he and his family are all committed to YHWH and one day he has an angel appears to him to say 'Cornelius, send for a guy named Peter' (v. 5). Cornelius says 'ok' and he sends some guys to go get Peter.

Meanwhile, Peter is up on a roof praying (in Joppa) and he gets the munchies something fierce and then he falls into a trance and sees this far out vision. You can see it in verse 11:

- 11 He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners.
- 12 It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air.
- 13 Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."
- 14 "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."
- 15 The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."
- 16 This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven (Act 10:11-16 NIV).

Ok, so, Peter has heard a voice. According to verse 14, he *thinks* that it is God talking to him. God appears to have said 'here, you can eat all of these animals and reptiles and birds.' How can he be sure that it's God saying that and not just his stomach?

Peter's first instinct I think is to 'check the Word.' When he wants to know if this really is God talking, he goes to Scripture. God has spoken objectively and conclusively in the words of the Bible and He is not going to contradict that by some new revelation and Peter knows it. He says in verse 14: 'Surely not, Lord! ... I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.'

What Peter is doing here is processing what he has heard and seen through the lens of Scripture. He knows that God has said in Scripture (the Old Testament from Peter's point of view) that there are animals that you should not eat as a faithful follower of God. For instance, in Leviticus 20:25-26, God says:

25 " You must therefore make a distinction between clean and unclean animals and between unclean and clean birds. Do not defile yourselves by any animal or bird or anything that moves along the ground—those which I have set apart as unclean for you. 26 You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own."

And so when Peter hears this voice that he **thinks** is from God saying 'it's ok to eat these things,' he's right to check it against what God has already said.

This is important for us too. Whatever we may **think** God is saying to us, He will never contradict what He has *already* said to us in His Word. The Bible is God's objective Word to us; we know that it is God-breathed; it is written by the Holy Spirit; vetted by generations of faithful Christians. Anything else is a subjective word that has to be measured against the objective Word of God. So first thing to do when you think you hear from God – check the Word. If it goes against what God says in the Bible, then it's a non-starter; it's not from God.

And I suspect that at this point, that was probably Peter's conclusion too. He had heard a voice that said to do something God's Word said not to, so he probably dropped it and thought 'boy I must be REALLY hungry.'

But then all of a sudden, verse 17-20, the guys Cornelius sent showed up asking for Peter and Peter heard another voice saying (v. 19) "Simon, three men are looking for you. 20 So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them" (Acts 10:19-20 NIV).

And so Peter goes down to hear what the men have to say and then the next day he heads back to Cornelius with them. The trip from Joppa to Caesarea is easily a day's walk – they leave one day and arrive the next (v. 24) and I'll bet he was thinking about what was going on the whole time.

When they arrived at Cornelius's, Peter said to them (v. 28):

28 He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. 29 So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?" (Act 10:28-29 NIV).

Cornelius explains how HE heard God speak to him and then it clicks for Peter. Verse 34, he says:

34 Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism 35 but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right" (Act 10:34-35 NIV).

And then he begins to explain the good news about Jesus; how He died and rose again for the forgiveness of sins, for the sins of the Jews and for the Gentiles too. See, that vision that Peter had, the word he heard from God was not just about what he could eat, but about who was welcome in the kingdom of God. Not just Jews, but Gentiles too.

How did Peter arrive at that conclusion? What helped him to 'realize' that this is what was going on?

I think he checked what he'd heard with the Lord. First, he checked with the Word. And when he thought this was just about food, the Word seemed to suggest that this was NOT God speaking. And yet the voice kept coming and so on the road, in Cornelius' house, I think Peter was checking what He had heard with the Lord. He was comparing what he was hearing with what he knew about Jesus.

And every step of the way, I think he was probably remembering the things that Jesus had told him when He was with him.

He probably remembered that time in Mark 7 when Jesus said:

15 Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean.'" Then in verse 19, Mark actually explains: (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods "clean"). So the OLD Testament Word had said 'don't eat those things' but the Lord Himself HAD said 'you can!'

He probably remembered all the times that Jesus flaunted the Jewish law that said He wasn't allowed to associate with a Gentile – the Samaritan woman at the well, the centurion and his son that He healed, the Gaderene man with a demon out in the graveyard. He probably realized that Jesus was preparing him for the revelation that ALL people are welcome in the kingdom of God.

Peter checked what he was hearing with the Lord and realized that it all agreed with what Jesus Himself had done. He decided that this was indeed God speaking to him.

What he heard made him more like Christ and so he trusted that it was indeed God he was hearing.

So Peter heard a voice. He thought it was from God. So he checked with the Word. Then he checked with the Lord. But even still, this was a big departure from what Peter had always known. Jews are allowed to eat bacon? Gentiles are allowed in the Kingdom? That's a huge shift. It's probably a little like us growing up with the conviction that cannabis is bad – it's wrong, it's sin – and yet now your doctor is prescribing it for pain relief. It's a big shift. Imagine that, but your whole religious identity and relationship with God is tied up in it.

That's a big deal and so in time, Peter took the final step of checking what he heard 'with the fam.' He went to other mature followers of Jesus to see if what he was hearing and what he was thinking was indeed a valid way of making sense of it all.

We can see that over in Acts 11.

Acts 11, verse 1, Peter starts taking some heat from other Jews because he's allowing Gentiles to believe in Jesus and Peter just lays it out. Verse 5 he tells a whole council of believers - the who's who of the early church - everything that we've just seen:

'I heard this voice and it said take and eat and then these Gentiles showed up at my door looking for me and then I went with them and then they received the Gospel and then I realized that this voice was really and truly God saying to me that nothing is 'unclean' and that these 'unclean Gentiles' are welcome

in the Kingdom. I've thought about what God has said in His Word; I know what Jesus our Lord has said. I think that this is legitimately God speaking but what do you guys think?'

This I think is a very important step for Peter to have taken. It's one thing to hear a voice and say 'oh, it's God.' It's another to take that and go to an experienced believer(s) and say 'what do you think? Am I hearing correctly?'

And as it turned out, the family of believers listened to what Peter had to say, prayed on it and then decided that he was right, that he WAS hearing correctly. Peter DID hear God's voice and God WAS now inviting all people, not just Jewish people, into His Kingdom. Good news for us because what Peter heard opened the door for us to be here.

So, let's think about this. How can this case study help us to know when it's God's voice and when it's not? I think Peter's experience here demonstrates for us three principles:

1. Check with the Word.
2. Check with the Lord.
3. Check with the fam.

Absolute first thing to do when you think you hear God speaking: check with the Word. See what God has already said in the Bible. What you hear subjectively today will not contradict what God has said objectively when the Bible was written. In a lot of ways, the New Testament makes this a lot easier for us and so we can check with Scripture to tell if we're hearing from God in pretty much every situation. If it lines up with Scripture, it's probably God; if not, it's probably not.

If, however, there's something that Scripture doesn't address when you hear from God, the second thing to do is to check with the Lord. Compare what you're hearing with what Jesus did in His lifetime. Think about 'WWJD'? In short, would listening to what you're hearing make you more like Christ? If yes, it's probably God; if no, it's probably not.

And then if that still doesn't answer it, or if you're still not sure, the third thing to do would be to check with the family. Run what you're hearing by other faithful believers to see if what you're hearing lines up with what a faithful Christian would do. This is a real 'iron sharpens iron' situation; we help each other to discern what we are hearing and if what we are hearing really is the Word of God. We need that accountability, we need that outside perspective, we need people who don't have the same blind spots as we do to help us to process if something is from God or not. If other mature believers agree with you, it's probably from God; if not, it's probably not.

So, if you want to be sure that you are hearing God's voice: check with the Word, check with the Lord, check with the fam.

Now, as I was working through this, I was trying to think about what this would look like in practice today. And I can think of a couple situations where this might come into play, so let's just run through this quickly with a couple more case studies.

Let's say you're contemplating a big change and you want to know what God is calling you to next. That was me eight years ago, leaving behind the worship ministry that I thought I was called to to come to be

your pastor here at Langford. I mean, all the worship leading doors closed and this was flung wide open. Was God calling me to come here?

Well, first I checked the Word. Is there any biblical reason why I shouldn't be a pastor? Well, I meet the qualifications of pastors in 1 Timothy 3 and other places. I think I have the shepherding and teaching gifts that Paul talks about in Romans 12 and Peter talks about in 1 Peter 5. What I was hearing lined up with Scripture so that gave me confidence that I was indeed hearing God's voice.

Then I check with the Lord. Spent a lot of time in prayer. Spent a lot of time considering will this experience of pastoring make me more like Christ and of course the answer was yes. I can't imagine a better way to grow as a disciple of Jesus than to help other disciples in their walk. So again, that opportunity for Christlikeness gave me confidence that I was indeed hearing God's voice.

And then I checked with the fam. I talked with Doug about; I talked with at least a couple of my seminary professors about it. I went to believers I trusted and said 'I think that God is calling me to this; what do you think? Does it make sense to you, given these circumstances, given who you know I am that this is God's voice that I'm hearing?' And their affirmation gave me confidence that I was hearing God's voice too. And here I am.

I would really encourage you to do the same. If you are facing a similar situation, a big change for yourself or someone in your family, do that. I'd be happy to help you with it, thinking with you about the Word, the Lord, give you my take on it.

It strikes me though that this question applies to really spur of the moment things too. Like, I see somebody on the bench at the park in tears and I hear this voice in my head 'go talk to them.' Or I walk by someone on the sidewalk asking for money and I hear a voice saying 'give them money.' How do I know if THAT's God speaking?

Well, in that case, I would do a real quick 'Check the Word, check the Lord, check the fam.' Admittedly, this spur of the moment kind of thing doesn't give you a lot of time to act and frankly time is your best friend when you're trying to discern the will of God. Take time to weigh what you're hearing if you can.

But if you can't and whatever you're hearing passes the 'check the Word, check the Lord, check the fam' thing, I would add two more things.

1. When I hear a voice like this in my head, I try to slow down and listen with my heart. Just pause, be still, try to be calm and listen. And I have a little personal rule of thumb that I'm a little hesitant to share because it's not entirely foolproof, but I kinda think that when God speaks and truly wants me to do something, He'll say my name. Like 'yes, Graham, give that person some money' or 'no, Graham, don't feel guilty about not giving them money.' I admit that that could be a little subjective but at the same time, Jesus DID say in John 10:3-4:

"...He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out... his sheep follow him because they know his voice" (John 10:3-4 NIV). For what that's worth, I offer that to you with the caveat that it's not authoritative by any means.

2. The other thing is that when God calls you to do something, He'll give you the energy and the will to do it. Philippians 2:12-13 says: continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling,

13 for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.
(Phi 2:12-13 NIV).

That means that if you hear a voice telling you to do something and it is truly God telling you to do it, then as a follower of Jesus, God will also give you the will to do that thing and the energy and strength and boldness to obey. If not, I think chances are good that it's NOT God calling you to do it.

I'll tell you, there are times when I've felt guilty because I haven't done something, but I think that's just my own emotional response to a situation. Other times though, I feel this compulsion to act, to make a phone call, to say something to someone and often times, in retrospect, I realize that that was God compelling me to act. I think that if you have the desire and the compulsion to do something, it's probably God calling you to do it; if not, it's probably just in your head.

So, how can you be sure it's God's voice you are hearing? Check with the Word, check with the Lord, check with the fam. For spur of the moment things, listen with your heart and act when you have the will and power to do it.

Now, million dollar question: should you audibly hear God's voice?

How can I be sure that it's God's voice I'm hearing? Does that mean I should literally hear God's voice?

Well, far be it from me to say that God can't audibly speak to you or to me today. I mean, He seems to have spoken audibly to Samuel, to David, to Jesus, to Peter, to Paul and I know that some of you have had experiences where you have literally heard the voice. By and large though, I think that God speaks through His Word and in the still, small quiet of our hearts. I think there's once that I've literally 'heard' God's voice, but even then it was more internal, like hearing with my heart rather than my ears.

There's no reason to feel bad, like less of a Christian, if you don't literally here God's voice; what's important is that you hear His voice in your hearts, through His Word. What's important is that we are willing to slow down and to listen and to do the things we hear Him calling us to.

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If you're interested in this question, you may find this video from Rick Warren helpful:
<https://youtu.be/-827QmRDjUA>. Notes from a similar message are available in written form here:
<https://shakhanbookclub.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/how-to-hear-god-speak-2.pdf>