

## (A Spiritual Leader) 4. Listening To God

**Zac Poonen:**

A spiritual leader will take time to listen to God, every day.

A phrase that occurs frequently in the very first chapter of the Bible is this: "Then God said".

God said something on every one of those first six days, when He remade the chaotic earth. And each time God spoke, the earth became a better place.

So, right there on the very first page of the Bible we learn one very important truth - that we must hear what God has to say every day. And if we submit to what God tells us every day, we will be transformed into better and more useful Christians.

There's a lot of difference between hearing what God has to say to us and just reading the Bible. Remember, it was people who studied their Bibles daily who crucified the Lord. They studied their Bibles but they never heard God speaking to their hearts (See Acts 13:27). That's the danger we face too. And then, we can be as blind as they were.

Genesis 1 also teaches us that God wants to speak to us every day.

But most Christian leaders don't listen to God every day. They only read the writings of men!

It's a great tragedy if you preach only what you've heard other men speak, because the word of man can never produce anything eternal. It's only the Word that God speaks that can produce eternal fruit - as we read in Isaiah 55:11.

In Genesis 1, we read that whenever God spoke, supernatural things happened. That's how it can be in our ministry too, if we preach what God has first spoken to our own hearts.

Paul told Timothy to take heed to his own life first before his teaching, if he wanted to save himself and others (1Tim.4:16). The only way to escape self-deception is by hearing what God has to say to us.

If you don't listen to what God has to say, then you'll preach in one of the following three ways:

1. You'll find out what the so-called "great Christian preachers" in the world are saying at this time - especially in America, where most of the money for Christian work in India comes from! (I say "so-called great preachers", because these preachers are not "great" in God's eyes). You'll read their books and repeat what they say. Once you discover that a particular subject is popular in Christendom currently, you'll decide to speak much about that. Your undiscerning flock will be impressed and will consider you well read and spiritually-minded!

OR

2. You'll study Biblical themes academically and teach them like a college lecturer studies and teaches Chemistry! And one can get a doctorate in Biblical studies far more easily than a doctorate in Chemistry! Many honorary "doctorates" are being given away today by third rate Bible-colleges to "title-hungry" preachers and pastors for a few hundred rupees each! You can get as many as you like! But even if you get an earned doctorate in theology, that will still prove only that you're a clever man. You may still not know either God or His Word.

OR

3. You'll try and sense what is most acceptable to your flock - because you want to be popular with them. You'll then be like businessmen who conduct market surveys to find out what most people want. This is how most pastors preach today. And that was how all the false prophets in the Old Testament preached too - and they flourished! Every false prophet would try to sense what the nation of Israel wanted to hear and they would preach just that. So they were popular with the people and made a lot of money. There are many such false prophets in Christendom today. But every true prophet in Israel was unpopular, because they told the Jews what they NEEDED to hear, and not what they wanted to hear.

Jesus once rebuked Martha for being busy with so much work instead of being like Mary who sat and listened

to Him speak. Our Lord went on to say that what Mary did was the ONLY necessary thing in life (Lk.10:42). We must all have the attitude that Samuel had, who said, "Speak Lord, your servant is listening".

What did we see in the very first page of the Bible? Whenever God spoke, something was immediately accomplished: Light was produced, the earth came up out of the waters, trees, fish and animals were created, etc.,

Isaiah 55:10,11 tells us that the Word which goes forth from God's mouth will never return empty without accomplishing what God desires and without succeeding in the matter for which it was spoken.

Notice two words in these verses that are highly valued by all people in the world - "accomplishment" and "success".

We all want to accomplish something in our lives and we all want to succeed. But life is short and we don't have the time to experiment with various methods for success and accomplishment - certainly not in spiritual matters. We shouldn't try out some method of doing the Lord's work and discover 20 years later that that was not God's way of doing things, and that we were on the wrong track! We can be saved from all such wastage of time, if we listen to the word that God speaks. That will always bring success and accomplishment.

I want to listen to a man who listens to God - because such a man can teach me more in five minutes than theologians (with long 'tails' of degrees), can teach me in hours. John the Baptist could teach people more about God than Professor Gamaliel or any member of the Jewish Sanhedrin!

When you listen to God, you won't preach what you've read in Christian books and magazines or heard from Christian tapes. The man who hears God speaks from revelation, not from academic knowledge or study. Such a man first experiences what he reads - and then speaks forth from his life.

What you teach from your head will go only into other people's heads. But what you preach from your heart and from your life's experience will go straight into their hearts and change their lives. I'm not saying that you shouldn't prepare your messages or that you shouldn't have written notes when speaking. Whether you use notes or not depends on how good a memory you have, not on how spiritual you are. What I'm saying is that whatever you speak must be from your heart and from your life.

Today we have liberal theological colleges and evangelical theological colleges. But what's the difference between the two? In one, the information transmitted from one brain to another is theologically incorrect whereas in the other, the information transmitted is theologically correct! But spiritually speaking, the evangelical seminary may be no better than the liberal one. In both seminaries, the lecturers and the students may be lovers of money and slaves to their lusts.

Jesus did not teach His disciples like that. He did not come to make us better informed about theology. He came to make us like Him in character.

Jesus taught His disciples more about character than about theology. What about you? Do you teach your flock how to overcome the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life?

There are a lot of people in our churches who look up to us to hear what God is saying to them. It's a solemn responsibility to preach to them, Sunday after Sunday. If I were you, I would fear, because we are accountable to God for what we tell them. We have to give an account to God one day, for every message we ever preached - for what we spoke, why we spoke it, and how we spoke. If you take your responsibility in this matter seriously, your ministry can change radically.

For over twenty years now, I've judged my own ministry in the Lord's light. After I preach God's Word, I ask the Lord to tell me whether there was something unnecessary in what I said, whether I wasted people's time, whether I sought my own honour, etc., Thus I've cleansed myself gradually from these evils and from boring people and preaching "over their heads".

Do you listen to God, after you've preached a message? Do you ask Him to show you whether you could have done it better? The fact that others considered it to be a good sermon means nothing at all. What did God think of it? That is the important question.

Many of you have so many people listening to you, in your churches, Sunday after Sunday. Are you influencing

their lives for eternity? Have you changed their sense of values so that they are no longer worldly but heavenly? This is what you must ask yourself frequently.

We must be especially careful to listen to God, when we have some important decision to make.

God speaks to us through many ways.

He speaks to us primarily through His Word. If something is clearly written in God's Word, then we don't need to pray to find God's will, because it has already been revealed.

God also speaks to us through our circumstances. Our Lord has the key to every door (Rev.1:18) and when He opens a door no-one can shut it and when He shuts a door, no-one can open it (Rev.3:8). So our circumstances are very often an indication of whether God wants us to go along a particular way or not. We don't have to bang away at a door that God has not opened. We must of course pray, when we see a door shut. But if after repeated prayer, a door still remains shut, it may mean that God does not want us to go through that door. We must ask God to show us if this is so, or whether He wants us to continue in persistent prayer to open that door (Lk.11:5-9).

God also speaks to us through the advice of mature, godly brothers. Such men have gone through many experiences and they can warn us of pitfalls that we are unaware of, ourselves. We don't have to blindly obey them, but their godly counsel can help us.

God often speaks to us, while we are fellowshiping with other believers. Thus He teaches us our dependence on other members of the Body of Christ, even for revelation on His Word.

God always has something important to say to us, whenever we go through a trial or when we are sick.

God also warns us through the failures of others. If, for example, we hear of some servant of God who has fallen into sin, it is good to ask God what lessons we can learn from that man's failure (for we are all weak) and how we can preserve ourselves.

God can also speak to us when we hear news of evils being done somewhere or of accidents that have taken place. Jesus told the people of His time to repent, when they heard of Pilate butchering some Jews and when they heard of the accident in Siloam where a tower fell and killed some people – because such things could happen to anyone (Lk.13:1-4).

Let me add a word of warning however, against trying to hear what God is saying, by randomly opening the Bible and reading the first verse that you see!

If you're eager to marry a particular girl, you may open the Bible at random to find some confirmatory verse. And if you don't find it, the chances are that you will keep opening the Bible until you find the verse that you want! That's how you can deceive yourself.

I heard a story of a man who was trying to find God's will in this way, who opened the Bible at random and read, "He went away and hanged himself" (Matt.27:5)! He opened the Bible again and found, "Go and do the same" (Lk.10:37)! He opened the Bible a third time and read, "What you do, do quickly" (Jn.13:27)! That cured him forever of trying to find the will of God in this way!

There may be times however, when we are under pressure, when the Lord may encourage us through a verse that we get, by opening the Bible at random. So this method is all right if you're looking for encouragement but not if you're looking for guidance.

I want to encourage you, dear brothers, to develop the habit of listening to God. This is the single most important habit that you can ever develop.