**Perceiving God's Voice**

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# Introduction

- Perceiving God's voice—what can we reasonably expect to experience when God speaks?
- This is a question I have struggled with for my entire life as a believer.
- The question was born out of a crisis of faith, which I experienced shortly after committing my life to Christ in my teens.
- Here I was, a new believer, hearing people making some of the most radical claims:
  - *"The Lord spoke to me."*
  - *"The Lord told me such and such."*
  - *"The Spirit impressed upon me."*
  - *"God showed me something."*
  - *"The Lord directed me."*

- I desperately wanted to hear from God as well, and so I did all the things I believed I was supposed to do to posture myself to hear from Him: I fasted, I prayed, I read my Bible, I tried to live a holy life.
- But I became deeply disillusioned when I didn't hear from God in the dramatic ways I assumed everyone else was. I started asking some hard questions:
  - *Was I doing something wrong?*
  - *Was my methodology all wonky? Should I try a different approach?*
  - *Had I done something to displease Him?*

- *Should I repent and recommit my life just to be safe?*
- *Was there something fundamentally wrong with me? Am I even truly saved?*

- Those questions set me on a long journey to discover how God actually speaks and guides His people.
- Along the way, I discovered that questions about hearing God's voice almost always form part of a broader conversation: *How do we discern the will of God for our lives?*
- I found that over the centuries, Christians have generally taken one of three distinct approaches to discernment and decision-making.
- Today, I want to put all three approaches on trial.
- I would like for us to test each of them against one of the most critical, high-stakes examples of discernment and decision-making in early church history.
- Allow me to set the scene with some context before we jump in.

- Paul and Barnabas have returned from their first missionary journey and have settled in Antioch.
- For a while, Jewish and Gentile Christians coexisted peacefully. But suddenly, a group of Jewish Christians—Judaizers from Judea—arrived in Antioch with a jarring claim:
- *“Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”*
- This caused a massive theological conflict. Paul and Barnabas opposed them fiercely.
- The dispute was so severe that it couldn't be resolved locally; they had to send a delegation up to the headquarters in Jerusalem to meet with the apostles and elders.

- We need to understand the significance of what is happening here. This was not a minor disagreement.

- This was a battle over the very foundation of the Gospel, over the sufficiency of the work of Christ, over what one needed to do to be saved.
- When the delegation gathered in Jerusalem, they hardly had time to report all the things that God had been doing when the Judaizers once again began calling for the Gentile converts to be circumcised.
- Luke tells us there was *"much dispute."*
- At this point, this blossoming Christian church are looking to the apostles for a decision—a decision that would determine the way in which Christianity would be practised for the rest of history.
- Significantly, the Spirit of God does not choose to speak decisively and unmistakably.
  - There is no theophany.
  - There is no voice that booms from heaven.
  - There is no writing that appears on a wall.
- God doesn't simply give them the answer they needed. Instead, He allows them to wrestle through it, to navigate this massive decision through a discernment process.
- Today, we will take a look at precisely how they went about doing that.

**Acts 15:6–9** NKJV

6 Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter. 7 And when there had
been much dispute, Peter rose up *and* said to them: "Men *and* brethren, you know that a
good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of
the gospel and believe. 8 So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them
the Holy Spirit, just as *He did* to us, 9 and made no distinction between us and them,
purifying their hearts by faith.

**Acts 15:10–11** NKJV

[10] Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? [11] But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they."

**Acts 15:12–15** NKJV

[12] Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles. [13] And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, "Men *and* brethren, listen to me: [14] Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. [15] And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written:

**Acts 15:16–17** NKJV

[16] '*After this I will return*
*And will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down;*
*I will rebuild its ruins,*
*And I will set it up;*
[17] *So that the rest of mankind may seek the* LORD,
*Even all the Gentiles who are called by My name*,
*Says the* LORD *who does all these things.'*

**Acts 15:18–20** NKJV

[18] "Known to God from eternity are all His works. [19] Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, [20] but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, *from* sexual immorality, *from* things strangled, and *from* blood.

- And so, friends, as I said at the outset, over the centuries, Christians have generally taken one of three distinct approaches to decision-making.
- What I would like to do is review those three common approaches, weigh them against Acts 15, and establish if they offer any real value, if one approach should be preferred over another, or if it might be best to adopt elements from each approach.

- With that, let's jump in.

## 1: The Traditional or Specific-Will View

- The first approach to Christian discernment is what is referred to as the Traditional or Specific-Will View.
- This is the default setting for most believers.
- As the name suggests, proponents of this view argue that God has a detailed, specific, individual blueprint for every life. Our jobs are to discover His specific will and obey it.
- And we adopt a variety of means to try and discern His will.
- **The Strength:** People who hold this view take God's sovereignty seriously and demonstrate a deep desire to live a life of obedience that is pleasing to Him.
- **The Danger:** It struggles with the problem of subjectivity and severe *analysis paralysis*. People who believe that God has a specific will for each and every area of our lives can end up agonising over every micro-choice. The trouble is, they struggle to know with any real certainty what text of Scripture, what thought or impression, what specific circumstance, or what word from a fellow believer means anything.

- I must admit, I have defaulted to this myself.
- I recall sitting in my parents' living room, agonising over a decision, and I said to God,
- "Lord, I am not leaving this room until you speak to me and tell me what you would have me do."
- And then I became hungry and decided that the decision wasn't so earth-shatteringly important that I should starve over it.
- But you see the problem — we can often freeze up waiting for God to reveal a specific will to us.

- And so with that, let's test this approach against Acts 15.

## Testing it in Acts 15:

- Did these believers pray and ask God if He had a specific, non-negotiable will on the matter being addressed in Jerusalem?
- The passage does not explicitly state that they did.
- Can we reasonably assume that they will have prayed over the matter, and will have concluded that God did have a specific, non-negotiable will on the matter?
- I believe so. They understood the seriousness of this decision. They knew it had kingdom implications. As we see throughout the rest of Acts, this was a praying church that waited on God.
- And so, I think these early Christians did adopt this first approach into their decision-making process.

## The Application for Us:

- Start every decision by prayerfully asking: *"Might God have a specific, non-negotiable will on this matter?"*
- When you do that, you immediately start to apply a filter.
- If the answer is clearly a no, if the decision does not have kingdom implications and is morally neutral, go ahead and choose—and don't sweat the small stuff!
- In my view, too many hours have been whiled away agonising over where we should live, what car we should buy, what school we should choose, and the colour we should paint the walls in the church.
- If there are no biblical boundaries, we don't need to live in analysis paralysis—we are free to choose!

- However, if you prayerfully ask, *"Might God have an explicit, non-negotiable will on this matter?"* and you have the slightest inkling that the answer to that question is yes, then you need to knuckle down and do the hard work — and that hard work is not a passive sitting around waiting for a sign from heaven!
- This brings us to the next framework.

## 2. The Wisdom View

- Because the Traditional or Specific-Will View is so subjective and can create anxiety, Christians developed another approach called the Wisdom View.
- This approach is most commonly taken by conservatives.
- Proponents argue that God has given us His revealed Word and the grey matter between our ears.
- Where there is an explicit command in Scripture, we are simply to obey it.
- Where there is no explicit command, we are given the freedom to apply sanctified logic, common sense, and corporate counsel, trusting God to work out the details.
- **The Strength:** It provides immense freedom, clarity, and intellectual integrity.
- **The Danger:** It can become overly objective and hyper-rational, turning decision-making into a cold, intellectual exercise devoid of the Holy Spirit.
- And so with that, let's test this approach against Acts 15.

### Testing it in Acts 15:

- Did the leaders in Acts 15 use sanctified logic, evidence, and Scripture?
- Undeniably. Look at how the debate unfolds:
- **Peter stands up and presents experiential evidence:**

    - He reminds them about how God had coordinated things in such a way that he was able to present the gospel to Cornelius' household (Acts 10–11), pointing out that God gave Gentiles the Holy Spirit without requiring circumcision.
    - So Peter uses the affirming work of the Holy Spirit as an interpretive clue, to try and discern the will of God for this particular situation.
- **Paul and Barnabas present missional evidence:**
    - They share stories of the miracles and signs that God performed among the Gentiles.
    - Again, the fact that the gospel was gaining traction among the Gentiles is used as an interpretive clue to try and discern the will of God for this particular situation.
- **James presents Scriptural evidence:**
    - He quotes **Amos 9**, showing that the influx of the Gentiles aligns perfectly with Old Testament prophecy.
    - James is pointing to the fulfilment of prophecy as an interpretive clue to try and discern the will of God for this particular situation.

- By this time, the evidence is so heavily weighted, they can simply move on to make a decision.
- Notice, friends, they didn't sit in a circle, struggling with analysis paralysis. They evaluated real-world evidence, they anchored it in the Word of God, and then they made a decision.
- And so, these early Christians also adopted this second approach into their decision-making process.

## The Application for Us:

- God expects us to use our brains.

- He gave us Scripture, reason, past experience, and the collective wisdom of the church to discern well.
- This brings us to our final framework.

## 3. The Relationship View

- Those who hold to this perspective try to balance the risk of subjectivity on one hand and the risk of pure objectivity on the other by emphasising a third element—relationship.
- This third approach argues that discernment is fundamentally about intimacy.
- If you know God—if you understand His Word, His character and person, and His plans and purposes for creation—then with the help of the Spirit and your church community, you can make confident choices.
- I like to think of it like buying pizza for my wife and I. When I head off, I don't need to pull over at the pizzeria and pray for a sign. I don't need to call Bev and ask her permission for every topping. Why? Because I know her. I know what she likes and what she dislikes. Because of that relationship, I can choose freely, confident that my choice would honour her and that she would be pleased with it.
- And so with that, let's test this approach against Acts 15.

### Testing it in Acts 15:

- Did these disciples draw on their intimate, relational knowledge of Jesus?
- Without a doubt. Consider who the major spokespersons were. Peter was one of the first and most committed disciples of Jesus. He had walked with Jesus for three years and was chosen as the head of the church. James was Jesus' brother. These men knew Him.
- If you asked them, *"What would Jesus have wanted here?"* they wouldn't have needed a WWJD bracelet.
- They instantly remembered how He

    - Prioritised faith and internal transformation over external observance.
    - Challenged the Pharisees' obsession with ritualism and legalism.
    - Welcomed the Samaritan woman, engaged with the Canaanite woman and healed Gentiles.
- They knew intuitively that Jesus would have rejected circumcision for these Gentiles.
- Furthermore, they knew the Helper, the Paraclete, their Counsellor, the one Who was just like Jesus, and they knew that He would never approve.
- And so, it seems to me that these early Christians adopted this third approach into their decision-making process as well.

## The Application for Us:

- Seek to know Him.
- The more deeply you know the character of Christ through daily fellowship, the less you have to panic about micro-decisions.
- You begin to instinctively and intuitively know what choices He would be pleased with.

## The Climax: Hearing the Decree

- So, which of the three approaches is best?
- You might have a preference, but in reality, those early believers didn't show evidence of taking any one approach over another; they synthesised them.
- They prayed, they applied logic, they leaned into relationship, and they made a call.
- And listen to the letter they sent back to the Gentile believers in **Acts 15:22–29**:

**Acts 15:22–23** NKJV

[22] Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, *namely,* Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren.
[23] They wrote this *letter* by them:
The apostles, the elders, and the brethren,
To the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia:
Greetings.

**Acts 15:24–26** NKJV

[24] Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, "*You must* be circumcised and keep the law"—to whom we gave no *such* commandment—[25] it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, [26] men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

**Acts 15:27–29** NKJV

[27] We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also report the same things by word of mouth. [28] For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: [29] that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well.
Farewell.

- Notice that astounding phrase in verse 28: **"It seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us."**
- They didn't claim an audible voice spoke from the sky. They didn't demand absolute, infallible certainty.
- Through prayer, reasoning, corporate unity, and relational wisdom, they arrived at a Spirit-inspired consensus and said, *"This seems right to the Spirit and to us."*

## Conclusion

- What can we reasonably expect to experience when God speaks?
- There is a sense in which that is an un-answerable question.
- It is an un-answerable question because God is not a machine with which you might engage systematically, applying a formula, in order that you might experience repeatable results.
- He is a Person we walk with.
- While He can and sometimes does speak in extraordinary, awe-inspiring ways, He more commonly communicates through the quiet, ordinary dynamics of intimate relationship.
- But if we want a robust, comprehensive approach to decision-making as believers, I believe we need to take seriously all of the core elements highlighted by each of these frameworks.
    - We must wait upon God.
    - We must apply wisdom, leaning heavily upon the Word and Christian community.
    - We must lean into our relational understanding of who God is.
- When we do these things, we are less likely to have the faith crises I described at first, we are less likely to struggle with analysis paralysis, and are empowered to live as the free agents we are.