

“I picked up your book out of curiosity and couldn’t put it down—I read it straight through. Thank you for writing it!”

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“A key longing in every human heart is to connect with God, to actually hear his voice. Sam Williamson has written a remarkable book that teaches both how to hear God’s voice in Scripture, and then to hear his voice in every avenue of life. It’s filled with humor, insight, practical tips, and sound theology. I can’t recommend a better guide than *Hearing God in Conversation*.”

—GARY WILKERSON, pastor, president of World Challenge

“In *Hearing God in Conversation*, Samuel Williamson affirms the church’s long-held position that God’s primary means of speaking to us is through Scripture; at the same time, through a blend of Bible teaching, contemporary and classic Christian authors, and personal experience, he shows us that God is in no way limited in terms of what he can use to prompt us, nudge us, and lead us. Written in a casual, sometimes light-hearted style, *Hearing God in Conversation* propels us to a place of expectancy with respect to God’s voice; to look for God’s personal message to us in a variety of circumstances; and to be aware that God has a vast array of means he uses to guide his children.”

—PAUL WILKINSON, former writer for Christianity Today’s *Leadership Journal*

“If you want to grow in your ability to recognize how God makes himself known to you, I can’t recommend a better guide than Samuel Williamson’s *Hearing God in Conversation*. This is not the advice of an expert who has it all figured out, but the humility of a brother still on the journey who recognizes that at best we see in bits and pieces. But that is enough to mark out an amazing adventure with God. You will find the stories from his own life engaging, insightful, and helpful.”

—WAYNE JACOBSEN, pastor, author of *He Loves Me*

“This book is a rare gem, full of spiritual wisdom, practical insight, and personal examples of how God converses with us in our daily lives. I was captivated from the first page to the last. Sam Williamson is a great natural storyteller, a sound biblical narrator and armchair theologian, and a wise counselor with spiritual depth and insight.

“He is also an excellent writer—easy to read and joyful to follow. Reading his book is like carrying on an enlightening conversation with an experienced and faith-filled friend while sitting in an easy chair enjoying one another’s company. You can’t savor enough and you want to come back for more and more.

“The book is balanced in dealing with potential pitfalls and aberrations. It treats the need for discernment, how to distinguish God’s voice from other voices, how filters and biases can shape and block our ability to hear God’s voice, and the role of community in helping us discern and confirm God’s word for us.”

—DON SCHWAGER, author of *DailyScripture.net*

“‘God is always speaking to us, and he wants us to hear him.’ In *Hearing God in Conversation* Sam Williamson gives us some tools to do just that. He does a masterful job in leading us to this end with honesty, insight, and great advice. He writes about deep things with clarity and a disarming humor, helping the reader to explore new territory in hearing God’s voice.”

—DAVID MANGAN, author of *God Loves You and There’s Nothing You Can Do About It*

“Hearing God. Is it real? Is it normal? Is it weird? Sam grew up in a Christian family where listening to God was as normal and frequent as conversing with family members around the dinner table. It was simply what a relationship with God looked like for everyone, everyplace, all the time. Sam has done a brilliant job explaining, through Scripture, stories, and personal experiences, how God speaks and how to hear him.”

—GARY BARKALOW, author, founder of The Noble Heart



Hearing *God*  
in Conversation

Also by the Author  
*Is Sunday School Destroying Our Kids?*

Hearing *God*  
in Conversation

HOW TO RECOGNIZE HIS VOICE EVERYWHERE

Samuel C. Williamson

FOREWORD BY PAUL E. MILLER

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*I dedicate this book to my father,  
Robert Samuel Williamson,  
who taught me how to hear God's voice in Scripture,  
to walk with him in the cool of the day,  
and to talk with him on my drive to work.  
He now walks with his heavenly Father,  
face-to-face.*



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## Foreword

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When it comes to listening to God, most of us get nervous. We love the idea of tuning in to our Father's voice, especially amid the constant noise of our own lives and hearts, or the constant input from the world around us. C. S. Lewis aptly called our culture "the Kingdom of Noise." But the idea of hearing the Father's voice as it applies to the details of our lives scares us. We don't trust what we are hearing or thinking because we have seen people overspiritualize their emotional responses. Yet we don't want to live as functional atheists, either. It is a valid concern.

But the desire to hear God does not go away. Deep down we want to develop an eye for the One who has promised to lead us with his voice. Imagine a road with two deep ditches that constantly threaten to disable us. On the one side, there is the ditch of post-Enlightenment rationalism. On the other is the ditch of highly subjective emotionalism. If we travel a little too close to either side, we tumble down into the ditch. No wonder we get frustrated.

Unfortunately, such frustration can lead to a shutting down of the heart. Unbelief that God really cares about the nitty-gritty details of one's life begins to take over. Before we know it, all that is left is unbelief, and we stop praying altogether. A quiet defeat takes over. Prayerlessness wins the day. It feels like God is a million miles away and that even he doesn't realize it. It's easy to conclude that he is asking way too much of us.

Besides giving in to a quiet prayerlessness, what does such defeat look like? It is easy to look at the "Word only" approach to listening to God. Carefully and prudently, we seek passages of Scripture—any

passages—that can shed light on our situation. We cry out for help but, deep down, we are bothered because it can seem that Scripture only applies to people in general. God’s Word can seem too abstract at times to really help us. Our Father, the Shepherd, is only paying lip service. He does not mean it when he says for me to “ask, seek, wait, obey” and watch what happens.

We have become deists, having successfully removed an intimately interested God from our lives.

Christians can be just as stuck in the opposite ditch. Instead of “Word only,” we make too much of our emotions. This is the elevation of one’s own intuition to the status of divine revelation. We decide to take control, and our emotions, at the expense of the Word, win the day. We become subjective. We become goofy. It is embarrassing.

Just what is the solution to getting stuck by rationalism on the one hand or emotionalism on the other?

The call in our lives to guard against rationalism and emotionalism drives us to seek God in the sharp-edged, absolute character of the Word and the intuitive, personal leading of the Spirit. The Word gives us the structure—the vocabulary, if you will—while the Spirit personalizes it to our life. Keeping the Word and the Spirit together guards us from God-talk becoming a cover for our own desires or from living isolated from God.

The book you hold in your hands is just such much-needed help. I am delighted that Sam Williamson has given us such a great gift. In it, to use Sam’s words, he heads straight into “hearing God beyond the lectures,” and he does so with disarming honesty about his own frustrations, carefully thinking through Scripture while laying out the necessary balance between the Word and the Spirit.

Your Father wants you to be praying. He wants you asking. He wants you inviting him into the details of your life. Sam gives help in the pages ahead. He will help us get out of the ditch and back onto the road of richer, deeper relationship with the Father. It all begins with hearing God.

—PAUL E. MILLER

Author of *A Praying Life: Connecting with God in a Distracting World*,  
and *A Loving Life: In a World of Broken Relationships*

## My Parents' Gift of Extraordinary Ordinairiness

*There is not in the world a kind of life more sweet and delightful than that of a continual conversation with God. Those only can comprehend it who practice and experience it. . . . Let us do it from a principle of love, and because God would have us.*

—Brother Lawrence

*[When Adam and Eve] heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, [they] hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.*

—Genesis 3:8

The family culture that nurtures us in our youth also cultivates in us a sense of ordinairiness, perhaps even diminishment, concerning that upbringing: *What's the big deal? Doesn't everyone think this way?* My wife's family were sports fanatics. She was shocked to discover I had not once watched the annual Thanksgiving Day football game. *Doesn't everyone?*

My parents taught us kids how to hear God. I simply assumed that everyone expected to hear God's voice in their lives. I once shared with a small group of men my story of the first time God spoke to me as a ten-year-old. One of the men pulled me aside and forcefully suggested that

I never share the story again. He said no one would believe it happened to such a young kid.

Yet when he himself was ten, this man knew every name of every starting player on every NBA basketball team. I never would have believed it. Until I met my wife's brothers.

My parents practiced family devotions on us reluctant children. Every evening after dinner they taught worship, Bible study, intercession, and hearing God; they revealed to us the *meaning* of a divine relationship. They shared stories of God speaking to them, and we read books about Christians called by God. My parents even conducted practical labs with us: how to see God in Scripture, how to brainstorm with God, and how to hear his voice when praying for each other.

To me, it just seemed so ordinary, the way that the Christian life is meant to be walked. I've found, however, that hearing God is anything but normal for many believers. What my parents taught as ordinary is usually considered extraordinary.

But it's meant to be ordinary.

My parents taught us that we were redeemed in order to have a restored relationship with God. And the basis of every real relationship is communication; God saved us to have a conversational relationship with him. The temple curtain was torn in two so that we can connect with him again.

He calls to us, "Walk with me."

## Why Does God Save Us?

In 2006, *Christianity Today's* managing editor published a list of the twentieth century's top fifty books that shaped the evangelical world.<sup>1</sup> His number one influential book was not written by C. S. Lewis, John Stott, or Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It wasn't even Kenneth Taylor's *The Living Bible* (which was number six).

The number one book was written by an author few of us have heard of, and yet it has influenced every single one of us. This book was written by Rosalind Rinker, and it was titled *Prayer: Conversing with God*. She introduced the Christian world to praying with conversational language. No more *Thees*, *Thous*, and *which-arts*. Just everyday language.



She revolutionized our modern prayer life with the simple declaration, "Prayer is a dialogue between two persons who love each other."<sup>2</sup>

Ask believers what distinguishes Christianity from other religions and many will answer, "Other religions are works-based; in Christianity we are saved by grace. Buddha's last words were, 'Strive without ceasing,'<sup>3</sup> but Christ's last words were, 'It is finished.'"<sup>4</sup> At immeasurable cost—the cost of the cross—God himself entered into history and acted to save us.

But save us for what?

God saved us for more than good behavior and right thinking—for more, not less. The triune God, in whose image we are made, saved us to restore us to a relationship with himself.

In the garden of Eden, God once talked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day in a conversational relationship with his beloved creatures. Then, through humanity's disobedience, a barrier of unrighteousness formed, and our relationship with God was broken.

But God loved his creation—"For God so loved the world"—and he formed a plan to heal that relational breach. In that plan, Jesus saved us *away from* our sinfulness and saved us *back into* that conversational relationship with him. On the cross, the cry of Jesus, "It is finished," also cries out to us, "Come walk with me."

Jesus called his disciples with this simple invitation, "Come, follow me." They immediately joined him on the road and began to walk with God. This is the call of God to every believer. Jesus invites us to walk with him. It is the invitation of a relational heart.

## I Offer What I've Been Taught

In this book I share what I've learned about conversing with God. It may seem the height of arrogance for any person to attempt to teach the world how to hear God. All I can say is, *I'm passing on to others only what others have passed on to me.* My parents bequeathed to me real gold; I want to pass their extraordinary treasure on to others.

I only share what I've personally learned, practiced, and seen bear fruit. I can't share what I don't know. This book includes no chapters on visions or dreams; I don't get them, at least not the spiritual kind. But I *have* learned how to hear God in the conversations of ordinary life.

Prayer is not a one-way street with us shouting petitions to God, and Scripture is not a one-way street of God broadcasting his commands at us. *Both* prayer and Scripture involve *both* hearing and speaking. We are participants, not spectators; dancers on the floor, not observers at the tables; actors on the stage, not onlookers in the theater. We are involved in a divine dialogue.

The words of Scripture overflow with the images of a relational God.

We limit the infinite God when we restrict the ways he wants to speak to us.

We limit the infinite God when we restrict the ways he wants to speak to us. I was taught to hear God's voice in Scripture, and I hope I can pass this on to you. I was also taught how to recognize that same

voice when he speaks to me through friends, strangers, and in my drive time to work. I hope to pass that on to you as well.

## I Offer My Own Experiences

I write this book primarily to teach how to have a conversation with God. Prayer, this “dialogue between two persons who love each other,” is close to God’s heart. Many of us have low expectations for hearing God. Yet in a crisis, almost all of us look to him for direction. Our problem is that the clarity of his directional words depends on our ability to recognize his voice. And that is hard to learn in a crisis. If we want to hear God in the storm, let’s first learn to hear his voice in the calm.

Only in the last chapter do I write about how to recognize God’s voice for guidance. The rest of the chapters address hearing him in the many and diverse methods and manners he speaks to us in ordinary life.

Throughout the book I share examples from my firsthand experiences of hearing God. I often preface these stories with disclaimers such as, “*I thought* I heard God say . . .” However, since I don’t begin each story with such a qualification, I will add that general disclaimer here: When I say in this book that I “heard” God, I only mean to say I *think* I heard him.

Though I really do believe I heard him!

Some Christians today believe that God no longer speaks outside of

Scripture. I disagree. There are excellent arguments for the belief that God speaks directly and personally today. But I don't want to cloud the chapters with arguments. Instead, I've included an appendix that summarizes the common arguments *against* and the common arguments *for* the belief that God speaks directly today. I call that appendix "Answers to the Arguments."

Other Christians are turned off by the odd, eccentric behavior of some "hearing" believers who practice immoderate, crazy customs that don't square with the rest of Scripture. I think we need to address those excesses as well. I speak to those behaviors in the second appendix, "Questionable and Excessive Practices."

To hear God, we need the help of his Holy Spirit. It is God himself, stirring his Spirit in us, who enables us to recognize his still, small voice. It is God calling to us and our hearts responding to him that forms the foundation of our conversational relationship. As C. S. Lewis wrote,

They tell me, Lord, that when I seem  
To be in speech with you,  
Since but one voice is heard, it's all a dream,  
One talker aping two.

Sometimes it is, yet not as they  
Conceive it. Rather, I  
Seek in myself the things I hoped to say,  
But lo! my wells are dry.

Then, seeing me empty, you forsake  
The listener's role and through  
My dumb lips breathe and into utterance wake  
The thoughts I never knew.

And thus you neither need reply  
Nor can; thus, while we seem  
Two talkers, thou art One forever, and I  
No dreamer, but thy dream.<sup>5</sup>

My hope is that we will all learn to hear the voice of God in conversation, his Spirit in ours, as we learn to walk with him.

—SAM

Ann Arbor, Michigan, May 2016

## Acknowledgments

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Our accomplishments in life often come at great cost to the ones we love most. We frequently forget their sacrifices and more frequently fail to acknowledge their gifts of time, listening, and care. I owe so much to so many. I cannot repay my debt to you, my friends and family, but let me at least acknowledge the lien you have on my life:

- My wife, Carla: I could never have written about hearing God without your sacrifice of listening to me, sometimes at the cost of my not listening to you. I love and thank you.
- My parents, Bob and Beulah: I barely grasp a hint of the fortune you bequeathed to me through your love, patience, and treasure trove of teaching.
- My son Jonathan: You spent scores of hours with me, poring over my manuscript, insisting on crispness, reminding me of the power of humor, and encouraging me to the finish line.
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- Gary Barkalow and John Hard, who encouraged me to detangle my thoughts through writing them down: You are my friends.
- Katherine McAulay: Though we've never met, your thoughtful reading helped shine light in the murky marshes of an incomplete manuscript.
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Certain writers and speakers have influenced me so much that by now their thoughts have become my thoughts. I especially thank Oswald Chambers, C. S. Lewis, Dallas Willard, and Tim Keller, whose fingerprints are all over this book. Except on its weakest pages.

# The First Time I Heard God's Voice

*Why is it that when we speak to God we are said to be praying,  
but when God speaks to us we are said to be schizophrenic?*

—Lily Tomlin

I was ten years old the first time I heard God speak. It was autumn, a new school year had just begun, and a new fad was spreading among my adolescent classmates.

Cussing.

I was raised in a conservative Christian church where Sunday school teachers taught us the Ten Commandments. The teachers were vague about the meaning of adultery, and I didn't feel concerned. They weren't very clear about coveting either, so I felt safe.

They made up for their ambiguity when it came to cussing. Instead of an elusive "Don't take the name of the Lord in vain," they precisely taught, "Don't swear." And when they said, "Don't swear," they meant, "Don't cuss." For us, cussing was a sin on the order of mass genocide.

One day while playing school-yard tag, I tagged my girlfriend, Diane, and she shouted, "Shit!" I felt a horrible shock wave race through my body, as though I'd been hit in the gut with a sledgehammer. Forty-five years later, I still feel that visceral punch, and I can exactly picture the playground gate where Diane cussed. I gasped for air but nothing came.

Looking back, it seems silly that a cuss word could cause such a shock, but it did. I expected God to cast down a lightning bolt and burn Diane to ash. The thought almost paralyzed me.

Almost, but not quite. I leaped back seven feet in case the bolt went wide.

And then . . . nothing happened. Not one thing. The game continued. No lightning bolt. Not even a firefly. I felt as shocked by the absence of righteous retribution as I had been by the cuss. The shock might have even been greater.

My juvenile understanding of Christianity was simple: God blesses good people and he punishes bad people. In my unsophisticated ten-year-old mind, *blessing* meant being cool and *punishment* meant being uncool. But that's not what happened. Instead, the foul-mouthed kids became cooler while the clean-speaking kids grew uncool.

The wicked flourished and the righteous were trampled.

I decided that God could not exist. Oh, it took a week or so of watching the wicked prosper, but there was no doubt in my mind. God didn't exist. It was all a cruel hoax.

The next day I unleashed the filthiest mouth in the city of Detroit on my classmates. I said things even the wicked feared to say. (They still harbored some fear of God, but I knew better.) The sh-word was cussing for kids; I dropped f-bombs like hardwood forests drop autumn leaves—and I didn't even know what the f-word meant.

I was a poet in profanity.

Then, at the end of that day, alone in my bedroom, God spoke to me with a fierce, undeniable, and certain clarity. But all he said was, "*Sam, I am real, and you don't understand.*"

## God Wants Us to Know Him

Above all else, God wants us to know him personally—he wants a personal relationship. But we mostly want to know direction: "Should I take this job or that job?" We want information; God wants a conversation. We want to know answers; God wants us to know him.

When God spoke to me, I was deeply moved, but not by his answer to my question, why do the wicked flourish? God never even hinted at an answer. I was moved because I had actually heard his voice. I had begun to know the person of God, not just the facts of God; I had met him.

God always gives us what we most need, but he doesn't always give



us what we *think* we most need. Our deepest need is to know God. More than answers, inspiration, information, or guidance, we simply need to know God. That's why Paul wrote, "I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:8).

Before my first date with the woman who would become my wife, I knew a lot about her: she was a farmer's daughter, she studied social work, and she had attended Hope College. And she was cute. But on our first date, over a glass

God always gives us what we most need, but he doesn't always give us what we *think* we most need.

of wine, she told me of a secret longing. And I fell in love. My informational knowledge had just been trumped by a personal connection.

Knowing *about* God isn't enough. Paul prayed, "I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, *so that you may know him better*" (Eph. 1:16–17 SWP).

## God Wants Us to Hear Him

God is always speaking to us, and he wants us to hear him. The first time I heard him in my bedroom—and I really did hear him—I wasn't looking to hear from God. I thought he was a hoax. But he spoke anyway, because he longs—God himself longs!—for conversations with his family and friends.

I am amazed, dumbfounded even, at modern Christian teaching. We hear leaders claim that Christianity is about a personal relationship with God, but their teaching is limited to abstract doctrine, principles for good behavior, or devotional inspiration. In other words, most modern Christian teaching addresses our intellect, our actions, our will, or our emotions. Few are the credible teachers who teach us about hearing God—though they should—or about knowing him personally. Yet that is what the Bible says he desires.

Scripture is filled with metaphors for the nature of God's relationship with us. We are his sheep, his friends, his children, and—breath-takingly intimate—his spouse. These are relational metaphors. And the essence of relationship is communication.

Communication is so important to the human soul that many countries have outlawed solitary confinement as cruel and unusual punishment. Yet we Christians teach Christianity as though it's a philosophy class or a code of ethics, completely void of personal connection. We treat the Bible as though it's an auto repair manual instead of a personal letter from God.

Christians are great at doing clinical, detached dissections of biblical metaphors, exegeting the essence of their meanings. But God wants us to *wear* those metaphors like clothes—to put them on, live in them, and make them real. He wants us to begin to hear his voice.

Yes, it's helpful to understand the exegetical meanings of scriptural metaphors. It's better to meet their Author.

## He Really Does Speak to Us

Our Father wants conversation. He wants us to learn to recognize his voice. He literally speaks so we can literally hear. He doesn't always say what we want him to say; he often doesn't speak in the manner we expect; and hearing his voice requires us to learn to listen. But he is always speaking.

Scripture is filled with passages that teach us God speaks today. Here are a few for the skeptical:

The sheep *hear his voice*, and he calls his own sheep by name.  
(John 10:3)

Call to me and I will answer you, and *will tell you* great and hidden things that you have not known. (Jer. 33:3)

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone *hears my voice* and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. (Rev. 3:20)

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will *guide you* into all the truth, for . . . whatever *he hears* he . . . will declare to you. (John 16:13)

Your ears shall *hear a word* behind you, saying, “This is the way, walk in it,” when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left. (Isa. 30:21)

Whoever is of God *hears the words* of God. (John 8:47)

I will *instruct you* and teach you in the way you should go; I will *counsel you* with my eye upon you. (Ps. 32:8)

God's Word overflows with his longing to converse with us; he wants us to hear him, speak with him, and have a discussion.

## Hearing God Isn't Just for Spiritual Giants

Most of us are “normal” people—nurses, mechanics, office workers, clerks, engineers, teachers, maybe mid-level managers, or stay-at-home moms or dads. We feel like spiritual pygmies. *God doesn't speak with me*, we tell ourselves. *I don't have the spiritual stature of Mother Teresa*.

While that humble self-opinion is a terrific place to start, it is a terrible place to stop. God never speaks to us (or others) because of our (or their) greatness. He speaks because of *his* greatness. He loves to speak with spiritual adolescents. Paul writes, “We hold this treasure in earthen vessels *to show that the surpassing power is of God and not from us*” (2 Cor. 4:7 SWP).

It sounds spiritually humble to be like the people of Israel who said to Moses, “You speak to us . . . but do not let God speak to us” (Exod. 20:19). But such prayers only reveal spiritual *shallowness* on our part. It's as though we prefer to listen to God's servants rather than hear God himself.

It is God's glory to speak with us nurses, mechanics, and clerks. That way it's clear that the greatness belongs to God and not us. A humble attitude helps us to hear his voice. Think of whom God spoke with in the past:

Abraham was a heathen called out of idol worship when God invited him on a journey.

Moses was a murderer who fled justice.

Gideon was a coward hiding in the back recesses of a cave.

Samuel was a child.

Jonah was an intolerant, insensitive, grace-lacking bigot.

The disciples often acted like buffoons, and every one of them abandoned Jesus.

Paul persecuted the disciples of Jesus.

Balaam was a wicked man whom God spoke to through a mere beast of burden, his ass.

And I was a ten-year-old atheist.

Each story is different except for one thing: God didn't choose to speak with any of these people on the basis of their maturity, goodness, or spiritual giftedness. Many of them were less mature, more rebellious, and had fewer spiritual gifts than you.

"Oh," you might say, "but God chose them (even the rebels) because he saw their *natural* gifts. He knew he could do great things through

The gospel is always about God working with people who are completely unworthy of his attention.

them." That kind of thinking—and we all think that way occasionally—is contrary to the gospel. The gospel is always about God working with people who are completely unworthy of his attention. (That's why it's called the *gospel*.)

He doesn't use our greatness as much as he uses his own greatness to bring about something great in us.

God can make the littlest among us great, but he can't use the greatest among us until we become little. God wants to speak to you (O little men and women!) words of comfort, love, conviction, and hope. Yes, *you*.

## How Do We Recognize His Voice?

When I heard God as a ten-year-old, it wasn't through an audible voice. There was no handwriting on the wall (except perhaps what I had crayoned on it when my mom wasn't looking), nor was there a burning bush or a levitating tablespoon. I wasn't even reading the Bible. (Remember, I was a recent convert to atheism.)

Yet something stirred in my soul. It was as clear as an audible voice

and as powerful as a thunderclap. Somehow I knew God had spoken real words to me personally. There was an inner resonance, a quickening in my heart. And I knew it was God.

When the disciples reminisced about their unexpected discussion with Jesus on the road to Emmaus, they said, "Did not our hearts burn within us?" I too experienced a voice burning in my heart. It thrilled and delighted me. And changed my life.

## God Speaks in Multiple Methods and Moments

Our imperfect nature often causes us to miss the diverse ways and multiple occasions through which a perfect God speaks to us. The book of Job declares, "God speaks in one way, and in two, though man does not perceive it" (33:14). God is infinite, and he speaks in countless ways and settings.

Yet we finite creatures impose on God our limited expectations for how he speaks, in manners we're familiar and comfortable with, or perhaps the only ways we know. Certainly God speaks to us through those means, through Scripture study and Sunday sermons. He's just not confined to them. He is, after all, the most creative Being in the universe, and he communicates with us through an infinitely imaginative mixture of methods and moments.

Throughout this book, I'll reinforce those two principles of *methods* and *moments*. It's vital to keep them in mind if we want to grow in our ability to hear God's voice clearly. Let's look at them more closely.

### *Methods*

Part of the reason we fail to perceive God's personal word to us arises from false expectations constructed when other people recount their experiences. We too often hear people share descriptions of God speaking as though they happened like a scripted dialogue:

I asked God: *What should I do with my life?*

God replied: *Are you willing to take a risk?*

I said: *Yes, but I don't know what to do.*

God said: *Move to Timbuktu.*

When friends tell stories like this, we think, *I never hear God converse with me that clearly*. Let me tell you a secret: they don't either. At least not most of the time. Those reports are shorthand summaries of hours spent thinking, praying, hearing nudges, getting senses, and recognizing God's voice.

God employs multiple methods to communicate with us; he is not a paint-by-number God. If we limit his voice to just, say, the scripted dialogue or biblical studies, then we will miss his voice when he speaks in other ways. Below are his more common methods.

### A Responsive Resonance

God often speaks by nudging our hearts in response to an external circumstance. The nudge may be described as a burning in our heart or a sense of the weightiness of a particular moment. Perhaps a Scripture passage jumps out at us in prayer, or we overhear a chance comment by someone at the next table, and our hearts know something significant is going on.

For example, "While Paul was waiting . . . at Athens, his spirit was *provoked* within him as he saw that the city was full of idols" (Acts 17:16). Now think with me: idols filled *every* city Paul visited, but something in that moment stirred him.

### A Spontaneous Nudging

Sometimes God unexpectedly nudges our heart to pray for a friend or to act on an issue. It comes not so much as a direct word but as a general perception, an inner detection of a movement of God, unprompted by any event.

I once had a sense to pray for a friend. I wasn't sure what to pray, so I phoned him. He had just been let go from his job that day. We prayed on the phone. He was touched by my concern, only I hadn't been concerned—I hadn't even known. It was God who was concerned and who spontaneously nudged me.

### Direct Words

Occasionally God speaks a direct word—usually just a sentence or two, or perhaps just a phrase. This chapter opens with the story of God

speaking to me in my childhood atheism: "I am real, and you don't understand." God has spoken directly to me at other times too, to leave the mission field or repent to my spouse.

I would guess, though, that most direct words don't come to us out of the blue; at least not as much as they come to us after sensing a resonance in our heart. Only as we follow that resonance in prayer and reflection do we hear direct words.

### **Unbidden Memories**

God will often bring past events to mind. He might surface a memory so we can deal with its grip on our lives, or so we can take appropriate action. A few years ago, I remembered my twelve-year-old self saying something harsh to a neighborhood kid. A short while later I bumped into that kid, now grown. I reminded him of the event, and I repented. He too remembered it, and he wept as I repented. That occasion began an eighteen-month journey of repenting to people from my past, and every repentance, though embarrassing, brought new life both to me and to the one I'd hurt.

### **Planted Pictures**

The voice of God is not limited to nudges or even words. Sometimes God plants pictures in our mind. Around 1915, my grandfather received a mental picture in which the letters KWANGSI were spelled in red letters across the sky. He visited the local library to discover that the letters spelled a province of China (now spelled GuangXi). He prayed and felt called to be a missionary. He spent the next two decades living in that very province, and he founded four inland China churches with new believers. God speaks in many and various ways. Sometimes he even paints pictures.

### **Recalled Passages**

Past generations encouraged Scripture memorization. I was always a miserable student of memorization, but I find that God frequently brings passages to mind at just the right moment.

Once, talking with a man in deep trouble, I found no wisdom or words

to offer. Then out of nowhere a verse came to mind: “We comfort others with the comfort we’ve been given” (a rough paraphrase of 2 Cor. 1:4). I sensed God telling me to comfort my friend with the comfort God had given me. Nothing wise, just comfort.

Since my Bible verse memorization is abysmal, it simply had to be God!

### Visions and Dreams

I’ve never had a divinely inspired dream or a vision, but people whom I know and respect get them, and in them God can speak. Visions are different from images; they are more akin to short video stories, such as when Paul was directed in his sleep: “A man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us’” (Acts 16:9). There’s no reason to believe God cannot give us such visions today.

### God-Shaped Thoughts

This is perhaps the hardest to recognize, because these thoughts feel so much a part of us. Yet God-shaped thoughts influence the thinking life of every believer on earth. Not only can God’s Spirit in us speak a direct word to us, but he can also shape our very thoughts. How many times have you felt utterly empty, with no words to pray and no ideas to act on? Then, unexpectedly, a brilliant and obvious thought streaks through your mind. C. S. Lewis believed this to be one of the most common ways God speaks to us:

Then, seeing me empty, you forsake  
 The listener’s role and through  
 My dumb lips breathe and into utterance wake  
 The thoughts I never knew.<sup>1</sup>

God speaks in many and various ways. Who are we to limit him?

### *Moments*

God speaks with more methods than we normally attribute to him, but he also speaks in more *moments* than we imagine. I believe he wants



to speak in every moment. He doesn't limit himself to Sunday sermons or personal prayer times.

Many chapters in this book describe how to recognize God's voice in various situations, but it's worth remembering that his many moments include times of meditating on Scripture, watching a movie, counseling with friends, brainstorming, driving your car, sitting at the coffee shop, experiencing curiosity, and even times when God seems silent.

God mixes his many methods of speaking with the limitless variety of moments in our lives; he creates an infinite assortment of opportunities to recognize his voice. For example, take the one "moment" of reading the verse "God is my shepherd, I shall not want." God may remind you of another verse, "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves"; or he may stir within you, in response, a resonance of his great care for you; or he may speak a direct word, "You are not coming to me to get your wants fulfilled"; or he may give you an image of a contented child.

Our lives are filled with multiple moments—from waking at 2:00 a.m., to an afternoon walk, to an unpleasant meeting with your boss—and into each of those many moments, God can speak through his many methods.

## God Is Always Speaking

God invites us to walk with him even in—maybe *especially* in—our ordinary moments. When we learn to recognize that inner quickening, that burning in the heart, we begin to hear God speaking all the time.

Flying to New York to speak at a conference, a stranger said something about public speaking. I heard God convict me of the directionless life I was living.

I attended a weekend retreat with fifteen men to discuss the possibility of working together. I heard God flesh out details about his dream for my life.

While watching the movie *The Fisher King*, a pretty grim film, I heard God say that he sees me to the bottom and loves me to the top.

On a long walk last week, God interrupted my thoughts about

finances to think about the creep of modern culture into modern Christians' beliefs.

And forty-five years ago, when my girlfriend cussed, God spoke in the absence of lightning, and it changed the life of this ten-year-old reprobate.