

the whisper-led life

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Saul's Conversion Acts 9:1-19

God is whispering today. God is saying something to you this very hour and not just because you're in church but because it is of God's nature to speak for God is Word – God is a communicating God, God lives as Word and God's Word comes to us in a myriad of ways. Whether we hear it or not is another matter. Listening is a complex matter – it's not easy. So much depends on our desire to listen but also our ability to listen. Fran and I have often driven together as driver and navigator. Now this is an interesting experience not least because usually I'm driving and want to navigate as well and she's navigating and wants to drive as well and these are not approaches to have when you're trying to get somewhere without conflict. Of course if Fran were here she would tell you that my ability to follow instructions is somewhat impaired and she probably wouldn't use those very polite words! I, on the other hand, simply struggle to hear what she is saying when panic has changed the pitch of her voice significantly. Do you know how much the word 'No' sounds like 'Go' in English? And if one answers with the sentence 'I don't know!' even that sounds like 'Go!' to me. And even the word 'Stop' can sound like 'Go!' in certain circumstances... (is that going a bit far – right, I take that back – 'Stop!' never sounds like 'Go!') One thing is clear, when navigating a whisper is not a good thing. You just don't whisper unless you really want to have an argument. So why would God Whisper? Why

would God speak in a nearly inaudible voice to people God wants to help and to bless? If God wants to be the navigator – what’s the deal with whispering?

We need deal with this at the outset because it is so easy for us to doubt that God is actually wanting to speak to us and is, indeed, saying anything at all. I say this because I believe we’ve been subtly influenced by a theology called Deism. Deism one of the great false trails in theology which has been followed by Christians down through the years which understands that when God created Creation He set it up to run like a clock without any further interference or interaction with it. Indeed, in Deism, God deliberately leaves His Creation to run apart from His presence. This was greatly attractive to many after the Renaissance because it combined a belief in God with a kind of quasi-scientific understanding of the world where various laws operated which could be discerned and which didn’t need God’s continuous oversight or Presence. **[5b]** So Deism gave some people the ability to hold on to God but also be happy about the new scientific discoveries of the era. The trouble is that the Deist God is not the God of the Bible because Deism’s God is remote and unapproachable and, indeed, completely mysterious. There is no hope of revelation with this God and it particularly hard to see how Jesus might fit in with such a remote God. On the other hand, Jesus came precisely to show how much God wanted to be and is close to His Creation and so the incarnation – the bodily life of Jesus challenges just about everything Deism stands for. The life of Christ shows us that God **wants to speak to us**. God wants to be in relationship with us and wants, particularly, to allow us to respond to Him. God speaks and we may even

say that God lives to speak. But does God whisper? Have we got this right? Is this a good metaphor to use?

Whisper is a metaphor but it's a great metaphor because however God speaks to us it is clear that we usually only hear it as a whisper. I remember visiting a house once where two old people were living with a family. One was the Grandfather on the Father's side and the other was the Grandmother on the mother's side and listening to a conversation between the two of them was an exercise in side-splitting conversation. In the first place they were extremely formal with each other calling one another Mrs and Mr and being exceedingly polite. But both were hard of hearing and so a typical conversation might go something like this... "A good morning Mrs Smith, what a wonderful day is it today." "Pardon me Mr Jones... you want to know the time?" "Yes very fine indeed Mrs Smith and one hopes it may stay this way." "The day? I think it's the 5th but I shall have to check. Yes, yes, it is the 5th and I think it's about half past ten." "Yes I believe it will but I'm not sure when."

And on it would go. Frankly both raised their voices so that the conversation could be heard plainly two rooms away but to them with their difficulty with hearing each was speaking **in a whisper**. Likewise God's speech is loud enough but our hearing is deeply impaired by sin and so we almost always hear it as a whisper. And we see this even when God's speech is plain as day; when God says, don't do this or don't go there or perhaps do this and do that – we struggle to hear and certainly to obey. God's voice is a whisper because we are not good at hearing it and because we are not good at obeying it and both of these things lead to a thing we call **uncertainty**.

Uncertainty isn't something we like to talk about in relation to God and yet if we're honest this is how we experience God. We experience God uncertainly because of the fall. It's not that God is uncertain or unreliable but our experience of God is. It's not even that we can't be certain of God but it's one thing to be certain of the road – quite another to be certain of driving on it. We can be certain of God's love and still suffer an inability to experience that love.

Our passage from Acts illustrates precisely what I am talking about here. God speaks to both Saul and Ananias and both struggle to hear. God literally shouts at Saul – how else can we describe it?

1 Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest 2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. 3 As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" 5 "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. 6 "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." 7 The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. 8 Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. 9 For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

Saul, assured, confident, totally dedicated, full of righteous indignation and completely certain He is following God's will, marches to Damascus with official permission to arrest and brutalise any Christians he finds. Nothing could more clearly be the will of God. No one could be better equipped to carry out this will. Saul will stop at nothing to pursue his purpose.

Let me pause here for a moment because this must give us cause to reflect on our own understanding of God's will. Here we have a man educated beyond anything we know in the Word of God and yet, He has totally missed the will of God. His conviction means nothing; His zeal is completely misdirected; his methods are, in fact, a rebuke to God's Spirit and yet, he is convinced of the absolute opposite. We must be so careful with God's Word for even a man as committed to God as Saul can mistake the cry of human ambition and arrogance for the whisper of God. Saul has failed to comprehend God's whisper and so now God shouts!

And the result of that shout is to throw all that Saul knows and understands about God into complete chaos and confusion. All the ground of his faith, all the theological training, all the knowledge and all the scripture have suddenly been cast into the dark and Saul is what has hasn't been for years... **uncertain**. And what is uncertainty in regarding to hearing someone – it is the result of a whisper – when we whisper – we leave people uncertain – we leave people straining to hear – we leave people having to think about what has been said. God's shout to Saul is God's whisper because it leaves him uncertain. And uncertain is precisely where Saul needs to be.

Ananias hears God's whisper too but this is truly a whisper – a quiet nudge even though it is quite clear.

10 In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. 11 The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. 12 In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight." 13 "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your people in Jerusalem. 14 And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name." 15 But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. 16 I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." 17 Then Ananias went to the house and entered it.

Ananias has heard God's Word but he can't believe it – it seems wrong – it seems so odd and so he questions the word – he has a conversation about it. As clear as the word is and as clearly as he hears it – this word to Ananias is a whisper. It's a whisper because it is so strange. Why on earth would God have him invite the most dangerous, most bloodthirsty Christian killer into his house? Why on earth would God want to have mercy on such a man and am I, Ananias, to be the hand of that mercy? You have to be kidding God!?

Effectively what Ananias hears is a whisper which leaves him – the faithful follower of God... **uncertain**. Whenever God speaks, friends, it is in a whisper. Whether it is loud or soft, clear or unclear, precise or

imprecise – the Word of God is the whisper of God. As the writer of Proverbs reminds us.

- ² It is the glory of God to conceal a matter;
to search out a matter is the glory of kings.

So we must learn to hear the Whispers of God and, more so, we must learn to obey their promptings. But what does this take. In your first Session you will learn that discerning the Whisper of God is largely a matter of being prepared to hear that whisper and then testing it.

I.

a. Christ-followers who want to discern divine direction ask, “God, is this whisper really from you?”

b. Then, they *wait* to hear what he says. Waiting is our first and greatest test. If we’re not prepared to wait we’re usually going to get it wrong.

II.

a. Christ-followers who want to discern divine direction ask, “Does this whisper align with Scripture?”

Something that doesn’t align with scripture needs to be considered deeply suspect.

III.

a. Christ-followers who want to discern divine direction ask, “Is this whisper wise?”

Wisdom is essentially the ability to discern whether something conforms to

IV.

a. Christ-followers who want to discern divine direction ask, “Is this whisper in line with my character or wiring patterns?”

b. Illustration from *The Power of a Whisper*, man who was prepared to leave stockbroker industry to pursue Christian-music career

V.

- a. Christ-followers who want to discern divine direction ask, “What do those I most trust think of the whisper I have received?”
- c. Reference: Proverbs 11:14
- d. Three filters for choosing “wise” counsellors
- e. Reference: 1 John 4:1–6

Why work on this stuff? Quite simple really... God wants to talk to us. God wants us to hear His Word.