

“It’s not about Theocaching”

You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart (Jeremiah 29:13).

Jeremiah 29:11-13 ¹

Some of you will have recognized this morning’s *PowerPoint* background as the logo for www.geocaching.com. And I imagine that many of you remember that geocaching is one of my hobbies.

I don’t remember how I became aware of geocaching or even when I began doing it. I do remember my first GPS device—cute but rudimentary—as well as my fanciest device, which became obsolete once smartphones were invented. Amazingly, the geocaching app on my phone is better in every way than the expensive device I once used.

The process of geocaching, as you may know, is basically high-tech hide-and-seek. Containers of various shapes and sizes are hidden and their precise locations are uploaded to geocaching.com. Then we who geocache crawl around in the woods and the bushes trying to find those containers, and we log our discoveries in “the great computer in the sky” when we do. The relevance of geocaching to this message is the idea of hiddenness and of “hide-and-seek.”

As I continue my surgery-delayed “Black History sermons,” this morning’s message was inspired by the African American Spiritual, “**Every time I feel the Spirit moving in my heart, I will pray.**”² I’m going to briefly consider both parts of that sentence using the ideas of “Discerning the Movement of God’s Spirit”; and “Desiring the Fullness of God’s Friendship.”

Discerning the Movement of God’s Spirit. Although, as you probably do, I have quite a number of Bibles in various translations, I’ve used seven particular Bibles as my “markup” Bibles over the past fifty years. I’ve recently bought yet another Bible, which I expect to be my primary Bible for the foreseeable future, and I’ve spent quite a lot of time transferring dates from the margins of those previous seven Bibles into this latest one.

The dates I’ve transferred are dates on which God spoke to me very specifically out of the texts by which the dates are written. I haven’t counted them up, but there are dozens and dozens of such dates, marking the trajectory of my walk with God. You may do similar things.

So here’s my question. How do you *know* that God is speaking to you? How do we *recognize* the Voice of God? How do we *discern* God’s “still, small voice” as distinct from the many variations of our normal internal conversations?

Some people, of course, think they never hear from God. They make up their minds to get by in life with a God who is silent; but as Baptist philosopher Dallas Willard put it, that “is not much of a life, and it is certainly not the life God intends for us or the abundance of life that Jesus came to make available.

“Without real communication from God,” Willard wrote, “our view of the world is very impersonal, however glorious we may find God’s creation. There is *all the difference in the world* between believing that this is our Father’s world (or that God has arranged for our eternal redemption) and having confidence based on personal experience that the Father’s face is turned

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on March 17, 2019.

² The inspiration for this sermon is an African American Spiritual taken from Timothy R. Botts, *Bound for Glory: Celebrating the Gift of African American Spirituals through Expressive Calligraphy*, with reflections by Patricia Raybon (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House, 2011). Page numbers in parenthesis refer to Dallas Willard, *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God*, updated and expanded (InterVarsity, 2012).

toward us and is shining on us (Numbers 6:24-25), whether in the dark of the night or the brightness of the day, and that He speaks to us lovingly, specifically, and individually” (242).

Or, to take this in another direction, some folk think that if God spoke to them, they would automatically know Who is speaking, without having to learn; but that is a serious error that makes them vulnerable to the many crafty lies of the evil one. On the one hand, our initial inability to rightly discern God’s Voice is one of the results of our fallen and sinful condition; and on the other hand, none of us recognized the voice of whoever is now most dear to us the first time we heard it. We had to learn to recognize that human voice, and we have to learn to recognize God’s Voice, as well (220-221).

But it’s also critically important for us to realize that God is not playing hide-and-seek with us. Learning to recognize God’s Voice is not an adventure of “Theocaching” in which God plays hard-to-get. The divine Spirit who inhabits those of us who are in Christ is not mute, restricting Himself to an occasional nudge or case of goosebumps (25).

Jesus told us that both the Father and the Spirit are exactly as He is, and that, in fact, the Three of them are also One.³ And, given God’s self-revelation in Jesus, we can expect that if God wants us to know something, God will be both able and willing to communicate this to us plainly, as long as we are open to hearing and are prepared to obey (250).

My friends, if we believe God to be the kind of person Jesus revealed God to be, then such a Person is not frivolous or coy; He will not tease or torture us. In our relationship with Him there is no mysterious trick to receiving His Word for us. There is no riddle to solve, no incantation to get just right, no “theocache” to find – not with the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

If our heart’s desire is to fulfill God’s purposes, we can be sure that the God who came to us in Jesus will not mumble or tease or trick us regarding any specific matter He wants done (265-266, 269). Here, then, are six criteria by which to examine whether or not a particular word is a Word from God:

1. QUALITY.

The most immediate factor in a voice, which by itself is usually enough to tell those familiar with it whose voice it is, is a certain **quality** of sound. This is mainly a matter of which tones are produced and the manner in which they are modulated. In human speech, “quality,” also includes the style of speech. For example, is it slow or fast, smooth or halting in its flow, indirect or to the point? There is a “quality” to God’s Voice also.

2. SPIRIT

Besides *quality*, a certain **spirit** attaches to a voice. A voice may be passionate or cold, whining or demanding, timid or confident, coaxing or commanding. This is, of course, not merely a matter of sounds but also a matter of attitudes or personal characteristics that become tangibly present in the voice.

The Voice of God speaking in our souls bears within itself a spirit of peacefulness and confidence, of joy, of reasonableness, love, and of goodwill. God’s Voice is not the voice of a bully. It will not run over you, disregard your freedom to choose, or cajole you. The Voice of God is, in short, the Voice of Jesus, bearing within itself the tone of His life when He lived among us (230).

3. CONTENT

³ John 14:9, 18

In addition to *quality* and *spirit*, a third distinguishing mark of any voice is the matter of **content** or of the information it conveys. Although this is rarely the most immediate sign of who is speaking, it is in the end the most conclusive mark, because it reveals the history and conscious experience of the speaker (227).

The content of a word that is truly from God will always conform to and be consistent with the truths about God's nature and kingdom that are made clear in the Bible (231). No word that comes from God will ever contradict such principles.

The Bible is the specific, written record of the saving truths spoken by the infinite, living God, and it reliably fixes the boundaries of everything God will ever say to humankind, though it does not provide the detailed messages that God may communicate with individual believers today (186).

4. IMPACT

A fourth characteristic of God's Voice has to do with the "weight" or **impact** the Voice has in our consciousness. While God's usual speaking to us comes as the inner witness of the "still, small Voice" (1 Kings 19:12), God sometimes speaks in such a way that it feels like what Jeremiah described: "*Is not my word like a fire, and like a hammer that pulverizes rock?*" (Jeremiah 23:29).

When God speaks, whether to comfort, correct, or to command, that Voice is calm and steady. It is consistent with Scripture and with the Spirit of Jesus; and the impression that it makes on the mind is virtually unmistakable. When we hear God speak, our innermost being responds with "Yes, this is true and right. I understand and will obey," even when the guidance we receive is other than what we expected or desired.

5. CIRCUMSTANCE

A fifth test for whether a word is from God or not has to do with external **circumstances**. One of the tests of a prophetic word is whether or not that prediction comes true (Jeremiah 28:9). Examples both positive and negative are frequent on the pages of the Bible; but it is also true that we are frequently called to believe the Voice of God in spite of the evidence and circumstances we currently perceive. If the word is truly from God, the evidence will *change*.

6. CONFIRMATION

A final test for whether or not a word is from God is to talk it through for **confirmation** with one or two other mature believers whose walk with God you have reason to trust. Many times, the first five criteria are sufficient; but where there is doubt, discussing the matter with mature spiritual friends and praying through to clarity together is a powerful resource.

Using such resources as these, those who deeply desire to live under God's guidance and in cooperation with God's Spirit really *can* learn to distinguish the particular quality, spirit, content, and impact of God's Voice. Our discernment will not be infallible, but we can learn to discern God's Voice just as clearly and with as much accuracy as we discern the voice of any other person with whom we are on intimate terms (256).⁴ And with this, let's shift to our second focus this morning, which is "Desiring the Fullness of God's Friendship."

⁴ It also happens that we are given a word from God and are sure of it, but the events indicated do not come to pass. This may be because others are involved, and they may not know or may not do the will of God, and God may not overrule them (272).

Desiring the Fullness of God's Friendship. Self-centered and fragile as we are, you and I may sometimes regard our relationship with God as not much more than a "lightning rod" or "fire insurance." We engage in half-hearted efforts at relationship, not out of love, friendship, and partnership, but so that we might persuade God to keep us "safe," to give us what we want, to keep us comfortable, to help us feel good about ourselves, or dozens of other paltry things.

Sometimes we seek God's guidance for no better reason than to be able to blame God rather than ourselves if things don't turn out as we think they should. I hope that you can see that these approaches to relationship with God fall woefully short of the radiant, joyful, friendship and partnership God desires for us.

The primary purpose of conversation with God is not to get God to do things for us, but to take us into deep and joyful relationship with God and meaningful, purposeful partnership with God in the governance of the world and the inbreaking of God's Kingdom. *That which tends to hold us back from such joy and purpose is ambivalence about whether God is actually Good and Trustworthy. If we are unsure about either, we hold back and hedge our bets.*

The great Scottish commentator, William Barclay, noted that "If we can be sure that behind this world there is, not a capricious, jealous, mocking god, but a God whose name is Father, then although much may still remain dark, all is now bearable because behind all is love."⁵ The great Baptist preacher of New York, Harry Emerson Fosdick, agreed that "When anyone becomes sure that God has a wise and a good purpose for every child of His, and for all the world, prayer inevitably becomes not the endeavor to get God to do our will, but the endeavor to open our lives to God so that *God can do in us what he wants to do.*⁶ **Prayer is simply giving the wise and good God an opportunity to do what his wisdom and love want done.**"⁷

My favorite expression of this idea comes from evangelist A. W. Tozer: "Those who know Christ at all well come to give him a blind trust. They do not know what he will feel it right to do, nor what they themselves ought to ask from him; but they are entirely sure of his interest in them, and his compassion toward them, and his power to carry through what no one else could do for them. And they leave it at that, with the inner peace that only he can give."

Remember, my friend, that God is not hiding from you. Our life in Christ is not about "Theocaching." But even so, even at our best, we see only the smallest part of the picture, and we have only the foggiest notion of what we really need. Yet as we come to know and trust God more completely, we learn to allow God complete freedom to order and guide our lives, because we have become completely confident that God knows what is best, is able to provide what is best, and loves us beyond all measure.

God's promise is not that God will never allow any evil or suffering to come to us, but that no matter what happens to us, **we are still beyond genuine harm due to the fact that God remains with us, and God's Presence is utterly and absolutely enough all by itself.** Through the ages, the sustaining power of God's Faithful Presence has made the sickbed sweet and the graveside triumphant; has transformed broken hearts and relationships; has brought glory to drudgery, poverty and old age; and has turned the martyr's death into a coronation (61).

Yes, my friends, **"Every time I feel the Spirit moving in my heart, I will pray."** With those who *were* enslaved, with those who *are* enslaved, we, too, yearn for the coming of God's New Creation. With them, we remember God's promise that *You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart* (Jeremiah 29:13); and we remember that it remains God's eternal

⁵ William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible*, "Matthew," volume 1, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), p. 201.

⁶ Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Meaning of Prayer* (New York: Association Press, 1949), p. 53.

⁷ Fosdick, p. 59.

purpose that we who are loved by God “*may have the full measure of [God’s] joy within [us]*” (John 17:13).

Oh, my friends, the day will come whether soon or late, when we will each joyfully kneel before Him, and on that Day, All will be Well. Let your heart be glad!

The LORD bless you and keep you;

The LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you;

The LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace (Numbers 6:24-26).