

## **Book Explores How Christians Perceive God's Voice The Wired Word for the Week of August 9, 2020**

### **In the News**

Do you believe that when you speak to God he not only hears but answers you? If you do, you are in the company of millions of Christians -- and, contrary to what some non-Christians may claim, not just those on some lunatic fringe of the faith, but well-adjusted, mainstream followers of Jesus.

For many, and probably most, Christians, praying about the issues of one's own life as well as the needs of one's friends, family and fellow believers is standard practice. The fact that many of those who pray also believe God responds to those prayers got the attention of Tanya Luhrmann, an anthropologist from Stanford University. She decided to explore this phenomenon by attending churches belonging to the Vineyard movement, a confederation of congregations grown from the charismatic Christianity of 1960s America.

Luhrmann treats the Vineyardites as representative of "evangelical" Christianity, but we think what she found among that group applies more widely than that. Evangelicals are present in virtually every Christian denomination, and many Christians who wouldn't classify themselves as evangelical nonetheless pray and seek responses from God.

In her discussions with Vineyard Christians, Luhrmann found that many speak to God in highly familiar ways and believe they can discern God's answers. In other words, after they talked to God, they expected God to speak back.

But in what form? Luhrmann identified three ways:

First, people said God speaks back through circumstances. For example, you've thought about participating in a mission, and a few days later, you meet a stranger in church who's organizing a mission trip, and you conclude that God wants you to go.

Second, people said God speaks back through the Bible. For example, you are invited to be on your church's prayer team and initially say no. But later you read in Scripture about elders praying for the church, and you understand it as God telling you to join.

Third, people said God speaks to them in their minds. Explaining this in *Psychology Today*, Luhrmann wrote, "People talked about developing 'discernment,' about learning to pick out which thoughts came from God and which from themselves. Thoughts that came from God were ones that you hadn't been thinking about; thoughts that gave you peace; thoughts that seemed consonant with God's nature. 'We do not expect,' the pastor explained, 'that God would want someone to cut themselves, or tell them to jump off a bridge. That is not God.'"

Luhrmann is not a believer and tries to put this in secular vocabulary that make sense to her, using terms such as "therapy" and "imagination." She says that in the realm of discernment, God

becomes a "therapist" who listens to the pray-er's deepest concerns, fears and worries. She concluded that the "therapy" seems to work, for those who spoke to God about their personal issues often said that in response, God's love felt very real to them. Some said they also felt less lonely and less stressed.

Writing elsewhere, Luhrmann said, "What I found so striking as an anthropologist is that prayer changed people, not so much morally or emotionally, although prayer might change people in these ways, but in their capacity to imagine. Prayer changed the way people used their imagination and it changed the quality of their imagination, so that what they imagined felt more real to them. They became able to feel God beside them as they walked. They experienced God as talking back. They needed to use a new 'theory of mind' to do this -- they needed to be taught that what happened in their imaginations could be real. But when they practiced taking what they imagined seriously, they began to feel that they had evidence that God was real and responding to them."

Though Luhrmann is not a religious person, she stated that her intention with her research was neither to support nor to undermine claims evangelical Christians make about communicating with God, but rather to show that such claims do not spring from ignorance or from a mere desire to believe the world is not a matter of chance.

She also said that what she found especially striking in her research is that prayer actually changed people, "not so much morally or emotionally ... but in their capacity to imagine ... so that what they imagined felt more real to them. ... They experienced God as talking back."

### **More on this story can be found at these links:**

That Voice Sounds Familiar. The Wall Street Journal (subscription required for access)  
When God Becomes a Therapist. Psychology Today  
When God Talks Back. Huffington Post

### **The Big Questions**

1. Do you hear back from God when you pray? If so, in what ways? If not, how does the absence of a reply figure into your ongoing faith?
2. What role, if any, does imagination play in your prayer life? How are you defining imagination? Are you using the term in the same way that Luhrmann is, or is there a difference? Explain.
3. Can you be a Christian without praying? Explain your answer.
4. Do you ever think of God as a therapist? Do you go to God about your worries, concerns, fears, anxieties? If so, what happens when you do?
5. Luhrmann examines the idea of talking to God and his speaking back using psychoanalytical

and sociological explanations, but not theological ones. Can prayer, spiritual discernment and the voice of God be wholly understood apart from theology (the study of the nature of God)? Why or why not?

### **Confronting the News with Scripture**

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

#### **Genesis 18:32-33**

Then [Abraham] said, "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there." [The Lord] answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it." And the LORD went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place. (For context, read 18:1, 16-33.)

Genesis 18:16-33 tells of Abraham learning that God intended to destroy the town of Sodom. Abraham then has an extended conversation with God in which he poses scenarios with varying numbers of righteous persons found in Sodom and asks God if, for the sake of those persons, God would spare the city. (In the end, no righteous persons are actually found in the city and it, along with the town of Gomorrah, is destroyed.)

For our purposes in this lesson, we note that Abraham apparently could hear the voice of God so plainly that an actual conversation between them takes place. Genesis 18:1 says that "the LORD appeared to Abraham" (italics added), in the form of one of three men, and verses 22-23 say Abraham "remained standing before the LORD. Then Abraham came near and said ..."

**Questions:** What would you think about someone today who claimed to be having actual conversations with God? Do you think the kind of verbal exchange Abraham had with God was a special kind of communication granted to Abraham because of his crucial role in God's covenant? What forms does God use today to speak to us? From Scriptures like these, is God presented as a deity who encourages conversation? How does this sort of petitionary prayer compare to the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane -- "not my will, but yours"?

#### **1 Samuel 3:1**

... The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. (For context, read 3:1-18.)

This verse is telling us that in the period (perhaps years long) leading up to Samuel's divine call, God rarely spoke to anyone in Israel. If you read the later chapters of Judges, which describe that period, and notice how far the tribes of Israel often were from living God's covenant, it's not surprising. But it's worth considering whether God was not speaking or people were not listening. In the case of young Samuel, however, God takes the initiative, and continues speaking until Samuel, with some help from Eli, understands that it is indeed God's voice.

**Questions:** Is communication with God always from his initiative? Would he speak to us even if we didn't pray? When has God used some form of repetition to get your attention?

**Isaiah 55:6**

Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near ... (For context, read 55:6-9.)

The expressions, "while he may be found" and "while he is near," raise the question about whether God is nearer at some times than at others. The overall testimony of scripture is that God is never far from any one of us.

At the same time, however, God is not a servant of humankind, available at our beck and call. In fact, the prophets knew that there was an immediacy to God's call at certain distinct times. When the prophets said, "Thus says the LORD ...," they meant "God is speaking right now, so right now is the time to respond." They understood that God controls the lines of approach, and that there are events in the tides of our lives that make us suddenly aware that God has opened those approaches.

Those times especially call for response. This does not contradict our belief that God is always with us, but it recognizes that we can miss the blessing and help of God by not responding in those times when we are sharply aware of his call.

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul alluded to this truth when he wrote to the Corinthians, "See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!" (2 Corinthians 6:2).

**Questions:** What sorts of things tell you the "lines of approach" to God are open for your immediate response? Do you experience dry spells where it seems hard to talk to God or where your prayers seem to go nowhere? How do you get a conversation going again with God?

**John 5:37-38**

And the Father who sent me has himself testified on my behalf. You have never heard his voice or seen his form, and you do not have his word abiding in you, because you do not believe him whom he has sent. (For context, read 5:30-38.)

Jesus spoke these words to an audience that was skeptical about him. They wanted some proof of Jesus' identity as the Son of God, and Jesus says that the Father has testified on his behalf. The skeptics, however, have not heard the voice of God in this matter because of their unbelief.

In other words, belief in Christ opens the way for one to hear God speak.

**Questions:** Does that mean that not believing in Christ renders one unable to hear God? Explain your answer. Does an unbeliever hear God and become a believer, or does God convert the unbeliever, who can then hear and respond to God?

**Acts 11:7**

I also heard a voice saying to me, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." (For context, read 11:1-18.)

The apostle Peter made this statement to the church at Jerusalem while describing his vision in

which God taught him that the gospel was for Gentiles as well as for Jews (see Acts 10:1-35). Peter says it was "a voice," but clearly he recognizes that the whole vision was from God.

**Questions:** How does God use "vision" with Christians today.? Peter's vision pushed Peter and, as he told it to others, his fellow believers as well, when it came to definitions of clean and unclean. God challenged Peter three times with the vision to widen his boundaries and change his definition of who is in and who is out. How are we challenged today as individuals and as God's people?

Is God's persistence necessary because of our own reluctance to accept a challenge? Shouldn't Peter -- shouldn't we -- respond affirmatively immediately? How do we know if the perceived challenge is from God and not from Satan or from the popular culture? In other words, how do we know if the challenge is God's will or if it's opposed to God's will?

### **For Further Discussion**

1. Respond to this comment from author Herman Wouk (Wouk is Jewish, and prayer is a regular part of Jewish worship and practice): "If you believe in fatality, prayer is nothing. If you believe in God, the prayer of a [person] is an event; not necessarily a decisive event ... but a new element in a situation, like a birth."

2. Back in the sixth century there was a monk by the name of John Climatus who said that prayer, as "a dialog and union with God," has the effect of "[holding] the world together." That's a way of saying that the very act of praying, quite apart from what is said in the prayer, is a counterpunch to the things that knock us down. Prayer has the effect of holding the world together -- of holding our personal world together, too. Does this definition fit your experience of prayer? Why or why not?

3. E. Stanley Jones, who for years was a missionary in India, tells about his early career decision. He had given his life to Christ at 17, and at 23, he was asked by a college president to teach at the college. The president said to him, "It is the will of the student body, the will of the townspeople, the will of the faculty, and we believe it is the will of God for you to teach in this college." But at the same time, Jones had a letter from a friend that said, "I believe it is the will of God for you to go into evangelistic work here in America." He also received a letter from his denomination's board of missions saying, "It is our will to send you to India." And at the same time, he had the notion that God's will for him was to go as a missionary to Africa. He describes this as a "traffic jam of wills." In the end, Jones went to India. How do you pick out God's voice when there is a traffic jam of wills? In what ways might it be God's will for different people to have opposing views of God's will regarding the same situation?

4. Does God sometimes "speak" through what he doesn't say? Consider the following from a TWW team member before answering: "My mother was a missionary to children in Czechoslovakia in the late 1940s when she met my father, a Czech national youth evangelist. They came to love each other, and when my mother was in danger of expulsion by the atheistic Communist government, my father proposed. On the way to the courthouse where they were to

say their vows, they prayed: 'God, if it is not your will that we proceed with this wedding, do whatever is necessary to prevent it; if it is your will that we marry, let nothing interfere to stop it.' My existence and that of my five siblings tells you how God answered that prayer."

5. Are there occasions when you choose not to pray, not to talk to God? Why? Are you reacting to circumstances or to God? What did you perceive God's response to be when you refused to talk?

### **Responding to the News**

This is a good time to consider what you do to listen for God. How can you listen for God's voice more intentionally?

### **Closing Prayer**

O God, help us to be able to distinguish your voice from the clamor of our daily lives. And hearing you, make us ready to respond. In Jesus' name. Amen.