

DISCERNING THE

Voice of God

HOW TO RECOGNIZE WHEN GOD SPEAKS

PRISCILLA SHIRER

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Priscilla Shirer is a wife and a mom first. But put a Bible in her hand and a message in her heart and you'll see why thousands meet God in powerful, personal ways at her conferences and through her Bible studies.

For the past twenty years, Priscilla has been in full-time ministry. She and her husband, Jerry, have founded Going Beyond Ministries and count it as their privilege to serve believers across the entire spectrum of the body of Christ. Priscilla is the author of more than a dozen books and Bible studies on a myriad of topics and biblical characters, including the exodus, the armor of God, Jonah, and Gideon.

Between writing and studying, she spends her days cleaning up after (and trying to satisfy the appetites of) three rapidly growing sons—Jackson, Jerry Jr., and Jude.

INTRODUCTION

Maybe you're like me. When a little window pops up on your computer screen nearly every day—the one that says, “Updates Available”—you always choose the “Remind Me Tomorrow” option. And when tomorrow comes, you delay it again. And again.

Even though installing the newest version promises to make our technological lives better, we ignore it. We're too busy or maybe just too comfortable where we are. But then, over time, our computers start running slower, laboring harder, struggling to perform. The updates didn't seem necessary then, but they sure do now.

Which should make us all wonder: Why wouldn't we want to live every day with all the capacity, power, and protection we can get?

Each new morning and in each new season of life, the Father offers us a holy invitation to advance to the next level with Him. Against the common objections of our neglect, disinterest, busyness, and laziness, He invites us to meet with Him, to speak with Him, where His Spirit can speak afresh to us. He comes offering not so much a destination as a journey—a journey into ongoing depths of relationship with Him, a journey into the abundance that old habits are robbing from us—a journey where we'll actually sense His closeness and be led by His Spirit into alignment with His will.

“Remind Me Tomorrow” simply won't do.

That's why, a decade after first penning this study, I'm so looking forward to sharing this spiritual update with you. I believe these insights gleaned from another ten years of accepting His ongoing invitation—not perfectly but at least purposefully—will help remind you what's truly available from Him.

Each week, you'll find four days of insights that culminate in *The Fifth Day*. This is your opportunity to turn your attention inward and really listen to what the Holy Spirit has been teaching you throughout the week, to talk with Him and record what He's showing you. I'm also excited my own father and pastor, Dr. Tony Evans, has agreed to fold his perspectives into each week of your study. In *Digging Deeper with Dad*, you'll find another layer of insight to reinforce what you're learning. A Leader Guide is included as well—just some ideas for you if you're facilitating a group study.

We've got seven whole weeks ahead to enjoy and experience the benefits of what He is eager to instill (and install) in us. So, click yes. And let's go.

Priscilla Shiren

A Proactive Stance of Obedience

WEEK ONE

- _____ still matters.
- Stillness is still essential.
- Time spent in God's Word is still the only way to _____ your mind.
- Faith is still the shield that _____ the flaming missiles of the evil one.
- Jesus is still the only mediator between God and man.

_____ is not only the appropriate response to hearing God, but it is also the _____ that unlocks all the blessings God has for us and opens up the line of _____ between us and Him in the first place.

It's possible to be a _____ leper.

1. It's too _____ to be _____.

_____ is the disguise of the divine.

2. It's too _____ to be _____.

Sometimes the _____ moves of God are wrapped up in the _____ assignments of obedience.

3. It's too _____ to be _____.

obedience

DAY ONE

THE KEY:

TO UNLOCK GOD'S BLESSING

"His leading is only for those who are already committed to do as He may choose. To such it may be said: 'God is able to speak loud enough to make a willing soul hear'."¹

—LEWIS SPERRY CHAFER

My family has enjoyed a long history with the Dallas Cowboys. I was only ten when their legendary coach, Tom Landry, asked my father—then a young, 26-year-old preacher—to be the team's first-ever chaplain.

So every now and then as I was growing up, Dad would take me along to some of their football games. I remember walking out onto that vast field at Texas Stadium. From ground level, the turf stretched out in all directions like an enormous green carpet, and the bleachers seemed to extend to the heavens. Mostly, though, I remember Coach Landry. From my diminutive height, he seemed a giant to me—his trademark fedora perched above kind, thoughtful, smiling eyes, exuding a quiet strength. Everyone honored him.

If anyone else personified Cowboys football, it was Roger Staubach, the quarterback who led the 'Boys to two Super Bowl championships in the 1970s. That was a little before my time, of course, but I still remember him and his friendship with Coach Landry. They were both Christians, and they appeared to be almost like father and son. But things weren't always so close between them. Staubach admitted, as a player, he often bristled against submission to his coach's leadership. Despite his respect for Landry's genius in football strategy, Staubach wanted the freedom to call his own plays on the field, to lead the team with his own approach. He thought he knew how best to run the Cowboys offense. *His way.*

Staubach finally came to the point where he realized he needed to decide. Would he rebel against his coach's authority? Or would he get

on board with the direction his coach wanted him to go? “I faced up to the issue of obedience,” Staubach later said. “Once I learned to obey, there was harmony, fulfillment, and victory.”² Yes, *lots* of victories.

So there it is. The one word upon which freedom, fulfillment, and victory hinges for all of us.

Will we . . . *Obey*?

FIRST THINGS FIRST

I wrote the first printing of *Discerning the Voice of God* eleven years ago. My kids were only toddlers then and, looking back, I was still pretty wet behind the ears myself. Today my oldest two sons tower over me, both of them nearly six feet tall. Every time I hug them and notice how my head plants firmly against their chests (instead of theirs against mine), I’m reminded how growth is an inevitable indicator of life and health.

The same is true for our spiritual lives. If we’re walking with Christ and our spiritual lives are healthy, we should expect to see growth and changes in perspective simply as a natural progression. Just makes sense, doesn’t it? And I’m grateful for it—for the renewed perspective God has given me throughout the last ten years or so.

Now, I see clearly that the best way to *begin* a study on hearing God is where I originally *ended* it.

Hearing Him starts with our commitment to humble obedience. We won’t do it perfectly—we can’t always obey flawlessly—but we must do it purposefully, with ears primed to hear and discern God’s voice. One of the surest ways to keep from hearing Him is to adopt a stance of pride and staunch rebellion, in opposition to what His Word and His Spirit are saying to us.

We’re not likely to hear *anything* from God until we’ve abandoned our tug of war with Him, between our wills and His. We may struggle to detect one syllable of divine dialogue, much less receive any clarity in discerning what He means, until we’ve first opened the floodgates of surrender so He can start piping the volume through.

Drawing a clear connection between obedience and hearing God is a critical piece of discerning God's will and His ways. Prayerfully consider the following verses. After reading each passage, use the space in the margin to record how it connects willing obedience with discerning the voice of God.

"The secret counsel of the LORD is for those who fear him, and he reveals his covenant to them."

PSALM 25:14, CSB

[This is Jesus talking here.] "If anyone wants to do his will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own."

JOHN 7:17, CSB

[Jesus again.] "The one who has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. And the one who loves me will be loved by my Father. I also will love him and will reveal myself to him."

JOHN 14:21, CSB

We'll quell the resounding voice and conviction of God's Spirit within us the more we ignore or disregard it. He will not long waste His words on those who aren't postured to obey. The tender, submissive heart is the one sensitive enough to continually detect God's leading and to pinpoint the strange, alternative voices of the enemy, fear, and ego that seek to lead us astray.

So I've gotta ask you a tough question right here on the first day we're together in these pages: Do you *intend* to obey God, to obey His Word? Do you really *want* to do His will? Or have you already decided to follow your own way despite what God's Spirit will say? Be honest. (He already knows your answer.) I'm challenging you—on Day One—to allow the Lord to soften your heart and to become vigilant in laying down your own ambitions, elevating His will above the pressing nag of your own. It would be such a waste to engage in all these weeks of study together (which I am so, so excited to be doing with you, by the way), if in the end, we keep allowing our stubborn old hearts to stand in the way of hearing from Him.

Please tell me you're not going to do that.

Me either.

I want you to know, I'm well aware of how difficult surrender can often be. Take it from me—a girl with a heart that, apart from the Holy Spirit's indwelling, can be so steely and apathetic. So when I reached out to my Twitter® family, asking them to name the usual suspects that often keep them from surrendering to the Lord, I recognized many of their responses.

See if you recognize any of these scoundrels, these reasons why we don't obey. *(Circle the ones that resonate with you personally.)*

- fear
- pride
- laziness
- stubbornness
- peer pressure
- procrastination
- lack of trust in God
- uncertainty as to how to begin
- being too comfortable where I am
- impatience with God's timing
- feeling unworthy to be used by God
- being too busy with personal ambitions
- concern that I might be hearing Him wrong
- disappointment in God because of previous experiences
- doubt that obedience will lead to a desirable result

Got any more? Stick 'em here.

Choose one or two of the attributes you circled, and describe how it has specifically kept you from being obedient. If it's not too personal, prepare to share this answer with your group the next time you meet together.

“I can do
nothing on
my own. I
judge only as
I hear, and my
judgment is
just, because
I do not seek
my own will,
but the
will of him
who sent me.”

JOHN 5:30, CSB

As we dive headfirst into this study and plunge fully into the freedom of hearing the voice of God again (or maybe for the first time), we’re leaving these robbers behind. They’ve distracted and disoriented us long enough. We want to hear God clearly now.

If it seems we’re starting this journey at the wrong end of the action plan, putting the obedience cart before the “hearing God” horse, let me just say what I’ve learned to be true. Facing up to this issue of obedience is the alpha and omega of how we hear from God. Obedience isn’t just *one* of the keys. It is *the* key that unlocks all of the blessings God intends for us. It also keeps the door of communication with Him clear and continually open.

No wonder, then, the enemy would want to work overtime to cripple us with fear, stir up our pride, kindle our doubts, encourage our procrastination, or incite any of those other troublemakers against us, anything to keep us from running full throttle toward God in unbridled surrender.

Look at Jesus’ sentiments in John 5:30; see the margin.
Circle what He did *not* seek; underline what He *did* seek.

Clearly Jesus was not ignoring the fact that He possessed a will of His own. Yet He was committed to honoring His Father’s will above it. He heard the voice of the Father more clearly than anyone to ever walk the earth. The defining characteristic of His life was that He was always postured to obey. He was steeped in humility and available to do His Father’s bidding over His own sentiments and ambitions as a man.

You and I have our own will too. And that’s fine. We don’t need to pretend otherwise. Our problem comes from not *surrendering* that will to the Father’s superior will. His perfect will. His all-wise will. His all-good will. His “if you only knew what I could do in you, you’d never doubt Me for a moment” will.

Most of us fear the loss of our hopes, dreams, and ambitions should we ever submit ourselves entirely to the Father’s will. We imagine them being crushed and discarded, never to be fulfilled. Honoring God’s directives will indeed require adjustments on our part, but it will never leave us lacking. The will that is submitted to Him is not extinguished; it is simply surrendered. It becomes like clay in the Potter’s

hand—pliant and moldable—the raw material for His most stunning masterpieces.

We don't lose. We win.

In what ways, if any, have you been concerned about “losing yourself” if you surrender completely to God?

The will that is submitted to Him is not extinguished; it is simply surrendered.

Ultimately, submission centers us directly in the will of God and gives us the opportunity to experience the best we could ever imagine.

KEY CHOICE TO MAKE

Surrender. That's the key. Orient yourself toward a posture of obedience—up front!—that's how the door flings open for His voice to be heard and His will to be accomplished. The Lord says to those of His children who freely submit their wills to His:

“I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go; I will counsel you with My eye upon you.”

PSALM 32:8

God knows what is best and only requires us to obey so that we may experience it.

So hold it in your hands today. The key, I mean. Right now, in your mind's eye, picture God's guidance and directives to you as a large, ornate, silver key. It runs the full length of your palm, extending beyond your fingertips on one end and beyond your wrist on the other. It's unlike any other key you've ever seen or used before—that's how you know it must be able to unlock something you've never experienced before. It's worth it. This key. It's as unique as your own fingerprints. And it's yours. It is God's specific assignment and calling for you.

Now, right here, right now, at the very start of our Bible study on hearing God, make the commitment to use this key. I promise He will give you opportunity for it throughout this study and in the days beyond. Choose right now, before you do anything else, to receive this key and take seriously the privilege of using it.

“Examine me,
O LORD, and
try me; test
my mind and
my heart.”

PSALM 26:2

I know it'll require courage and tenacity. If you choose to squeeze your hand around it, you'll be doing so with a faith that is fully assured of the goodness and timing and wisdom of God. Yet even without full clarity as to what He may ask you to do or where He may instruct you to use it, either now or in the future, make the choice in advance to say “Yes, Lord,” sure that this key of obedience will unlock every good and perfect gift your Father intends for you.

Look back at the things you circled earlier—things that are keeping you from surrendering to God in every aspect of your life (p. 11). Offer each of them to Him as you go through this study.

Then, be brave enough to let God search you further. Ask Him to reveal any calloused places that may be blocking you from clearly hearing His voice. Yield to Him any area where you sense resistance and doubt.

You're making a “key” decision here, crucial to being able to experience what walking confidently in His will is all about. Write down anything He's spoken to you through your time of study today.

DAY TWO

THE PLAN:

TO DO GOD'S BIDDING

"I know the Lord is speaking to me when I have an impression during prayer that is consistent with His Word and supported by wise counsel."

—CHRISTINE CAINE

Obedience can be an intimidating word. Depending on our upbringing and other influences from our early life, it may invoke different emotions. For some, it conjures up odious thoughts of harsh, seemingly pointless regimens of rules and regulations that are stifling and oppressive instead of life-giving and fulfilling. For others, it seems oddly devoid of intimacy and relationship, more of a never-good-enough attempt at measuring up. And for even more of us, the word itself feels like a threat to our innate desire for independence. It bristles against the fabric of our self-reliance and autonomy.

In the paragraph above, underline any perceptions about obedience that you've felt or experienced before.

What other kinds of defining sentiments do the word *obedience* and its ramifications immediately bring to your mind or bubble up in your emotions?

What things, people, or life circumstances have been contributing factors to this thought process?

Obedience—at least the kind that our good, loving, sovereign God requires—is neither legalistic nor lacking in affection. Although it places needed boundaries and demands on us—as in, "*If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross*

and follow Me" (MATT. 16:24)—each bit of instruction He gives is born out of the tenderness of His heart toward us and His desire to steer us toward His best for our lives. Obedience is not a *no*; it is actually His best yes. It swims in oceans of grace and leads us to freedom, wholeness, and health. It opens us up to His unbridled blessing and abundance.

Obedience is not a *no*; it is actually His best yes.

In the paragraph above, underline any sentiments about obedience that you've seen to be true in your experience.

The irony of obedience is like a delicate dance of trust. It may require real sacrifice from us, while somehow leading to blessing and incomparable abundance.

"If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."

JOHN 13:17

- It binds us while concurrently loosening us.
- It holds us tightly while also letting us go.
- It redirects us only to replenish and renew us.
- It restrains us while simultaneously releasing us.
- It limits us while also opening up spacious possibility.

Without our intentional surrender to the former, we cannot experience the benefits of the latter—benefits that are so important and hold so much incredible promise, we can hardly afford to leave them to chance. We must plan and intentionally strategize to pursue them, to pursue obedience. If left to our flesh's tendencies toward rebellion, we will live in a consistent state of resistance toward God and His ways. But if we (literally) *plan to obey*, we put ourselves in position any day of the week to hear what He wants us to do next, and then to have Him bless us with the supernatural joy of following Him.

HOUSE RULES

My three sons and I have a morning routine. Maybe you do too, whether you're wrangling toddlers or teenagers or just trying to get your own self out the door in one piece. For my brood, our morning plan typically involves a strategic engagement of assignments for which each person, or at least somebody, is responsible—bed making,

bathroom cleaning, dishwasher emptying, taking out the trash. You get the picture.

Now listen, I'm not saying it comes off without a hitch every day. Don't ask me to take this illustration too far, unless you're willing to come over and help me sort some laundry. And I mean the sweaty, stinky, back-to-back nights of basketball practice variety. The only thing I'm trying to say is, I don't come up with this list of chores on the fly. It's not a random, hope-this-works-out sort of expectation on a busy morning in the Shirer household. That would never work.

Know how I know? Because I've tried that before. And trust me (or say a firm, confident, head-bobbing *amen* with me), it's a recipe for chaos and frustration. It's absolutely essential to work through a plan that's been organized ahead of time if we are to have any hope of success. I need a blueprint that's been prearranged, tried, and adapted through many dangers, toils, and snares. Despite my own affinity for spontaneity and impulsiveness, I learned a long time ago that nothing—and I do mean *nada*—is accomplished during our mornings without a *plan*. Spur of the moment, flying-by-the-seat-of-our-pants operations invite complete mayhem. Only a predetermined commitment to a plan is able (or, again, at least *potentially* able) to hold our mornings together.

Let's pivot here and apply this same logic to something even more important than mama's sanity on an average weekday. Let's talk about that *key* we shared a conversation about yesterday—the key of surrendered obedience that leads to actually hearing from God and being able to live with the pure satisfaction of doing His will. Is anything really more important than that?

No?

Then what's your *plan* for doing it?

We aren't haphazard and arbitrary with a lot of the things we deem important in life: our health, our retirement plan, our monthly calendar of appointments. We even enlist others to help us stay on track with some of those things—help we're sometimes willing to pay for! So, what about our commitment to being spiritually aligned with the God of the universe and with how He wants to direct our hearts? If we don't put an intentional resolve and strategic course of action for following

“[God] said, ‘Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.’ So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him.”

GENESIS 22:2-3, ESV

Him in place, we’re basically leaving it up in the air, susceptible to the flighty whims of our circumstances and feelings. There’s simply too much eternal treasure at stake for that.

But don’t take my word for it. We go to God’s Word for instruction. In the story of the patriarch Abraham, we find both the value and profitable results of making *plans* to obey. (We’ll start considering Abraham’s story today and continue it throughout the rest of the week.)

LOOKS LIKE A PLAN

Read Genesis 22:2-3 in the margin. Look for the following words, then fill in the blanks by writing what the verse says Abraham did in response to God’s instruction. (“Saddled his donkey,” for example, is the first one.)

Saddled _____

Took _____

Cut _____

Went _____

Old Testament sacrificial rituals were quite laborious. The process was painstakingly detailed and time-consuming, not to mention messy (what with all that slaying and dismembering going on). But in reading a short, concise record of it, like we see here in Genesis 22, appearances can be deceiving. The succinct summary of Abraham’s activity in verse three, outside of the emotional torment invoked by verse two, makes the whole thing sound rather easy.

Yet the assignment Yahweh gave to Abraham could not have been accomplished on a whim. No haphazard spontaneity would enable Abraham to follow through on this mission. It was too arduous and meticulous of a task to accomplish without adequate preparation, strategy, intentionality, accountability, and dedication to detail. Each of these would be required in order to fully obey God’s directive.

For each word on the next page, lookup the accompanying verse. Ask the Lord to give you clarity as to how the principles behind these elements might become a more strategic part of your plan of action to be obedient to His will. Jot down anything that really stands out to you.

Preparation (Neh. 2:7-9,13-15)

Strategy (Eph. 6:11-13)

Accountability (Eccl. 4:11-12)

Intentionality (Col. 3:1-2)

Dedication (Dan. 1:8)

Consider the following as it related to Abraham's plan of obedience.

- 1. PREPARATION AND STRATEGY:** The journey to Mount Moriah in Jerusalem required *three* days (see Gen. 22:4). This meant gathering supplies ahead of time for overnight camping as well as measuring out rations for food and drink, all in order to sustain the entourage as they made their trip to the place of sacrifice.
- 2. ACCOUNTABILITY:** Abraham's choice to bring two servants along may have been to provide help in carrying enough wood to build an altar. But, perhaps he brought them along for companionship as he carried out this difficult assignment.
- 3. INTENTIONALITY AND DEDICATION:** Along with the wood, "glowing pieces of charcoal or other embers would have been carried in small pottery containers and carefully nursed along until a fire was needed."³

In each of the previous facts, what do you observe about Abraham's commitment to intentionality in his obedience?

1.

2.

3.

See how he refused to leave anything to chance? He didn't just *hope* to carry out God's instructions. He put measures in place to be certain of it—certain he would arrive at his destination, certain he'd be equipped with appropriate supplies to carry out the task, certain of having suitable accountability in place to make sure the job was done with precision. Every step along the way, Abraham's plan put him in position to hear what God would say or do next.

Now this may not be what we prefer our obedience to *feel* like. But this is what obedience *looks* like. This is what obedience *does*. When Abraham lived out his trust in God by making plans to obey what he'd been told, his faith was rewarded with the miraculous appearance of a substitutionary animal and the subsequent salvation of his son Isaac.

So what about you? What about me?

Will we, like Abraham, prepare to be obedient to God?

- Will we commit to align our actions and attitudes with the direction of obedience?
- Will we take the necessary precautions to cut out people or pastimes that influence us toward disobedience?

- Will we fortify our resolve by intentionally surrounding ourselves with influences that encourage us toward godliness?
- Will we humble ourselves to remain accountable to other mature believers who have our best interests at heart?
- Will we commit to shifting our attitudes or actions the moment we realize they are out of alignment with God's will?
- If you say "Yes, I will," what kinds of plans would help you turn these noble desires into real resolutions? Especially in areas of your life where obedience is the most difficult?

Our answers to these questions will determine the extent to which our spiritual ears are primed to hear God.

If you haven't already, on the inside of the front or back cover of this book, make a list of personal circumstances troubling you. As you work through this Bible study, focus on these circumstances and how God is speaking to you concerning them.

God will undoubtedly be giving you new directives and insights as we journey together through these pages. The question is: What can you do today to strategize a lifestyle of obedience? So when He speaks, you're there—with plans to obey?

Here's one suggestion: If you're doing this study within the context of a group, take full advantage of the relationships you'll develop within this community. See every person as a partner in your journey of spiritual growth and you for them. Each of them has been divinely chosen by the Lord to walk this road with you, at least for the weeks you're sharing this study. Be intentional and strategic about your commitment to obedience *together*. There is strength in numbers!

DAY THREE

THE COST:

TO RECEIVE GOD'S BEST

"Our spiritual ear will never be sensitive to his voice if we have a personal agenda to which we are already committed. God leads and speaks to the humble who have surrendered their plans and want to do His will. With an 'open heaven' and a surrendered will, we will be able to clearly hear God's voice in our hearts."

—JIM CYMBALA

My son Jude was only three years old the day I saw him walking around our backyard with his hand stuck in a mason jar.

I'd been nearby reading, looking up every now and then to check on his well-being while he played with his toys. But the sound of his whimpering piqued my attention, and the sight of this new development made me too curious not to investigate.

"Come here, honey, what's the matter?" Drawing closer, he told me in broken toddler language what I already knew: he couldn't get his hand out of the jar. But the best I could tell, the only reason he couldn't was because he had his hand balled up into a tight fist. "Just open up your hand, and it'll come right out."

Ah, but there was the problem—inside that grubby fist was an acorn he'd seen at the bottom of the jar—a treasure he didn't want to let go of. No matter how reasonably I tried to explain that he could get both his hand *and* the acorn out if he'd only listen to me, he refused to release his grasp. He spent the rest of his playtime that day wandering around the yard, still wearing that jar on the end of his arm.

How much fun could that be?

But, who of us hasn't done the same thing? We're all prone at times to hold on too tightly to our own ambitions, relationships, expectations, and even our successes, long after God has instructed us to let them go. In the moment, letting go doesn't make sense. Releasing them doesn't seem worth the alternative. We insist on carrying them around for awhile—maybe for a lifetime—no matter how they may limit or short-circuit the benefits we could otherwise enjoy.

But hearing from God and enjoying the freedom that comes from doing what He says often requires us to empty our hands, trusting He will fill them with something better. And if we haven't prearranged our allegiance, if we haven't preplanned our strategy, if we haven't enlisted suitable accountability—all in a determined commitment to obedience—our wayward emotions will betray us into clinging to things out of rebellion and personal comfort, out of fear and insecurity. We'll miss living in the *"spacious place"* God desires for us (**2 SAM. 22:20, CSB**).

We must be willing to pay the cost that leads to His best.

Is there an area of your life in which you are currently resisting obedience because of the cost involved in "letting go"? List the perceived cost below.

LETTING GO

Yesterday, we looked at the planning required for Abraham to obey God's instructions. Read Genesis 22:2-3 again today:

"[God] said, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.' So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him."

GENESIS 22:2-3, ESV

Talk about "letting go"! Consider the emotionally traumatic toll that God's directive placed on Abraham. We ain't talking acorns here. By

any standard, God's instruction was *brutal*—a gut punch to the tender heart of a loving father—not to mention a seeming contradiction to Yahweh's own promises.

I'm sure you've read and heard enough of this story to be familiar with all the irrationalities implied in what God was saying. He had promised Abraham a great nation from Abraham's offspring. And now it seemed He was asking Abraham not only to sacrifice this son he loved but also the future God had promised. A new nation? Descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky? Sort of impossible without Isaac, right? And yet Abraham had clearly heard what seemed an unreasonable, unimaginable command from God: *Let go!*

What does a person *do* with that? With an unthinkable assignment? No one would have faulted Abraham for running away from it. The cost of obedience seemed unreasonably high. While we're familiar, of course, with Abraham's story, we know our own stories even better, which leads me to ask you (as I ask myself):

How has your response to God, regarding whatever He's asking you to release, been similar or different from Abraham's reaction at the beginning of verse 3?

Perhaps one reason Abraham could do the unthinkable here was because costly obedience wasn't new to him. This concept of "letting go" had become an ongoing experience in His relationship with the Lord. Consider his track record:

Turn to Genesis 12:1-3, and answer the following questions.

1. What was Yahweh's instruction?
2. What would Abraham need to "let go of" in order to obey?

3. If Abraham submitted to God's directive, what was the promised outcome?

Seriously, almost from the first time we meet Abraham to the very end, everything God required from him seemed to necessitate a radical level of expense—his home, his family, his heritage, his comfort. Yet, Abraham was willing to pay it. Situations in which he could have easily answered with a vehement *no*, instead he responded with a valiant *yes*. His stance was sure. His compass had been set to march toward God's purposes. *No matter the cost*. He might not have been crazy about what God was telling him. But one thing's for sure—

He was hearing from God.

Because he didn't let the cost frighten him into disobedience, Abraham received the outlandish benefits of God's grace—not only astounding, personal miracles but also a firm foundation for the beginning of a new nation founded firmly on trust and faith in Yahweh as *Jehovah Jireh*, "*The LORD Will Provide*" (**GEN 22:14**).

RISK AND REWARD

So Abraham's costly obedience resulted in abundant blessings, not only those that buoyed him and his family for years to come but also those that extend to you and me even all these millennia later. Among the clearest takeaways is a lesson that each of us wanting to hear from God must learn.

Expect to pay a price.

Only an errant, misguided theology would present bouquets completely devoid of thorns. Because, listen, there is sacrifice involved in your commitment to God. And yet from age to age, from one faithful follower to another, from testimonies that pile up behind us into mountains of indisputable evidence—the benefits far outweigh the costs. Believing this truth is essential.

"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us."

ROMANS 8:18

When we refuse to follow God's direction, it's usually because we're convinced that whatever He's asking us to give up is greater than what we'll gain.

By obeying, we'll see some of these benefits in a physical, visible, tangible way on earth, while other blessings will be reserved for us as treasures and rewards of heaven. But no matter here or there, then or now, God's benefits and blessings will always be far more valuable than whatever it is we feel so resistant to release. Ask Abraham and many others—or simply ask yourself.

Name some clear blessings you can trace back to a decision you made to obey, even when it seemed costly at the time.

In disobedience, we miss God's blessings, invite His necessary discipline, and break the intimacy that allows our spiritual ears to hear what He is saying to us.

If only we'd understand the advantage we're gaining in the exchange.

Look up at least two of the following examples, and outline the cost of obedience to each individual.

Esther (Esth. 4:14-17)

The Disciples (Luke 18:28-30)

Paul (Phil. 3:4-11)

Jesus (Phil. 2:8-10)

We all have to lay something down in order to receive God's best. And when we do—like Paul, we come to know Christ *"and the power of his resurrection,"* even as we *"share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death"* (**PHIL. 3:10, ESV**).

Like Esther, we eventually come to know days of *"light and gladness and joy and honor"* (**ESTH. 8:16**).

Like Jesus' disciples, we come to experience Jesus' promise to them: *"Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many times as much at this time and in the age to come, eternal life"* (**LUKE 18:29-30**).

As you have launched into this study, what modifications do you already suspect you'll need to make in the following areas in order to be obedient to God's directives?

Ambitions:

Beliefs:

Expectations:

Relationships:

Traditions:

Other:

Which of these would you consider to be the greatest costs to you? Costs that at one time you might not have been willing to pay?



DAY FOUR

THE TIME:

TO RESPOND TO GOD'S VOICE

Have you ever met someone whose relationship with God is so full, robust, and real that his or her life seems more like a spreading wildfire than a quietly contained religion? *I have.* Through the years, I've crossed paths with many people whose passion for God and their continued optimism about life with Him have stirred my soul.

They fascinate me, these individuals who are radically unique even among other Christians I know. There's just something deeper and more substantial about their walks than the rest of ours. They have a firm, unshakable resolve in God, and their experiences with Him are as mind-boggling as they are flat-out beautiful.

Whenever I meet people like this—those whose spiritual fires ignite my own—I always take time to ask them what they'd pinpoint as the main reason behind their ongoing fervor. And without fail, their answers are remarkably similar. (It always makes me wonder: if the secret is really so evident, why aren't we all doing the same thing?) Here's the repeated theme: *their walks with God aren't centered primarily on knowledge; they hinge on a relationship experience.* These people are dedicated to studying the Bible, yes, but they're also dedicated to aligning their lifestyle with it. The knowledge they acquire from delving deeply into Scripture only whets their appetites for knowing its Author more intimately and for seeing Him at work amid the regular rhythms of their everyday living.

In response to my question, one person made a statement that sums up everything I've ever heard anyone say on this subject. "I decided a long time ago," she said, "the only appropriate response to God is my complete and immediate obedience. I am committed to obeying His leading no matter how absurd, difficult, or unpopular His directive may seem. If He said it, I'm doing it. Immediately."

You want to hear God's voice? Really? Let this woman's answer become the beat of your own heart. Because this—*this*—is what

separates the passionate and fervent from the critical and skeptical. This is what separates those who know *about* God from those who actually experience Him, encounter Him, and hear His voice. When the Spirit leads, they heed and follow.

Immediate obedience creates the needed margin for God to invade our everyday lives, to stir up supernatural activity, to cause our hearts to pound with anticipation, and to ruin us for “church” as usual. Seeing God, hearing His voice, sensing His presence near us, and watching Him working through us will make our obedience worth it.

IMMEDIACY

Let’s turn our attention back to Abraham. He seemed to understand not merely the blessing of obedience but of *immediate* obedience. He knew the importance of responding to God without delay. He knew there were blessings to be found in a lifestyle of righteous, and right now, obedience.

When the Lord told Abraham to leave his homeland, giving him no further information on where he was to go, he obeyed immediately with nothing more than God’s word for security (Heb. 11:8). On another occasion, when God instructed him to circumcise every male in his household, Abraham did it the very same day (Gen. 17:10-14,22-23).

Now Abraham wasn’t perfect, okay? The Bible is honest enough to reveal some of his bobbles in character, many of which were quite serious. In fact, Genesis 15:6 says Abraham’s “*righteousness*” came from the same place ours does: “*He believed in the LORD.*” (You may remember reading about this in the New Testament—Paul often references Abraham’s faith story in his New Testament letters.) Abraham was faithful, not flawless.

But, Abraham was good at being immediately obedient. He consistently did what God said, and he did it without delay.

In the passage we’ve been studying this week (Gen. 22:2-3), how did Abraham follow a pattern of immediate obedience?

The only appropriate answer when we hear God speaking is, “Yes, Lord.”

“If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.”

JOHN 14:15

“Abraham rose early in the morning...”

GENESIS 22:3, ESV

What do Abraham's actions tell us about:

1. His internal posture of obedience toward God
2. His readiness to make quick adjustments
3. His lack of concern for conflicting opinions

Put yourself in Abraham's shoes, how might your response have been different from Abraham's especially given the weight of God's instructions?

Would the ram have been caught in the bush if Abraham had delayed his obedience? No one can know for sure. But consider the perfectly-timed intersection of the ram and Abraham on top of that mountain.

When the Lord gives me instructions that I don't particularly like, sometimes to the point that I'm afraid to carry them out, the last thing I want to do is get up "early in the morning" to start putting them into action. It's usually easier to do anything other than what God has said to do. Instead I'll often—oh—think about it, pray about it, or talk to my husband and friends about it. Sometimes I'll even try to ignore it. I can think of times, for example, when the Holy Spirit has convicted me to get up and leave right in the middle of a movie or to back away from a conversation that's becoming unhealthy. He's nudged me to close the cover on a book that, while intriguing, well-written, and perhaps even recommended to me as a couldn't-put-it-down page-turner, is starting to show signs of taking me places I don't have any business going. Yet far too frequently, my obedience is not as quick as it should be. What about yours?

Abraham didn't wait a couple of days or weeks to make sure God was certain about what He wanted him to do. He gave the Lord instant, unquestioning obedience, despite being given some unbelievably difficult instructions.

Has the Lord given you instructions this week that you've been slow to respond to Him about? If so, what were those instructions?

What was the reason for your delay? What talked you out of acting on it? What kinds of rebuttals have you been listening to and leaning on?

Delayed obedience is disobedience.

And disobedience always yields consequences.

We find another illustration of this truth in Numbers 13–14: the record of an event in Yahweh’s relationship with Abraham’s descendants (the children of Israel). After being freed from Pharaoh’s rule, the Hebrews wandered the sandy, desolate landscape of the Sinai Peninsula. Finally, God instructed them to send spies into the promised land to survey the territory that He planned to give them.

Let’s be clear on their mission here. They weren’t being sent out to determine whether or not the people should take the land. This was more of a scouting trip, a preview of coming attractions concerning what God had already promised them. And yet the sight of the land’s inhabitants and the potential problems in trying to occupy it sparked fear in the hearts of the spies, fear that spread like wildfire throughout the rest of the nation. Except for two strong, faith-filled men—Joshua and Caleb—the rest of God’s people determined they should *not* do what God had told them to do, *not* claim what He had given them to claim. In fact, they were so frightened that they even wanted to return to Egypt (Num. 14:1-4).

God’s anger was kindled against His beloved people because they refused to trust Him despite all He had accomplished on their behalf. God’s anger opened their eyes to the consequences of not obeying Him. By not responding with immediate obedience, they cost themselves the opportunity to take the land right away.

Read the people’s action and God’s response in Numbers 14:39-45. Record your observations.

Is there any way that Israel's actions mirror your own actions right now?

How can you proactively shift your response toward God in this area of your life, so that you're obeying Him immediately?

DELAY

I'm riveted by Paul's explanation of the armor of God in Ephesians 6. This passage has not only given me insight into the defenses at my disposal to help me stand firm, but it has also shined a spotlight on the tactics our common enemy uses to keep me (and all of us) from experiencing victory.

Turn to Ephesians 6:14 and identify the second piece of armor listed there.

How would you define the spiritual virtue that correlates with this piece of armor?

If *righteousness*—right living—provides a defensive mechanism against a full frontal demonic attack (and it does), your enemy's goal will always be to steer you toward *wrong living* (and he will). He'll employ any enticements he can lay in your path to persuade you toward disobedience and rebellion. He wants you exposed, your breastplate unused, your life laid bare and available to every threat and deadly scheme he's planned.

And if he can't get you to *disobey*, he will at least try convincing you to *delay*. The enemy knows that when we as believers align our lives to God through immediate obedience we have a clear means of defense against him—our breastplate of righteousness. And since this piece of armor will always prove too strong for Satan to infiltrate, he conspires to keep it lying at our feet, left at home, or off for the weekend, anything to keep it out of place as long as possible—hours, days, weeks, months, years, *a lifetime*.

Go back to the first lesson this week, and look at the things you circled on page 11 that have kept you from obeying God in the past. Write several of the most frequent ones below.

Delayed obedience is disobedience and leaves us exposed to the enemy's advances.

How can you clearly detect when the enemy may be scheming against you, perhaps using this particular device to delay your obedience?

If the enemy can't get you to *disobey*, he will at least try convincing you to *delay*.

I'm not saying the enemy is the only reason behind things we may be struggling with. (He isn't always. Sometimes it's just us.) But, when I suspect he may be the source of it, I don't know about you, but it causes a holy indignation to rise up inside me. It makes me want to stand firm and no longer allow him to snatch God's best away from me. Sometimes he doesn't even have to snatch it—I just hand it over.

Well, no more.

Breastplate is on. Resolve is firm.

I will honor God's Word immediately, refusing to let procrastination keep me from being able to deflect the attacks of the enemy. I want to receive all the benefits that come to a person whose life honors God.

Let's make this commitment together, okay?

THE FIFTH DAY

"Almighty God, in this hour of quiet I seek communion with you. I want to turn away from the worry and fever of today's work, from the world's jarring noises, from the praise and blame of other people, from the confused thoughts and fantasies of my own heart, and instead seek the quietness of your presence."⁴

—JOHN BAILLIE

I have an ongoing prayer request that frequently peppers my conversations with God. No matter the specific details I'm verbalizing, I always seem to land here:

"Lord, reveal Yourself to me."

The definition of the original Greek word for reveal in John 14:21 (CSB) means "to exhibit, to appear in person, to declare."⁵

More than anything else that might define or characterize my circumstances, I want to hear His voice, detect His fingerprints in my life, and see Him moving within it all. No matter how many times I make this appeal to Him in prayer, and no matter how many different combinations of words I use, God's response is always an echo of this verse:

"The person who has My commands and keeps them is the one who [really] loves Me; and whoever [really] loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I [too] will love him and will show (reveal, manifest) Myself to him. [I will let Myself be clearly seen by him and make Myself real to him.]"

JOHN 14:21, AMPCE

In other words, He says to me, *Priscilla, you really want to see Me? Then get busy being radically obedient to Me.* His Word tells us to plan on it. On obeying. Whatever it may seem to cost. And not to wait another second before we start. As backward as it may seem at first, what we do in preparation *before* we hear from God is just as important as how we choose to respond to God *after* we hear from Him. God doesn't just speak to be heard; He speaks to be obeyed.

So today—on this Fifth Day—I’m not giving you anything to lookup. I’m only asking you to *look up*. At Him. Use this time of seeking Him (and seeking to hear Him) as an opportunity to commit yourself to up-front, proactive obedience—before He even says a word.

Flip back through this first week of study, looking for things you’ve highlighted, starred, or underlined. Read some of the answers you’ve given to the questions I’ve asked. Perhaps reread some of the Scriptures you studied that you wanted to spend more time with. Generally, just reflect on what you heard God saying through His Word and His Spirit—into *your* spirit—that left a particular mark.

Then, rest with Him a while. Marinate in what He’s been leading you to consider and act on. And as you interact with Him in prayer on this less structured Fifth Day, do what you most like to do when you want to be sure you remember something important. Journal it. Type it up. Draw a picture of it. Write a song or poem about it.

This is your day to listen. When you get up from here, it’s time to obey what He’s showing you to do.

OBEDIENCE DETECTED

by Dr. Tony Evans

At our church in Dallas, we've installed motion detector lighting to cut down on the amount of electricity wasted when lights are left on for no reason. Now, when someone walks into a room, the lights come on; when the person or group walks out, the lights turn off.

Even so with our God. Just as motion within our church building causes the presence and power of light to manifest itself, obedience activates God's presence and power in our everyday lives. He stands ready to reveal greater illumination of His will to anyone from whom He detects obedient motion.

Jesus made clear the direct relationship between obedience to God and communication with God when He said, *"If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him"* (JOHN 14:23). Obeying His Word leads to closeness in relationship. Not only does it draw us closer to both the Father and the Son, it frees the Holy Spirit to communicate with us (v. 26). Thus the whole Trinity is involved in speaking to any believer who prioritizes obedience—obedience that is motivated by love for the Lord.

The goal of love is obedience. The more you love someone, the more you want to please them. The more you want to please them, the more intimate your relationship grows. The more intimate your relationship grows, the freer the other person feels to speak with you. Legalism—where people obey only out of force or threat, out of fear or

obligation—never works. It never leads to a higher level of hearing from God. Communication is a relational issue in which love drives our obedience.

Here's another illustration to drive home the point: A woman was married to a man who gave her a list of twenty-five demands he expected her to fulfill as his wife. He would regularly check the list to see if she was meeting his expectations. But the two of them rarely spoke or felt close to one another because their relationship was based primarily on rules. After a time, the man passed away. A year or so later, this widow fell in love and married someone else. One day as she was cleaning the house, she opened a drawer and ran across the list of duties her first husband had given to her—tasks she once hated. Seeing the list again brought a knowing smile to her face. Now, she was completing the entire list for her new husband and enjoying every minute of it. She was obeying from love now, not duty, and the result was a relationship in which they shared everything together.

The further we drift away from God, both in love and obedient lifestyle, the less we will hear Him. Coming near, loving to obey Him, invites the intimacy of hearing His voice.