

Theme: We need to learn to listen to God's voice above all other voices.

Introduction: I want to begin by showing you what it's like to try and listen to one distinct voice in the midst of a lot of other voices. Maybe some of you are like me in that you sometimes get overwhelmed, confused, or agitated in a crowd. It's easy to lose a sense of focus on the one important voice when you're bombarded by a host of other voices.

This morning I want to talk about voices—the kinds of voices that we hear throughout life—and how we interact with these voices. In the presence of all of these voices, there's always one voice that's truly worth listening to—the voice of God. What we'll see is that this voice is always speaking. It's up to us whether we choose to listen to this voice or to the host of other voices that are also competing for our attention.

- I. Think about the voices in your life. I'm talking about influences, circumstances, counsel, impressions—all the things which make up the mental fabric of your life.
 - a. Some of these voices may be constructive, some destructive; some may be voices that you intentionally listen to, some may be voices which you try to ignore or drown out.
 - b. It's the voices in your life that I want to discuss today. I want to do this by looking at some examples in Scripture.
 - i. As we know, the Scriptures were written for our example. So we find instances of characters who acted in accordance with God's purposes, and those who didn't.
- II. The first one who comes to mind for me is Abraham. Among the top five characters in Scripture, Abraham is one who stands out for me as one who walked in abiding and trusting closeness with the Lord when everything in his life seemed to contradict God's promises.
 - a. We pick up with Abraham's story when he was already a grown man. God called him to go out from the land of Ur, a land east of what would become Israel in Mesopotamia. God called him to leave his father's family, which would have been a dramatic thing for anyone to do—then as now.
 - i. God then promised Abraham a vast number of children. In that day, progeny was an indication of one's well-being and legacy. However, not only did Abraham not have a great progeny; he had no children.
 - ii. Then we have the matter of Abraham's age. One hundred in any age is terribly old. Certainly the idea is that Abraham was well past the age when he could reasonably hope to have a child.
 - iii. This is where we meet Abraham: landless, childless, and old. The odds were stacked against him. He had no reasonable hope for a bright future.
 - iv. The one thing Abraham had to cling to was a promise from God. God had promised to Abraham a great name, vast land, and an incalculable progeny.
 - b. Think of the voices in Abraham's life.
 - i. There was the voice of Abraham's circumstances—bleak, unfavorable circumstances indeed. Not a single child, and because of his age, not even a glimmer of hope for a child.

- ii. Not only that, but he did not own a plot of land. He was a wandering Bedouin until the day he died. Other than a cave in which he buried his wife, Sarah, Abraham was landless.
- iii. Think of the kind of ridicule and sneers that Abraham likely would have endured. His family and servants probably had their own opinions regarding Abraham's condition and prospects.
- iv. In all this the one voice that would have countered all of the negativity, all of the ridicule, all of the doubting, all of the odds, was a faint but firm promise from God.
- v. Yet we, who know the rest of the story, know that God's voice was the surest and firmest voice there was. In the truest sense, it was the only voice that mattered.
- c. Think of the odds in your life. Does it seem like the cards are stacked against you? Perhaps it's always felt like that.
 - i. Maybe the voices are saying that it just won't happen, that it's just not realistic. The odds are too great, there are too many factors or complications.
 - ii. This is an area where I know it's easy to practice what seems like an irresponsible faith, and to chase fantasies in the name of trusting God.
 - 1. While I admit that I think a lot of very sincere Christians have chased fantasies rather than God's true will, the story of Abraham teaches us, among other things, that God will not be defied by odds.
 - 2. I can't really tell you what, in your life, separates God's true will which should be trusted from foolish fantasies. But let me simply say, if God has promised you something, that's the only voice you need to be listening to.
 - iii. And so the ridicule, the sneers, the doubts, shouldn't be given a place in your mind. The idea that if God is for us, then nothing or no one can be against us marks a profounder truth than we can truly know in this life.

- III. Let's talk about another voice that can come into our lives, and thus let's look at another person that encountered voices other than God's. I think of Elijah following Mount Carmel.
- a. You remember Elijah had just been a part of an awesome demonstration of God's power. Yahweh had struck the altar with fire and 450 prophets of Baal had been slaughtered. Victory had been won. Yet the treacherous Jezebel had once again threatened to kill Elijah.
 - b. I'm not sure what exactly was in Elijah's mind as he fled for his life from Jezebel. He had just been a part of an epic victory, yet he was once again a fugitive on the run. I wonder if he was just worn out from being an outcast, unpraised, enjoying a meager reward for his faithfulness. He was downcast and discouraged, so he prayed, "Take my life; I'm no better than my ancestors."
 - c. Why such despair? Why such discouragement? There were voices inside of Elijah's head as well as God's voice.
 - i. There was—most obviously—the very real voice of Jezebel telling Elijah that she was going to kill him (voices threatening with violence are usually voices that get our attention).

- ii. There were the voices of his fellow Israelites who seemed to care little for the ways of God or for what was right or true. It probably seemed to him that he was all alone.
 - iii. There was the voice of the apparent fruitlessness of his ministry. What had he achieved after the years of laboring for the Lord? What made him think that he could make any difference—any more than did his ancestors—in a world that seemed so bent against the ways of the Lord?
 - d. Then there was God's voice.
 - i. I'm struck that God's voice to this discouraged prophet did not come in the form of consolation, but in instruction.
 - ii. God's voice to Elijah was faint but direct: there is still work to do, so get up and get it done!"
 - e. Have you ever experienced God's voice like that?
 - i. I'll admit that when I've found myself discouraged and down, the last thing I want to hear is more instruction. I want to hear something like, "It's ok. I'm proud of you! Keep going! It's going to be alright!" I want to hear assurance and affirmation.
 - ii. But I've come to realize that in times of discouragement—or in times of discouraging circumstances, my attitude hinges primarily upon the voices that I choose to listen to.
 - iii. I've found that a despairing attitude comes largely from a despairing narrative of my own creating. There may be external voices that affect my thinking, but much of it is my own feeding of the discouragement. I create the narrative and therefore I create the despair. It's really just self-pity in its rawest form.
 - iv. Yet there's a voice that's far more real and powerful—the voice who commanded the fire on Mount Carmel—that I can choose to listen to. Maybe that voice seems faint in comparison with the blaring and almost deafening voices of discouragement that come into my mind. Yet that is the voice of truth, and it's the only voice worth listening to.

IV. What about Solomon? When's the last time you heard a message preached about Solomon? Yep, son of David, builder of the temple of the Lord, great establisher of the Israelite empire. Yet Solomon wasn't without his faults, most pointedly his distractions from the devoted walk of his father, David.

- a. Solomon may have been great, but he made great mistakes. His success, wealth, and power increased beyond his ability to handle them. And his wives! We won't even get into that.
 - i. You could say that the voices in Solomon's life were the distractions of his power and pleasures. The voice of God was drowned out by the countless other seemingly good things in his life. How could one hear Yahweh when there was more indulgence and decadence than any one man could endure?
 - ii. It's a sad commentary on this man's life that despite his achievements done for the Lord, despite his pedigree as the son of the man after God's own heart, that we are told that he did not follow in the ways of his father David.

- b. It's so true that we should doubly watchful in times of prosperity. That's when we're in the greatest danger spiritually.
 - i. The pattern plays itself out so many times in Scripture and in modern life: God's people turn to him in times of crises, while in times of prosperity they neglect him, ignore him, or turn their backs to him.
 - ii. The voices of pleasure and power are too loud and too appealing. God's voice is faint because it's not as exciting, not as enticing. Why listen to the voice of one who calls for trusting submission when you're getting exactly what you want?
 - iii. The seed which was choked by thorns in Jesus' parable—representing those for whom the cares of life and the desires for riches chokes out the word of God—is observed in countless lives who begin with sincere hearts and yet achieve success and wealth, and who are soon to busy—to distracted—to care much about following a God whose ultimate promise pertains to another life, and who calls for obedience and sacrifice. For such people, the prospect of immediate pleasures seems a whole lot more appealing.
- V. How about the voice of crisis or persecution? I think of Paul and Silas, trapped in a Philippian jail after being wrongly accused and beaten.
- a. We see them in the children's Sunday school books, but these were real men with real wounds, sitting in a real prison. Think of the voices that could have been resounding in their ears.
 - i. There was the voice of humiliation that goes with being publically ridiculed and beaten. They had been the object of mob-violence without any advocate or friend.
 - ii. There was the voice of the physical suffering they had endured. Have you ever been flogged?
 - iii. There was the voice of hopelessness that went with their questionable future. They weren't sure at that point (if ever) they were getting out of that jail.
 - b. Yet Paul and Silas heard an even louder voice in the midst of the noise. In the midst of those bleak circumstances, they heard God's voice speaking to them.
 - i. And so they praised. In circumstances like that, God's voice could have seemed only a faint whisper. All around them were the voices announcing suffering, crisis, pain, humiliation.
 - ii. Yet they were able to hear a more powerful and real voice rising above the rest. And they chose to listen to that voice.
- VI. Here is where this comes home for us. At any given time in our lives, any one—or a combination of these, or other—of these voices may be found ringing in our ears. It is up to us, though, which voices we listen to.
- a. Circumstances, discouragement, pride, pleasure, crisis. These could all be deafening voices that drown out anything else.
 - i. God's voice may seem only a faint sound that whispers to us through an encouragement from a friend, from a message that we hear at church or on the radio, through something we read in the Bible or a passage that we remember.
 - b. But know this: God is always speaking to us. It's up to us, though, to listen.

- i. In order to do this, I need to put myself into the place where I can hear. This may mean intentionally placing myself into the stream of God's voice by doing such things as reading Scripture, talking to a godly friend about things that I'm concerned about, praying earnestly.
- ii. But beyond that, listening to God's voice involves an intentional decision to listen to that one voice above the crowd. In the midst of your circumstances, your discouragement, your pleasures, your crises, God's voice is active. It's up to you and to me to listen to it.
- iii. What that means is that I choose to listen to that voice as the only voice that matters, and I ignore every other voice.