

# Are you listening?

(www.voicewithvision.org)

## Introduction

"How does God speak?". This is a very popular question asked by many. To many people who do not know God, this very question may seem unreal. But Christians know that God speaks, but they want to know how He speaks.

In the New Testament, we read in Acts, that God speaks to His children through different ways. Many incidents are recorded in Acts that shed light on how God speaks to His children.

He speaks primarily through His written word, sometimes through his prophets or angels, through visions or dreams or through a voice which we can hear deep in our hearts. No matter how He speaks, all that He says will never contradict His written word. His written word is the final authority. Anything contrary to His written word is not "God speaking".

God loves to speak to His children and guide them. If you are a child of God, then you have every right to go to Him and ask Him anything and He will be more than happy to speak to you, to guide you and lead you. His word says, *"Ask, using my name, and you will receive, and you will have abundant joy"* (John 16:4). All we need to do is ask in the name of Jesus. It is because of Jesus we can go directly to God and ask anything, using His name. The gap that was there between man and God has been bridged by Jesus. He is our mediator.

He loves to lead and guide His children, and the only qualification to be His child is to be born again. If you are born again and have Jesus in your heart then you are His child and God speaks to you. You do not need another mediator, because we already have a mediator and that is our Lord Jesus Christ. *"For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus;"* (1 Timothy 2:5) KJV.

Do not let any one mislead you into thinking that you need some thing special to listen to God. You go to Him and you ask Him in the name of Jesus and He will speak to you. It is very simple.

A very disturbing trend which has developed among believers these days is the tendency to know God's will for their lives through someone else, a particular person, a type of mediator. If they need to take an important decision, they immediately rush to Mr. So&So and Mr. So&So prays and asks God for them and tells them what to do! In effect this Mr. So&So acts as the mediator. These modern day mediators keep people from going to God directly. Because, if they did, then they will lose their unique position and also the "offering" they receive for the "service".

(But let me clarify, there is nothing wrong in asking people to pray for you or going to ministers to ask for advice and counseling. What I am referring to here, is different.)

But still many Christians say that they can't hear God speak. They try hard, but say they do not hear anything. They always think that only certain "special" people can hear and listen to God. If you say you cannot hear God speak, then let me tell you, God speaks to you!! He speaks to you, you hear Him, but you fail to recognize His voice. You hear, but fail to listen and understand

All believers hear God speak. But the problem is, many are not willing to listen and understand what He says.

If you are a child of God and say you can't hear God speak, then you have to ask yourself a different question:

**"Am I listening?"**

From the beginning God has been communicating to His people through various means. It is heartbreaking to see these last days, many Christians and ministers failing to listen to God. They read the Bible but fail to listen to God and understand what is said! They hear many sermons but fail to listen and understand! They hear that deep inner voice that softly speaks to them, but fail to discern His voice! Through all these, God speaks to His children, but they fail to listen to Him.

The difference between hearing and listening is this. To hear, all you need is a pair of ears. But to listen, you need ears and a pure, willing heart. A hear that is not pure or a heart that is not right with God may hear His word, but will not understand it. Jesus says in Mathew 13:9 *"Anyone who is willing to hear should listen and understand"*. It is not enough to hear, you also need to listen and understand.

During the days of Jesus in this world, a majority of people heard Jesus' words but it was a minority who understood His words. Many studied the scriptures to find out who the Messiah would be, but when Jesus came, very few recognized Him as the Messiah. They read the scriptures which point to Jesus, but failed to understand what it said!

*"You search the scriptures because you believe they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to me! Yet you refuse to come to me so that I can give you this eternal life" (John 5 : 39,40)*

These were very religious people who read the scriptures sincerely, yet they failed to understand what was written in it. Even today, many sincere Christians and ministers read God's word but fail to understand what it says. They read, but fail to listen and understand. The Spirit of God speaks, but they fail to listen what He says.

Many Ministers backslide because somewhere along the way they fail to listen and understand God's word. Many false teachers and false teaching has crept into the Body of Christ because many teachers, down the line become insensitive to the guidance of the Spirit of God and fail to understand what God's word says!

I have read biographies of many men & women of God who began well and did many great things for the Lord. But sadly, many of them ended their lives, giving into deception. Not only were they deceived, they also deceived others. They failed because they failed to listen to God's word! They were hearing God's word, many of them had the Bible with them, they even read it daily, but their heart was not right. They heard the word of God but did not listen and understand the message from the word. It can happen to anyone at anytime. All believers are vulnerable to this very destructive disease. It creeps in slowly and destroys lives thoroughly.

There are many reasons why people fail to listen to God. But I am going to write about three primary reasons why these days, Christians as individuals and as Churches fail to listen to God.

- 1. Structure that Kills**
- 2. Heart that Deceives**
- 3. Success that Blinds**

### **Structure that Kills**

I consider any rule, practice, tradition or habit as a structure. There is nothing wrong with structures per se. Some structures bring in order and discipline. But at the same time, we have to be very careful with them. Structures are a means to an end. Structures should help us accomplish what God has called us to do. But instead of using the structure to grow in the Lord, if we find satisfaction in the structure itself, then it will bring death. Instead of just using the structure, if we begin to beautify the structure and bring it to the center of our attention, then we miss the substance. And structure without the substance is useless.

For example, a man develops the habit of getting up at 5 O'clock in the morning every day to go to the Church to pray. This man is developing a habit, which in other words is a structure. There is nothing wrong with this habit, in fact it is a good habit as it helps him grow spiritually. He is doing it with the right spirit, he grows spiritually and brings forth fruit of the Spirit. This structure now gives life.

But if this same man, after sometime develops a spiritual pride because of his habit and looks down on other believers, who do not go to Church at 5 O'clock as inferior believers, then this same structure which brought him life, now brings him death. Because now the structure (that is, getting up at 5 O'clock in the morning daily and going to Church) is more important to him than what the

structure brings forth. (that is, growing in the Spirit and bringing the fruit of Spirit) .

Now his focus has shifted to the structure and he loses focus of the substance The structure which was supposed to help him develop fruit of the Spirit such as humility has instead brought a fruit of the flesh, pride. A Structure is to be judged by what it brings forth. If it brings forth fruit of the spirit, then it is constructive, instead if it brings forth the fruit of flesh, then it is destructive.

**Structure is meant to work with substance. When a structure exists without the substance, it brings death. This structure chokes the life out of the individual or the Church. It is a structure that kills.**

Killer structures are the main reason why many Churches are ineffective in the Body of Christ. Many Churches brought in structures to regularize their activities. But sadly many are choking to death by the same structures that once helped them grow in the Lord. When structures take the main place, then people automatically fail to listen to what God has to say. It is the tradition that becomes important, not what God has to say. It is the agenda or the plan that is more important, not what the Spirit of God has to say. It is their own perceptions that is important, not what the message the Lord wants to convey. These structures close the mind of people and they no longer listen to God.

I know of many Pastors in South India who preach that wearing any form of gold jewel or ornament is sin. Some even do not serve communion to such people. This is an example of how a teaching, to help people grow spiritually can be turned into a structure that brings death. The teaching is a simple "Do not be greedy of gold ornaments". But this teaching is now turned into a structure which says "If you wear gold or any ornaments you do not please God and people who do not wear any ornaments are spiritually superior and have a special place in heaven". I know the people who do this quote from the Bible why they are correct. I also know the Spirit of God speaks to them and tells them how they are wrong (Even through this article). They hear, but do not listen and understand!

Because to them the structure is more important than what the Spirit of God has to say! Even though some know they are wrong deep inside, still they do not want to accept they are wrong! They choose not to listen. They close their hearts to what the Lord has to say. I can give you many such examples of how Christians refuse to listen to God because of their traditions, which they have had for many years. It is their traditions that come first, not God's word.

This was the problem that Jesus faced and fought against during his time on this earth. God gave the law to the Israelites and the law was supposed to guide them and give them a sense of direction. But by the time Jesus came in to the world and started to preach, the law was contaminated with human traditions and habits. All that was left was the killer structures brought in by humans, without any substance. The Pharisees and the Sadducees had successfully sucked the life out the law with their human traditions and habits. In Psalm 119:103 King David says this about God's law *"How sweet are your words to my taste; they are sweeter than honey"*.

It was this sweet law the Pharisees & Sadducees had turned into bitter medicine for the people, sucking the life out of it by inserting their traditions into it. *"As such, you break the law of God in order to protect your own tradition. And this is only one example. There are many, many others."* (Mark 7:13). They disobeyed God's word because their tradition was more important. They broke God's law to uphold their traditions.

That is the reason the religious leaders in Jesus' times were always in conflict with Jesus. Jesus wanted life in their structures, but they wanted only the structure not the life. That is why they were not able understand what Jesus had to say. For them their tradition was more important than the word of God. We read in Mathew 12 : 1-7 about one such conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders of His time.

*"At about that time Jesus was walking through some grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry, so they began breaking off heads of wheat and eating the grain. Some Pharisees saw them do it and protested, "Your disciples shouldn't be doing that! It's against the law to work by harvesting grain on the Sabbath."*

*But Jesus said to them, "Haven't you ever read in the Scriptures what King David did when he and*

*his companions were hungry? He went into the house of God, and they ate the special bread reserved for the priests alone. That was breaking the law, too. And haven't you ever read in the law of Moses that the priests on duty in the Temple may work on the Sabbath? I tell you, there is one here who is even greater than the Temple! But you would not have condemned those who aren't guilty if you knew the meaning of this Scripture: 'I want you to be merciful; I don't want your sacrifices.'*"

Here the argument is regarding Sabbath. Jesus' disciples being hungry broke off the heads of some wheat and ate the grain. The Pharisees considered this "work". And they complained to Jesus about the "violation". Jesus gives them a very interesting reply. He refers to what King David did when he and his companions were hungry. They ate the special bread reserved for priests alone. That was also violation of the law, but the spirit of the law was not violated. In other words, the structure was broken, but substance remained intact. The Pharisees saw the broken structure, but Jesus saw the substance that was not violated.

Here are these religious people accusing Jesus and His disciples over a "violation" of the law and talk about the sanctity of the temple but completely failed to recognize Jesus, the Messiah who was greater than the temple!! That is why He says "There is one who is even greater than the temple".

This is the danger with dead structures, they make you ignore important things and make you focus on things that really do not matter.

*"I tell you, there is one here who is even greater than the Temple!" (Mathew 12:6).* They failed to see the one greater than the temple. For them, their tradition was important and their zeal for the structure has blinded them to see the truth about Jesus. All along Jesus was speaking to them, they heard Jesus speak, but failed to listen and understand what He said. They read the scriptures, but did not know its meaning!!

*"But you would not have condemned those who aren't guilty if you knew the meaning of this Scripture: 'I want you to be merciful; I don't want your sacrifices.'"*

Again Jesus says "if you knew the meaning of this Scripture..." . These people did not know the meaning of this Scripture. They could not see the life in God's Word because they are used to seeing the dead structures. They are so used to death that anything with life freaks them out. Many dead Churches do not want to hear life giving word of God. They refuse to listen to God's Word that brings changes. They have put such strong structures that they are scared to break those structures. When structures that are supposed to bring life, brings death, then it has to be broken.

That is why Jesus intentionally did many things before the eyes of those hard hearted religious zealots. In Mathew 12 : 8-14, he intentionally goes to the temple on a Sabbath day and heals a man with a deformed hand. He did it in full view of the the Pharisees. Because He wanted to break the structures that was bringing death instead of life. But the Pharisees, instead of understanding the intentions of Jesus, hardened their hearts. Instead of welcoming the life giving actions of Jesus, they plotted to kill Him!! (Mathew 12:14).

The religious leaders of Jesus' time heard all Jesus said but could not understand anything He said. They heard but never listened. They heard but never understood. The reason was the structure called tradition. It was this dead structure that prevented them from recognizing the Messiah. He was right there before them but they could not see Him as who He really was. All they saw in Him was his humanness and failed to see His Divineness. They saw His miracles, but did not understand them.

Examine your heart and ask yourself, do you have any death bringing structure in your life? If you are a pastor or a leader ask yourself, what dead structure is sucking the life out your Church? *"But if we examine ourselves, we will not be examined by God and judged in this way".* (I Corinthians 11:31)

## Heart that deceives

God expects His children to listen to Him first and then do what He tells Him to do. He wants His children to be completely dependent on Him - all the time. That is the heart of a loving father who always wants to help His children do the right things. He expects His children to listen to Him, but He never forces Himself on anyone.

This truth was demonstrated as the Lord led Israel out of Egypt.. God never gave Moses the plan in advance, He led them one step at a time. Remember, Moses did not plan something and then went to God for confirmation. He went to God with an open mind and a pure heart, without his opinions or desires. That was why he was able to listen to the Lord and understand His words - all the time.

Many Christians say they go to God and ask him for guidance, but many come without a clear answer. They go to His presence to listen. But the problem with many Christians is that, they already decide what to do in their minds, and then go to God for confirmation, which they call "asking for guidance". If you go to God with a pre-conceived mind and pretend as if you want His guidance, you will not get His guidance. Because, when He speaks, you cannot listen because your mind is already made up.

Many Christians and ministers say that they listen to God for guidance and seek His will in many things. But increasingly I see many of them take decisions (or at least have an opinion in their minds about what they want to do) and then go to God for confirmation and "guidance". God cannot guide a ship that has already set its course. God never forces himself on anyone. He can guide you only if you let Him do it completely.

God expects His children to come and ask His guidance with an open heart. We are to go to Him with the problem, not with the solution. We are to go to Him after emptying our hearts of all our own desires, plans and perceptions. If you plan something and go to God for guidance, then you will always come out with a "It is God's will" answer. Because your heart was not sincere in the first place.

Here we see a remnant of Judah after the invasion of the Babylonians, ask Jeremiah to enquire God and tell them what God wants them to do. Jeremiah agrees to their request.

*"Then all the army officers, including Johanan son of Kareah and Jezaniah son of Hoshaiah, and all the people, from the least to the greatest, approached Jeremiah the prophet. They said, "Please pray to the Lord your God for us. As you know, we are only a tiny remnant compared to what we were before. Beg the Lord your God to show us what to do and where to go."*

*"All right," Jeremiah replied. "I will pray to the Lord your God, and I will tell you everything he says. I will hide nothing from you." " (Jeremiah 42 : 1- 4).*

Their request seems very spiritual. They say they will obey God, whatever He tells them to do.

*"Whether we like it or not, we will obey the Lord our God to whom we send you with our plea. For if we obey him, everything will turn out well for us." (Jeremiah 42:6).*

And Jeremiah enquires the Lord for them. The Lord replies and this is what He tells them:

*Ten days later, the Lord gave his reply to Jeremiah. So he called for Johanan son of Kareah and the army officers, and for all the people, from the least to the greatest. He said to them, "You sent me to the Lord, the God of Israel, with your request, and this is his reply: 'Stay here in this land. If you do, I will build you up and not tear you down; I will plant you and not uproot you. For I am sorry for all the punishment I have had to bring upon you. Do not fear the king of Babylon anymore, says the Lord. For I am with you and will save you and rescue you from his power. I will be merciful to you by making him kind, so he will let you stay here in your land.'*

*"But if you refuse to obey the Lord your God and say, 'We will not stay here,' and if you insist on going to live in Egypt where you think you will be free from war, famine, and alarms, then this is what*

*the Lord says to the remnant of Judah. The Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: 'If you insist on going to Egypt, the war and famine you fear will follow close behind you, and you will die there. (Jeremiah 42:7 -16)*

The Lord categorically tells them that they have to stay in Judah and not to go to Egypt. *"Listen, you remnant of Judah. The Lord has told you: 'Do not go to Egypt!' Don't forget this warning I have given you today (Jeremiah 42:19)*

Even after receiving such clear instructions from the Lord these people who initially came to God with a very "humble heart" refused to listen and obey the Lord's word. In fact they even accused the prophet who brought this word a liar. *"You lie! The Lord our God hasn't forbidden us to go to Egypt! Baruch son of Neriah has convinced you to say this, so we will stay here and be killed by the Babylonians or be carried off into exile." (Jeremiah 43:2,3)*

The same people who came to the prophet and said that they will obey God whether they like it or not say now that they won't listen to Him. They even justify their disobedience by saying that the prophet is convinced by their enemies to say this.

You see, these people had already decided in their minds to go to Egypt. They came and asked the prophet for just a confirmation. When he did not confirm their decision they trashed the prophet's word and carried on in their ways.

*For you were **deceitful** when you sent me to pray to the Lord your God for you, saying, 'Just tell us what the Lord our God says, and we will do it!' <sup>21</sup> And today I have told you exactly what he said, but you will not obey the Lord your God any better now than you have in the past. <sup>22</sup> So you can be sure that you will die from war, famine, and disease in Egypt, where you insist on going." (Jeremiah 42:20-22) (Bold Mine)*

This is how many people ask God for guidance. They decide in their hearts first and then ask God for confirmation. This is what Jeremiah calls deceitful. Because their heart was not right.

### **A deceitful heart always prevents people from listening to God.**

Even when God says something contrary to their decision, they somehow justify their decision and do according to their plan. They fool themselves. Because they and everyone around them think they are doing God's will, but in fact it is purely their will with an outward appearance of God in it.

Ask yourself some very honest questions before you go to God to understand His will regarding anything in your life. Empty your heart so that you go into His presence without any pre-conceived solution to the problem. Go to Him with a clear mind and a clean heart, then you will be able to hear, listen and understand His voice.

Obey His voice whether it makes sense to you or not. Many times the guidance of the Holy Spirit does not make sense to the human mind. Just be sensitive to His Spirit and do what He tells you to do. This will bring glory to His name.

Ask the Holy Spirit to examine your heart for any deceit in it. Because a deceitful heart cannot listen and understand God's word properly.

*"But if we examine ourselves, we will not be examined by God and judged in this way". (1 Corinthians 11:31)*

### **Success that Blinds**

Christians, who go to God and listen to Him properly, succeed in all they do. God blesses the works of people who listen to Him everyday.

To some this success gives self confidence. Soon, they do certain things on their own without asking God, because they are successful and confident. (There is nothing wrong in being confident, but if this confidence makes you think that you can do things without asking God, then it is wrong.)

And they do not go to God for all issues. They think that they are now capable of handling things on their own, because of their successes in the past, and they go to God selectively. These are people who develop an independent Spirit as time goes by. An Old Testament incident gives us better insight into this attitude.

Joshua was a leader mightily used by God after Moses to lead the Israelites. The Lord's hand was on Joshua. His tenure began with a great miracle, as the Lord split the river Jordan, allowing the Israelites to cross through a dry river!

*"Now it was the harvest season, and the Jordan was overflowing its banks. But as soon as the feet of the priests who were carrying the Ark touched the water at the river's edge, <sup>16</sup> the water began piling up at a town upstream called Adam, which is near Zarethan. And the water below that point flowed on to the Dead Sea until the riverbed was dry. Then all the people crossed over near the city of Jericho."* (Joshua 3:15,16)

His first military campaign was also a resounding success. It was a historical victory. No army had since won a battle like the Israelites in Jericho. The great walls of Jericho came tumbling down without a weapon being used. It was a great military victory. That was followed by a victory in Ai. Joshua was successful in all his campaigns. He succeeded because he listened and obeyed God in all things and God's hand was on him. He had everything going for him. Now comes a relatively "minor" challenge. This is not a Jericho type challenge, but relatively "small".

*"But when the people of Gibeon heard what had happened to Jericho and Ai, <sup>4</sup> they resorted to deception to save themselves. They sent ambassadors to Joshua, loading their donkeys with weathered saddlebags and old patched wineskins. <sup>5</sup> They put on ragged clothes and worn-out, patched sandals. And they took along dry, moldy bread for provisions. <sup>6</sup> When they arrived at the camp of Israel at Gilgal, they told Joshua and the men of Israel, "We have come from a distant land to ask you to make a peace treaty with us."* (Joshua 9: 3-6).

The Gibeonites asked Joshua for a peace treaty. But the Lord had made it very clear through Moses not to make any treaties with their neighbors. *"Make no treaties with them and show them no mercy"* (Deut 7:2). The Gibeonites resorted to deception because they knew that the Israelites would not sign a peace treaty, if they knew that they were people from that area. So they lied to Joshua and deceived him by telling him that they are from a distant country (Joshua 3:9). The following verse tells us how the Israelites were deceived.

*"<sup>14</sup> So the Israelite leaders examined their bread, but they did not consult the Lord. <sup>15</sup> Then Joshua went ahead and signed a peace treaty with them, and the leaders of Israel ratified their agreement with a binding oath."* (Joshua 9:14,15)

They examined the bread, **but did not consult the Lord.**

You see, after a great miracle and two resounding military victories, Joshua and Co. were confident. But sadly, their confidence made them to rely on their newly acquired skills and knowledge to discern, instead of consulting God. The challenge seemed so minor, that they did not want to bother God; they thought they could handle this "minor" challenge themselves. They relied on their scientific knowledge by examining the bread, not on the Lord God almighty who led and guided them.

**Their success has blinded their eyes because they failed to listen to God. They could not listen because they did not consult Him.**

If they had gone to the Lord He would have opened their eyes to the deception. Many in the body of Christ today are also deceived because they fail to go and ask God regarding many "new and exciting" teaching that has crept in to the Body of Christ. Many ministers get deceived because they fail to ask God about a particular teaching and use their own analytical mind to find out whether it is Biblical or not. Only the Spirit of God can reveal all the deceptions that have crept into the Church these days. If you try to analyze with your mind you will fail.

Many in the Body of Christ these days are blinded by their own successes. They begin their life or ministry well. They obey God in all things and the Lord gives them victory and they succeed in all

they do. As they succeed, they slowly stop going to the Lord for all things. They develop a "formula" based on their success and start to lean on the formula.

Instead of relying on the Holy Spirit on a daily basis they rely on their "successful formula". They do all things based on this formula and go to God for guidance only when "major" challenges come up. Now they do things using their experience, skill and their knowledge. They slowly become insensitive to the guidance of the Spirit of God. They do not listen to God because they fail to go and ask Him.

Remember, you can do worldly things using the knowledge and the skills of the world. But Spiritual things can only be done by the constant guidance of the Holy Spirit. **Nothing of the flesh can accomplish anything spiritual.**

The reason why David was a man after God's heart was because he always sought God for everything. In all situations, whether minor or major, he always asked God for guidance. II Samuel has many instances where David asked God for guidance whenever faced with a challenge, whether minor or major. Remember, David was a battle hardened veteran when he became King. But still he relied on God constantly for guidance, because he knew that victory comes to him not by horses or by chariots but from the Lord. It is this dependence on God that made David the greatest King in Israel's history. David enquired and consulted the Lord on all things and this pleased the almighty God..

*"But if you fail to drive out the people who live in the land, those who remain will be like splinters in your eyes and thorns in your sides. They will harass you in the land where you live". (Numbers 33:55)*

Because Joshua and the leaders of Israel failed to enquire God, they could not get rid of the Gibeonites and they had to live with them, who later, became a thorn in their sides. They continue to be a thorn in Israel's side ever since to harass them, even to this day.

Dear beloved, I ask in the name of Jesus, never ever think that you can do things without the Lord's guidance. Ask Him and then do anything that God has called you to do. Wait on His presence, listen to Him and then get busy. Do not get busy on your own. If you get busy without His guidance you will regret it later.

If you know you have done something wrong by not listening to Him, immediately turn from it. Next time go to Him and listen to Him, He will lead you and guide you. The Lord loves His children when they come to Him for guidance.

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