

Learning to Hear God's Voice

What Experience Has Taught Me About Listening and Obeying

“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.”
—John 10:27 NIV

Over the years, I have had times when I believed I heard God clearly. I have also moved ahead with confidence, only to discover that I was leaning more on my own experience than on His direction. Both have taught me something about listening.

Early in my career at Los Alamos National Laboratory, I was given responsibility for a department that was struggling. Over the next several years, God helped us become one of the most effective organizations at the laboratory.

Because of that success, I was promoted to lead a very different group of highly educated technical professionals. I assumed that the approach that had worked so well before would work again. The results were almost disastrous. People became frustrated, complaints were filed, and formal investigations were opened into my leadership. For a time, I was not sure I would keep my job.

Thankfully, I had a supervisor who believed in me and helped me through that difficult period. As I looked honestly at what had happened, I began to see my mistake. I was not leading the same people or facing the same problems, yet I had arrived with the same answers.

I had treated previous success as though it were present direction. I had not stopped to ask, "Father, what are You doing here, and how do I need to adjust?"

Not long afterward, I was promoted again, this time to lead the Utilities organization of about two hundred people. I was determined not to repeat my mistake.

During my first two weeks, I met individually with each of the thirty-five leaders in the organization. Rather than arriving with answers, I asked questions:

"If you were in my position, what would you change?"

"What am I not seeing?"

I filled pages with notes and looked for common themes. Before making significant changes, I met with each leader again to be sure I had understood.

The organization flourished, but not because I had discovered a new leadership technique. God had first changed the way I approached the responsibility. I had learned to listen before deciding.

That experience taught me that simply living through something does not guarantee that we will learn from it. Experience becomes useful when we stop long enough to examine it. It also taught me that God may use what He showed us yesterday, but yesterday's answer is not always His direction for today.

Several years later, that lesson became especially important when Denise and I faced a much more personal choice.

We had lived in Los Alamos for twelve wonderful years. Both of our children were born during that time. We had built deep friendships and become part of a remarkable homeschool community. I led worship, and Denise and I helped lead Cleansing Streams ministry for seven churches.

We were not looking for a change. We believed we were where God wanted us to be.

At the time, I was leading the five-service utility at Los Alamos National Laboratory. One day I was looking at the Colorado Springs Utilities website for ideas that might be useful in Los Alamos. While I was there, I noticed that they were searching for a chief operating officer.

I printed the job description, took it home, and said, "Honey, this sounds just like my heart. I think I ought to apply."

I honestly did not expect it to go anywhere. I thought I might get an interview, see my parents in Colorado Springs, and gain some useful interview experience.

Instead, after a nationwide search, I became one of the finalists. As the process grew more serious, I realized this was no longer an interesting professional opportunity. It was a choice that could change our lives. We would have to leave people we loved and a place that had become home.

I remember praying, "Father, please let me come in second. I don't want to have to decide whether to leave everything we have here."

That prayer revealed what I wanted. Before I could hear clearly, I had to admit that I did not want an answer that would take us away from Los Alamos.

A few days later, I was offered the position.

As I prayed, I began looking back over the ways God had spoken to me through the years. I considered the opportunities He had given me and the responsibilities that had gradually increased. A pattern began to emerge. It seemed that God had been preparing us for this long before I knew the opportunity existed.

What I did not know was that Denise was also praying. That same day, while she was in Santa Fe, she sensed the Lord say:

"He has been faithful over little. Now I'll make him ruler over much. Enter into the joy of the Lord."

When we came together that evening, neither of us needed to persuade the other. We compared what we believed we had heard and smiled.

"I think we know what God is saying."

Denise and I have long believed that we should be in agreement before making a major decision that will affect both of us. One person should never use the words "God told me" to put spiritual pressure on the other. Neither of us had influenced what the other heard, and that mattered.

The choice was still difficult, but beneath the sadness was a quiet confidence.

Peace matters when we are discerning God's direction. Galatians 5:22 identifies peace as part of the fruit of the Spirit, and Psalm 34:14 tells us to "seek peace and pursue it." I have learned, however, not to confuse peace with relief.

We can feel relief because a particular choice allows us to avoid something difficult. That feeling can be persuasive. The peace I look for is different. It is a quiet confidence that remains as I continue to hold the matter before God. It does not promise that the way ahead will be easy. In fact, it may accompany costly obedience.

Peace should never be used to excuse something Scripture does not permit. Nor does it remove the need to think carefully and listen to wise counsel. In our case, peace helped confirm what God appeared to be saying in several other ways. It did not remove the sadness of leaving Los Alamos. It gave us confidence that the sadness was not a warning to stay.

Looking back, no single part of that experience carried the entire decision. The job opening was a circumstance, but an open door by itself is not an instruction from God. What Denise heard carried weight because it agreed with Scripture and came without prompting

from me. The pattern of God's earlier work in my life also helped us understand what might be happening. As we continued to pray, the quiet confidence remained.

Together, these things pointed in the same direction.

The move to Colorado Springs was not mainly about accepting another job. It was about trusting God enough to follow when He asked us to leave something we loved. We could not see everything that lay ahead, but we had enough direction to take the next step.

Those two experiences have shaped the way I now approach discernment. The first taught me not to assume that I already know the answer. The second taught me to become honest about what I want and then remain open to what God says.

The first place I listen is Scripture. God will not lead us in a way that contradicts what He has already said. If Scripture clearly tells me to forgive, love my wife, keep my word, or care for someone in need, I do not need a separate word from God before obeying. I may need His help, but I do not need further direction.

When the answer is not directly stated in Scripture, I try to come before God without demanding a particular outcome. George Müller described bringing his heart to the place where he no longer insisted on his own will in the matter. He was not suggesting that our desires simply disappear. He meant that we become willing for God's answer to be different from the one we prefer. That kind of surrender helps us hear without continually trying to persuade God to approve what we have already decided.

I then pray and wait. God may not tell me everything I want to know, but He will give me what I need to take the next faithful step. My responsibility is not to create direction. It is to remain available and respond when He gives it.

God often speaks in ways that are quiet and personal. A passage of Scripture may take on fresh meaning, or a thought may continue returning as we pray. At times He may use a dream, a prophetic word,

or something more unusual. Scripture makes it clear that He is not limited in how He communicates. He once used Balaam's donkey.

However God speaks, everything we believe we have heard must be tested. A personal or prophetic word never carries the same authority as Scripture, and it should never be used to control another person. The more unusual the experience, the more carefully I believe it should be weighed.

I also seek the perspective of other people because I know how easily I can hear my own preference and call it God's voice. A spouse, pastor, trusted sage friend, or wise counselor may notice something I have missed. They do not make the decision for me, but they can help me recognize places where my vision may be limited.

Discerning God's direction does not mean turning off the mind He has given us. Proverbs 3:5 warns us not to lean on our own understanding. It does not tell us to abandon sound judgment. We study what needs to be understood and think carefully. Then we bring our best judgment back to God in prayer.

Circumstances also matter, but I give them less weight because they are so easy to misread. An open door may be an invitation, but it may also be a distraction. A closed door does not always mean no. Circumstances are part of the picture, but they should not be allowed to decide the matter by themselves.

When these different witnesses begin to agree, the direction often becomes clearer. When they do not, I have learned to wait.

Waiting does not mean doing nothing. We continue obeying what God has already made clear and remain faithful to our present responsibilities. We resist the temptation to create movement simply because uncertainty makes us uncomfortable. We do not want to skip the relationship in our eagerness to get on with the doing.

When circumstances are confusing, I begin by settling again that God loves me. I do not try to interpret His character through the difficulty of the moment. I ask Him to help me see the situation from His perspective and trust Him with what I cannot yet understand.

Not every choice requires a special word from God. Sometimes, after we have prayed and considered what Scripture teaches, more than one good option remains. In those moments, God may be giving us the freedom to make a wise choice and trust Him with it.

But when His direction does become clear, hearing must lead to obedience. Continuing to ask for more confirmation can sometimes become a way of delaying what we already know to do.

Jesus said that obedience is an expression of our love for Him. I have found that my ability to recognize His voice becomes sharper as I respond. Each sincere yes makes His voice more familiar.

Obedience does not guarantee the outcome we expect. There have been times when following God opened doors I could never have imagined. There have also been times when obedience led through difficulty. Results are not the final measure of whether we have been faithful.

We obey because we trust the One who is leading us.

Questions to Sit With

If you are trying to discern God's direction, take these questions into an unhurried time of prayer:

- Father, what are You doing in this situation, and how are You asking me to adjust?
- Has God already addressed this matter in Scripture?
- What outcome am I hoping for, and how might that preference be affecting what I think I am hearing?
- Have I brought my heart to the place George Müller described—empty of my insistence on a preferred outcome and willing to receive whatever God says?
- What are my spouse and the trusted people in my life seeing?
- Is there a quiet confidence that remains as I continue to pray, or am I simply feeling relief because one choice appears easier?

- What is the next step God has made clear, and what should I refrain from doing until I know more?

Write down what comes to mind. Return to it after several days and notice what remains steady. Ask God to correct anything that is coming from fear or your own preference, and ask Him for the courage to obey what He makes clear.

Jesus did not describe His sheep as people who had mastered a method. He said they knew His voice. That kind of familiarity grows through relationship.

We will not always hear perfectly. We may move too quickly or wait longer than necessary. God is able to correct us without abandoning us.

Stay close to Him. Obey what He has already made clear, and leave what you do not yet understand in His care.

A Note of Gratitude

Several trusted voices have helped shape my understanding of discernment. George Müller's account of how he sought God's will taught me the importance of releasing my preferred outcome. Henry Blackaby and Claude King's *Experiencing God* helped me learn to look for what God is doing and then adjust my life to Him. Tom Yeakley's teaching on making decisions according to God's will has been helpful in understanding how Scripture, peace, counsel, sound judgment, and circumstances work together. Dallas Willard's *Hearing God* offers a needed reminder that our life with God is larger than the search for a particular answer.

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