

CHAPTER ONE

CALLED INTO FELLOWSHIP
WITH GOD

My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.

JOHN 10:27

Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, and let your soul delight itself in abundance. Incline your ear, and come to Me. Hear, and your soul shall live.

ISAIAH 55:2-3, NKJV

It was a warm spring day in 1984 and I was in my garage doing some spring-cleaning. Earlier in the morning, I had spent three hours in prayer as part of a discipleship class that I was teaching. At that time, Donna (my wife) and I had two boys, ages 12 and 7. We were both quite content with the size of our family and had no plans for more children. In fact, we were praying about permanent birth control measures. As I asked God about our plans, He really surprised me. He said to trust Him and have more children! What a shock! I thought, "How am I going to tell Donna about this?" She was content with two children. Her lifestyle was getting easier

as the children grew older. Alone, sweeping the garage floor, many thoughts raced through my mind. Was this really God speaking or was this just my imagination? Are we too old to have more children? How would I explain this to Donna?

I was pretty sure that I had heard God's voice. As these thoughts flooded my mind, a long-time friend pulled into our driveway. She had borrowed our baby bed several years before when she and her husband were expecting a baby. Two children later, she drove up with—you guessed it—our baby bed in her car! Totally unsolicited by either Donna or myself, she brought the bed back and said, "I am bringing your bed back. You might need it." At that point I knew! This couldn't be a coincidence. God had spoken to me and we were to have more children. Our third son, Jonathan, was born in 1986 and our fourth son, Stephen, in 1989. It has been about twenty years since that day in the garage and we now have four boys. Jonathan and Stephen are both teenagers and are a tremendous blessing to our family. What a blessing it has been that God spoke those words to me that morning, and that I took the time to listen.

From this event, I realized God's sheep hear His voice and that God desires to fellowship with man. We see this demonstrated in the Garden of Eden as God spoke freely to Adam and Eve, walking with them in the cool of the day. He had fellowship with them. He communicated with them. Adam and Eve were friends of God. Not only was this true in the garden, but also throughout history, God and man have had fellowship. Through this fellowship, God has nurtured, loved, and guided man. God has also invited man to partner with Him in advancing His kingdom throughout the earth.

Intimate fellowship with God is the foundation of our Christian experience. Jesus Christ came to earth to offer us much more than a dead religion—He invited us to become the friends of God. Christianity, therefore, is a personal relationship based on fellowship between God and His people. Paul stated this when he said, “God is faithful, through whom you were called into *fellowship* with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Cor. 1:9). Fellowship implies a partnership of two-way communication, joint participation, intimacy, and communion.

We all know that for communication to be effective between two people, it must include talking and listening. One-way communication that is dominated by one person talking while another listens is not nearly as fulfilling as two-way conversation. This same principle is true in our relationship with God. For our relationship to grow and be fulfilling it must be two-way. Most believers are far more comfortable doing all the talking and little of the listening. Our prayers consist of a list of needs and wants, yet we often spend very little time listening to what God desires to speak. However, listening to God's voice is an essential part of our relationship with Him. Note these Scriptures:

While he was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice out of the cloud said, “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; *listen* to Him!” (Matt. 17:5).

My sheep hear *My voice*, and I know them, and they follow Me (John 10:27).

But He answered and said, "It is written, 'MAN SHALL NOT LIVE ON BREAD ALONE, BUT ON EVERY WORD THAT PROCEEDS OUT OF THE MOUTH OF GOD'" (Matt. 4:4).

He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and *hears* him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. So this joy of mine has been made full (John 3:29).

Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, and let your soul delight itself in abundance. Incline your ear, and come to Me. *Hear*, and your soul shall live (Isa. 55:2-3, NKJV).

From these passages, it is evident that God desires fellowship with each of us. He loves to hear our voice as we worship and pray. He enjoys it when we talk to Him about our concerns, fears, hopes and dreams. And He eagerly desires us to be attentive to His voice as He speaks words of encouragement, love, nurture and guidance.

WHY WE NEED TO HEAR GOD'S VOICE

There are at least three reasons why we need to learn to hear God's voice for ourselves. Each of these reasons strengthens our relationship with God and draws us closer to Him. Hearing God's voice:

1. Builds intimacy and friendship with Jesus
2. Gives us personal guidance
3. Is essential for effective ministry

1. Hearing God's voice builds intimacy and friendship with Jesus.

Hearing Jesus' voice is one of the most fulfilling parts of a personal relationship with Him. When He speaks affectionate words to us or when He gives us revelation and guidance, it encourages and draws us closer to Him. We feel loved and secure in our position in Him. Even if He has just spoken a word of correction to us, we feel cherished and close to Jesus just because He—the God who created the universe—spoke to us. Hearing His voice nurtures an intimate and loving friendship with Him. This is such an important topic that we have devoted an entire chapter to discuss it. In Chapter 2, we will look at how cultivating an intimate relationship with Jesus is the foundation for a lifestyle of hearing His voice.

2. Hearing God's voice gives us personal guidance.

We need to learn to hear God's voice so that we can follow Jesus. For example, we know from the Bible that man is to work. Paul said, "If anyone will not work, neither let him eat" (2 Thess. 3:10). But we do not know from the Bible whether we are to work at the factory down the road or at the store in town. We need to hear God's voice in order to know which job to take. We also know from the Bible that God plans for most people to marry. God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him" (Gen. 2:18). However, the Bible doesn't tell us whom to marry. We need to hear His voice so that we marry the right person.

I saw the importance of this in 1998 when my oldest son, Bryan, got engaged to his wife, Angie. She is the perfect helpmate for him and she is a wonderful daughter-in-law to us—

we love her very much. While they were dating, both Bryan and Angie believed that God wanted them to get married. However, they both wanted God to speak clearly to them in order to confirm this.

One day Bryan decided to give Angie a piece of jewelry to demonstrate his love for her. He asked his manager at work for a place to purchase quality jewelry. His manager recommended a jewelry store that Bryan had never been to. Before Bryan entered the store, he said a little prayer to God, "Lord, please show me what to buy." As he looked around the store, a cross pendant stood out to him so he decided to buy it. When he gave it to Angie later that night, she was in shock. She asked him, "Did you talk to anyone? Did you talk to my mom?" Bryan did not know why she was so surprised by the gift so Angie told him, "Three years ago I went to the same jewelry store with my mom and I saw a similar cross pendant. When I saw it, I said a little prayer to God, 'Lord, let the man that I marry buy this for me.'" God supernaturally revealed to them that they were to get married. What an exciting confirmation of God's voice to them! From this example, we see how important it is to hear God's voice for personal guidance.

3. Hearing God's voice is essential for effective ministry.

During the days of His earthly ministry, Jesus only did what He heard or saw His Heavenly Father doing. Jesus only healed when His Father said to heal. He only cast out a demon when He heard His Father say to do so. Jesus had a strong relationship with His heavenly Father that was uninterrupted by sin. Because of this, Jesus clearly heard from God and did His will. Likewise, we are called to do the same.

We must learn to hear our Father's direction and then do what He says do. Because this topic is so vital for effective ministry, in Chapter 4 we focus entirely on how Jesus ministered in response to hearing His Father's voice.

COMMON WAYS GOD SPEAKS TODAY

God speaks to His people today in a variety of ways. Jack Deere, in his book *Surprised by the Voice of God*, presents four common ways that the Holy Spirit speaks today. He says that God speaks through:

1. The Bible
2. Experience
3. Natural means
4. Supernatural means¹

1. God speaks through the Bible.

The most common way that God speaks to us is through the Bible. Paul said:

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16-17, NKJV).

There are two Greek words for “word” in the Bible. One is *logos* and the other is *rhema*. When the word *logos* refers to the Bible, it corresponds to the general Word of God or the full counsel of God. The word *rhema* means the spoken word or a

specific word of God spoken into a certain circumstance. God speaks to us through the written Word of God to give us a solid foundation for life. We will be blessed if we will become a doer of the “logos” Word of God. He also speaks through the specific “rhema” word in order to nurture us and provide specific direction for our life and ministry.

2. God speaks through experience.

Not only does God speak to us from the Bible, He also speaks through life experiences. He speaks through trials, through common events, through other people, and through miracles. Probably every one of us has had a friend speak a word of confirmation to us at just right moment. Most likely, we have also heard God speak in the midst of trials and difficulties about what really is important in our lives or to show us our need for patience and humility. God speaks often (and sometimes loudly!) through our experiences.

3. God speaks through natural means.

God also speaks through natural means. He speaks through nature. He speaks through the weather. He speaks through human messengers. We have all heard that perfect message from our pastor that was just right for us and spoke exactly into our circumstances. God also speaks through natural events. For example, several years ago when an earthquake hit San Francisco during the World Series, many believed God was speaking to the people of America to wake up. Through this devastating tragedy, many thought God was saying that playtime was over and that it was time for America to turn back to God.

4. God speaks through supernatural means.

God also speaks in supernatural ways. He speaks through dreams, through visions, through angelic encounters, through His audible voice, and through thoughts and impressions. We have found that many more believers have learned to discern the voice of God in the first three ways than in the fourth category. If believers can learn to hear God's voice through supernatural means, then they can become very effective at hearing God in each of the different ways that He speaks. Hearing God speak through supernatural means will be the primary emphasis of this book.

BECOME A DOER OF THE WORD

God desires to speak to all of His children, not just to a special few. He is not just interested in speaking to the preacher, the president or the missionary. He desires to speak regularly and clearly to all who are in a relationship with Him. He is no respecter of persons. He will communicate with all who will dedicate themselves to learning to hear His voice. It takes time and attention to learn to hear God's voice. Furthermore, it is essential to understand that we cannot have true fellowship with our Lord Jesus Christ, nor can we do our part to advance His kingdom effectively, unless we learn to hear His voice. Therefore, I challenge you to make learning to hear God's voice a priority in your life!

As we conclude this chapter, it is important to remember the purpose of this book. It is to activate believers so that they might learn to be more effective in hearing God's voice. Since the principles taught in this book have proven successful in many different cultures and settings, they will also work

for you. As we begin this study together, I exhort you to become a “doer of the Word” and not merely a “hearer only.” In doing so, God will activate you to hear His voice more effectively, both for personal guidance and ministry!