

“Greg Pruett is a man of absolute integrity and faith; a modern-day Elijah. . . . His passion is contagious. You will love his heart, his words, and his wisdom.”

MAX LUCADO

Foreword by Mart Green

EXTRAORDINARY HEARING

Preparing Your Soul to Hear from God

GREG PRUETT

Author of Extreme Prayer

EXTRAORDINARY HEARING

Preparing Your Soul to Hear from God

GREG PRUETT



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Extraordinary Hearing: Preparing Your Soul to Hear from God

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FOREWORD

FOR SEVERAL YEARS I've worked with many people to try to speed up the translation of the Bible into more than six thousand of the vital languages spoken on our planet. Our projections showed the work would not be finished until 2150.

And then another voice spoke. It said we could get the job done by 2033.

Was this the voice of God leading us? Or was it man-made? To eliminate more than a century from the target would take extraordinary hearing, for sure!

Greg Pruett entered my life as we set out on this grand and daunting adventure for the Kingdom of God. I knew that Greg, as president of Pioneer Bible Translators, would need to feel led to join our effort if we were to have any chance at all of eradicating “Bible poverty” on our watch. From the earliest days, I also knew that if we were going to meet our goal, it would take extreme prayer, the kind Greg wrote about in his first book. Throughout this initiative, Greg has been a strong champion for prayer, reminding us of its centrality and power. When we set up a prayer task force to coordinate the efforts of all eleven Bible translation partners, Greg was picked to lead the group.

It has been a joy to meet with Greg, our ten other Bible translator CEO partners, as well as the four other resource partners involved with illumiNations, to strategize our “big, hairy, audacious goal.” Most of our monthly meetings have taken place in the Admirals Club at Gate C20 of the Dallas/Fort Worth airport.

Now that I’ve read Greg’s new manuscript, I have to ask: Did we, in fact, hear God speak about our Bible translation goal? I believe so, but as we rush toward 2033, we will see for sure.

As you read *Extraordinary Hearing*, you will note the extremely practical nature of the ideas unpacked in this book. Greg does not speak or write theoretically; he describes real-world experiences that have brought him and his wife, Rebecca, to where they are today. The principles he shares have immediate, this-world application, with the power to change all our lives for the better.

Another highlight for me is Greg’s mischievous sense of humor, wrapped around the stories he tells and the lessons he brings out of them. Meeting regularly with Greg over the past decade has enabled me to hear his voice and appreciate his distinctive sense of humor, even as I read his words. And he writes so descriptively! At one point as I read the manuscript, I grabbed my wife and said, “Listen to this!” We both smiled as I read aloud a paragraph from this unique, new book, pleased and gratified to hear Greg explain a key issue with such skill and grace.

Even the title he chose, *Extraordinary Hearing*, hits the mark. Look up the word *extraordinary* in the dictionary and it will define the term like this: “going beyond what is usual.” Look up the word *hearing* in that same dictionary and it will say, “the process, function, or power of perceiving sound.” Put

them together and you have “going beyond what is usual in the process, function, or power of perceiving sound.”¹

And that is *precisely* the adventure you are about to embark on in this book.

In the following pages, Greg will help you to understand the process, function, and power of extraordinary hearing—the ability and skill it takes to accurately hear God’s voice and distinguish it from a host of other voices.

I trust that as you read *Extraordinary Hearing*, you, too, will grow in your ability to hear God’s voice . . . and then obey whatever you hear!

The Bible is alive,

Mart Green

*Founder of Mardel Christian and Education;
ministry investment officer at Hobby Lobby
August 2022*

INTRODUCTION

God Is Calling

THE FIRST TIME God spoke to me, I was sitting inside a dark storage cabinet. Hear me out on this; don't judge me yet.

I found it nearly impossible to get alone back at Texas A&M University in 1987. Twenty-four hours a day, my roommate played records by the drug culture band the Moody Blues. He also slept with a throwing knife in his hand, which kept me on edge. So to pray, I would slip over to the All Faiths Chapel, a church-like, glass structure that most students rigorously avoided. The decision to seek God in that quiet place of prayer changed everything for me.

While I prayed there, a mysterious, quiet student with striking, blue eyes attracted my attention. Most days she

would play the piano and sing worship songs for a long time. She seemed to embody the stillness and spirituality I was chasing after—and I might have wanted to pursue some other qualities she had, too, but this story isn't about that right now.

One day while on my knees in the chapel trying to connect with God, even in the stillness of that austere place of worship, something about praying with a few people walking around felt a bit too public for me to concentrate. I attended InterVarsity Christian Fellowship at the time, which had a cabinet in the back of the chapel used for storing Bibles, hymnals, and boxes of the Gospel of John suitable for mass distribution. The cabinet stood just a foot and a half off the ground, built into a wall.

Back then, people talked about going into your “prayer closet.” So one day, feeling the intense need to get alone with God, I climbed up into that cabinet, sat down on a box, and deftly pulled the door closed without smashing my fingers.

Delicious darkness swallowed me. I remember the smooth, dusty feel of cardboard boxes all around and the reassuringly religious smell of musty hymnals. I reveled in the quiet hour I spent there, the supreme silence you find only in an isolated closet inside a ghostly still chapel. I knew right away I had found my prayer place. From then on, I often passed a blissful hour pouring out my soul before God's throne, right there in the dark of that cabinet.

It felt heavenly . . . except on those rare occasions when someone from InterVarsity would swing by for supplies and the door sprang open with a crash of brilliant light. As my eyes adjusted, squinting like a raccoon caught in a porch light, I saw the wide-eyed expression of shock sweep over the person's face. Then, little by little, shock would give way to stunned bewilderment. Next, as they came to grasp that a student had

inexplicably perched himself in the cabinet, it got awkward. No social etiquette exists for what to do when someone discovers you praying in a storage cabinet.

Perhaps I should have confidently reached over and offered the person a hymnal, as though I were hunched up there for just that purpose. I especially liked when they abruptly slammed the door shut, apparently realizing they had committed some terrible social sin—in the process plunging me back into the inky darkness.

It was worth it.

The Day God Spoke to Me

I remember the day God clearly spoke to me. One moment I lifted up a concern to the Lord, and the next I heard in my mind urgent words not of my own design: “*While you still can!*” I stumbled out of the darkness that day, troubled by what I had “heard.”

I didn’t hear a sound caught by the ear, but instead a thought coming from outside myself. At first I wondered, *Does “While you still can” mean my time on earth is short?* That didn’t seem to fit. Everyone’s time is short. As the words replayed in my mind, it dawned on me that, when you waste an opportunity in this life, you never get it back. We who follow Jesus must take action “while we still can.”

Jesus said it this way: “As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work” (John 9:4). When I saw the same idea written in the Word, I came to understand that I had indeed heard the Lord, a repeat of a message already written in the Bible two thousand years ago.

I now realize that this moment gave me my calling. The eyes

of the Lord had ranged “throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him” (2 Chronicles 16:9). When He looked over at Texas A&M University in 1987, He saw a naive college kid whispering in a dark closet and said to a nearby angel, “Hey, watch this.” With just the four words “*While you still can,*” He laid claim to my whole life. From that moment, I knew one thing for sure: I must waste no time in pursuing my purpose. God had made me *for* something.

The words make sense now. God could glance down the pathways of time and see that I would marry Rebecca, the intriguing beauty playing the chapel piano. He could see that she would influence me to abandon my career ideas and become a Bible translator, the dream she had pursued and prayed about while she played. He knew the long process ahead of me, something that would take decades. He knew I would eventually become a leader in a Bible agency at the exact moment in history when we would have the chance to start the last Bible translation projects needed. His first words to me therefore became a resounding command not to mess around. He telegraphed the future for me, that I would need to focus if I were to realize my created purpose.

Those words crashed into my life like thunder. I recognized in that message an opportunity to give myself away to Him forever. I still mist up whenever I remember it. Nothing like it happened again for a very long time.

What If You Could Hear Him?

What if *you* could hear God speaking? What difference would that make in your life? I don’t mean hearing an audible voice. I wouldn’t need to write a book about hearing *that*. You would

just listen. Instead, I mean receiving a message from Him as a thought in the mind. Deaf people also have access to this kind of “hearing” because our powerful God can speak into any human mind in any language, including sign language.

The listening I’m pursuing, the hearing I have in mind, refers to receiving internal guidance from God, the leading of the Holy Spirit deep within us.

Such hearing used to be limited to a few prophets gifted with the Spirit. But now all of us who follow Jesus have access to that same Spirit. Hearing God is not only a *possibility* but also a *necessity* if we want to serve Him well. We need the instructions that Isaiah described: “Your own ears will hear him. Right behind you a voice will say, ‘This is the way you should go,’ whether to the right or to the left” (Isaiah 30:21, NLT). We need the fellowship that Jesus promised: “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone *hears my voice* and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me” (Revelation 3:20).* He would not have told the church at Laodicea to listen for His voice at the door if no voice was coming.

Wouldn’t life be so much more efficient with God’s instructions? Couldn’t we get more work accomplished investing four hours a day following God’s marching orders than we could in a ten-hour workday under our own wisdom? How much sweat and energy have we poured down a hole, like vanishing gallons of water, as we pursue fruitless ideas and counterproductive dreams, when we could instead focus our lives on doing *exactly* what God created us to do under His direct guidance?

Ah, but how can we know it’s really Him speaking?

* *Italics in Scripture quotations reflect the author’s emphasis.*

Has God Finished Speaking?

I grew up in a relatively conservative church whose leaders *mostly* taught me that God had finished speaking once He revealed the Bible. He said everything He had to say when the perfect Word of God came to exist, they insisted.

Were you taught the same thing? Fortunately, I owe a debt of gratitude to my spiritual forebears because they also taught me to believe and treasure the Bible above all human input, even theirs.

Real theological turbulence in my life started when I did what they taught me to do: I actually read the Bible. The God in the Bible seemed much more talkative than I had learned growing up.

Then I went to college and came under the influence of people who seemed to hear from God all the time. I had never known charismatic Christians. Their habits impressed me. I observed them for a time and recognized that they seemed to regard their impressions and impulses as the word of the Lord.

One night, while I was at the church building studying for an engineering test, a fellow student brought me a paragraph written by Cliff, her friend with the gift of prophecy. She spoke softly as she reverently held out a small scrap of paper. “Greg,” she announced, “Cliff just prophesied the word of the Lord!” I read it and nodded appreciatively while inspecting the words. “Good,” I said.

Dumbfounded by my lack of enthusiasm, she waved the paper around in front of my eyes and declared more emphatically, “You don’t understand! *This* is the word of the Lord!” I gave it a second look, no doubt unable to keep the skepticism off of my face.

They seemed like good words, but I didn’t plan to staple

them into the back of my Bible or anything. I tried to drum up *some* enthusiasm, but I managed only to keep nodding, keep looking down at the paper, and keep repeating my original unsatisfactory remark: “Good.”

I thought, *Maybe this is really it! Could it be that impulses during prayer really are the way to hear from God?*

But as an engineering student, I tested out the idea first. I would pray and then write down any strong impressions that came to me in prayer. I thought, *The word of the Lord has come.* But then I mused, *Of course, if these impulses truly are from God, the real world around me will conform to these messages.* I wrote them down carefully and watched to see whether they would come to pass. My tests proved them to be wholly unreliable.

I had not yet learned to recognize God’s voice.

For the most part, I found that impulses are just impulses—truly important information for impulsive college students. We really need to *know* that God has spoken before we act on it. I do not want to live in a world of a pretend God whose voice I only imagine! I suspect the same is true for you.

Longing to Know Him

I long to truly know the Creator of this awesome universe. I don’t want to make Him up. I want Him to rip open my world and clear up my muddled thinking and teach me how to thrive in this universe He made. I hunger for Him to hand me a great work to perform that will please Him. I crave walking in the brilliance of His presence each day as I live my life. I yearn to talk to the Mind great enough to stretch stars across the sky and meticulous enough to handcraft molecules. And I desperately wish to hear Him speak to me.

I think He created me with this craving deep inside, like

Adam walking in the cool of the Garden with God, just to pass time together in peace and quiet satisfaction. As I pray, I don't want just to get things from God. I want *God!* It's not enough for me to gallop after every errant impulse that enters my mind in prayer.

Sometimes in life, as in the Bible, a fine line exists between prophecy and lunacy. We can find it hard to tell the difference. In the twentieth chapter of Isaiah, we learn that the Lord instructed the prophet to go about his business, naked, for three years. I'm not making this up! Understandably, it's the shortest chapter in Isaiah by far, as if he couldn't bear to dwell on it. While I'm not above embarrassing my kids for the sake of a great sermon illustration, that has to be level two. But then again, God did tell Isaiah to name one of his kids Quick-to-the-Plunder-Quick-To-Destroy (Isaiah 8:3).² How embarrassing in middle school! I had a toddler like that, too, but I didn't put *that* on her birth certificate.

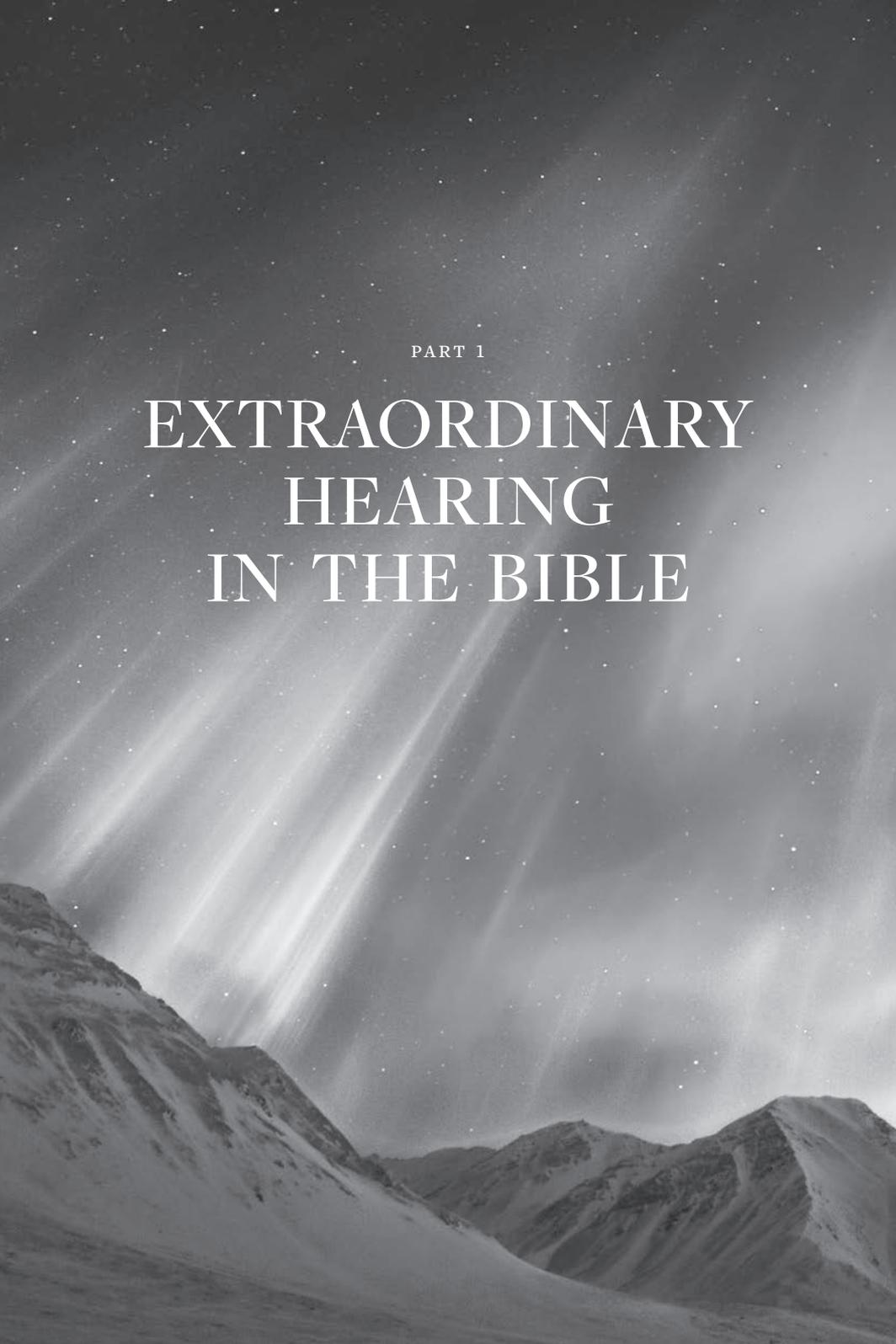
I imagine that Isaiah's kids looked back on that phase of their dad's ministry as "the naked years." Worst of all, God put him through all of that humiliation just to drive home a prophetic point that, from my limited human perspective, Isaiah could have made quite sufficiently by speaking a couple of sentences in a Speedo swimsuit.

We do not serve a safe, ordinary God.

That's why we need to tread carefully as we learn to hear Him speak so that we can know for sure we are *really* hearing from God. We should expect that occasionally the word of the Lord could shock us, as in Isaiah 20. But we must not end up following equally embarrassing impulses from our own erratic neural synapses. For that reason, the first chapter of this book starts by basing our conversation on the rock-solid foundation of Scripture.

Discussion Questions

1. How comfortable do you feel with the idea that God could still speak to you?
2. Why do you believe that He does? Or why not?
3. If you can, describe a time when you believe God may have spoken to you or when the Holy Spirit directed you to do something.
4. How could you tell whether it was God speaking to you?
5. Do you feel a need for God to speak clearly into your life? Explain.
6. About what kinds of things in your life would you like God to guide you?

A black and white photograph of a mountain range under a starry night sky. The mountains are in the foreground and middle ground, with a valley between them. The sky is filled with stars and several bright, diagonal light rays or aurora-like patterns that create a sense of divine light or revelation. The overall mood is mysterious and awe-inspiring.

PART 1

EXTRAORDINARY HEARING IN THE BIBLE

CHAPTER 1

GOD SPEAKS

*In those days the word of the LORD was rare;
there were not many visions.*

I SAMUEL 3:1

THE LAMPLIGHT JUST started to dim on the face of the young boy tossing and turning in his bed inside the Tabernacle. Ever since his third birthday, Samuel had slept just on the other side of the veil from the Ark of the Covenant—literally in the presence of God. Back when his mother first gave him to God, he could fall asleep only by the golden lampstand's precious pool of light. Now that he was twelve, the dark no longer scared him. Even so, on nights when he brooded about how much he missed his mom, that lamp's light held back a different darkness.

As the tent gradually filled with shifting shadows, he made the mistake of rolling over in bed to face the cloth veil hiding

the holiest place. Instantly his mind filled with the temptation to sneak a peek under the curtain to see the forbidden space and the smooth, golden box with imposing angelic figures fashioned on top, glittering with gold. He thought with a shiver about Eli's stern warning not to slip under the curtain into the Holy of Holies, for fear that he might touch the Ark of the Lord and die right there on the spot. He hadn't slept for a week after that lecture.

He was wondering what would happen if he crept over to the table across from the lampstand to snatch a bit of sacrificial bread when sleep stole over him. He dozed off at last.

Suddenly a voice broke the silence of the darkness. "Samuel!" it exclaimed.

His eyes instantly snapped open.

Eli must need something, he mused as he popped out of bed with the springy step of a young boy. He sprinted over to interrupt the slumber of the elderly priest.

"I didn't call you," Eli grumbled. "Go back to bed." For some reason, Eli always seemed grumpy at night. Samuel returned to his bed and tried to go back to sleep.

"Samuel!"

The second time he scampered even faster. Surely this time Eli wouldn't deny he had called him. But wow, was Eli ever upset!

"Go back and lie down! I didn't call you," Eli grouched again. Samuel turned to go, a little slower this time, as a long, frustrated sigh rose from Eli's bed behind him.

Samuel felt truly puzzled. As he slipped back into his bed among the imposing articles of worship, he could not sleep. He had just settled in for a long night of staring in terror at the cloth of the ceiling when it happened for the third time.

"Samuel!"

He reluctantly crept into Eli's bedroom one last time, peering quietly to see if, by any chance, Eli waited for his arrival. But instead of anger, he saw that Eli's eyes had grown wide with recognition.

After all these many years of silence, could it really be? Eli thought with wonder.

"Samuel," he instructed, "next time when you hear the voice, say 'Speak, LORD, I'm listening and at your service'" (1 Samuel 3:9, GPT[†]).

No sooner had Samuel lain back down in bed than the sheer weight of a presence as vast as space pressed on his consciousness from the other side of the curtain. God came and stood in that dark tent between the golden Ark and the wide-eyed boy.

The Creator of the universe earnestly called: "Samuel! Samuel!" This time, the boy's soul had a ready answer: "Speak, because I'm listening and at your service." And then Samuel heard words that changed everything: "Listen, I am about to make a move in Israel so stunning it will ring in everyone's ears like a bell when they hear about it" (1 Samuel 3:11, GPT). With those words began the ministry of one of the great prophets of the Bible.

God Talks

The God of the Bible speaks to people. He has things to say, and He loves people so passionately that He just can't keep His plans to Himself. Our God is not one to keep His mouth shut! For some reason, at least with some mysteries, it simply isn't in His nature to keep a secret.

[†] When I want to highlight a nuance that other English translations might obscure, I use my own, which I playfully call the GPT (Greg Pruett Translation).

It doesn't surprise me that God would talk to a boy. But it shocks me that He had remained silent for a long time before that: "In those days, the word of the LORD was scarce. Visions just weren't appearing" (1 Samuel 3:1, GPT). Imagine how hard it must have felt for a God who loves conversation to hold His silence! The people who should have longed to walk and talk with Him instead busied themselves to get rich. Samuel's ministry changed all that.

One person plus God can become a powerful combination when people learn to listen. The Bible explains it this way: "The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground" (1 Samuel 3:19). What would that be like, for every word you say to count?

As I write this book, I long for you and me to learn to get so in tune to walking with God that every word we write or speak would soar brilliantly into the sky to become true and reliable, useful in the hands of God. We who serve the Lord desire to have a life like Samuel, so enveloped by God's presence that not a single utterance passes our lips, only to crash uselessly in the dirt.

God Explains

God talks *a lot* in the Bible. He made Adam and Eve apparently so that He could walk and chat with them in the cool of the Garden (Genesis 2:19; 3:8-9). Even after sin entered the world, some people still walked and talked with God.

Enoch walked with God for three hundred years, and, perhaps, God considered him such a riveting conversationalist that He took him away. No one saw Enoch on earth again (Genesis 5:24). Noah also "walked with God," modeling a just lifestyle and living above reproach (Genesis 6:9, ESV). One

day as God and Noah walked and talked, God explained His plans: “So, Noah, I want you to know that I’m about to put an end to everything alive.” That’s the kind of thing God says in a chat. Then through a flood, He destroyed a world that had grown violent and corrupt.

Throughout the Bible, God talks with His people about the big moves He’s about to make. He upended Abraham’s life with a command and a sweeping, global promise: “All peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:3). God thinks His chosen people have a right and a need to hear His thoughts. One day He said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? . . . For I have chosen him” (Genesis 18:17, 19). Then He and Abraham spent the next minutes debating the fate of the city of Sodom. It mattered to God what Abraham said in that conversation because He had chosen him. And God has chosen us too.

Later, God spoke to Jacob, switching his name to Israel because Jacob was the kind of man who wrestled with people and with God—and who came out on top (Genesis 32:28). That’s how Jacob’s descendants, the people of God, became known as “Israel.” Those who struggle with God, His nature, and His plans—that’s our true identity. We who follow the spiritual heritage of Israel find ourselves grappling with God with all our might, striving to get a grip on who He is and why He made us.

Later, God spoke to Moses through, of all things, a burning bush (Exodus 3:2). Moses’ friendly conversations with God grew so frequent that he had to erect a special conference tent outside the camp just for consulting with the Creator. Everyone in the camp watched intently as a pillar of cloud descended on the tent, and Moses would go inside to listen and talk. Sooner or later, of course, Moses would have to come out and do the hard work of leading Israel (Exodus 33:7-11).

Joshua, however, refused to leave the tent (Exodus 33:11). He became qualified to replace Moses as leader by continually dwelling in this “Tent of Meeting” in God’s presence. The Holy Place of the Tabernacle at the center of the camp later replaced the function of the Tent of Meeting and sometimes was still called the Tent of Meeting. The Temple later replaced the Tabernacle, but the Holy Place remained a space where God and priests would encounter one another (Luke 1:11). The first place of worship did not give God’s people a location to meet one another. It was a place where God met and talked to His people.

God Warns through Dreams

From almost the very beginning, God has spoken through dreams.

- He cautioned Abimelech in a dream: “You are a dead man because you took a married woman from her husband” (Genesis 20:3, GPT).
- Jacob saw angels on a stairway to heaven at Bethel and inherited the divine promise from the figure standing at the top (Genesis 28:12-15).
- In a dream, God scared Laban to death, warning, “Watch yourself so you don’t say a word to Jacob—either good or bad” (Genesis 31:24, GPT).
- He sent dreams to Pharaoh so that He could use Joseph to save His people from starvation in a famine (Genesis 41:25-27).
- He appeared to Solomon in a dream to let him choose the future of his reign (1 Kings 3:5).

- He saved baby Jesus from Herod by forewarning both the wise men and Joseph in a dream (Matthew 2:12-13).
- Pilate's wife told him to leave Jesus alone because she had been warned in a dream (Matthew 27:19).
- Daniel explained the purpose of dreams: "There is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries" (Daniel 2:28).

God Reveals Truth in Pictures

God shows His people visions too. Biblical visions take at least two forms, either something seen with the eye or a mental image from God. Often, we don't know which one happened (see 2 Corinthians 12:1-4).

One day God twice asked Jeremiah, "What do you see?" Jeremiah simply said, "I see the branch of an almond tree" and "I see a pot that is boiling." Another time God asked the same question and received the answer, "figs" (Jeremiah 1:11,13; 24:3).

God asked Zechariah, "What do you see?" But Zechariah saw far more complex pictures than Jeremiah (Zechariah 4:2; 5:2).

Amos got the same question a couple of times, but he saw a plumb line and a basket of fruit (Amos 7:8; 8:1-2). Each time, the visions captured spiritual meaning in symbols that the prophet was expected to proclaim.

God speaks indirectly through visions so that people will think hard to figure out what He's saying. God shocked Peter with a vision of "unclean" animals coming down from heaven, beasts that God had forbidden Jews to eat. God commanded Peter to break the law by eating those animals. Later, the meaning dawned on Peter: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism" (Acts 10:34).

God Poses Questions

God asks his people probing questions:³

Adam, where are you? (Genesis 3:9)

Cain, why are you angry? (Genesis 4:6)

Abraham, why did Sarah laugh? (Genesis 18:13)

Is anything too hard for the LORD? (Genesis 18:14)

Hagar, where have you come from, and where are you going? (Genesis 16:8)

What's the matter, Hagar? (Genesis 21:17)

What is your name, Jacob? (Genesis 32:27)

Why do you want to know my name? (Genesis 32:29)

Moses, what is that in your hand? (Exodus 4:2)

Moses, why are you crying out to me? (Exodus 14:15)

Joshua, stand up! What are you doing down on your face? (Joshua 7:10)

Job, where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? (Job 38:4)

Elijah, what are you doing here? (1 Kings 19:9, 13)

King of Judah, why do you worship gods who could not save their people? (2 Chronicles 25:15)

You of little faith, why are you so afraid? (Matthew 8:26)

Why are you thinking these things? (Mark 2:8)

Why are you sleeping? (Luke 22:46)

Why do you call me, "Lord, Lord," and do not do what I say? (Luke 6:46)

Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? (Acts 26:14)

God doesn't ask because He needs to know; He asks because He needs us to think about the answer. God asks great questions.

God Leads His People

When God brought Israel out of slavery, He started the general idea of the people of God who are owned and treasured by Him (Exodus 19:6). That phrase meant they were the people being led by God, unlike everyone else. After the ten plagues forced the Egyptians to let Israel go, God's leadership both amazed and terrified the people right from the start.

God explained the Israelites' next move, saying something like this: "Listen, Moses, I'm taking my people to the land of Canaan. Everyone normally takes this trip using a huge, well-traveled highway from Egypt to Canaan along the sea. It would take just a few weeks. We're not doing that. If my people faced battle as they passed through the Egyptian fortresses at the border, they would turn back (Exodus 13:17-18, GPT). So instead, I want you to start wandering aimlessly in the wilderness in the wrong direction from here to here, then over to there, and then finally you'll end up with your back against the Red Sea in the least strategic position conceivable. Pharaoh will conclude that you are hopelessly meandering around in the desert and strategically inept. He can't resist a ripe target like that. So he will rally his top charioteers and the special forces of one of the greatest militaries in the world and try to attack you" (Exodus 14:2-4, GPT).

If I had been Moses, about then I would have gingerly raised my hand and asked, "Umm, what part of this plan sounds like a good idea to you, O LORD? Could we reexamine the highway option?"

Amazingly, Exodus 14:4 just says, "So the Israelites did this." God didn't explain that He had a plan for them to cross the Red Sea on dry ground. Why, oh why doesn't God feel the need to clarify the most important parts of His plan? But no, He expects His people to take step-by-step directions, right up

to the Red Sea and certain catastrophe—only later rescuing them in some unexpected way that only He could imagine. That’s what it means to become the people of God, led by Him and by His unique reasoning.

God instructed His people to follow a cloud by day and a fire by night, and anyone who followed the cloud was part of the people of God, by definition:

Whether the cloud stayed over the tabernacle for two days or a month or a year, the Israelites would remain in camp and not set out; but when it lifted, they would set out.

NUMBERS 9:22

Ponder God’s succinct plan for the wilderness: “Follow the cloud.” Maybe some people thought, *We’ve camped here too long*. If they broke camp and left, they were out. Maybe someone else might think, *I’m not ready to move on*. If the cloud left and they stayed, they weren’t the people of God either. The whole point was to follow the cloud.

Through that long wilderness time, God built into His people the habit of obedience. That’s why it took forty years to go from Egypt to Israel instead of weeks or months. That’s how long it takes for people to develop an immediate response of obedience without question. When they finally got ready to obey, they became fit to enter the land. When God said, “March around Jericho,” they marched without much discussion.

God Does Not Change

I recognize that many people whom I respect believe that God no longer sends dreams and visions, no longer speaks, and no

longer allows us to prophesy on His behalf. They say the Bible replaced all of that. I've heard them make some impressive biblical arguments.

I just disagree. I can't see how our receiving the Bible would change the habits of the God who inspired the Bible. As the prophet Amos said, "For the LORD is the one who shaped the mountains, stirs up the winds, and reveals his thoughts to mankind" (Amos 4:13, NLT). That's just who the Creator is. None of us would want to explain to God a theology that insists He can't or won't talk anytime He wants to. When I read the Bible, the simplest interpretation doesn't say that an end would come to God's normal pattern of talking with people. In fact, Peter quotes the prophet Joel to say that, as we approach the end times, maybe God will speak out even more:

In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.

ACTS 2:17-18

He Still Speaks

Back in 1988, Rebecca and I spent our hours "studying" together down at the Kettle Restaurant's all-night breakfast buffet in College Station, Texas. Meanwhile, God got busy in West Africa informing the Yalunka people that they would soon have a chance to receive the gospel. The announcement came in the form of dreams to two old men. One man was called Vieux Sayon (Old Sayon), and the other was named

Manga Konbon (Chief Konbon). Both were old men when their dreams came, just as Joel said.

Much earlier in his life, Vieux Sayon had committed to follow Christ when the first missionaries came from the Christian and Missionary Alliance mission in the 1920s and 1930s. Sayon was the son of the first Yalunka Christian, Sergeant Bokari. He had been a good friend—some say the best friend—of the missionary who built a house and a church building in the village where we would later work and live.

People tell me that the whole village was considered Christian before the government changed in the 1960s and all the missionaries got kicked out. A time of persecution arose, and nearly everyone in town reverted to the religion they followed before, including Vieux Sayon and Manga Konbon. Manga Konbon became a well-known diviner who would tell people what sacrifices to offer to gain power from the spirits.

Then one night, Vieux Sayon had a dream. In his dream he saw American people soaring about the village with outstretched arms, like ominous human airplanes. He awoke with a start the next morning and told one of the few Christians left in the village about seeing dozens of Americans gliding about town.

“It was terrifying,” he recounted.

Years later, his dream began to come true when Rebecca and I arrived to live in his village. But he told the same Christian man, “Just you wait! In my dream there were a bunch of them. *This* is just the beginning.”

After a time, we began hosting dozens of short-term visitors. At one point, we had two houses and two huts lodging nearly a dozen Americans. Vieux Sayon nodded knowingly and said, “Yes, *this* is what I saw in my dream.”

Manga Konbon had a different dream. One year the church invited all the non-Christian village leaders to join

us to celebrate Christmas. He stood up and testified that everyone in the village should listen to the Christians because he had had a dream. In his dream, he looked up and saw two towns. One town was a place of great suffering. The other town reverberated with singing, music, and joy. Between the two towns he looked up, and there, high above, stood a glorious person. Manga Konbon called out to him: “Sir, I would like to go into the town with the music and celebration.” The person sadly shook his head and said, “You can’t, because you are not a Christian. You must go to the other town.”

Did these dreams come from God? They both warned influential people about the future, to alert them that God intended to do something new among them—much like what happens in the Bible. I conclude from Scripture and from experiences like these that God really does still speak, just as He did with Abraham, Pharaoh, Joseph, Jacob, and others. God still lets people know what He’s doing.

Although these newly perceived messages don’t carry the same weight as the Word of God revealed in the Bible, we still ought to ponder them.

Do You Listen?

These two Yalunka men never did return to Christ, despite the warnings. The cares of the world and the pressures of the surrounding culture that followed the Quran were too much for them. These precious men had every opportunity, but they never chose to follow Jesus. They gradually grew frail and died while separated from Jesus and His gospel . . . which brings us to the next chapter.

God speaks to people to explain, warn, or question, but only certain people listen. The Bible says:

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.

PSALM 19:1-4

We don't have to wonder if God still speaks. He reveals Himself to everyone, without exception. The difference between God's people and all other people scattered over the face of the earth is that, when God speaks, *His people listen*.

Discussion Questions

1. How important do you think it is to God that people know Him?
2. If you ever had a dream that you suspect came from God, what was it like? What did you learn from it?
3. Have you ever been praying and seen a mental image that seemed to communicate meaning to you? If so, what did you learn?
4. How does your experience of God leading you compare to how God works in the Bible?
5. Review the section about questions that God asks people. Which of God's questions is your favorite? Why?
6. What was God trying to make His people understand by asking that question?